

Cuba sees largest protests in decades as economy deteriorates and COVID-19 pandemic worsens

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12 July 2021

Thousands of Cubans engaged in mass demonstrations on Sunday in and near Havana and other cities throughout the country in the largest wave of protests on the island since 1994. Like the earlier *Maleconazo*, the current wave of protests has been driven by years of economic hardship, with the COVID-19 pandemic serving as a trigger event to expose the rotten foundations of the Cuban government's petty-bourgeois nationalist perspective.

Protests appear to have begun in San Antonio de los Baños, a municipality southwest of the capital. However, as videos circulated on social media, they quickly spread elsewhere, including Havana, and most of the country's major cities, including Santiago de Cuba, Santa Clara, Matanzas, Cienfuegos and Holguín, as well as numerous smaller towns such as Palma Soriano.

While some protesters advanced slogans including "Freedom" and "Down with the dictatorship," others called attention to increasing hunger and food shortages, and in some cases demanded COVID-19 vaccines and other medical supplies as cases of the Delta variant flare. Protesters also looted some "dollar stores," widely hated as symbols of inequality where those with access to dollars are able to purchase imported items at inflated prices.

There were numerous clashes with police, as officials carried out arrests of protesters and deployed tear gas and other repressive measures, in some cases leading protesters to overturn police cars or pelt them with rocks and concrete. In a bid to shut down the protests, the government has been intermittently cutting off internet access.

Among those arrested were Frank García Hernández and others associated with the "Comunistas." García Hernández was the conference organizer of the "International Academic Event Leon Trotsky" in May 2019, and played a central role in barring the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) from participating in the conference, which was attended by Pabloites and other representatives of the pseudo-left.

Although there is much confusion among the protesters, for the most part they appear to be driven by the same factors that are bringing workers and youth elsewhere into the streets: the increasingly unbearable conditions of life and stifling political repression. The motivations for the Cuban protests are similar to those behind the protracted mass demonstrations in Colombia, which have been far more brutally repressed, but given a fraction of the attention by the US media.

Already difficult due to a drop-off in subsidies from Venezuela, itself in deep crisis, economic conditions over the past year have deteriorated even further as the COVID-19 pandemic caused international tourism to evaporate and even affected the sugar harvest, which was the smallest since 1908. Officially, the economy shrank 11 percent, the biggest contraction since 1993.

As a result of the decline in hard currency earnings, imports to the island have fallen 40 percent, leading to pervasive shortages and widespread anger over the hours-long daily queuing that has become necessary to obtain basic commodities.

There is also increasing anger now over the government's response to the pandemic, which has seen deaths per day skyrocket and a near collapse of the health system in Matanzas as the Delta variant has taken hold. As Cuba saw 6,422 new cases, Francisco Durán, national director of epidemiology, said during a Friday video conference, "I don't have to say that this is the worst day for Cuba since the start of the pandemic."

Just a few days later, Cuba saw a record 6,923 cases on Sunday, and 47 deaths, in a country of just under 11.2 million, with cases basically doubling over the previous week. Having seen only 12,200 cases in all of 2020, the island has now recorded over 232,000 so far in 2021, while deaths have risen from 146 to a total of 1,579. There are now over 32,000 active cases in the country.

Over half the recent cases have occurred in the province of

Matanzas, whose famous Varadero beach resort reopened to international tourism in November of last year. Public health policy has been subordinated to economic considerations, just as they have been elsewhere, including the United States. With the surge in case numbers, the province has run out of hospital beds, leading the government to “hospitalize” patients at home.

Appearing on television Sunday, Cuba’s President Miguel Díaz-Canel referred to these problems, admitting, “Now, we have to implement domiciliary hospitalization in the wake of insufficient capacities in a group of Cuban provinces,” and urged Cubans to “have a more direct and responsible participation.”

Cuba’s vaccination efforts have been slow, with only around 3 million Cubans having received at least one dose of vaccine and just 15 percent fully vaccinated. Rather than import foreign-produced vaccines, Cuba has developed its own vaccines, named Soberana-02 and Abdala, which require multiple doses, using older vaccine development technologies. A Cuban study indicates the Abdala vaccine, which requires 3 doses two weeks apart, is around 92 percent effective, but the study has not been published, and was carried out prior to the predominance of the Delta variant.

In an attempt to echo Fidel Castro’s own personal appeal to protesters to back down in 1994, Díaz-Canel visited San Antonio de los Baños on Sunday after the protests and reportedly entered several homes to take questions from residents, many of whom were reportedly fed up with widespread power outages.

On television Monday, Díaz-Canel made clear the government understood legitimate grievances were being aired by layers of the population acting independently of US-backed, “pro-democracy” figures, but claimed they were being manipulated by these forces into protesting. “We must make clear to our people that one can be dissatisfied, that’s legitimate, but we must be able to see clearly when we’re being manipulated,” he said.

Elsewhere, Díaz-Canel stated, “As if pandemic outbreaks had not existed all over the world, the Cuban-American mafia, paying very well on social networks to influencers and YouTubers, has created a whole campaign and has called for demonstrations across the country.” Following the protests, Díaz-Canel called for “Revolutionaries to the streets” in support of the government and said, “The order to combat has been given,” and perhaps more ominously, “We are prepared to do anything.”

This earned a rebuke from Julie Chung, Acting Assistant US Secretary of State for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, who tweeted, “We are deeply concerned by ‘calls to combat’ in #Cuba. We stand by the Cuban people’s right

for peaceful assembly. We call for calm and condemn any violence.”

Miami Mayor Francis Suarez called for US military intervention, “to protect the Cuban people from a bloodbath,” while the Biden administration issued an official statement of staggering hypocrisy calling for the Cuban government to respect the Cuban people’s “right of peaceful protest and the right to freely determine their own future” and to “serve their needs at this vital moment rather than enriching themselves.”

One of the more cynical calls has been for the opening of a “humanitarian channel” for medicine and supplies, which has been supported on social media using the hash-tag #SOSCuba. The call for humanitarian aid in this way recalls the attempt to push a “humanitarian convoy” across the Francisco de Paula Santander bridge connecting Colombia and Venezuela in 2019. US puppet Juan Guaidó and the right-wing opposition in Venezuela had hoped the trucks laden with supplies provided by the CIA-linked United States Agency for International Development (USAID) would provoke mass defections from the Venezuelan military and lead to popular support for ousting Maduro.

Cuban workers must reject the machinations of US imperialism and call for the release of all detained protesters. As in all countries, the only way to bring the pandemic under control and solve even the most basic social problems is for workers to take the fate of society into their own hands. The only way forward for the Cuban working class is to study the lessons of the Cuban Revolution and the whole experience of Castroism as elaborated in the analysis of the ICFI and work to establish a section of the International Committee in Cuba.



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