

Cuba's socialist renewal



By Marce Cameron

© RSP Books 2010

ISBN 978-0-9806122-5-7

Published by RSP Books, Suite 72, 65 Myrtle Street, Chippendale
NSW 2008

nationaloffice@rsp.org.au

Printed by El Faro Printing, 79 King St, Newtown NSW 2042

Contents

‘This revolution could destroy itself’	4
Radical renovation	6
Critical juncture	7
Currents of opinion	10
Storming heaven	13
Sovietisation	14
Rectification	16
Special Period	17
Vicious cycle	19
Gains of the Special Period	20
Venezuelan revolution	21
Youth	23
Post-Fidel era	25
Changes under Raul	27
Paternalism	29
Property, decentralisation and participation	30
Revolutionary optimism	32

Cuba's socialist renewal

By Marce Cameron

On New Year's Day, millions of Cuban revolutionaries and their supporters around the world celebrated one of the great historical turning points of the 20th century — the triumph of the Cuban Revolution.

When Fidel Castro's Rebel Army victory caravan entered Havana on January 8, 1959, there were scenes of joyous pandemonium. "It was one of those rare moments in history", wrote the US journalist Lee Lockwood, "when cynics became romantics, and romantics became fanatics".

That same day, a 32-year-old Fidel addressed the jubilant multitude. Somebody released white doves, one of which alighted and sat perched on Fidel's shoulder as he spoke. Many Cubans saw this as an omen that he would lead them to a better future.

Fidel, gazing into that uncertain future, reminded Cubans of the difficulties that surely lay ahead: "The tyranny has been overthrown. Our joy is immense. However, much remains to be done. We shall not deceive ourselves believing that in the future everything will be easier, because perhaps everything will be more difficult." Even in that moment of triumph, Fidel cautioned against triumphalism.

'This revolution could destroy itself'

Fast-forward nearly half a century to the Great Hall of the University of Havana on the night of November 17, 2005, and Fidel once again warned against triumphalism. He shocked his youthful audience, and the nation, by candidly revealing that up to half the revenue from fuel sales was being lost to corruption at every point along the supply chain, from the refineries to the petrol bowsers — equivalent to the salaries paid by Cuba's socialist state to the entire teaching staff of its world-class higher education sector.

Fidel gave other examples of what he described as "the general state of disorder" reigning in the country, and warned: "This country could destroy itself, this revolution could destroy itself, they [US imperialism] cannot destroy it. We could destroy it ourselves, and it would only be our fault." It was a wake-up call. Hundreds of young

social workers had already been dispatched to monitor the refineries, ride the tankers and staff the petrol stations temporarily to re-establish order.

“In this battle against vice there will be no truce for anyone. We shall be thoroughly scrupulous. We will appeal to everyone’s sense of honour. We are sure of one thing: every human being possesses a healthy dose of honour. When one looks in the mirror, one is not always the harshest of judges, even though, in my opinion, the first responsibility of a revolutionary is to be extremely severe with oneself”, he said.

Criticism of errors and weaknesses should not be limited to small circles. “We never resort to criticism on a larger scale ... We must carry out criticism and self-criticism in the class room, in the [Cuban Communist] party cells ... in the municipality and finally in the entire country.”

Reflecting on the fate of the Soviet Union, Fidel asked: “Is it that revolutions are doomed to fall apart, or that people cause revolutions to fall apart? Can either man or society prevent revolutions from collapsing? I could immediately add to this another question: Do you believe that this revolutionary socialist process can fall apart, or not? Have you ever given that some thought? Have you ever deeply reflected on it?”

Before the Special Period — the deep economic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s main trading partner, at the beginning of the 1990s — Cuba was a relatively egalitarian society after three decades of socialist revolution infused with the radical humanism of Cuba’s revolutionary tradition. Alongside universal free health care and education, across-the-board state subsidies ensured equal access to most goods and services.

Today, those same subsidies allow what Fidel called the “new rich” — a substantial minority of Cubans who can live comfortably without having to work thanks to remittances, theft from the socialist state and other illicit activities linked to the black market — to pay next to nothing for these goods and services. In effect the working people are subsidising the new rich. “Did you know that there are people who ‘earn’ forty or fifty times the amount of one of those doctors over there in the mountains of Guatemala?” Fidel asked, referring to Cuba’s international volunteer medical brigades. There were, he said, “several dozens of thousands of parasites who produce nothing” in Cuba.

The whole vast edifice of universal state subsidies would have to be dismantled, Fidel argued, in the name of social justice. “Subsidies and free services will be considered only in essentials. Medical services will be free, so will education and the like. Housing will not be free”, he suggested. “Can the country resolve its housing problem by giving away houses? And who will get them, the proletariat or the humble people? Many humble

people were given houses for free and then they sold them to the new rich. How much can the new rich spend on a house? Is this socialism?"

The elimination of subsidies would allow the state to increase salaries, pensions and student allowances, putting more money into the pockets of working people at the expense of the parasitic new rich. "[E]veryone who works for the country and the revolution will receive more. The abuses will end; many of the inequalities will disappear, as will the conditions that allowed them to exist. When there is no one left that needs to be subsidised we will have advanced considerably in our march towards a society of justice and dignity. That is what true and irreversible socialism demands", Fidel concluded.

Radical renovation

Why is a radical renovation of "the Cuban model of socialism" both necessary and urgent today? By "model" I don't mean a blueprint or a preconceived idea of how to build socialism, I mean the Cuban Revolution as it exists in the totality of its concepts, structures, methods and mentalities.

In his first major speech as acting president in July 2007, Raul Castro called for "structural and conceptual" changes. To give an example of one such conceptual change, Raul has repeatedly stressed the need to abandon the notion that social equality means egalitarianism, that is, equal access to goods and services regardless of one's labour contribution to society. This in turn implies a profound structural change: the elimination of most state subsidies and the recovery of the role of wages as a means to allocate goods and services according to the individuals' or work collectives' labour contribution.

"Socialism means social justice and equality, but equality of rights, of opportunities, not of income", Raul said in a speech to Cuba's National Assembly of People's Power on July 11, 2008. "Equality is not the same as egalitarianism. Egalitarianism is in itself a form of exploitation; exploitation of the good workers by those who are less productive and lazy." This is not a new idea but a reaffirmation of the necessity, during the transition period between capitalism and socialism, for the distribution of goods and services to be linked to the individuals' or work collectives' social contribution through their work, as the founders of scientific socialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, explained in the 19th century.

Only in a fully communist society — a remote objective for the Cuban Revolution today and conceivable only long after capitalist rule has been abolished on a world scale — could distribution conform to the communist principle "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs".

When we talk about the necessity for a radical renovation of the Cuban socialist model, we need to distinguish between the revolution's concepts, structures, methods and mentalities, on the one hand, and its ethical and political principles, on the other.

The Cuban Revolution is a collective project of individual and social liberation that strives to realise certain ethical and political principles and objectives.

Among these are international solidarity, national sovereignty, social justice and equality, participatory democracy and the ethic of “being” as opposed to the ethic of “having”, meaning that the yardstick by which an individual should be judged is not the size of one’s bank balance but one’s personal qualities and social contribution.

These core ethical and political principles have taken deep root in Cuban society, and their validity is not questioned by Cuba’s revolutionaries. “The system’s principles must be defended”, says Rafael Hernandez, editor of Cuba’s pro-revolution *Temas* magazine, “but the model itself must be transformed”. Progreso Weekly web site’s Havana bureau editor Manuel Alberto Ramy adds: “It is not a question of dismantling the system but of rebuilding it with the effective participation of all citizens, through the established institutions”.

A radical renovation of Cuba’s socialist model is necessary because much of this model is obsolete, and obsolescence brings with it the danger of stagnation and retreat. The contradictions within the existing model have accumulated to the point where the Cuban Revolution, not for the first time in its turbulent half-century, has reached a critical juncture.

Necessity combines with urgency, since the conditions for this renovation have ripened and it cannot be postponed indefinitely. In fact it is already under way. As Cuban journalist Luis Sexto observed on July 15, 2009, “Cuban society, rigid for many years, shakes off the starch that immobilised it ... [t]o change what is obsolete”.

Critical juncture

What brings the Cuban Revolution to this critical juncture? What are the material and spiritual contradictions of the revolutionary process that demand a dialectical resolution? There are many clues to this in the excerpts from Fidel’s landmark November 17, 2005, speech that I quoted earlier, and in Raul’s insistence on the need to reassert the socialist principle of distribution “to each according to their work”.

More is revealed in the following vision of a future Cuba taken from a November 2007 interview with Eliades Acosta, then head of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) culture department, with the Cubarte web site hosted by the Ministry of Culture: “We aspire to a society that talks out loud about its problems, without fear, where the media reflect life without triumphalism, where the errors are aired publicly in a search for solutions, where people can express themselves honestly, where the economy works, where the services work, where Cubans do not feel they are second-class citizens in their own country due to some measures that were indispensable in the past but that are obsolete and unsustainable today. We want a society with plenty of information, varied

information ... [so that] we can communicate with the world in a natural manner and can defend the essence of our identity and the accomplishments of the revolution.”

Respected Cuban journalist Luis Sexto, recipient of the 2009 Jose Marti national journalism award, Cuba's most prestigious, and a regular columnist for the Union of Young Communists' daily paper *Juventud Rebelde*, captured the mood of the besieged island in a September 16 commentary, “Cuba, the reasons for patience”, published on the Progreso Weekly web site:

“Today, after almost 20 years of the so-called Special Period, with its aftermath of deficiencies, shortages, equivocation, mistakes, the absence of a clear program ... The material accomplishments have deteriorated ... [and] many Cubans today suffer a disconnect between what should have been and what is. They suffer and even doubt.” Yet “they feel (rather than see) that the Revolution has been a creative enterprise and that, despite its turbulence and failings, its human and fair nucleus still harbours an opportunity for material and ethical improvement”; while “other people suffer but don't doubt”.

Cuba's revolutionaries, Sexto added, look forward to “a national, revolutionary policy that will cure the rigid slogans and arthritic mentality of our concepts by giving them flexibility and realism. Depending on the experience, change is the equivalent of survival; resistance goes through re-adaptation. Resisting also presupposes depositing our hopes in the bank of patience.”

In a December 9 commentary for Progreso Weekly titled “Clock, don't tick the hours”, Sexto expanded on these comments. I'm going to quote from these comments at length because they are a good summary and because Sexto exemplifies what could be called the “critical renovationist” current among Cuba's revolutionaries.

A professor of journalism at Havana University's Faculty of Social Communication, Sexto is also a poet, social critic and commentator. He writes about Cuba as he sees it with a rare combination of subtlety, lucidity, human warmth and a provocative, gritty realism that embraces Cuba's contradictory reality. Through his weekly column in *Juventud Rebelde*, Sexto has cultivated a loyal following among like-minded Cubans and stimulated a rich online debate.

In “Clock, don't tick the hours”, Sexto writes:

Is the country taking too long to embark on its self-renewal and concretise the changes in concept and structure that, when announced as immediate tasks, were praised as the most revolutionary proposals to date?

Because I write from Cuba and am committed to the fundamental ideas originally expressed in 1959, I have a flexible and open mind ... That is why I continue to believe that the situation in Cuba today cannot be simplified in the media propaganda that pictures Cuba as

a “hell”, combining unethical equations and science-fiction formulas. Nor can it be defined in the unctuous, unilateral speech that, when defending Cuba, describes it as an advanced station of paradise on Earth ...

I'm inclined to suggest that, because of a certain impatience spurred by reality itself, the most usual perception in Cuba considers the concretion of that “revolution within the revolution”, of “changing what needs to be changed”, a bit belated. But is it true that everything stays the same in Cuba? Is the nation dull and cold? Tired? Enthused? Or failed?

“No”, would answer many who, from retirement or administrative work, remember the feat that prompted them to become part of a unique historic process and share the glory of educating, laying down roads, building schools, factories, above all, justice and winning brotherly wars. All this while resisting invasions, sabotage and blockades conceived, paid for and fuelled by the United States, where one of its cities [Miami] ... became the capital of the counter-revolution in Latin America.

“Something is always happening” in Cuba, even though the decision makers may find it inconvenient to insist on what is agreed to, approved and applied. One has to be very sharp to bring together, as pieces of a single strategy, diverse events related to the essence of the Cuban system. The decrees about land and its multiple usages, and the decision to pay wages according to output confirm the willingness to dismantle the rigidity of the economy and Cuban society.

We must also take into account the adjustments that tend to eliminate egalitarian paternalism and productive entities that are inefficient and ineffectual, such as many [agricultural] Basic Units of Cooperative Production ...

Silence long ago became a “social pact” that localises the extent of measures and debates, because the defensive scheme that tries to freeze any internal movement that threatens national unity and consequently facilitates an opening to Washington's never denied and never eased hostility is very old ...

[T]he enemies of socialism gather mostly in [the US]. Some also live on the island. I dismiss the so-called “dissidents”, who make a rascally living behind the policies sponsored from abroad. What I mean is that, sometimes unconsciously, the boxed-in mentality of some revolutionaries tries to slam the brakes on dialectical change, in the belief that everything done since 1959 is perfect.

The rectification or readjustment of Cuba's socio-economic organisation, within the scheme of a united society, scares some, because it involves distancing ourselves from the discredited dogma. And it horrifies others, because it implies a hierarchical de-verticalisation of society to allow democratic horizontality, and that might eliminate authoritarian methods and privileges copied from extinct doctrines.

That circumstance, so delicate for those who try to sew a torn shirt that could rip in other places, explains, in my opinion, the correctness of the slow pace exemplified by the postponement of the Sixth Communist Party Congress, without whose approval little could be remade in the structural aspect, and the still undetermined date of the party conference, the stage previous to the congress.

However, even within the lack of definition, I believe I see that in Cuba there is a considerable tendency among popular, intellectual and political sectors to advocate an urgent socialist restructuring that would not imply concessions to the United States or disloyalty to the basic principles of the revolution ...

Is Cuba late in its reclaimed and planned socialist renewal? ... I share the common criterion: time, our ally, could become our main enemy, both if we hasten and if we postpone the solution by waiting for a more benign climate. In politics, arriving early is bad; arriving late is even worse. Although, as [a] poet accurately wrote, perhaps when we think that we have all the answers, all the questions will change.

Currents of opinion

I suggested earlier that Sexto is part of what could be called the critical renovationist current among Cuba's revolutionaries, which represents one current of opinion within the revolution and one pole in the national debate promoted by Raul Castro on the future of socialism in Cuba. What defines this current, and are there any others?

The critical renovationist current is made up of those revolutionaries who perceive that unity of action and unanimity of opinion are two different things and their confusion in practice does great harm to the revolution; secondly, that nothing less than a deep, integral transformation of Cuba's socialist model — of many of its concepts, structures, methods and mentalities — must be carried through if the revolution is to endure in the post-Fidel era, part of which is forging a real culture of public criticism and debate, something Cuba has lacked.

It's clear from the excerpts I quoted earlier from his November 2005 speech that Fidel, who remains first secretary of the PCC, is part of this critical renovationist current, as is Raul, who has called for structural and conceptual changes and has initiated some such changes, from the encouragement of fearless public debate to reforms which begin to dismantle the edifice of universal state subsidies other than those guaranteed in Cuba's socialist constitution, such as free healthcare and education. Given this, it must be assumed that most, if not all, of the PCC's central leadership recognise the need for a radical renovation of Cuba's socialist project.

Most young Cubans, who have grown up amid the hardships and social inequalities of the Special Period, welcome the call for debate and are impatient for change. While some dream of an unattainable capitalist utopia, others, probably the majority, long for

a more dynamic and participatory socialist project. This refers not to participation in mobilisations and in carrying out the tasks of the revolution — the Cuban Revolution has never lacked opportunities for this kind of participation — but participation in deciding what those tasks will be.

The other current is made up of those who are wary of debate and fearful of change. This conservative current has generational and structural contours. It is concentrated among the older generations and among those who zealously guard their administrative prerogatives, and in some cases illicit privileges, from criticism and initiative “from below”.

False unanimity, the suppression of differences (whether due to self-censorship or administrative acts) and hostility to criticism and initiative “from below” are partly a consequence of the state of siege that Cuba is subjected to by US imperialism: the economic blockade, radio and TV broadcasts from the US that urge Cuban citizens to rise up against the “communist dictatorship”, the huge US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and US-sponsored subversion and terrorist activities. As well as the siege mentality, these habits and practices are also rooted in the legacy of Soviet influence.

Under Raul's presidency, new spaces for ongoing critical reflection and debate have been opening up, but not without resistance. As Eliades Acosta noted in his November 2007 interview, “There's the abuse of institutional practices to limit criticism. We must abandon the practice of shushing the problems, which does not help the revolution but instead protects posts or positions or postures that are harmful to the ethical climate of society. Raul [Castro] himself, who heads the party and the state, with all the moral authority he enjoys, told the people that this is the time to ‘remove our shirts’ and discuss our problems.

“The [Communist Party] Political Bureau issued a document that supports criticism in the media. But what did we find? There is reluctance, inertia; there are people who are not prepared because they find it difficult to break the psychological barrier. But when we read the press, and we read the non-institutional press, and the e-mails (which are here to stay), we see that the people are participating. We see a very healthy activation of the civic spirit of Cubans.”

Here, Acosta alludes to what the critical renovationist current is coming up against: “the abuse of institutional practice to limit criticism”, that is, the efforts of some functionaries to stifle critical viewpoints and debate. In “Clock, don't tick the hours”, Luis Sexto makes the sharp observation that some oppose change “because it implies a hierarchical de-verticalisation of society to allow democratic horizontality, and that might eliminate [authoritarian methods and privileges copied from extinct doctrines], a reference to the influence of Soviet bureaucratic “socialism”.

Sexto even goes so far as to describe such misguided revolutionaries as unwitting “enemies of socialism”, arguing that “sometimes unconsciously, the boxed-in mentality of some revolutionaries tries to slam the brakes on dialectical change, in the belief that everything done since 1959 is perfect”. Such attitudes are not limited to functionaries.

As *Temas* magazine’s Rafael Hernandez explained in a November 28, 2007 interview with Havana’s Radio Progreso Alternativa, “The resistance to new ideas, criticism and changes is something that I find in my neighbourhood. I don’t have to go to any government office to meet with resistance ... It’s not a mentality that’s exclusively installed in the heads of some bureaucrats but in the heads of many citizens I know ... In our civic culture, there are elements that resist change and refuse to accept specific criticism or reject the convenience of discussing specific problems in public.

“When we talk about debate or criticism, we often talk about censorship, restrictions, control, but we never talk about our own lack of a ‘debate culture’. We must foster a culture of debate from the start, because our society doesn’t have it. We often call a debate ‘good’ when the participants say the same as we think. That’s not debate; debate is discrepancy. And it is very important that in a debate we express divergent positions in a spirit of dialogue, of mutual respect. And I think that [Cuban] politics is going through that stage right now.”

Haven’t there been such debates in the past? Indeed, Hernandez points to “a very important process of public discussion” that took place between 1986 and 1990 during the “rectification of errors and negative tendencies”, culminating in the debates around the call to the 4th PCC Congress at the onset of the Special Period. According to Hernandez, this was “the most profound and democratic critical debate ever staged in Cuba”.

So today’s debate on the future of Cuba’s socialist project is not unprecedented. Another example is the legendary “workers parliaments” held in 1994. These were lively grassroots debates held in workplaces across the island to strive for consensus on economic measures to confront the Special Period crisis. But such debates haven’t been institutionalised, that is, they haven’t become an organic part of the political culture of the Cuban Revolution. This is now beginning to change, and what is different about the present debate compared with previous such debates is that, as Hernandez notes, the culture of debate is maturing.

There “are very positive signs of a move towards a culture of debate, one that I have seen being vehemently defended by honest young citizens eager to share their revolutionary ideas with the rest of society,” Cuban economist Antonio Diaz Medina commented in an opinion piece titled “Popular debate on the Cuban economy” published by Progreso Weekly on January 27.

In a well-known passage from his May Day 2000 address that adorns billboards all over Cuba and which many Cubans can recite by heart, Fidel defines revolution as, among other things, “having a sense of the historical moment” and “changing everything that must be changed”. The critical renovationists have made “changing everything that must be changed” their catch-cry. Let’s take Fidel’s advice and step back from the debate itself to try to grasp the context, the historical moment in which this debate is unfolding.

The history of the Cuban Revolution can be divided into four relatively distinct periods or epochs, and today the revolution is on the cusp of, or entering, a fifth. The first epoch spans the decade of the 1960s, from the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship in January 1959 until 1970, when Cuba became integrated into the Soviet bloc’s Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, which ushered in a second epoch of “Sovietisation”. This drew to a close in the mid-1980s with the launch of the “rectification of errors and negative tendencies”.

Then there’s the post-Soviet Special Period, a crisis period from which revolutionary Cuba has yet to fully emerge. Yet today Cuba is entering a new era thanks to two developments of great significance: the merging of the Cuban and Venezuelan socialist revolutions in the context of the new rise of the left in Latin America and the failure of US efforts to isolate Cuba; and the fact that Cuba is now gradually, and gracefully, entering a post-Fidel era and an approaching generational renewal of leadership at the highest levels.

Storming heaven

The first period of the revolution was characterised by idealism. With the audacity of youthful inexperience, Cuba’s revolutionaries tried to “storm heaven”, to pass rapidly through the stage of socialist construction so as to arrive, within a generation or two it was hoped, at a communist society. In the heady 1960s this seemed to be the way the world was heading, with the rise of the anti-colonial struggles in the Third World, the Cultural Revolution in China and the world-wide youth radicalisation at the close of the decade.

In this first period two qualitative turning points stand out: the emergence of a revolutionary working people’s government out of the mass mobilisations that followed Fidel’s resignation as prime minister in July 1959 — in protest at the refusal of the revolutionary government, in which the revolutionary leaders were a minority, to fully implement the radical agrarian reform law signed by Fidel on May 17 of that year — and the opening of the socialist stage of the revolution in late 1960, with the wholesale expropriation of the big capitalist enterprises and the building up of a post-capitalist, centrally planned economy.

In 1962, after the US government had imposed its full economic blockade, the *libreta* or ration book was introduced. Faced with an acute scarcity of consumer goods due to the US blockade and an exodus of skilled personnel from the island, Cuba's socialist state moved to guarantee each household a monthly quota of basic goods at highly subsidised prices. This undercut hoarding and ensured an equitable distribution, while subsidies ensured universal affordability.

The ration book came to symbolise the revolution's commitment to social equality. Yet today, when a significant minority of Cubans can live comfortably without having to work thanks to remittances from relatives in the US or black market activities, the rationing system entrenches social inequality by allowing those with higher incomes to buy subsidised goods.

In March 1968, in what became known as the "revolutionary offensive", the revolutionary government decreed the wholesale expropriation of urban small businesses, right down to the man on the street with his ice-cream cart. Bringing retail trade under state control further undermined hoarding and profiteering. It also undermined subversion: US imperialism had found points of support for its campaign of terrorist bombings and subversive activities among the urban petty proprietors.

Today, apart from a small number of family-run restaurants, there are very few urban small businesses operating legally in Cuba, although there are considerable numbers of licensed self-employed people who offer services from juggling clowns to home-stays, and micro-businesses such as people selling food out of their homes. Walk down any street in Old Havana and there will be someone offering passers-by tiny cups of sweet black coffee from their doorway. The situation is different in the countryside, where there are hundreds of thousands of peasant farmers and agricultural cooperative members.

Sovietisation

Cuba's economic integration with the Soviet bloc from 1970 onwards coincided with the ebb of the revolutionary movements in Latin America and the Cuban leadership's self-criticism of the idealism of the preceding decade. Soviet arms, technicians and trade were an indispensable lifeline for a revolution facing hostile capitalist encirclement. But the revolution paid a high price for survival, gradually ceding ground to a pervasive "Sovietisation" that made itself felt in every sphere of national life.

Politically, a generation of cadres was educated in the sterile dogma of Soviet "Marxism" with the infamous Soviet manuals on "Marxism-Leninism"; the cultivation of values and leadership by example began to give way to the pragmatism of the Soviet-trained administrators and technocrats; bureaucracy began to flourish in bloated ministries; the mass organisations withered at the grassroots. "Verticalism", which had

its roots in the first period of the revolution when the objective and subjective conditions did not yet exist to institutionalise working people's democracy, became entrenched.

Verticalism refers to the situation where elected representatives or administrators feel unable to decide anything without consulting their superiors, and so it goes on up the chain until it reaches somewhere near the top, a minister perhaps, then a decision is taken and it creeps down the hierarchy, leaving Cubans exasperated as they wait for an answer — as satirised in the 1966 Cuban black comedy *Death of a Bureaucrat*. When it seems like the real decisions are being made elsewhere, popular participation in decision making is discouraged.

In economic management, Cuba adopted the Soviet method of accounting in which state enterprises met abstract targets based on monetary values rather than completing actual projects of social benefit. For example, an engineering firm would build half a bridge span, then move on to something else. The Soviet bureaucracy's penchant for gigantic projects, ecological vandalism, woeful inefficiency and stifling state paternalism also left their mark.

In the cultural sphere, a puritanical bourgeois moralism — combining conservative elements of Christianity and Afro-Cuban traditions, Latin American *machismo* and the conservative outlook of the counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union — was imposed through creeping state censorship, stifling the cultural blossoming of the 1960s. Examples include official hostility towards gays, Beatles fans and men with long hair, and Leon Trotsky's writings being considered taboo, if not actually banned.

Within the PCC, support for Soviet ideas and methods came mainly from cadres who had their origins in the old Stalinist Popular Socialist Party, which had merged with the other revolutionary organisations — Fidel's July 26 Movement and the student-based Revolutionary Directorate — to form the PCC in 1965. More generally, there was a tendency to uncritically assimilate these ideas and methods.

Yet the Cuban Revolution, unlike the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s, did not succumb to bureaucratic counter-revolution. Cuba's revolutionary continuity and vitality always had the upper hand. One expression of this was Cuba's international solidarity. Between 1975 and 1990, Cuba sent some 300,000 volunteers and its best weaponry to southern Africa.

Together with their Angolan and Namibian comrades, the Cubans landed a crushing, humiliating defeat on the apartheid, nuclear-armed regime of South African imperialism — a defeat which led to Namibia's independence, the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the downfall of apartheid. The Cuban leadership did not bother to consult the Soviets beforehand, and this feat of internationalism was accomplished with only minimal Soviet support.

Revolutionary continuity was also expressed in efforts to institutionalise a participatory socialist democracy, efforts which counteracted somewhat the entrenchment of administrative verticalism. Established island-wide in 1975, Cuba's municipal, provincial and national assemblies of Peoples Power are inspired by the working people's democracy of the 1871 Paris Commune.

The smallest constituencies are based on a few city blocks or a rural township, so citizens are generally familiar with their candidates and elected representatives. Municipal elections are competitive, with between two and eight candidates nominated by local residents in open meetings. Candidate's biographies are posted in public places and candidates address meetings of constituents, but electoral advertising is banned so that money has no influence. The PCC, Cuba's sole legal political party, cannot nominate or campaign for candidates; PCC members may be nominated and elected on their individual merits.

For the provincial and national assemblies, candidacy commissions comprising representatives of Cuba's mass sectoral organisations, chaired by a representative of Cuba's trade union confederation, the CTC, draw up candidate lists in an exhaustive process of public nominations and consultations. The aim is to come up with a balanced team of leaders. The final list must be ratified by the municipal assemblies before being submitted for public vote. Voting is by voluntary secret ballot of all Cuban citizens aged 16 years and up. The ballot boxes are guarded by school children, not soldiers. Each candidate must receive a majority of votes to be elected.

Rectification

The PCC's Third Congress in 1986 launched a "rectification of errors and negative tendencies". Emphasis was placed on the need to abandon the mentality of copying other countries' methods, which might not be appropriate for Cuba, rather than direct criticism of the ruling Soviet bureaucracy. The Cuban leadership, unlike armchair critics, had to consider the consequences of biting the hand that fed them.

Fidel called for a return to the anti-bureaucratic ideas of Che Guevara, who had served as Cuba's minister of industries from 1961 to 1964. Che had promoted volunteer work brigades, among other measures, to cultivate a communist attitude to work and to combat the pernicious tendency for functionaries to adopt a bureaucratic mentality. Even in the absence of the high salaries and special privileges (such as exclusive stores, luxury cars and holiday mansions) enjoyed by the Soviet bureaucracy, people in positions of authority in revolutionary Cuba may zealously guard their prerogatives, resist change and display all the hallmarks of the bureaucratic mentality.

In Cuba, the material basis for such habits and practices is not the existence of an institutionalised system of privileges for administrators upheld by a totalitarian police

state — as in the Soviet Union — but the persistence of specialised functionaries and the division between mental and manual labour inherited from class society. As long as there are specialised functionaries, there will be a tendency towards bureaucratism, which can only wither away to the degree to which the working people as a whole take on the tasks of public administration.

Che had come up with an effective antidote to bureaucratism in volunteer work brigades. During rectification, brigades were mobilised on a large scale to build homes, childcare centres and other social works that had been neglected; thousands of paid functionaries were reassigned to productive work, and workers were encouraged to expose negligent or corrupt officials. Rectification began the difficult task of de-linking Cuba's socialist revolution from the doomed Soviet "model", but it was interrupted by the sudden demise of the Soviet Union itself in 1991 and the declaration of the Special Period.

Special Period

Let's remind ourselves of the magnitude of this crisis. Between 1990 and 1993, Cuba lost 85% of its trading relations, and GDP fell by 35%. As Soviet shipments of fuel, raw materials, machinery, spare parts and consumer goods slowed to a trickle, US imperialism took advantage of Cuba's predicament by tightening its economic blockade.

Cubans watched as statues of Marx and Lenin were torn down in Prague, Berlin, Leningrad — now renamed St Petersburg. As Cubans trudged for hours or rode bicycles to work and queued for hours for scarce rationed goods, a TV cooking show demonstrated how grapefruit rinds, dipped in flour and fried, could be eaten as a dubious substitute for Cubans' beloved steak. Faced with such a crisis, the life expectancy of a capitalist government would have been weeks at most. The millionaire former owners of Cuba's farms and factories packed their suitcases in Miami and waited for the seemingly inevitable, the imminent collapse or overthrow of Cuba's revolutionary government. They are still waiting.

More than a crisis, the Special Period embodied a decision to resist. Cuba would preserve as much as possible of the gains of the revolution while putting on hold the building of socialism for the duration of the crisis period. Where unavoidable, concessions would be made, but the cardinal achievement of the 1959 revolution would be preserved at all costs: political power in the hands of the working people.

Cuba had no choice but to reintroduce elements of capitalism and market mechanisms in order to save the socialist revolution, such as the legalisation of the US dollar as a parallel currency; more joint ventures between Cuba's socialist state and foreign investors; a surge in self-employment; the self-financing of state enterprises; the

establishment of a network of hard-currency stores and the “free” agricultural markets; and a tourism-led economic recovery.

During the Special Period, the revolution would have to walk a tight-rope between economic stagnation and the tendency of the market concessions to lead to growing inequality, the corrosion of socialist values and the restoration of capitalism. To protect all Cubans on the island from the worst effects of the crisis, rationing was extended to cover whatever essential consumer goods the state could afford to purchase on international markets and distribute at highly subsidised prices, while maintaining its commitment to free health care and education. No schools or hospitals were closed, nobody was thrown out of their homes and mass sackings were avoided by paying idled workers 60% of their salaries.

But as stores with non-rationed goods emptied, the purchasing power of the Cuban peso tumbled from a black market rate of 7 to the US dollar in 1989-90 to a low of around 120 pesos in 1994, rendering the peso almost worthless on the black market, where just about anything had a price in US dollars. With little to buy in Cuban pesos other than highly subsidised basics, the material incentive to work had collapsed — yet most workers heeded the revolutionary leadership’s appeals to keep working. The revolution had sowed the seeds of solidarity; now it was reaping the harvest.

While the market concessions had the desired effect of stimulating the economy, which began a gradual recovery from the mid-1990s, they also led to a sharp rise in income inequality. An income stratification emerged based on access to hard currency from a variety of sources — remittances from family members living overseas, self-employment, tips from tourists, theft of state property, under-the-table bonuses from the foreign partners of joint ventures with the state, prostitution and illicit activities linked to the thriving black market.

The social impact of this stratification was mitigated by rationing, subsidies and the twin pillars of free health care and education, but over time a social divide has consolidated. For those who depend solely or largely on their salary, pension or student allowance, life is a daily struggle to make ends meet with wages still insufficient to cover all basic necessities.

Given this, many Cubans have had to turn to the black market to make ends meet. For some this has become a way of life; for most it’s just a way of getting by. The Spanish verb *resolver*, to resolve, has taken on a new meaning in Cuba. Though it may pain them, even committed revolutionaries sometimes find themselves having to break the law so that they or their dependants can live with dignity — an ethical dilemma Cubans call “double morality” — mostly in small ways, such as buying milk from a farmer that is supposed to be rationed to children under seven and pregnant women.

The need to “resolve” has bred a generalised tolerance towards theft of state property and the flouting of public order. If workers pinch things from their workplace to sell on the black market, they are less able to point the finger at negligent or corrupt administrators without drawing unwanted attention to themselves. While the moral authority of Cuba’s revolutionary leaders is based on their exemplary modesty and commitment to the revolutionary cause — the more responsibility a post entails, the less corruption is tolerated and the more one is expected to set an example of personal sacrifice — using one’s position for personal gain is widespread in the lower levels of Cuba’s public administration.

Not all those with high incomes are parasitic. A waiter in a tourist hotel may collect more tips in a single night than a surgeon earns in a month; peasant farmers and agricultural cooperatives can sell part of their produce in the farmers markets, where prices are much higher than in the ration stores; some workers now receive incentive payments in convertible Cuban pesos, which have replaced the US dollar as Cuba’s second currency. Some 60% of households now have access to at least some convertible pesos from one source or another.

But the people who live most comfortably are the ones who don’t work at all, because they’re too busy making money on the black market, or can choose not to work because they receive substantial remittances from relatives living overseas. In a mockery of the socialist work ethic, parasites who spend their days “working” the black market selling cigars or other contraband stolen from the socialist state, or protected species such as sea turtles that fetch a high price for their meat, can flaunt their gold chains and designer clothes before humble workers and students for whom a new pair of US\$20 Chinese sneakers, sold in the convertible peso stores, may be an unaffordable luxury.

Vicious cycle

While much progress has been made and the worst years of the Special Period have long since been left behind, Cuba’s centrally planned economy remains trapped in a vicious cycle: wages and salaries are not only insufficient to cover all necessities, they are also too low to act as much of a stimulus to productivity. Yet increasing workers’ incomes depends on achieving higher levels of productivity and efficiency.

Largely a legacy of the Special Period, this structural dysfunction stunts Cuba’s economic and social progress and blocks its definitive exit from this crisis period, even with the solidarity of oil-rich Venezuela. Excessive subsidies, low wages and the parallel circulation of two currencies corrode the economic and ethical foundations of Cuba’s socialist project. They are inseparable evils that cannot be solved in isolation since they are really three sides of the same coin, to stretch the analogy.

Much of what is obsolete about the Cuban model of socialism flows from, or is reinforced by, this core structural dysfunction — such as paternalism, a pervasive, many-sided and deeply entrenched negative phenomenon that has both material and psychological dimensions. This structural dysfunction must be transcended if the revolution is to achieve what Fidel, in his landmark November 2005 speech at Havana University, called “true and irreversible socialism”.

So we've come full circle, back to Fidel's November 2005 warning that the revolution could destroy itself through its own errors and weaknesses, an implicit acknowledgement of the need for structural and conceptual changes, some of which Fidel touched on in his speech that night: dismantling the edifice of universal state subsidies and gratuities — apart from those guaranteed in Cuba's socialist constitution, such as the right to free health care and education — in order to reassert the socialist principle of “to each according to their work”; and forging a real culture of public criticism and debate within the revolution.

Gains of the Special Period

It should be stressed that the legacy of the Special Period is far from wholly negative. Most importantly, the Cuban Revolution has endured — an epic feat of resistance that deserves to be studied by revolutionaries everywhere, not only for its hard-won lessons but above all because it's so deeply inspiring. Today, Cuba confronts the challenge of carrying through a radical overhaul of its socialist model with the benefit of the enduring lessons and remarkable achievements of the Special Period.

One is the world's first and so far only large-scale transition to low-input sustainable agriculture, symbolised by the hugely successful urban farms and gardens that are as much about growing community as they are about growing food and green medicine. Another is the ongoing “energy revolution”, which has cut carbon emissions and oil consumption, installed millions of new energy-efficient light globes and appliances in Cuban homes, modernised and decentralised the entire electrical power generation and distribution system and redistributed wealth in favour of working people via the imposition of a steeply progressive electricity tariff, which also encourages savings.

The Battle of Ideas, launched in 2000 to reassert socialist values eroded by the market concessions, also deserves to be highlighted. At the heart of the hundreds of social, cultural and educational programs and projects encompassed in the Battle of Ideas is the graduation of some 40,000 young revolutionary social workers and the many vital tasks they have been assigned. Above all, the Special Period has taught Cubans how to do so much with so little by drawing on a wellspring of solidarity and by harnessing the creative potential of a well-educated and highly skilled workforce in the search for solutions.

Cuba has had to learn how to run a modern tourism industry almost overnight; cobble together spare parts for its living museum of pre-revolution US cars and Soviet trucks; and develop a nascent medical biotechnology sector into a world-class research and development complex that has invented, among other things, the only effective vaccine for meningitis-B and the anti-cholesterol drug policosanol, derived from sugar cane, which can be bought in Australian pharmacies.

Key social indicators such as life expectancy (78.5 in 2007) and infant mortality (4.8 per thousand live births in 2009) have continued to improve during the Special Period. According to the UN Human Development Index, Cuba has achieved a high level of human development and is ranked 51 out of 182 countries. A 2006 World Wildlife Fund report found that Cuba is the only country in the world that is developing sustainably, with both a high level of social development and a relatively small “ecological footprint”, a measure of a country’s per capita impact on the biosphere. In December, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) declared Cuba to be the only country in Latin America and the Caribbean that has eliminated severe childhood malnutrition.

During the Special Period, Cuba’s unparalleled international solidarity has never faltered. Cuba’s international cooperation in health care, education, sports and technical assistance with other poor countries is selfless and unconditional, extending even to our own Asia-Pacific region. Australia has overseen the theft of East Timor’s oil. By contrast, socialist Cuba is training around 800 East Timorese medical students free of charge in Cuba, and smaller numbers of students from Papua New Guinea, Solomons, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru and Vanuatu.

Cuban doctors and educators are also working in these countries, paid for by Cuba. In New Zealand, Cuban educators are using the Cuban *Yo Si Puedo* (Yes I Can) teaching method to overcome Maori illiteracy. The nearly 400 Cuban medical personnel on assignment in Haiti responded heroically when the disastrous earthquake struck in January.

Venezuelan revolution

The international conjuncture is arguably more favourable today than at any time since Cuba’s 1959 revolution, with the flowering of Venezuela’s Bolivarian socialist revolution, the new rise of the left in Latin America and US imperialism under increasing pressure from the rest of the world, important sectors of the US capitalist class and the majority of US citizens to lift its cruel and criminal economic blockade.

The opening of Venezuela’s socialist revolution brings Cuba some much-needed moral and material reinforcement, and not a moment too soon. Not only is the Bolivarian Revolution the first new socialist revolution of the post-Soviet era, thus free from the malign influence of Stalinism, but this revolution is taking place in a country

eight times the size of Cuba with twice the population and sitting atop the world's largest oil reserves.

For all its novelty, Venezuela's revolution is essentially the spread of the Cuban Revolution to the South American continent. It would not exist without Cuba's example, its solidarity and the guidance offered by Cuba's outstanding Marxist leadership team. Venezuela is close to Cuba both geographically and historically. Venezuela's independence hero Simon Bolivar and his Cuban counterpart Jose Marti shared the dream of a Latin America united in solidarity and social justice against US imperialism — a dream that is now becoming reality through the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) led by Cuba and Venezuela.

Venezuela's revolutionary socialist President Hugo Chavez commented in December: “[A]s Fidel said, if the Venezuelan Bolivarian revolution is destroyed, the entire continent would fall into the hands of the [US] empire. The Venezuelan revolution without the Cuban revolution would not exist. Both are obliged to battle in unity to free the entire Latin American continent from the Yankee empire.”

The ALBA alliance took centre stage at the UN climate change summit in Copenhagen in December, when Chavez, Bolivian President Evo Morales and the Cuban delegation scuttled the US attempt to impose an unjust, toothless document in lieu of an acceptable agreement. They used this platform very effectively to denounce imperialist capitalism as the dark horse dragging humanity to the brink of an ecological apocalypse.

The core of ALBA is the Cuba-Venezuela alliance, which has developed to the point where the two revolutionary processes are merging to become, as Chavez put it in August 2008, “one and the same revolution”. The scale of Cuba's collaboration with Venezuela is now comparable to Cuba's historical relations with the Soviet Union in magnitude, but there is a qualitative difference: what is taking place today is a merging of two sister revolutionary processes. This collaboration is both deep and many-sided.

Some 40,000 Cuban doctors, teachers and other professionals are working in Venezuela, and thousands of Venezuelan youth are studying in Cuba. There is growing integration between Cuba's socialist state enterprises and their Venezuelan counterparts, which are expanding at the expense of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. A vast new petrochemical complex being built in Cienfuegos, in central Cuba, is one such project. With Venezuela's help, Cuba may become an oil exporter in as little as five years. In December, the two countries inked another 285 cooperation agreements for 2010 worth \$3.2 billion, and agreed to establish seven joint-venture companies in sugar, aluminium, transport and agriculture.

Venezuela's revolution is converging on “the Cuban road” — without mechanical copying, especially of errors and weaknesses — because there is no other road if the

Bolivarian socialist revolution is to remain true to itself. Asked by Democracy Now web site's Amy Goodman at the Copenhagen conference, "How do you throw away capitalism?", Chavez responded: "The way they did it in Cuba. That's the way. The same way we are doing in Venezuela: giving the power to the people and taking it away from the economic elites. You can only do that through a revolution."

Youth

No less important for Cuba's embattled revolution are the winds of hope wafting across from the other side of the Caribbean. Cuba's youth, who have grown up in the shadows of the Special Period, long for new horizons: decent salaries, a home of their own (Cuba has an acute housing deficit made worse by the 2008 hurricanes), the possibility of travel beyond their island; above all, a more dynamic and democratic socialist project. Young Cubans have no memory of life under capitalism and tend to take for granted the revolution's enduring achievements; they are more prone to disillusionment with the revolution than either their parents or grandparents.

US imperialism works hard to co-opt them with the false hope of a capitalist utopia. Gold chains and designer labels are the new status symbols for some, while the ubiquitous reggaeton music that thumps out its hedonistic and misogynistic lyrics from every bar and neighbourhood has largely displaced the traditional salsa and the earlier craze for more politically progressive, home-grown hip-hop. This reflects a desire to escape material hardship and the rigours of the revolutionary struggle, and a certain generational dissonance. Some of Cuba's disillusioned youth have left the island.

But by participating in the Venezuelan social "missions" in health care, education and sports, young Cubans can see for themselves what capitalism has done to the capitalist Third World. They can see that Che's image is not only ubiquitous in Venezuela but that his speeches and writings are also studied seriously, as are those of Fidel. They can experience something infinitely more precious than gold: the gratitude of the humble people of the *barrios* whose lives they have saved, and who can now read and write with such pride thanks to their efforts. Young Cubans can absorb the invigorating spirit of this new revolution in all its freshness and vitality and bring some of this spirit back home.

Cuba's internationalist mission in southern Africa, which drew to a close as the Soviet bloc was disintegrating, forged a generation of revolutionary cadres and leaders that steered Cuba in the face of the enormous crisis of the Special Period. Today, Cuba's internationalist mission in Venezuela is playing a similar role for a new generation, as is the revolution's battle for the hearts and minds of its youth at home through the noble efforts of its 40,000 young social workers.

Cuba's young social workers work with disaffected youth who are neither studying nor working, often because they are making money on the black market. The approach of the young social workers is not to preach Marxist doctrine or to urge disaffected youth to attend political rallies, but to seek to befriend them and win their personal trust. These friendships are cultivated in the privacy of the youth's home, always by a young social worker working alone.

The social workers consult with the neighbourhood-based Committees for the Defence of the Revolution and the People's Councils, the base level of Peoples Power. They also consult with the local police about the general problems in the neighbourhood, but if a young person is involved in black-market activities, the social workers' code of ethics forbids them from divulging this information to the youth's parents, the police or even to another young social worker.

To establish a genuine friendship based on mutual respect, the social worker must see things from the point of view of those they are trying to help. Some youth initially reject the offer of friendship, but sooner or later most of them agree to talk to a social worker. Three-quarters of the young social workers are women, and many come from "marginal" communities where youth are more susceptible to disaffection.

As well as befriending them, the young social workers try to help disaffected youth find employment or study projects that coincide with the needs of the revolution. One initiative is the creation of art teacher training colleges in each province to prepare thousands of young art instructors to teach dance, sculpture, music and painting in junior high schools.

From salsa to baseball, Cuba is a cultural power, thanks to the revolution's efforts to make it possible for the working people as a whole to participate in cultural creation. The best of Cuban and world literature and art is promoted as an antidote to the spiritual emptiness of capitalist consumerism. Cuban TV, radio and the press are free of commercial advertising and there are two TV channels devoted entirely to educational programming.

Cuban children are familiar with Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, a classic of world literature that appeals to children and adults alike. One of the characters in the story is a businessman who is constantly counting the stars he thinks he owns, hoping to use them to buy more stars. The Little Prince owns the flower and the volcanoes on his asteroid because he cares for them, and they care for him; but since one cannot maintain the stars or be of use to them, he argues, the businessman cannot truly own them. It is an allegorical comment on capitalism's drive to commodify everything.

As well as work among disaffected youth, the social workers have been assigned other important tasks. A nationwide door-to-door survey carried out by the young

social workers identified 37,000 elderly people living alone, who are now visited by social workers who attend to their needs. Another project has identified children considered vulnerable because of problems at home. These children receive special attention from the young social workers, who almost become part of the child's family.

In seeking to address the needs of individuals, the efforts of the young social workers embody a conceptual change: a move away from the assumption that everyone has the same needs. This is implicit in the rationing system, for example, in which even vegetarians are guaranteed a monthly quota of meat or fish. Cuban society is more heterogeneous today than ever before, not only because of the social differentiation that has emerged during the Special Period, but because the revolution has cultivated individuality, that is, a diversity of individual needs, desires and circumstances. This, it should be noted, is not the same as selfish individualism.

Efforts to coerce the unemployed to find work under capitalism are hypocritical, since the biggest social parasites, the corporate rich, are rewarded for their idleness with enormous incomes derived from the exploitation of other people's labour through their ownership of productive wealth. There is no such hypocrisy in socialist Cuba's humane and patient efforts to reintegrate disaffected youth into work or study.

Post-Fidel era

To complete this panorama of the historical moment Cuba is living through today, we must consider the implications of Fidel's gradual withdrawal from public life and the approaching generational renewal of Cuba's revolutionary leadership at the highest levels.

Since Fidel fell gravely ill in August 2006, Cubans have gradually become accustomed to his public absence. Having recovered from life-threatening intestinal surgery, he is reportedly in good health and is mentally alert, enjoying his semi-retirement surrounded by his extended family. In his "Reflections of Comrade Fidel", published in the Cuban media and reprinted widely in the foreign press, he continues the struggle, commenting on global affairs and meditating on the crisis facing humanity. He is consulted on key decisions, but the day-to-day leadership of the government is now firmly in the hands of a capable team headed by President Raul Castro.

The notion that Raul is just waiting for Fidel to die so he can take Cuba down "the Chinese road" is a fantasy of the revolution's enemies. Whatever political differences there may be between Fidel and Raul, they are tactical and stylistic, not programmatic. There is no indication that Raul intends to turn traitor to the cause to which he, like Fidel, has dedicated his entire adult life. More importantly, Cuba has a collective leadership. Fidel and Raul have different strengths: Fidel is charismatic, brilliant, creative, improvising and very much a hands-on leader; Raul is more methodical, team-oriented, practical

and concise, preferring to work quietly behind the scenes. Raul's main task is to prepare the new generation to take over.

While there has never been a personality cult in Cuba, Fidel's influence among many of his followers transcends politics. More than a political leader, Fidel is a spiritual leader in the secular sense. In his speech marking the 50th anniversary of the revolution, Raul reminded Cubans: "An individual does not make history, we know this, but some indispensable people have the capacity to decisively influence the course of events. Fidel is one of them; nobody doubts it, not even his most bitter enemies.

"Ever since his early youth he adopted as his own one of [Jose] Martí's thoughts: 'All of the glory in the world can fit into a kernel of corn.' This he turned into his shield from everything that is superfluous or transient, into his main weapon to transform praises and honours — even if well-deserved — into greater humility, honesty, fighting spirit and love for the truth, which he has invariably placed above all else." Cuba's future leaders, said Raul, must "never forget that this is a revolution of the humble, by the humble and for the humble."

While Fidel may no longer be indispensable today, as an individual he is irreplaceable. For as long as Fidel was at the helm of the revolutionary government his immense personal authority tended to overshadow the role of institutions, for better or for worse but mostly for the better. When Fidel's friend, Colombian author and Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez, was asked why the Cuban Revolution had not fallen like the USSR, he replied: "Fidel is at the same time the head of government and the leader of the opposition". That is, Fidel was always the revolution's sternest loyal critic.

Havana University historian Jesus Arboleya has aptly observed: "It is logical to assume that Fidel Castro's legacy will have a tremendous influence in the future of Cuba ... if [his enemies] have been unable to defeat the mortal human being, I can't figure out how they will face the perfected myth of his memory. In this sense, Fidel will continue to be one of the pillars of the Cuban Revolution."

The approaching Sixth PCC Congress, likely to be held in late 2010 or in 2011, will be the last presided over by the *historicos*, the generation of leaders that led Cuba's working people to victory in 1959. Not only is a generational leadership transition inevitable, but as Luis Sexto wrote on August 5, the "political future of a socialist Cuba will not be a future of charismatic men and women. The historic conditions that forged unique, original figures filled with historic credit no longer exist. It will be a future of institutions, primarily the Communist Party, which will have to exercise its power with an open and democratic spirit."

According to Rafael Hernandez, the revolution "must go forward and leave more and more room for the new generations. Those new generations are demanding capability,

power, a degree of decision over their own ideas, their own problems and criteria about the meaning of a socialist society. And I think that the socialism of the future is the socialism of the young.”

Changes under Raul

Among the reforms initiated under Raul's presidency, Cubans may now stay in tourist hotels and buy electrical goods such as mobile phones, computers and electric scooters; the cap on bonus payments tied to productivity has been lifted; and a new payments system that ties incomes to productivity is being generalised across state enterprises. Cubans can now hold multiple jobs, and students may work part time to supplement their allowances and gain work experience. Excessive state subsidies are being gradually withdrawn.

The biggest changes so far have been in agriculture. Raul has declared increasing food production the government's top priority and a matter of national security. While Cuba spends billions of dollars on food imports, half the farmland has been lying idle, much of it overrun with the farmer's nightmare, a woody tropical weed known as the *marabu* bush. The government is now promoting a large-scale “return to the land”.

Land belonging to the state will not be privatised. Rather, individuals, cooperatives and state farms are being encouraged to grow crops or raise livestock on idle state land. Raul reported to the National Assembly in December that 54% or almost a million hectares of this land had been granted in usufruct, i.e., leased rent-free on a long-term basis. These land grants have benefited around 100,000 people. A social movement among producers has sprung up to pass on knowledge to new farmers. Urban agriculture too is being expanded by creating or consolidating “green belts” around the cities.

Farmers can now buy seed and supplies directly from a new chain of state stores, instead of everything being centrally allocated by the state, while the state has doubled, tripled or quadrupled what it pays to producers to stimulate production and thus lower prices in the free markets. Guaranteeing a stable supply of cheap, locally produced food to replace expensive imports is a precondition for the elimination of the ration card.

In a bold administrative decentralisation, responsibility for deciding what crops and livestock are to be farmed where has been devolved from the head office of the agriculture ministry in Havana and the provincial capitals to Cuba's 169 municipalities, bypassing a notorious chain of administrative bottlenecks. In November, a report in *Granma* estimated there was an excess of 89,000 administrative personnel, some 26% of the total, in the state farm sector alone. This “engenders bureaucracy, raises costs, hampers productivity, creates disorder and prevents workers from improving their incomes”. A rationalisation and reorganisation of the administrative workforce in the state farm sector has begun.

Regarding the changes under Raul's presidency, we should note the following. First, these changes are broadly consistent with the diagnosis made by Fidel in his November 17, 2005, speech at Havana University and the line of march he proposed to achieve "true and irreversible socialism", while not being limited to the ideas expressed by Fidel then or since.

Secondly, while most of these changes flow from government decrees, some — such as the trend towards more public criticism and debate and the gains won against homophobia in recent years — result from encouragement or support "from above" meeting with a groundswell of activism "from below" to overcome administrative opposition, inertia and backward attitudes.

Thirdly, the pace of change is constrained by the need to strive for consensus on the most far-reaching changes and the fact that the Cuban leadership has had to devote much of its energies to crisis management, because of the devastating 2008 hurricanes — which caused economic losses equivalent to a fifth of Cuba's GDP, and from which the country is still recovering — and the global economic turmoil of the past year, which has hit the Cuban economy hard.

This makes further changes all the more urgent, yet it has also delayed their timely implementation. The PCC's Sixth Congress, originally scheduled for late 2009, has been postponed at least a year. On the plus side, this leaves more time for a clarifying public debate, and the party's internal preparations, in the lead-up to this historic Congress.

Already, millions of Cubans have participated in two rounds of organised debates in neighbourhoods, workplaces and PCC base committees. In late 2007, more than five million people, almost half the population, participated in a first round of grassroots debates and produced some 1.3 million concrete proposals, all of which were recorded and analysed by the party leadership. A second round of debates began in September.

Intersecting with these organised debates is an informal debate that carries over into the new institutional spaces that have been opening up in the island's mass media. *Granma* and *Juventud Rebelde*, the two national daily papers, have opened their pages to critical comments from readers on everything from local grievances to the subtleties of paternalism. The revamped Spanish-language web page of *Juventud Rebelde* now allows the discussion to continue in cyberspace, with readers posting comments and debating each other and columnists such as Luis Sexto and Jose Alejandro Rodriguez, another popular and fearless critic.

La Calle del Medio (The Middle Road) is a new monthly, 16-page colour magazine "of opinion and debate". It carries critical commentaries on many controversial and formerly taboo topics such as students cheating in exams, and long and thoughtful letters from readers. In these commentaries the capacity for critical thinking of the average Cuban

citizen — the fruit of the revolution's efforts over several generations to forge a new human being capable of contributing to the building of a socialist society — shines through and illuminates the difficult path ahead.

Paternalism

What are the key issues that have emerged in this debate? One key issue is debate itself, or the lack of it. Many letters to the editor rail against the habits and practices of false unanimity and the suppression of differences, and openly denounce “bureaucracy”.

A second key issue, and the most controversial topic, is the debate over the ration book and its possible elimination. Most letters are supportive; some are against. Among those who agree with its elimination there is a discussion about how and when this should be done, and what measures should be implemented to ensure that those who cannot work are not disadvantaged.

A third key issue is paternalism, a complex phenomenon with both material and psychological dimensions. When people look to the state to solve all their problems for them and when they expect society to provide for all their needs regardless of their labour contribution to society, that is paternalism. When administrators treat citizens like children who can't think and make decisions for themselves, this is also paternalism.

Not only does paternalism stifle individual and collective initiative, it robs people of their sense of social responsibility. It is linked to the structural dysfunction of excessive universal state subsidies and low wages, and to the over-centralisation of decision-making. It is also a consequence of egalitarianism.

When conscientious and productive workers are paid the same, or nearly the same, as lazy workers, a contemptuous attitude towards social property and the socialist work ethic tends to develop among the less politically conscious workers, who may think: “Why bother to work hard when I'll get paid just the same?” In his famous essay *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, written in March 1965, Che Guevara noted that despite the importance given to the social recognition of exemplary workers in Cuba — incentives of a moral character that Che argued would be decisive in the long run to the development of communist consciousness — there existed a “vanguard group” that was more committed to the revolution than the mass of workers.

Among these vanguard workers “there has been a qualitative change” in their attitude towards the revolution and its tasks “that enables them to make sacrifices in their capacity as an advance guard”, yet most workers still “see only part of the picture and must be subject to incentives and pressures of a certain intensity. This is the dictatorship of the proletariat [i.e., the political rule of the working people] operating not only on the defeated class [of capitalist exploiters] but also on individuals of the victorious class.”

While Che emphasised the importance of moral incentives and warned of the dangers of relying on “the dull instruments left to us by capitalism” such as individual material incentives, he argued that an appropriate combination of moral and material incentives was needed to develop the productive forces and forge a communist consciousness simultaneously.

The distinction between a minority of exemplary workers and the majority who are less politically conscious and committed still exists in Cuba. “For the worker to feel like the owner of the means of production, we cannot rely solely on theoretical explanations — we have been doing that for about 48 years — nor on the fact that his opinion is taken into consideration in the labour meetings. It is very important that his income corresponds to his personal contribution and the fulfilment by the work centre of the social object for which it was constituted”, Raul Castro said in a speech to Cuba’s National Assembly of People’s Power on July 11, 2008.

Property, decentralisation and participation

A fourth key issue in the debate, or really several closely related issues, come under the heading “property forms, decentralisation and participation”. Regarding property forms, many argue that a different balance of social and private ownership of productive wealth is needed.

At one extreme are a few who think that most or all state property should be turned into autonomous producer and service cooperatives — a shopkeeper’s utopia that would quickly lead back to capitalism. In the absence of economy-wide planning, the market would have to mediate the relationship between cooperatives, undermining the very basis for planning to meet social needs and ecological realities. There is also a practical objection: can Cuba’s medical biotechnology industry or its railway system be broken up into competing petty cooperative enterprises and still function?

A more common view is that a far more limited opening to private, and especially cooperative, property in non-essential services and small productive entities would be a step forward and a necessary retreat from the sweeping 1968 revolutionary offensive that expropriated the urban petit-bourgeoisie. We should note that the central leader of the Russian Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, argued in some of his last writings that cooperatives are not antithetical to socialist construction in economic sectors where labour is not objectively socialised, such as in peasant agriculture, small workshops, restaurants and the like.

As one *Granma* reader argued in a December 4 letter, “From their nationalisation by the Cuban state in 1968, small businesses and retail firms were converted, little by little, into a source of illicit profit, the robbery of the state, inefficiency and maltreatment ... Arguably socialism, by definition, necessitates social ownership of the fundamental

means of production, and this is not at odds with personal, family or cooperative property over some means of production or services. The state must free itself from the yoke of these entities which, far from being social property, have become a means for the enrichment of a minority group that exploits [the majority] to the detriment of the satisfaction of the needs of the client, that is, the people.”

The opposing view is that expanding the scope of cooperatives and other small-scale private initiative is unnecessary and unwise. One *Granma* reader, referring to the 1968 expropriations, noted in a December 25 letter that “the counter-revolution, which has not ceased in its determination to obstruct the [revolutionary] process, found in those small proprietors an excellent breeding ground from which to forge their destabilisation and terrorist plans against the Revolution”. It is also pointed out that there seem to be fewer complaints about the quality of the services offered by the state outside of the capital, Havana, adding a geographic dimension to the debate.

Decision making and public administration have always been highly centralised in revolutionary Cuba, many would argue excessively so. In the early years of the revolution there was no alternative given the turbulence of the confrontation with US imperialism and the immaturity of the administrative culture of the working people. Moreover, the centralised allocation of resources and the mobilisation of people in conditions of siege, scarcity and national emergency are behind much of what we admire about revolutionary Cuba, from the energy revolution to hurricane evacuation and recovery. During the Special Period, centralised control over the use of scarce resources became even more important.

All the democratic institutions exist in Cuba, from Peoples Power to the mass sectoral organisations of workers, women, students and farmers to the 8-million member neighbourhood-based Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, which help maintain public order and organise such things as recycling, local community projects and blood donations for the victims of disasters in other poor countries; to the PCC, a voluntary, selective organisation of around 800,000 of the most capable and committed revolutionaries.

Yet the democratic content of these institutions has rarely lived up to its full potential and to most Cubans’ reasonable expectations. Mariela Castro, Raul’s daughter and a leader in the fight for gay and lesbian rights in Cuba, told the Al Jazeera news service on January 1: “Cuban people are asking for a much more sustainable socialism, not a return to capitalism. They want a permanent system of consultation, better mechanisms of participation to work for a democratic socialism.” As Luis Sexto argues, “a hierarchical de-verticalisation of society to allow democratic horizontality” is needed. The recent

devolution of agricultural decisions to the municipalities is a step in the right direction, and lessons learned here can be applied elsewhere.

While there is much room for improvement, Cuba's socialist democracy is far more democratic than any capitalist "democracy". Under capitalism, most of the productive wealth is owned by a tiny number of super-rich families. The most important decisions affecting society are made in the corporate boardrooms and by the privileged officials at the head of the civil service. Participation in public administration is reduced to ticking a voting paper every few years for parties that take turns running the government on behalf of the big corporations. Cuba neither practices nor preaches this kind of fake democracy, which conceals the rule of the corporate rich over society.

Revolutionary optimism

Let's return to Fidel's November 2005 speech at the University of Havana, where he described Cuba as an "idiot country" but added, "This is not speaking badly about the Revolution, this is in fact speaking very well of the Revolution, because we speak of a Revolution that can discuss all this and can grab the bull by the horns, even better than the Spanish bull-fighter".

Fidel reminded Cuba's revolutionaries that history is on their side. "I believe that sooner rather than later the [US] empire will disintegrate and the American people will enjoy more freedom than ever, they will be able to aspire to more justice than ever before; they will be able to use science and technology for their own improvement and for the betterment of humanity; they will be able to join all of us who fight for the survival of the species."

In the meantime, Cuba's socialist revolution has spread to Venezuela. Together, Venezuela and Cuba are blazing a trail for socialism in the 21st century, and Cuba's revolutionaries face the challenge of carrying through a socialist renovation of their society, a challenge that recalls this prescient and wonderfully evocative passage from the man they remember fondly as Carlos Marx:

"Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm swiftly from success to success; their dramatic effects outdo each other; people and things seem set in sparkling brilliants; ecstasy is the everyday spirit; but they are short-lived; soon they have attained their zenith, and a crapulent depression lays hold of society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm and stress period.

"On the other hand, proletarian revolutions ... criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise

again, more gigantic, before them, recoil ever and anon, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: 'Here is the obstacle, now jump!'"

More than any other, Cuba's socialist revolution has demonstrated the capacity to reinvent itself at every critical juncture while staying true to itself. It is, as Raul Castro reminded Cubans celebrating its 50th anniversary, "a revolution of the humble, by the humble and for the humble". Its resilience is due, above all, to the wisdom and courage of Fidel and the other central leaders of the Cuban revolution. We can be confident that the Cuban Revolution will prevail.♦

if wars, starvation, environmental devastation, exploitation and injustice make you angry...

if you reject the idea that they are somehow “inevitable” or permanent features of human society....

then, like us, you’ve probably thought a lot about how to change the world....

Don't just get angry!

Join the fight for socialism of the 21st century

“I think that there is not much space to maneuver in, I think that there will be nothing beyond the 21st century if we do not change the world’s course in this 21st century, I think that the phrase of Karl Marx is today more valid and dramatic than ever, there is hardly any time left: socialism or death, but real death— of the entire human species and of life on planet earth, because capitalism is destroying the planet, capitalism is destroying life on earth, capitalism is destroying the ecological equilibrium of the planet. The poles are melting, the seas are heating up, the continents are sinking, forests and jungles are being destroyed, rivers and lakes are drying up; the destructive development of the capitalist model is putting an end to life on earth. I believe it’s now or never.”

“Capitalism must be transcended through socialism, this is the path by which the capitalist model must be transcended, that of true socialism. To equality, to justice!”

— Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez

Join the Revolutionary Socialist Party

Send me more information about the Revolutionary Socialist Party

Name:

Phone:

Mobile:

Email:

Address:

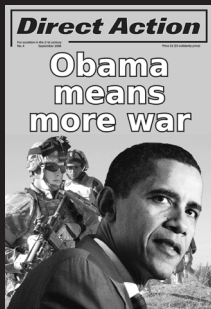
Mail to: Suite 72/65 Myrtle St, Chippendale 2008

Email: <nationaloffice@rsp.org.au> Web: www.rsp.org.au



**Don't miss an issue...
Subscribe to**

Direct Action



Subscribe or donate on the web <www.directaction.org.au> or use the form below.

I would like to subscribe to *Direct Action*:

\$20 for 12 issues (one year) \$10 for 6 issues (six months)

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Postcode: _____

Phone: _____ Mobile: _____

Email: _____

Make cheques or money orders payable to *Direct Action*. Mail to: Shop 72/65 Myrtle St, Chippendale 2008. Email: subs@directaction.org.au

It's the longest siege in human history: for half a century, socialist Cuba has been under economic, political and military attack by the United States. Despite all the obstacles, the Cuban Revolution has made tremendous progress in creating a society based on human solidarity rather than greed.

Now Cuba is emerging from the "Special Period" of economic hardship created by the loss of trading partners in the Soviet bloc, and a discussion has begun on how best to renew the course toward socialism. This pamphlet examines the ideas and opinions being put forward in the profound and wide-ranging debate now spreading through Cuban society — a debate of great significance for socialists everywhere.



\$4.95

★ RSP Books