

# 50 years since the murder of Che Guevara

## Including a republication of *Castroism and the Politics of Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism*

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October 9 marked 50 years since the murder of the Argentine-born guerrilla and co-leader of Cuba's 1959 revolution, Ernesto Che Guevara, who was captured after the collapse of a disastrous 11-month-long attempt to foment a guerrilla war in Bolivia.

The anniversary has been widely marked by the media as well as in speeches and ceremonies in Cuba, Bolivia and elsewhere. Much of the press coverage serves to deliberately obscure the political significance of Guevara's life and death, while those marking the anniversary have, for the most part, exploited the occasion as a means of lending a left cover to their reactionary politics and masking their own betrayals.

The *New York Times* published a lengthy feature article Monday on the anniversary, interviewing witnesses to Che's capture and subsequent assassination by Bolivian soldiers. Notably absent from the piece was any mention of the presence at Guevara's execution of the CIA agent Felix Rodriguez, a Bay of Pigs veteran assigned to hunt down the guerrilla leader. Rodriguez went on to participate in the Operation Phoenix assassination campaign in Vietnam and the Iran-Contra affair. This professional killer subsequently claimed that his intention had been to transport the guerrilla leader to Panama for interrogation and, undoubtedly, torture, but that the order to kill him had come down from the Bolivian army command.

This omission amounts to a form of historical revisionism that defies innocent explanation. Rather, the attempt to write the CIA out of what constituted a criminal assassination is in keeping with the close ties between the *Times* editorial board and the US intelligence apparatus.

The anniversary was marked in various ways in Latin America. Among the most hypocritical and absurd was the observing of a minute of silence by the corrupt politicians of the Mexican House of Deputies, a proposal made by a leading member of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), a political formation deeply implicated in the disappearance and presumed mass murder of the 43 *Ayotzinapa* teaching students three years ago.

In Bolivia, President Evo Morales marked the anniversary by traveling to the site of Che's murder and sleeping there in a tent. He used this stunt to launch his campaign for a fourth consecutive term, despite a 2016 popular referendum rejecting a repeal of the Bolivian constitution's term limits. The move has sparked widespread demonstrations under conditions in which the Morales government, part of Latin America's so-called "left turn" begun at the end of the 1990s, has come into increasing confrontation with the working class.

In Cuba, the main event marking the anniversary was held in Santa Clara, the site of a mausoleum containing the remains of Guevara, which were transferred from Bolivia to Cuba in 1997. Miguel Díaz-Canel, first vice president of Cuba's Councils of State and Ministers and the expected successor to the presidency when 86-year-old Raul Castro steps down next year, gave the main speech, sounding the familiar themes of Guevara

as a kind of secular saint and inspiration for Cuban youth based on his upholding of "the sanctity of study, work and fulfilling one's duty."

He said Che had taught that "imperialism cannot be trusted, even a bit," adding that recent events had borne out this advice. He was apparently referring to the recent moves of the Trump administration to roll back the rapprochement initiated between the Obama administration and the Castro government, which has thrown into crisis the plans of Cuba's ruling elite to solidify their privileged position by forging closer relations with US capitalism.

In Venezuela, President Nicolas Maduro, confronting the country's deepest economic crisis, a mounting corruption scandal, growing popular hostility to his government and threats of intervention from Washington, delivered a statement on the anniversary proclaiming, "Today we revolutionaries, the *guevaristas-chavistas* of this time, can say that 50 years ago, a man did not die, but a myth was born."

Neither Maduro nor any of the others issuing such tributes have cared to delve too deeply into the precise content of this "myth," which has been promoted not only by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalists in Latin America, but also by a host of middle class and pseudo-left groups in Europe and North America, most notably the Pabloite revisionist tendency that broke with the Fourth International.

In their heyday, these tendencies openly embraced the Guevarist conception that guerrilla war waged by small bands based in the countryside represented a new road to socialism, eclipsing the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity of forging its conscious vanguard through the building of independent mass revolutionary parties.

The attempt to implement this retrograde guerrilla perspective led to a series of catastrophic defeats in Latin America, separating a layer of revolutionary youth from the working class and helping to pave the way to decades of military dictatorships.

While the successor organizations to the Pabloite groups that promoted guerrillaism in the 1960s and 1970s have long since moved on, entering capitalist governments and supporting imperialist regime change operations, some of them still exploit the image of Che as a kind of phony revolutionary window-dressing for their reactionary operations. None of them have attempted a serious reappraisal of Che's legacy, not to mention their own reprehensible role.

The following lecture on these questions was delivered in January 1998, in the aftermath of the 30th anniversary of Guevara's death, when the slain guerrilla leader's remains were returned to Cuba.

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### *Castroism and the Politics of Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism*

By Bill Van Auken

*This lecture was delivered in Sydney, Australia on January 7, 1998 to the International Summer School on Marxism and the Fundamental*

*Problems of the 20th Century. It is also available from Mehring Books in pamphlet form.*

Castroism has been the subject of immense confusion, not a small part of it created by the Pabloite revisionist tendency which emerged within the Fourth International. The Pabloites presented—and some of them still present—Castroism as a new road to socialism, as confirmation that the socialist revolution could be carried out, and a workers' state established, without the conscious participation of the working class.

Led by Joseph Hansen in the US and Ernest Mandel in Europe, the Pabloite revisionists abandoned the struggle for revolutionary leadership in the working class, and ceded the historical tasks of the proletariat in the backward countries to the petty-bourgeois nationalists.

In so doing, they helped prepare some of the most terrible defeats suffered by the working class in the latter half of the 20th century.

The International Committee of the Fourth International waged an implacable struggle against this perspective, thereby defending and developing the theoretical and political weapons forged by Marxism over the whole previous period. Involved in this struggle were the most essential questions relating to the tasks of Marxists.

Our movement fought against those who saw Marxism merely as a means of discovering, describing and adapting themselves to supposedly unstoppable objective processes that were compelling other, non-working class, forces to lead the struggle for socialism. It defended the perspective that the only road to socialism lay in building revolutionary parties, based on the international proletariat, in a relentless struggle against the dominant bureaucracies and petty-bourgeois leaderships, no matter how powerful or popular they might appear.

In dealing with Castroism 35 years later, we are entitled to ask who was right in this dispute? Did Castroism provide a new road to socialism or did it turn out to be a blind alley and a trap for the working class? What were the consequences of the Pabloites' renunciation of the role of the working class and its conscious revolutionary vanguard? We will take the opportunity in this lecture to review this strategic experience and its lessons for the working class movement.

## **Che's revival**

A fitting place to begin our analysis is with the recent commemorations marking the 30th anniversary of the execution of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the most prominent exponent and practitioner of the perspective of guerrilla warfare with which Castroism is identified. In recent months we have witnessed a virtual Che revival, though not the sort that the Argentine-born guerrilla could have envisioned, even in his worst nightmare.

Che has become the object of commercialization in a manner which seems quite incongruous with his radical reputation. His image itself has been transformed into a commodity. The Swiss watchmaker Swatch has come out with a "revolution" model, with the guerrilla's visage. His face has also been used to advertise skis, to adorn the covers of rock CDs and even to sell beer.

In Argentina, the government of Carlos Menem, the favorite of Washington for his embrace of the IMF and enthusiastic support for the Persian Gulf war, has even issued a commemorative stamp honoring Che as a "great Argentine."

The Castro regime has also gotten into the act. It recently brought back Guevara's remains from Bolivia, reintering them in Cuba with pomp and circumstance. The Cuban government has organized Che tours for foreign ex-radicals and markets Che T-shirts and trinkets, providing a new source of hard currency for the crisis-ridden Cuban economy.

What is it about Che that makes him so susceptible to being turned into a harmless, though profitable, icon? The qualities which his admirers cite are well-known. Physical bravery, self-sacrifice, asceticism, giving his life for a cause. These can all be admirable traits. No doubt they present a stark contrast to the prevailing social ethic in which a man's worth is determined by the size of his stock portfolio. But these qualities, in and of themselves, are by no means indicators of the political and class character of those who possess them. Religious sects and even fascist movements can claim to have produced martyrs with similar qualities in their own struggles for wholly reactionary ends.

A careful review of Guevara's career demonstrates that his political conceptions had nothing to do with Marxism and that the panaceas of armed struggle and guerrilla warfare with which he was identified were fundamentally hostile to the revolutionary socialist struggle of the working class.

In the midst of the recent revival of the image of Che there have appeared several new biographies of the guerrilla leader. Those of the Mexican author Jorge Castaneda and the American John Lee Anderson, while by no means offering a Marxist political analysis, do provide some useful insights into both Guevara's trajectory and that of the Cuban revolution.

What emerges so clearly from the detailed recounting of Che's career in these books is the abysmal shallowness and the tragic results of his political perspective.

Alongside these factual accounts there has been a renewed attempt by various petty-bourgeois left tendencies to portray Guevara as a revolutionary leader and theoretician whose example and conceptions continue to provide a meaningful perspective for the struggle against capitalism. Unlike the biographers, these groups provide no fresh insights or information. They combine a diseased nostalgia for the glory days of middle class radicalism with what can only be described as a falsification of Guevara's real views and their political consequences.

Some, such as the Socialist Workers Party in the United States, uncritically echo the official commemorations of the Cuban government. Others, like the old Pabloite scoundrel Livio Maitan in Italy or the Morenoite MAS in Argentina, attempt to portray Guevara as having posed some sort of revolutionary alternative to both Stalinism and the Castroite regime itself.

In a recent statement on the Cuban question, the Morenoites praise Che's slogan of "One, two many Vietnams," and declare: "Even if with disastrous methods—guerrilla focus, isolation from the mass movement, opposition to the construction of revolutionary workers parties—it expressed the necessity of extending the revolution internationally."

How a necessary and revolutionary perspective can be expressed through disastrous methods, the Morenoites do not bother to explain. This tendency, like all the Pabloite factions, has made a career out of attempting to demonstrate how various forces—Peronism, Stalinism, guerrillaism—are "expressing" the struggle for socialism.

Indeed, the Morenoites, at an earlier stage, even reached the point of finding this expression in the Cuban dictator whom Castro overthrew, Fulgencio Batista. Proclaiming him "Cuba's Peron", they hailed the Cuban working class for failing to respond to a general strike call issued by Castro's July 26th movement. After Castro won, however, they placed his portrait alongside that of General Peron on the masthead of their newspaper.

The political alchemy of the Morenoites notwithstanding, the disastrous methods of Guevara were a faithful expression of the political perspective—or perhaps more accurately lack of any real perspective—which underlay them.

Neither the Morenoites nor any of the other Pabloite tendencies care to make a class analysis of Castroism and Guevarism, trace their historical origins and development, or draw up a balance sheet of the experience

with guerrillaism in Latin America over the past nearly four decades.

That critical task can only be carried out by our movement, based on the struggle it has undertaken throughout that period for the political independence and international unity of the working class.

### **Proletarian socialism versus petty-bourgeois nationalism**

The Pabloite revisionists, like the middle class ex-radicals in general, are hostile to such an approach. They fervently hope for a revival of Castroism. All of them were enthused by the appearance of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Chiapas, Mexico and likewise applauded the actions of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement when it seized the Japanese embassy in Lima, a little more than a year ago.

Our movement did not join in celebrating this apparent resurgence of Guevarism and the hollow political formula of “armed struggle.” We have a long record of fighting against such conceptions, recognizing that they embody not the revolutionary socialist strivings of the proletariat, but rather the politics of petty-bourgeois nationalism. They are directed not at resolving the vital questions of revolutionary leadership within the working class, but rather at denying the revolutionary role of this class altogether and diverting radicalized layers of students, as well as workers and peasants, away from the struggle for socialism.

They serve not to illuminate, but rather obscure, the strategic problems of the socialist revolution that were elaborated by Trotsky in his theory of Permanent Revolution. Such slogans as “the duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution,” “armed struggle,” and “protracted peoples’ war” leave unanswered the issues of what class will play the leading role in the revolution, what is the connection between the revolution in one country and the world revolution, and what is the relation between the struggle of the workers and oppressed in the backward countries and that of the working class in the advanced capitalist ones.

Behind their radical rhetoric, these movements have definite conceptions about all these questions. Invariably, they are directed at suppressing the independent revolutionary struggle of the proletariat, and subordinating the oppressed masses as a whole to the needs of the national bourgeoisie.

In this sense, no matter how radical these movements may appear, they are, in the final analysis, one of the last bulwarks of imperialism against the socialist revolution. It is this essential nature of petty-bourgeois nationalism and guerrillaism which provides a key to understanding the ease with which capitalism has appropriated the image of Che for its own purposes.

If one examines carefully the politics of the Peruvian MRTA and the Mexican Zapatistas, they are merely a different manifestation of the accommodation with imperialism carried out by all bourgeois nationalist regimes and movements. The Tupac Amaru group seized the Japanese ambassador’s residence with the aim of pressuring Japanese imperialism to exert influence over the Fujimori regime to soften its policy. The group’s ultimate aim, communicated to some of the hostages, was to force a negotiated settlement through which it could transform itself from an armed movement into a legal petty-bourgeois political party.

As for the Zapatista movement, it has been universally hailed precisely because it has, from the beginning, renounced any revolutionary aims. The vague demands of Subcomandante Marcos have been for democratization, an end to corruption and increased cultural rights for the indigenous population. These demands could and have been embraced not only by the petty-bourgeois left, but by sections of the ruling PRI and even the right-wing opposition party, PAN. Marcos and the Zapatistas, rather than providing a revolutionary road forward for the Mexican workers and

oppressed peasantry, have been converted into another instrument for settling political accounts within the Mexican bourgeoisie.

### **The political role of the petty bourgeoisie**

What precisely do we mean when we describe these different movements as “petty-bourgeois nationalist”? This is not merely a political epithet thrown by Marxists at their opponents. It is a scientific definition of the class interests and methods which characterize these movements. Marx, basing himself on the experience of the 1848 revolution, and Trotsky, in his theory of Permanent Revolution, demonstrated that the petty-bourgeoisie is incapable of independent and consistent political action. Its inconsistency is a reflection of its intermediate social position. Caught between the two main classes of society and continuously being differentiated into exploiter and exploited, it is compelled to follow one or other of these classes—either the proletariat or the bourgeoisie.

In the postwar period, imperialism created and came to depend upon a new social layer identified as the middle class. In the advanced capitalist countries, this consisted of functionaries who staffed government bureaucracies and corporate offices, administered social services of newly-created welfare states and ran the growing mass media.

An analogous stratum emerged within the oppressed countries, and it was to this layer that imperialism handed over power during the period of decolonization. In Latin America, as in other areas of the globe oppressed by imperialism, the opportunities presented to this social layer were far more limited than what prevailed among their counterparts in the advanced capitalist countries. Thousands of students graduated from university with no prospect of a professional career. In many cases those who did pursue a profession or attempted to live off a small business enjoyed little more in terms of living standards than the average worker. It was this social stratum which provided the principal social base for petty-bourgeois nationalist politics.

There was, therefore, an objective class basis for the emergence of the Pabloite theories of a “new world reality”, in which the struggle for socialism could be undertaken, not by the working class and its conscious revolutionary vanguard, but rather by the radicalized petty bourgeoisie. Ultimately these revisionist formulations reflected both the strivings of this particular social layer, as well as imperialism’s need for a buffer between itself and the threat of proletarian revolution.

### **The roots of the Cuban Revolution**

Like every major event, the revolution led by Fidel Castro in 1959 had deep roots in preceding historical developments. These historical roots, generally ignored by the cheerleaders of Castro among the Pabloites and the petty-bourgeois left in general, must be examined to understand the class content and political significance of Castroism.

Cuba’s history was shaped principally by the abortive character of its independence struggle, which effectively transferred its status from a colonial possession of moribund Spanish colonialism, to an economic and political semi-colony of the rising imperialist power, the United States.

The US intervened in Cuba in 1898 following a 30-year war waged for Cuban independence. The intervention was short and decisive. The Spanish were relieved of their colonies in the Treaty of Paris, a settlement in which the Cubans themselves had no participation.

This settlement produced what became known as the Platt Amendment

Republic. Named for the US senator who drafted it, the legislation was passed in Washington and then imposed as an amendment to the first Cuban constitution. It included a prohibition against the nominally independent Cuban republic entering into any international treaty deemed prejudicial to US interests. It also guaranteed the US the right to intervene militarily: “for the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty, and for discharging the obligations with respect to Cuba imposed by the Treaty of Paris.” The US would avail itself of this “right” repeatedly in the first part of the 20th century.

Cuba’s dependence upon US imperialism was not merely the formal one embodied in the Platt Amendment. It rested upon the Cuban export of sugar to the US market. This single crop accounted for the vast majority of the island’s export earnings and was shipped almost exclusively to the United States. The sugar monoculture condemned the majority of the population to backwardness, poverty and chronic unemployment.

The political and social relations that came to prevail in Cuba were bound up with the uncompleted character of the bourgeois democratic struggle for national independence. While Cuba’s semi-colonial status was among the more blatant in the world, it was by no means unique.

As the Fourth International was to warn on the eve of the Second World War: “Belated national states can no longer count upon an independent democratic development. Surrounded by decaying capitalism and enmeshed in the imperialist contradictions, the independence of a backward state inevitably will be semi-fictitious and the political regime, under the influence of internal class contradictions and external pressure, will unavoidably fall into dictatorship against the people.”[1]

Another statement, written in the same year, stressed that there was no possibility of ending imperialist oppression outside of the world socialist revolution: “The hopes of liberation of the colonial peoples are therefore bound up even more decisively than before with the emancipation of the workers of the whole world. The colonies shall be freed politically, economically and culturally, only when the workers of the advanced countries put an end to capitalist rule and set out, together with the backward peoples, to reorganize world economy on a new level, gearing it to social needs and not monopoly profits.”[2]

As we shall see, Cuba’s subsequent history has proven this thesis, albeit in the negative. Without such a united and international struggle of the working class, genuine economic, political and cultural liberation has proven impossible.

The relationship between the US and Cuba gave rise to a bourgeois political setup which was notable for its impotence, extreme corruption and frequent eruptions of violence. US domination of the economy, combined with a predominance of foreign immigrants in both the business and landowning classes, also bred a Cuban nationalism which was characterized by extreme anti-Americanism and even a xenophobic strain.

Another perspective, however, did emerge in Cuba. In 1925, the Cuban Communist Party was formed, affiliating itself to the Third International. Its most prominent figure was Julio Antonio Mella, a law student who became the leader of a university reform movement in the early 1920s and sought to turn the students to the working class.

Mella and his comrades led the struggle against the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado, whom Mella described as a “tropical Mussolini.” Jailed by the dictatorship, he was freed under popular pressure and then fled the country, traveling to the Soviet Union, Europe and finally Mexico.

Mella broke with the Communist Party in Mexico in 1929, declaring his support for Trotsky’s struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. Shortly thereafter he was assassinated.

Mella had emerged out of a broad movement of Cuban students and intellectuals seeking to change the island’s corrupt political system and its domination by US imperialism. But he renounced the prevailing

nationalist conceptions and adopted the perspective of socialist internationalism.

Stalinism was to prevent the working class from providing its own solution to Cuba’s historic problems based on such a perspective. It can be said, therefore, that Stalinism helped prepare Fidel Castro’s rise to power long before he and the Cuban Communist Party ever considered joining forces. By suppressing the perspective for which Mella and the first generation of Cuban Marxists had fought, Stalinism promoted the growth of radical petty-bourgeois nationalism.

In the first lecture at this school, David North dealt at some length with how history consisted, not merely of “what happened” and “who won”, but rather, what alternatives existed, what were the consequences of those which were taken and those which were not. What would have happened had the Left Opposition prevailed? The same question can be posed in relation to Cuba, albeit on a smaller scale.

There are limits, of course, on what we can safely say about “what might have been”. One cannot assert with any assurance, for example, that had there been a genuine communist party in Cuba, a socialist revolution would have taken place in such and such a year. We can state with certainty, however, that had there existed a genuine revolutionary party of the working class, as opposed to the corrupt political apparatus of Cuban Stalinism, the emergence of the specific tendency known as Castroism would have been impossible.

In the wake of the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist Party in Cuba, the country passed through a profound revolutionary crisis. A nationwide insurrection erupted in 1933, forcing the dictator Machado to flee the country. The high point of this movement was a general strike by the working class, which saw the seizure of factories, sugar mills and estates.

As the general strike grew in intensity and scope, the Stalinist Cuban Communist Party, which dominated the unions, issued a back-to-work order, claiming that the strike threatened to provoke a US intervention. While the vast majority of workers ignored the order, the CP nonetheless entered into secret talks with Machado, obtaining concessions for the party in exchange for its responsible role in seeking to end the walkout.

This deal, short-lived only because of Machado’s subsequent flight into exile, was to set a pattern which the CP would follow for the next 25 years. The Stalinists continued their domination of the labor movement, while forging a series of alliances with conservative bourgeois parties and even military regimes. In the 1940s, the Stalinists entered the government of US-backed strongman, Batista.

## Castro and Castroism

With Stalinism held in contempt for its collaboration with right-wing parties and dictatorships, the rhetoric of anti-imperialism and social revolution became increasingly the monopoly of radicalized middle class nationalist elements particularly centered among the students of Havana University. It was in this hothouse environment that Fidel Castro got his start.

Born to a Spanish landowning family, Castro’s awakening to political life began as a student in a Jesuit high school. There, he came under the influence of Spanish priests who supported Franco fascism. He read all of the works of Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of the Spanish Falange and was, according to his classmates, strongly attracted to fascist ideology.

In the late 40s and early 50s Castro was involved in the activities of the armed student gangs that dominated the university. The ideology of these gangs was both nationalistic and explicitly anti-communist.

Castro entered a struggle against Batista as a member of the bourgeois Ortodoxo Party. He had stood as a candidate to the Cuban legislature in 1952, but Batista's coup of that year thwarted his parliamentary ambitions. He then began organizing a small group of followers for armed action. He led an assault on the Moncada army barracks in July 1953. All of the 200 participants were either killed or jailed.

Castro's actions were not unique. Throughout this period, followers of various parties and petty-bourgeois factions carried out attacks on garrisons, assassination attempts and even the seizure of Batista's palace. There is little in Castro's political statements during the period leading up to the 1959 revolution to differentiate him from the run-of-the-mill politics of anti-Batista Cuban nationalism. His most famous speech, "History will absolve me," prepared in his defense at the trial on the Moncada assault, consisted of denunciations of the dictatorship's repression and a list of fairly mild democratic reforms.

Following a brief jail sentence, Castro went to Mexico, from where, at the end of 1956, he organized a landing of some 80 armed men. Like Moncada, the landing was a catastrophe with barely a dozen surviving the first encounters with Batista's repressive forces. Yet, barely two years later Castro was to take power.

Power literally fell into the hands of Castro's guerrillas because there existed no other credible political force on the island.

This political vacuum was a function, above all, of the absence of any revolutionary leadership in the Cuban working class. Whatever the limitations of Castro's reformism, his social policies were far more radical than those put forward by the Stalinists. Moreover, his armed actions, as limited as they were, won wide popular support at a time when the Cuban Stalinists were seen as accomplices of the dictatorship.

Castro's original intentions were to reach an accommodation with the US. On his first trip to the United States, four months after coming to power, Castro declared the following; "I have stated in a clear and definitive manner that we are not communists. The doors are open to private investments that contribute to the development of industry in Cuba. It is absolutely impossible for us to make progress if we do not reach an understanding with the United States."

Castro's movement, however, had committed itself to a limited agrarian reform as well as social measures to benefit the Cuban people. In its first months it had decreed a redistribution of unused land, a reduction in rents, wage increases and various measures expanding education and health care.

Washington would have none of it.

The US sought to discipline Castro with naked economic pressure. In a spiraling conflict with the Cuban regime, the US cut Cuba's sugar export quota, its principal economic lifeline and then refused to provide it with oil.

The Cuban regime responded with nationalizations, first of US property, then Cuban-owned enterprises, and a turn to the Soviet bureaucracy for assistance.

US foreign policy was rigidly ideological and vindictive. Britain had handled similar developments in a quite different way. African leaders like Nkrumah, Kaunda and Kenyatta were cultivated despite their radical and even "socialist" rhetoric, thereby preserving British imperialism's influence and interests in the region.

Ironically, US arrogance and stupidity has proven to be one of the central pillars of Castro's rule over the past 40 years. They have allowed him to pose as the embodiment of Cuban nationalism and to cast any opposition as a tool of Yankee imperialism.

Along with the turn to Moscow, Castro forged an alliance with the Cuban Stalinists. This move was hailed by the Pabloites, and the petty-bourgeois left in general, as a further indication of the revolution's radicalization and its socialist character. It was nothing of the sort. As we have seen, Cuba's Popular Socialist Party, as the Stalinists were then

known, was a thoroughly reactionary and discredited political force. It represented part of the existing bourgeois political setup in Cuba, having faithfully served even the Batista regime.

Having found himself unexpectedly catapulted into power, Castro turned to the PSP out of necessity. He had neither a party, a program nor even a real army. The Cuban Stalinists provided him with an apparatus and an ideology through which he could rule.

Castro subsequently would reinterpret his own political past, declaring that he had become a "Marxist-Leninist" long before the Batista coup, though "not quite" a communist. All of his political adventures, from his days with the armed anti-communist gangs on the university to his campaign as a Congressional candidate for a bourgeois party, were recast as mere tactical initiatives aimed at preparing the conditions for a socialist revolution.

What was it that Castro, as well as other left bourgeois nationalists, found in "Marxism-Leninism"? Clearly, they were not seeking a scientific perspective to guide the struggle of the working class for its own social and political emancipation. At the same time it was more than just a pretense aimed at winning support from Moscow.

They saw the Marxism-Leninism they learned from the Stalinists as a policy which promoted the use of the state to effect desired changes in the social order. They also found in it a justification for their own unrestricted control over this state, ruling through an omnipotent "revolutionary party" headed by an infallible and irreplaceable national leader. It should be recalled that Chiang kai shek also modeled his party, the Kuomintang, on what he learned from Stalinism.

### **The myth of guerrillaism**

Like virtually all the nationalist regimes and tendencies that emerged in the postwar period, Castroism has rested on a set of myths concerning its own origins and development. Such mythologizing is inevitable, given the class character of these movements, resting as they do upon the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie, while claiming to represent the interests of the oppressed masses.

After coming to power, Castro and his followers portrayed their victory as the exclusive outcome of the armed struggle waged by the guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra mountains: a military victory over imperialism and the native bourgeoisie won by a small force through sheer will and determination. As Che Guevara was to write, barely a month after the toppling of the Batista dictatorship:

"We have demonstrated that a small group of men who are determined, supported by the people, and without fear of dying... can overcome a regular army... There is another lesson for our brothers in [Latin] America, economically in the same agrarian category as ourselves, which is that we must make agrarian revolutions, fight in the fields, in the mountains, and from here take the revolution to the cities, not try to make it in the latter.."

This conception, which became the official explanation of the Cuban revolution, represented a radical distortion of events. In the course of Batista's six years in power, some 20,000 Cubans lost their lives at the hands of the regime. Of these, 19,000 were killed in Cuba's cities. Acts of sabotage, political strikes and other forms of resistance, the majority of them outside the control of Castro's July 26th movement, were widespread and ultimately provided the principal impetus for the regime's downfall.

Castro's guerrillas amounted to, at most, a few thousand men. There were no conclusive military battles and the largest engagement involved no more than 200 guerrillas. Batista lost the support both of the Cuban

bourgeoisie—a substantial section of which backed Castro—and Washington, which imposed an arms embargo on his regime. Deprived of this support it rapidly disintegrated.

Within Cuba, this myth of Castro's guerrillas defeating both US imperialism and the native ruling classes through sheer audacity and military prowess served a very definite political purpose. It justified the consolidation of a regime that placed all the reigns of state power incontestably in Castro's own hands.

The myth developed by Castro and Guevara was to be exported with catastrophic results. The so-called Cuban road was promoted throughout Latin America as the only viable form of revolutionary struggle. Thousands of Latin American youth were led to the slaughter by the promise that all that was required to overthrow governments and end social oppression was courage and a few guns.

Guevara's most well-known writing, "Guerra de Guerrillas" or guerrilla warfare, served as a handbook for this doomed strategy. It summed up what he described as the three great lessons of the Cuban experience for the "mechanics of revolutionary movements in America":

- Popular forces can win a war against the army.
- It is not necessary for all conditions to be present to make a revolution; the insurrectional foco [term for guerrilla unit] can create them.
- 3. In the underdeveloped Americas the terrain of the armed struggle must be primarily the countryside.[3]

What little political analysis these writings contained was radically false. Latin America's path of development had been capitalist for many years. The essential foundation of oppression in Latin America was not, as Guevara claimed, *Latifundia* - that is the concentration of land in the hands of a tiny minority - but rather capitalist relations of wage labor and profit. Even as these works were being written, the continent was undergoing major structural changes that were further proletarianizing the population and leading to massive migration from the rural areas to the cities.

None of this was analyzed. Revolutionary preparation was reduced to the impressionistic process of picking the appropriate rural arena for guerrilla war. Those who followed this advice ended up trapped in jungles and backland, where they were condemned to one-on-one combat with the Latin American armies.

What emerges again and again in Guevara's politics is the rejection of the working class as a revolutionary class and contempt for the ability of the workers and oppressed masses to become politically conscious and carry out their own struggle for liberation.

While he proposed the countryside as the only possible venue for armed struggle, it was not a matter of mobilizing the peasantry on social demands. On the contrary, Che's conception was one based on the utilization of violence in order to "oblige the dictatorship to resort to violence, thereby unmasking its true nature as the dictatorship of the reactionary social classes." In other words, the aim of the guerrilla band was to provoke repression against the peasantry, who would supposedly respond by supporting the struggle against the government.

For such a struggle, neither theory nor politics were required, much less an active intervention in the struggles of the working class and oppressed masses. As Guevara set about to build guerrilla groups in Latin America, he insisted that they exclude all political controversy and discussion. Unity was to be based solely on an agreement on the tactic of "armed struggle".

### **The fiasco of Guevarism**

The results were predictably disastrous. It was in his native Argentina

where Che set up one of the first guerrilla groups, under the leadership of the journalist Jorge Masetti. In his biography of Che, Anderson provides a particularly chilling account of this fiasco. The guerrillas never saw combat. Some became lost and apparently starved in the wilderness. Others fell into the hands of the police. Before the decimation of the group, however, Masetti had ordered the execution of three of its members for alleged disciplinary infractions. The author cites one of the survivors of this debacle, who notes that all three of the condemned men were Jewish. It turned out that Masetti, before his alignment with Castroism, had been a member of an extreme right-wing nationalist and anti-Semitic organization in Argentina.

Che's own group in Bolivia came to a similar end. What is most noteworthy about his activities there was his complete indifference to the social and political situation in the country itself. The tin miners, the most powerful force in the Bolivian revolution of 1951, were engaged in strikes and confrontations with the army in the months preceding Che's arrival in the country. In his diary he merely noted these events as part of the scenic backdrop to his own activity. He had no perspective or policy to present to the Bolivian workers. As for the Bolivian peasantry, its reaction to the initiation of armed struggle was not to back the guerrillas but rather to turn them in to the military.

In Bolivia, the Castroites had counted on the support of the pro-Moscow Communist Party. This support was never forthcoming and many have blamed the Stalinists and the Moscow bureaucracy itself for condemning the guerrillas to total isolation and perhaps even providing US intelligence with information on Che's whereabouts.

This is plausible. The secretary general of the Bolivian CP, Monje, was apparently a KGB asset who moved to permanent residence in Moscow shortly after Guevara's death. One thing that emerges from Castaneda's biography is the extraordinary domination of all of the principal Communist Parties of Latin America by such figures, in many cases men who had a direct role in Trotsky's assassination in 1940. He also establishes, through formerly secret documents from the Soviet archives, how these parties were funded through direct subsidies from Moscow. The Soviet bureaucracy was financing reliable political agencies whose purpose was to further its own quest for peaceful coexistence with Washington.

But in the end one is left with the fact that such a betrayal was not really that necessary. The idea that a revolution would be made by bringing less than two dozen armed men into a region where they had no political antecedents, no support or even a worked out program and perspective to win such support, was doomed from the outset. It is a measure of the pathetic character of this adventure that in his final days, surrounded by the Bolivian army, Guevara was planning to appeal for international support... by addressing letters to Bertrand Russell and Jean Paul Sartre.

### **Cuba and the Fourth International**

The Cuban revolution proved to be a crucial turning point in the history of the Fourth International.

After leading the struggle against Pabloism in 1953, the American section, the Socialist Workers Party, reunified with the main Pabloite tendency led by Ernest Mandel a decade later. The reunification was based primarily on their common assessment of Castroism and the role of petty-bourgeois nationalism. They determined, based on the nationalization of the bulk of the productive forces in Cuba, that it had become a workers state. Furthermore, they advanced the perspective that Castroism could become an international tendency, giving rise to a new revolutionary leadership of the world working class.

This perspective had implications reaching far beyond Cuba. As Trotsky had pointed out in relation to the debate over the definition of the Soviet state in 1939-1940, behind every sociological definition lies a historical prognosis. Bound up with the designation of Cuba as a workers' state was a break with the entire historical and theoretical conception of the socialist revolution developed from Marx onwards.

In Cuba, power had fallen into the hands of a guerrilla army which was clearly of a petty-bourgeois nationalist character, without any serious ties to the workers. The workers themselves had played no significant role in the formation of the new regime, nor had they established any means of exerting democratic control over the state once it was formed.

To designate such a regime as a "workers state" had immense ramifications. It meant abandoning the entire struggle waged by the Marxist movement for the political and organizational independence of the working class. Instead, it indicated that the path to socialism lay through subordinating the working class to the nationalist leaderships. It would be the Castroites, the guerrilla armies and other nationalists rooted in the petty-bourgeoisie who would lead the socialist revolution, not the working class, educated and organized by parties of the Fourth International. That was the central historical prognosis flowing from the sociological definition of a Cuban workers state put forward by the Pabloites.

The perspective elaborated by the SWP's Joseph Hansen in relation to Cuba was founded upon a gross vulgarization of Marxism. He took as his point of departure the previous decision by the Trotskyist movement to use the highly conditional and somewhat makeshift definition of "deformed workers state" in describing China and the Eastern European buffer states.

In these earlier discussions, the SWP had placed the emphasis on the adjective "deformed", to indicate that these states were historically unviable. They had opposed Pablo's attempt to use this definition as a means of endowing Stalinism with a revolutionary potential.

Hansen, however, in an even cruder fashion than Pablo, set out to demonstrate how Cuba met a series of abstract criteria—above all economic nationalization—which supposedly placed it in the category of workers state.

The working class had not made the revolution, and it exercised no control over the state apparatus in the revolution's aftermath. But these facts were taken merely as a few more normative criteria the Cuban revolution had failed to meet, demonstrating that progress was still to be made, and that uncritical support was all the more necessary.

As Hansen wrote at the time: "The Cuban government has not yet instituted democratic proletarian forms of power as workers, soldiers and peasants councils. However, as it has moved in a socialist direction it has likewise proved itself to be democratic in tendency. It did not hesitate to arm the people and set up a popular militia. It has guaranteed freedom of expression to all groupings that support the revolution. In this respect it stands in welcome contrast to the other non-capitalist states, which have been tainted with Stalinism.

"If the Cuban revolution were permitted to develop freely, its democratic tendency would undoubtedly lead to the early creation of proletarian democratic forms adapted to Cuba's own needs. One of the strongest reasons for vigorously supporting the revolution, therefore, is to give the maximum possibility for this tendency to operate." [4]

Cuban reality was quite different from the rosy scenario painted by Hansen. The Cuban Trotskyists, for example, were ruthlessly repressed, their leaders jailed and their press smashed. The island has long held one of the largest number of political prisoners of any country in the world, not a few of them Castro's former comrades in the July 26 movement.

From a theoretical standpoint, the most deceptive aspect of Hansen's assessment was his suggestion that, if given the opportunity, the Castro regime would "institute democratic proletarian forms of power"; i.e.,

workers councils or, to use the term forged in the Russian revolution, soviets.

Such organs of workers power, however, are not instituted or granted from above by a regime created by the petty-bourgeois nationalists. Such institutions, whether created by Castro, Gaddafi or Saddam Hussein, are never more than window dressing for a bonapartist regime. Genuine workers councils or soviets can be created only by the workers themselves, as a means of organizing the masses, overthrowing capitalism and establishing a new proletarian state power.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not hand soviets down to the workers after seizing power. Rather, they led the struggle for power through these organs that the Russian proletariat had created itself, based on the development of its class struggle and the growth of political class consciousness produced by the protracted intervention of the Russian Marxists.

The Pabloites adopted the position that Castro's nationalizations, and his self-proclamation as a Marxist-Leninist, constituted the confirmation of the Permanent Revolution.

In reality, Cuba, like so many other oppressed countries in the course of the decades following the Second World War, provided a confirmation of Permanent Revolution, but in the negative. That is, where the working class lacked a revolutionary party, and therefore was incapable of providing leadership to the masses of oppressed, representatives of the national bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois nationalists were able to step in and impose their own solution. Nasser, Nehru, Peron, Ben Bella, Sukharno, the Baathists and, in a later period, the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, were all examples of this process. In virtually all of these cases nationalizations were also carried out.

In a document sent by the Socialist Labour League to the SWP in 1961, the British Trotskyists sharply criticized Hansen's adulation of the petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships.

"It is not the job of Trotskyists to boost the role of such nationalist leaders," they stated. "They can command the support of the masses only because of the betrayal of leadership by the Social Democracy and particularly Stalinism, and in this way they become buffers between imperialism and the masses of workers and peasants. The possibility of economic aid from the Soviet Union often enables them to strike a harder bargain with the imperialists, even enables more radical elements among the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaders to attack imperialist holdings and gain further support from the masses. But, for us, in every case the vital question is one of the working class in these countries gaining political independence through a Marxist party, leading the poor peasantry to the building of Soviets, and recognizing the necessary connections with the international socialist revolution. In no case, in our opinion, should Trotskyists substitute for that the hope that the nationalist leadership should become socialists." [5]

Those familiar with the subsequent degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party know that this passage reads like a direct indictment of the line which Healy, Banda and Slaughter would begin pursuing barely a decade later, in relation to the PLO and various Arab regimes. This only demonstrates the acuteness of the analysis, and the fact that the revisionist attack on the Fourth International was rooted in objective class forces. Having abandoned the struggle against Pabloism, the leadership of the British section was to fall victim to the same class forces that had fatally undermined the SWP.

What was involved in proclaiming Cuba a workers state, and its revolution a new road to socialism, was the renunciation of the entire perspective of Permanent Revolution. The working class no longer had to play the leading role in the backward countries, nor was it necessary to fight for the development of socialist consciousness within this class. Instead, bands of guerrillas, basing themselves on the peasantry, could

bring about socialism without, and even in spite of, the workers.

This marked the rejection of the most essential foundation of Marxism. The struggle for socialism was separated from the proletariat. No longer was the liberation of the working class the task of the working class itself. Instead it was turned into a mute spectator of the actions of heroic guerrillas.

In considering this perspective, one can clearly grasp the class basis for the enduring infatuation of the petty-bourgeois left as a whole with Fidel Castro. What they see in Castro is the ability of the petty-bourgeoisie to dominate the working class and to play a seemingly independent role. Cuba, for them, served as proof that the leftist intellectual, the student radical or middle class protester did not have to subordinate themselves to the working class and the difficult and protracted struggle for the development of socialist consciousness among the workers. Rather, they could revolutionize society through their own spontaneous activity.

In combating this revisionist attack on Marxism, the SLL traced the dispute over Cuba to fundamental methodological questions. It demonstrated that the SWP was engaged in what Trotsky had described as the “worshipping of the accomplished fact,” that is, adapting themselves to the so-called reality determined by the existing social structure, the existing leaderships in the working class and the bourgeois forms of consciousness prevailing among the broad masses of workers and oppressed. All of these were accepted as objective, determining factors, entirely separated from the conscious struggle of the revolutionary proletarian party.

The SWP’s method was one of passive contemplation of these “facts”, and an adaptation to existing leaderships, in search of what appeared to offer the most immediate prospects for political success. Thus they became apologists for these leaderships, justifying their every action with the argument that, given the circumstances, what else could they do? These “circumstances” however, always excluded the conscious struggle of Trotskyists to mobilize the working class independently on its own socialist and internationalist program.

The SLL defended the theoretical conquests made by the Trotskyist movement in the struggle against Stalinism. It insisted that the strategic experiences of the whole imperialist epoch had demonstrated that non-working class leaderships could not carry through to completion the struggles for liberation from imperialist oppression and backwardness in the colonial and former colonial countries.

These struggles could be completed only through the conquest of power by the working class and the extension of the world socialist revolution. The principal task flowing from this analysis was the building of independent revolutionary parties of the working class, based on a struggle against all opportunist trends, particularly the Stalinists, who sought to subordinate the working class to nationalism and nationalist leaderships.

Above all, Pabloism denied that the achievement of the socialist revolution required the development of a high level of socialist political consciousness within the leading sections of the working class. The political consciousness of the workers was, in the Pabloite scheme of things, a matter of indifference. To the extent that the working class was seen as having any relation to the socialist revolution, it was merely as an objective force led and manipulated by others.

The resolution drafted by the Pabloites after reunification with the SWP spelled out the political implications of the theoretical revisions developed on the Cuban question. It stated the following: “The weakness of the enemy in the backward countries has opened the possibility of coming to power even with a blunted instrument.”[6] In other words, workers states could be established without even building parties of the working class.

In these countries, they declared, and particularly in Latin America, the conditions of mass poverty and the relative weakness of the bourgeois state structures “create situations in which the failure of one revolutionary

wave does not lead automatically to relative or even temporary social or economic stabilization. A seemingly inexhaustible succession of mass struggles continues... The weakness of the enemy offers the revolution fuller means of recovery from temporary defeats than is the case in imperialist countries.”[7]

This was a gross distortion of Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution. When Trotsky pointed to the weakness of the bourgeoisie in Tsarist Russia it was not in some kind of timeless vacuum, but rather in relation to the domination of imperialism on the one hand and the objective strength of the small, but concentrated, Russian working class on the other. The bourgeoisie was never too weak to either crush or control the petty-bourgeois democracy. It was weak in that it confronted a young proletariat with a revolutionary leadership at its head.

The Pabloites, however, had rejected the role of the industrial proletariat and had assigned the task of revolution to just such petty-bourgeois forces.

Their theory of “blunted instruments” and “inexhaustible mass struggles” was elaborated on the eve of the first in a series of US-backed coups—led by General Castelo Branco in Brazil—which were to plunge Latin America into a decade of nightmarish repression, whose shadow still hangs over the continent.

The Pabloites not only failed to prepare the working class for these events, they helped facilitate them by insisting that the revolution could be carried out by forces other than the working class and endorsing the Castroite perspective of armed actions by isolated guerrilla bands.

### **Pabloism and the crisis of leadership**

Why did Castroism become such a pole of attraction in Latin America? While the continental-wide conditions for guerrilla warfare presented by Guevara may have proven false, there was one thing that the countries shared in common. The dominant leaderships in the working class, particularly the Stalinist Communist Parties, offered no way forward under conditions of growing revolutionary crisis.

So the “new reality” which the Pabloites celebrated, the rise of a petty-bourgeois-led radical nationalist tendency like Castroism, was essentially a manifestation of the unresolved crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class itself. Yet they presented it as the solution to this crisis, disavowing the strategic aim of the Fourth International. Abandoning an independent orientation to the working class and the struggle to build up a party which could smash the bureaucracies’ domination, they reduced the role of the Fourth International to that of aiding the petty-bourgeois nationalists and Stalinists, influencing them and subtly nudging them to the left.

How was this perspective realized in practice? In 1968, the Pabloites held their Ninth Congress, in the immediate aftermath of Guevara’s Bolivian fiasco and on the eve of great class struggles in Latin America. They instructed the parties affiliated to the United Secretariat in Latin America to abandon the working class and engage in guerrilla warfare.

As the congress document stated: “Even in the case of countries where there may first occur great mobilizations of conflicts by the urban classes civil war will take varied forms, in which the principal axis for a whole period will be the rural guerrilla, a term whose principal meaning is military-geographic and which does not imply an exclusively (or even predominantly) peasant composition.”[8]

The resolution continued: “The only realistic perspective for Latin America is that of an armed struggle, which can last for many years. Technical preparation cannot be conceived of merely as an aspect of work, but rather as the fundamental aspect on an international scale and one of the fundamental aspects in those countries where even the



minimum conditions don't yet exist.”[9]

There could not have been more explicit instructions. In case anyone within the Latin American sections harbored doubts as to whether they had sufficient backing among the peasantry, or the necessary political conditions to stage an uprising in the countryside, the resolution assured them that no peasant support was necessary and that the political situation was beside the point. All that was required were “technical preparations” for armed struggle.

The result was the political liquidation and physical annihilation of the cadres led by the Pabloites in Latin America.

In Argentina, for example, the official section of the United Secretariat reconstituted itself as the ERP before formally breaking with the Pabloites. It engaged in the kidnapping of business executives for ransom, simply adding on demands for increased wages and better conditions for the workers.

What was the effect of such actions? The workers were essentially taught that it was not their role to wage the struggle to put an end to capitalism. They were merely to serve as grateful spectators, as heroic armed guerrillas did it for them.

In Chile, the workers conducted a sustained offensive, ultimately strangled by Allende's Popular Unity government whose policies paved the way for the Pinochet dictatorship. In Argentina, the Cordobazo of 1969, in which the workers of Cordoba seized control of the city, inaugurated a protracted offensive which was suppressed by the Peronists and then annihilated by the dictatorship of Videla. In Bolivia, the miners rose up repeatedly only to be subordinated by their leaderships to a supposedly nationalist and left section of the military under General Torres. Predictably, Torres soon handed power over to his more traditional colleagues who carried out the ruthless repression of the Bolivian workers.

With their turn to Castroism, the Pabloites had abandoned both the working class and the struggle to free it from the domination of the old bureaucracies. Just as Castro had supposedly confirmed Permanent Revolution, he had also rendered this crucial struggle superfluous.

The SWP's Hansen put forward this thesis with his usual cynicism and crudity, proclaiming that Castro had overcome the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism.

“Unable to blast away the Stalinist obstacle, the revolution turned back a considerable distance and took a detour. The detour has led us over some very rough ground, including the Sierra Maestra of Cuba, but it is clear that the Stalinist roadblock is now being bypassed.

“It is not necessary to turn to Moscow for leadership. This is the main lesson to be drawn from the experience in Cuba... To finally break the hypnosis of Stalinism, it became necessary to crawl on all fours through the jungles of the Sierra Maestra.”<sup>10</sup>

This conclusion had definite political implications, reaching far beyond Cuba. If one could simply “bypass the Stalinist roadblock” by means of guerrilla war led by petty-bourgeois nationalists, the difficult and protracted struggle waged by the Fourth International to break the chokehold which Stalinism maintained over the working class, was not only superfluous but counterproductive.

The net effect of this perspective was not to break, but rather strengthen, the grip of Stalinism over the workers' movement in the oppressed countries and particularly in Latin America. It helped to divert a whole generation of Latin American youth from any struggle within the working class. The turn to guerrillaism represented a boon to the Stalinists and other bureaucratic leaderships. It isolated the most revolutionary elements among the youth as well as a section of radicalized workers, thereby strengthening the bureaucracy's own grip over the workers movement.

In the end, the Pabloites' adaptation to petty-bourgeois nationalism helped ensure that the working class had no revolutionary leadership as it entered the major class struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The

guerrilla adventures they promoted, gave the military and imperialism the pretext for imposing dictatorship. Thus, this revisionist tendency played a crucial role in preparing the bloodiest defeats ever suffered by the workers of Latin America.

### **Balance sheet of guerrillaism**

What became of the Guevarist-Castroite movements that the Pabloites proclaimed as the new instruments of the socialist revolution? To trace their concrete evolution is to lay bare the class character of these movements from their origins.

The FALN of Venezuela was one of the principal guerrilla movements of the 1960s, formed with Cuban support. Let us cite a statement by one of the leaders of this movement during that period.

“When we speak of the liberation of Venezuela we mean the liberation of all Latin America; we do not recognize frontiers in Latin America. Our frontiers are ideological frontiers. We interpret international solidarity in a truly revolutionary way, and we are therefore committed to fight, to fight imperialism until it no longer exists; we are committed not to lay down our arms until North American imperialism in particular is reduced to impotence.”

The author of these lines was Teodoro Petkoff. Not only did he lay down his arms, he has since become Venezuela's Minister of Planning and the chief official responsible for implementing IMF austerity programs. From proclaiming continental solidarity and a struggle to the death against Yankee imperialism, Petkoff is now engaged in slashing wages and privatizing state enterprises with the aim of successfully competing with other capitalist economies in the region for transnational investment. He is expected to emerge as the leading candidate in this year's presidential election in Venezuela.

His case is representative. In Uruguay, the Tupamaro guerrillas now form part of the Frente Amplio, a bourgeois electoral front which administers the disintegrating social conditions in the capital of Montevideo. The M-19 movement worked out an arrangement with the Colombian government, that not only assured their leaders posts in parliament, but allowed their members to trade their weapons for small business loans.

In the early 1980s, the Castro regime and its supporters claimed that Central America, with the taking of power by the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and the eruption of civil war in El Salvador, offered a fresh vindication of their perspective.

But what became of all these movements? The Sandinistas, the FMLN in El Salvador, the URNG in Guatemala, all joined in pacts with the very forces responsible for the murder of hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants. Castro helped broker these pacts in the Contadora and Esquipulas negotiations which consolidated power in the hands of US-backed factions of the bourgeoisie, while turning the cadres of the so-called liberation movements into parliamentary deputies, military officers and policemen in the new regimes. All of these groups have become divided into various factions, denouncing each other, with great justification, for political betrayal and financial corruption.

Meanwhile, the masses of the region confront conditions of poverty and oppression which are as bad or worse than those which gave rise to the revolutionary upheavals in the region 20 years ago. The net effect of these Castroite-influenced petty-bourgeois nationalist movements was to sow demoralization among a layer of the more militant workers, youth and peasants.

## Cuba today

What of Cuba itself? What is the end result of the new road to socialism which both the Castro regime and the Pabloite revisionists proclaimed 35 years ago?

For 30 years the island survived thanks to huge subsidies from the Moscow bureaucracy. According to both Castro's supporters and US estimates, economic subsidies from the Soviet Union to Cuba amounted to somewhere between \$3 and \$5 billion annually. The mechanism for this aid was the purchasing, by the Soviet bloc, of Cuban agricultural products, particularly sugar, at above world market prices—as much as 12 times as high—and the sale of petroleum at below market prices. Based on this arrangement, Cuba reached the point of buying sugar from the neighboring Dominican Republic, and reselling the oil on the world market to obtain hard currency.

Dependence on Soviet subsidies ultimately had the effect of solidifying Cuba's monoculture in sugar, the historic foundation of its backwardness and oppression. Just as before the 1959 revolution, Cuba's exports, 83 percent of which went to the USSR and Eastern Europe, consisted of sugar, tobacco, nickel, fish and a few other agricultural commodities. From the Soviet bloc it imported manufactured consumer goods and machinery, not to mention a large share of its food.

No amount of tinkering or abrupt changes in economic policy dictated by the infallible 'lider maximo' Fidel Castro changed this essential relationship. In the end, the substantial reforms won by the Cuban people in the areas of health, education and nutrition were sustained through these subsidies. Now that the regime is turning to foreign direct investment, the reforms are being systematically whittled away.

Castro entered into a Faustian bargain with the Soviet bureaucracy, in which he functioned as a pawn in US-Soviet relations in return for Soviet subsidies. Inevitably, the devil has come to collect his due.

Dissolution of the USSR spelled economic catastrophe for Cuba. The Castro regime's response has been to promote increased foreign investment and to allow the emergence of a growing social stratification within Cuba itself.

Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina explained Cuba's policy recently in an interview with the state-run newspaper *Granma*: "In Cuba what is taking place is an economic opening with full guarantees for foreign investors... This opening is strategic and is widening and deepening with every day..."

"Mitsubishi Motors, Castrol, Unilever, Sherrit Gordon, Grupo Sol, Total, Melia Hotels, Doms, ING Bank, Rolex, DHL, Lloyds, Canon, Bayer, these are all names of success in the universe of business and they are in Cuba. Some of these firms have the greatest capital in the world and they have placed their confidence in us.

"Ease of investing capital, security and respect, guarantees of profit repatriation, availability of personnel with a high level of excellence, accommodation, desire to get ahead, seriousness in negotiations and loyalty of their Cuban partners are some of the elements which those who have decided to join with Cuba appreciate most..."[11]

Though he didn't say it in *Granma*, the point is undoubtedly made to these investors in private that in Cuba they can obtain some of the cheapest labor in the hemisphere and are guaranteed a strike-free environment by a Stalinist-trained police state.

The Castro regime habitually claims that foreign capitalist investment has been sought for the purpose of saving the "social conquests" of the Cuban revolution. The reality is that the Castro regime, like bourgeois regimes throughout the former colonial world, is engaged in marketing cheap labor to the multinationals.

In the case of Cuba, this is done in an extremely direct and centralized form. Cuban labor is contracted out to the foreign corporations for hard

currency paid to the Cuban government. The government hires the needed workers and then pays them a fraction of this amount in the form of pesos, the local currency. The foreign companies retain full discretion in firing workers.

The growth of social inequality is fed by a burgeoning dollar economy. The greatest source of foreign reserves today is the cash sent by exiles based largely in the US to their relatives in Cuba. What can one say of a "revolution" which is economically dependent on those whom it recently denounced as counter-revolutionary "gusanos," or worms?

Other hard currency filters in through the growth of the tourist industry, which the Castro regime has made the centerpiece of its economic planning. The result is what some in Cuba have described as touristic apartheid. New hotels, restaurants, stores have been erected, reserved solely for foreigners, with ordinary Cubans barred. Prostitution is rampant. The immense majority of the population lives under conditions of poverty.

The Castro regime blames all of the island's economic problems on the US embargo. Without question the US policy is a brutal and irrational exercise of imperialist power against a small, oppressed country. But this policy has been in effect for 35 years. In the meantime, Cuba had economic relations with virtually every other major country in the world.

Cuba's crisis is fundamentally the outcome of the bourgeois character of the revolution itself. It failed to resolve any of the historic problems of Cuban society. Rather, the contradictions were covered over with massive subsidies from the Soviet bureaucracy.

Few countries have seen such a massive exodus of refugees. In the first years of the revolution these consisted largely of the bourgeoisie and more privileged layers of the middle class. But those who have fled on rafts and inner tubes in the 1980s and 1990s are motivated by the same forces which sent thousands fleeing from Haiti, Mexico and other countries: the desire to escape hunger and oppression.

On top of these conditions rests a regime that stifles the aspirations of the masses of Cuban working people. Castro rules through a political dictatorship organized along military lines. The essential institution of the state is the armed forces which runs most of Cuba's economic enterprises.

Castro is enshrined in the Cuban constitution as president for life. To oppose him is therefore not merely "counter-revolutionary," but unconstitutional. He is both head of state and head of government as well as first secretary of the Communist Party and commander-in-chief of the military. In short, all power is concentrated in his hands and he imposes his personal dictat over every significant decision. With Castro now in his 70s, succession is becoming an increasingly pressing question. His brother Raul occupies all secondary posts in the government, military and party.

To the extent that Cuba was identified with socialism—something promoted by both the imperialists on the one hand and the Castro regime and its petty-bourgeois left supporters on the other—it has had the effect of discrediting the conception of a socialist alternative to capitalism, particularly in Latin America.

## Summation

The First International under Marx adopted the slogan that "The liberation of the workers shall be the task of the workers themselves." That is, socialism was, in the final analysis, the self-determination of the working class. It could not be granted to the workers or won for the workers by some other class force acting on their behalf. It could be the product only of the conscious struggle of the working class, democratically organized as a class for itself, fighting to change society on its behalf and that of all humanity.

The International Committee defended this perspective against all the fashionable theories of the 1960s and 1970s which rejected the working class and claimed to have discovered other, more revolutionary, vehicles providing convenient shortcuts to socialism. Thirty odd years later, there is nothing left of these theories. The struggle undertaken by the ICFI has been powerfully vindicated by history.

We should recall what Joseph Hansen said about the intransigent struggle of the International Committee and its refusal to bow before Castroism. This stand, he warned, would be “political suicide in Latin America.” What really happened? Pabloite revisionism and its support for Castroism helped to lead a generation of radicalized youth into suicidal adventures for which the working class paid the biggest price.

What would have been the effect if, instead of adapting themselves to Castroism, the forces which fell under the influence of Pabloism had subjected the politics of petty-bourgeois nationalism to a relentless criticism?

Certainly the result could have proven to be one of temporary isolation, at least from the movements dominated by the petty-bourgeoisie. But in the process they would have educated the most advanced sections of workers and youth. Through this struggle, a leadership could have been prepared capable of mobilizing the working class in revolutionary struggle. Instead of falling under the domination of military dictatorships which helped achieve a temporary restabilization of world capitalism, Latin America could have given a powerful impetus to the world socialist revolution.

The central lessons we must draw from this strategic experience concern the critical responsibilities of Marxists. Their task is not that of discovering and adapting themselves to some other forces who will spontaneously carry out the socialist revolution. Rather, it is to build independent revolutionary parties of the working class, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, that base themselves on implacable theoretical firmness and tell the working class the truth.

The objective conditions in Latin America and internationally are maturing to the point where the struggle undertaken by the Trotskyist movement will intersect with the revolutionary movement of millions. The lessons this movement has assimilated from the struggle for socialism in the 20th century, will become decisive for its realization in the 21st.

#### Notes

[1] Leon Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), p. 202

[2] *Documents of the Fourth International: The Formative Years 1933-40* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), p. 394

[3] Ernesto Che Guevara, *La Guerra de Guerrillas*, (La Habana:Talleres de INRA, 1961)

[4] Joseph Hansen, *Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution: The Trotskyist View* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), p.75

[5] Cliff Slaughter, ed., *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism: A Documentary History*(London: New Park Publications, 1974), vol. 3, *The Socialist Workers Party's Road Back to Pabloism*, p. 65

[6] *Ibid*, vol. 4, *The International Committee Against Liquidationism*, p. 199

[7] *Ibid*

[8] United Secretariat 9th Congress documents

[9] *Ibid*

[10] Joseph Hansen, *Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution: The Trotskyist View* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978) p. 265

[11] *Granma*, 16 November, 1994



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