

Cuba as Alternative

**An Introduction to Cuba's
Socialist Revolution**

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& others**

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Contents

Preface	5
Introduction: Cuba As Alternative <i>by Neville Spencer</i>	7
I. Cuba's Economic, Social & Political Alternative	17
1. Cuba's Path Out of Underdevelopment <i>by Roberto Jorquera</i>	19
2. Cuba's Struggle Against Racism <i>by Roberto Jorquera</i>	27
3. Women's Liberation in Cuba <i>by Nancy Iglesias Mildenstein</i>	33
4. Homophobia & Gay Rights in Cuba	40
I. Revolution Within the Revolution <i>by Jo Ellis</i>	40
II. Cuban HIV/AIDS Care Leads the World <i>by Karen Lee Wald</i>	43
5. Cuba's Green Revolution <i>by Dick Nichols</i>	48
6. Cuba's People's Power Democracy <i>by Rachel Evans</i>	55
7. Life & Living Standards in Cuba <i>by Julián Gutiérrez</i>	61
II. Cuba's Revolutionary History & Example	71
1. 'History will absolve me': Cuba's Revolution Is Born <i>by Roberto Jorquera</i>	71
2. Four Decades of the Cuban Revolution <i>by Greg Adamson & Roberto Jorquera</i>	75
III. A Socialist Island in a Sea of Capitalism	83
1. How Washington Uses Emigration as a Weapon Against Cuba <i>by José G. Pérez</i>	85
2. 'Cuba will neither negotiate nor sell out its revolution' <i>Interview with Fidel Castro</i>	92
Bibliography & Selected Readings	109



Preface

For more than 40 years the Cuban Revolution has been a vital centre of resistance to a global capitalism which condemns the majority of humanity to social injustice, inequality and misery.

As this book outlines, it has also been an example of what is possible even in a Third World country, if people have democratic control and ownership of the major means of production.

Cuba as Alternative has been produced by the Democratic Socialist Party to outline the major achievements of the Cuban Revolution. It is by no means an exhaustive account but rather an introduction to some of the main issues of significance for progressive and socialist activists.

In Australia and many other advanced capitalist countries, governments are preaching the need for further privatisation and cuts to social services on the pretext that they can no longer be afforded by governments. However, in Cuba the population continues to have access to free education and health care — one of the most advanced health care systems in the world. The population still has the right to work or receive up to 70% of the average wage if work is unavailable. This is a far cry from what many people in the First World have access to, including here in Australia where the majority of the unemployed will be forced to work for social security, removing their right to a decent livable income.

While, at the turn of the millennium, a new wave of radicalisation is spreading throughout the world against corporate “globalisation”, Cuba has long been at the forefront in criticising the world economic order and promoting concrete demands for a world without the domination of multinational corporations and wealthy, imperialist governments.

The following articles provide answers to some of the most frequently asked questions about Cuba and help demystify the Cuban Revolution. It is important that all progressive and socialist activists look beyond the capitalist media’s distorted picture of Cuba and study and understand the basic facts and principles of the Cuban Revolution and, most importantly of all, use it as an inspiration for building a

revolutionary movement in their own countries.

This book has been produced in collaboration with *Green Left Weekly* and the Committees in Solidarity with Latin America and the Caribbean (CISLAC) and many of the articles are reproduced from *Green Left* and CISLAC's magazine *Venceremos*.

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November 2000

Introduction: Cuba As Alternative

By Neville Spencer

There has probably been no previous point in history where such a uniform global social and economic order has existed as exists at present. Almost every country is implementing the same economic program. Governments are privatising state assets: electricity, telephone services, public transport and so on. Even vital social services such as public health and education are being transferred into private hands through one means or another.

Although, for a period, most governments provided some degree of a welfare state, giving the poor access to health, education and other services that they could not otherwise afford, that era is rapidly disappearing. In response to demands to increase or just retain these measures, politicians, government officials and economists all claim that we can no longer afford them.

The overwhelming preponderance of “neoliberal” economic measures seems to support the claim that this economic trend is inevitable. This has even led to recent theorisation that we are in an era of “globalisation” in which economic forces are sweeping the world — forces which are too powerful for individual states and even elected governments to stand in the way of.

This ideology has gained widespread acceptance. So much so that few people stop to wonder how it could be that constantly increasing levels of technology and productivity could have delivered us to this fate. Rather than increasing our standards of living and leisure time, as one would logically expect, increased productive capacity has done the exact opposite. In this light, the “we can no longer afford it” argument might start to appear suspect if not for the fact that almost every country in the world seems forced to follow the same trend.

However, there is evidence that this argument is in fact spurious. One of the most important and striking pieces of such evidence is the island nation of Cuba. Working only on the information available to most people through the capitalist-owned press,

this would seem like an odd claim to make. Most people would know of Cuba only as a poverty-stricken country ruled by a repressive “communist dictatorship”, an image reinforced by stories of people fleeing Cuba in boats and rafts.

But this impression is founded on very little actual information. Most people would think that Cuba is a dictatorship only because they have repeatedly heard or read the words “Cuban dictator” preceding the name Fidel Castro. Actual information about the Cuban electoral system, or even merely the knowledge that it has an electoral system at all is, like most information about Cuba, not readily available.

This collection of articles aims to challenge some of the myths promoted by the capitalist media by providing some brief but substantial information about Cuba. It also aims to show that Cuba is not only not the repressive dictatorship that the media would have us believe but is in very many respects an impressive, democratic and humane alternative to the rapacious capitalism that the media defend.

Cuba is indeed a poor Third World country and, as such, is not the ideal example of what humanity could achieve were the full potential of its technology and productivity put to the task of advancing human wellbeing. But, since its revolution of 1959, Cuba has produced many remarkable achievements that challenge the “we can no longer afford it” ideology, in spite of the historical legacy of being a semi-colonial Third World country.

At the same time, the fact that Cuba is a poor Third World country, with a per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of about one sixteenth that of Australia, only serves to demonstrate how much more ought to be achievable in a wealthy First World country.

That the facts of revolutionary Cuba’s achievements are not made common knowledge is hardly surprising since the capitalist press, on whom most people depend to provide such information, is instead leading the way in promoting the “we can no longer afford it” ideology. Like many other capitalists, many media moguls have become fabulously wealthy promoting the “we can no longer afford it” ideology.

A social alternative

Health and education are major priorities for the Cuban Revolution. In contrast to many much wealthier countries, Cuba provides education for all its citizens up to tertiary level for free. It provides free health care, including advanced surgical procedures which are unavailable in other Third World countries. It provides treatments such as advanced heart surgery for free and has even pioneered treatments like neuron transplants for victims of Parkinson’s disease.

Half of Cuba’s doctors, along with many of the more privileged sector of Cuba’s population, left after the revolution. Since then, Cuba has put much effort into training

new doctors. From just 3000 doctors just after the revolution, it now has 64,000 — the highest number of doctors per head of population in the world.

Cuba has also sent thousands of health professionals to other countries to provide assistance, even outstripping the UN's World Health Organisation in its provision of doctors to other Third World countries. Cuba currently has more than 2000 health professionals working in 57 countries.

One of the effects of the revolution's expansion of health services has been to raise life expectancy in Cuba from 55 to 74 years. Infant mortality has dropped from around 60 per 1000 live births to 6.2, the lowest for any Third World country and lower even than many First World countries. By comparison, the Latin American average is 33 and the US eight.

As well as the health system, these improvements are also due to the improvement in nutrition among the Cuban population. Cuba is possibly the only Third World country where starvation is unknown. As a Third World country living under an economic blockade, providing adequate nutrition is a difficult task. The Cuban diet is very basic and luxury foods are rare treats, but the government ensures that what there is gets distributed relatively evenly so that everyone has adequate nutrition. Average calorie intake is 135% of requirements.

Cuba also has the highest number of teachers per capita in the world. Prior to the revolution illiteracy was around 30%; it has now been practically eliminated. One of the first campaigns launched after the revolution was the literacy brigades. Brigades of volunteers, particularly high school students, were sent to different regions of the country to teach others to read and write, especially targeting women and the rural population where illiteracy was more severe.

Cuba also provides scholarships to thousands of students from other Third World countries.

An economic alternative

One of the most significant factors in improving the quality of life of the Cuban people is the fact that its economic resources are not controlled by the small minority of wealthy individuals who own the bulk of the economy, as in most other countries.

In capitalist countries, production is carried out for the sole purpose of making profits for capitalists. Satisfying peoples' needs is often a necessary byproduct of this process, but production is regularly carried out to the overall detriment of society and the environment, so long as it is profitable. Providing goods and services to people who cannot afford them is not profitable. Providing jobs and decent wages to people so that they can afford more goods and services is also undesirable beyond a certain

extent. Better wages eat into profits and full employment puts workers in a stronger position to demand better wages.

Capitalist governments operate on the principle that the overriding concern is to look after profits. They tell workers that the wealth will “trickle down” if they too adopt as their main goal the need to make profits for capitalists. Yet when workers demand the higher wages or improved social services through which this wealth might trickle down, they are opposed tooth and nail by the capitalists and capitalist governments. In recent decades the wealth gap has generally been widening and wealth is, in fact, trickling up.

With most of its production controlled by the state or by cooperatives, the Cuban economy is directed by conscious, collective decision-making. This doesn't automatically guarantee against bad decisions being made, but it does mean that overall human wellbeing can be consciously set as the goal of this decision-making rather than simply being hoped for as a spin-off from decisions made by a small minority in pursuit of profits. Production or production methods which harm the environment or community health; wasteful, unnecessary consumerism such as useless goods, packaging and advertising; cutting wages or damaging workers' health, are all acceptable if profit-making is the goal. But in no way will they be accepted in a conscious, collective decision-making process with human wellbeing as its priority.

In Cuba, decisions about allocating investment or employing workers are not subject to the whim of individual capitalists seeking only to make profits. This is why, at a time when other countries are making cutbacks to social services such as health, education, child-care or social security — freeing up funds which wind up in the pockets of capitalists — Cuba is improving them and still providing them free.

Even though it is a poor country, Cuba spreads its wealth relatively evenly among its people. Elsewhere, a minority lives in luxury while others are homeless or starving, while in Cuba everyone has a livable, if basic, standard of living.

The two main reasons why Cuba has not been able to increase its overall wealth to levels like those of First World countries are: that it began the revolution as an underdeveloped country, and that it has been subject to an economic blockade and sabotage from the US for most of the past four decades.

The US imposed the economic blockade of Cuba in 1960. As a neo-colony, almost all of Cuba's trade was with the US. Its economy was geared to provide the US with sugar and a holiday destination. Hence the blockade made much of Cuba's erstwhile economic activity impossible or redundant.

The estimated economic cost of the blockade in 1998 was US\$800 million. The total cost of the blockade and other economic damage inflicted on Cuba by the US is

estimated at US\$181 billion since 1960.

The US also engineers various forms of sabotage against Cuba. Right-wing Cubans living in the US regularly carry out terrorist attacks on Cuba from Miami, which the US either turns a blind eye to or actively organises. The most infamous example was the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 which Cuba defeated.

Recently, articles in the *New York Times*, revealed that the person behind the recent spate of hotel bombings in Cuba was Luis Posada Carriles. Posada has been a long-time CIA “asset” and had previously been convicted in Venezuela for the 1976 bombing of a Cuban passenger plane in which 73 people were killed.

It is unlikely that any other country could have weathered the attacks that Cuba has endured without mass starvation and political upheavals. Cuba has dealt with them in a carefully planned and resourceful manner.

For instance, because it cannot obtain much oil, the Cuban government has provided bicycles to its population. It has also started to provide buses to carry people and their bicycles, so that people can ride to the nearest bus stop, catch a bus to near where they need to go and then continue to ride from there.

To try to climb out of its status as an underdeveloped country and to earn foreign currency, Cuba has concentrated on redeveloping its tourist industry and also using its now very numerous doctors and scientists to make it a leader in biotechnology.

The tourist industry has grown very successfully, helping it recover from the loss of trade with the Soviet Union which had previously helped make up for some of the loss of trade with the US. This has, however, made tourism sites a target of US-inspired terrorist attacks.

Relying on the tourist industry to counter the effects of the blockade has had drawbacks. In particular, it has created resentment among some Cubans, as the island provides luxuries to tourists that are out of the reach of ordinary Cubans. Nonetheless, most realise that it is a necessity given the blockade and the consequent need for foreign exchange earnings.

In the field of biotechnology, Cuba has pioneered hundreds of medical-pharmaceutical products and techniques, such as the meningitis B vaccine and neuron transplants, as well as agricultural biotechnology products. This has been a successful industry, though marketing the products around the world is difficult in the face of US attempts to stop any countries trading with Cuba.

An alternative to discrimination

As well as challenging the claims about the inevitability of the neoliberal economic model, the example of Cuba also challenges commonplace ideology about social issues

and prejudices such as sexism and racism. Once again, the sheer preponderance of sexism, racism or just simple selfishness gives credibility to the often-repeated claims that they are inevitable — a part of human nature. And since they are biologically innate, there is no point trying to get rid of them. The example of Cuba, on the other hand, gives credence to the counter-argument that they are not innate and inevitable but are, in fact, historically and socially created and thus susceptible to being eliminated in a different period of history in a new kind of society.

In Cuba, the creation of a new social system has made possible its impressive attempts to eliminate discrimination against women. The revolution's starting point here was very difficult. Less than 10% of women had employment in 1959, nearly all of them in traditional, predominantly female, low-paid employment such as domestic servants. The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) successfully campaigned to increase women's participation in the workforce by 100,000 per year. Cuba has also launched retraining programs to enable women to take up employment outside traditional areas. This has meant that women have been able to earn average wages close to those of men. In other countries laws formalising equal pay for women have failed to deliver real wage equality because women are still encouraged or forced into low wage employment.

Many of these gains in Cuba are related to measures that free women from the burdens which prevent them from equal participation in society — measures which a society directed by the need to make profits would simply not provide. Cuba is committed to providing contraception, free child-care and free legal abortions, things which are the subject of constant struggles in other countries. The accessibility of education has also been an important factor. Most university graduates are now women and, in a dramatic turn around from the previous concentration of women in traditional employment, most scientists are also women.

Cuba has also gone further than any other country in the ideological promotion of women's rights. The women's movement, which was organised and encouraged after the revolution, has influenced changes in Cuban society and law, such as in stopping sexist advertising and beauty contests. Of course, Cuba hasn't eliminated sexism, but it is hard to imagine some of the things achieved by Cuba being achieved in a capitalist country.

Pre-revolutionary Cuba had much in common with South Africa under apartheid. At least a third of Cuba's population is of African decent, yet blacks were banned from many clubs, bars, restaurants, movie theatres and beaches. Even Batista as president of Cuba was banned from the Havana Yacht Club.

The revolution, however, prioritised the elimination of racism. All laws

discriminating against blacks were removed.

But what is most important to note is that Cuba also went further than just providing this type of formal, legal equality that is acceptable to most modern capitalist countries. Cuba has gone a long way towards eliminating *real* inequality. The main sources of discrimination against blacks in pre-revolutionary Cuba were not the specific apartheid-style laws. The main reason why blacks could not get into decent schools or have access to health care was simply that they could not afford it. They were concentrated in all the lowest-paying jobs.

The revolutionary government has campaigned consistently to eliminate racist consciousness in Cuba. It has made the elimination of discrimination in employment a key task and has promoted the fact that its cultural heritage is heavily indebted to the African origins of much of its population. Most importantly though, it has removed material barriers to racial equality. By providing free health care and education, the financial barriers which divided society have been significantly removed. While blacks were previously concentrated in the slums, the drastic reduction of rents after the revolution turned this problem around. The granting of ownership to tenants gave blacks in Cuba a higher rate of home ownership than any other country in the world.

Cuba has not been content to just create formal equality by eliminating racist laws. Other countries, such as Australia, have eliminated specifically racial laws yet ignore the continued existence of systemic social discrimination, which has the black population of Australia suffering poverty, vastly higher levels of unemployment and a life expectancy 20 years less than the rest of the population. Cuba has been trying to achieve a racial equality that is real and not merely formal-legal.

Cuba's efforts in combating discrimination against gays and lesbians were certainly much slower coming than its efforts in combating sexism and racism. Anti-homosexual laws drawn up prior to the revolution were maintained for over 20 years of the revolution. But this error has been rectified.

During the '90s there have also been moves to once again go beyond merely eliminating formal, legal discrimination against gays and lesbians and challenge deeply-ingrained prejudices. Most famously, it was the very popular Cuban film *Strawberry and Chocolate*, which criticised Cuban homophobia and established it as an evil to be combated just as sexism and racism already had been.

A democratic alternative

One of the main slanders promoted by the media against the Cuban revolution is that it is a dictatorship. Yet they almost never tell people anything about Cuba's electoral system.

Cuba's current system of government is based on what is called the People's Power system. The system was introduced after 1976 following widespread discussions and a referendum in which 98% voted in favour of the new system.

As originally introduced People's Power was a system in which the people elected municipal assemblies, which then elected regional assemblies, which in turn elected the national assembly. This has since been altered so that all assemblies are now directly elected.

The electorates are comparatively small, usually just several blocks in urban areas. The electorates meet to nominate between two and eight candidates.

After the candidates are nominated, there is nothing like the typical campaigning which happens in other countries. Information about each of the candidates is produced and distributed. Each candidate has the same amount of publicity and this is paid for by the state. This prevents the undemocratic spectacle, at its extreme in the US, where campaigning requires multi-million dollar budgets available only to millionaires or those with millionaire backers.

Voting is by secret ballot and anyone aged 16 or over is eligible to stand in elections or vote.

In other countries, candidates, once elected, cannot be removed until the next election and are thus free from the need to fulfill the will of their electorate. It is not uncommon in such countries to see elected governments carrying out policies which opinion polls show most of the population oppose.

In Cuba, elected candidates may be recalled at any time if their electorates are not happy with them. This power is exercised relatively regularly and is not just a legal dead letter.

Candidates do not have to be members of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) to stand. In fact, the PCC doesn't put forward candidates: candidates are nominated as individuals. Many people who are not PCC members stand and are elected. Often there can be several PCC members standing against each other.

It is the case, however, that there are no political parties other than the PCC. This initially came about following the revolution when political leaders opposed to the revolution left Cuba en masse, while the political parties which supported the revolution decided to unify, forming the PCC in 1965.

The government legislated to keep this situation. This denies the US government, which spends millions of dollars trying to overthrow the Cuban government, the option of forming its own political party, as it has done in many other countries.

This does have the disadvantage that candidates cannot easily be elected on the basis of their support for one or another national political platform, but rather are

elected on the basis of their perceived individual merits.

However, the example of the Nicaraguan revolution suggests that this may nonetheless be the option that is the most democratic. In Nicaragua, after the Sandinistas (FSLN) overthrew the US-backed dictator in 1979, a multi-party electoral system was established more akin to familiar models of representative democracy than to the Cuban model. The US still labeled it a dictatorship, despite the fact that the FSLN had won a landslide victory in the first elections held in 1984, with an electoral system not unlike that the US pretended to be championing.

The US was able to defeat the FSLN in the 1990 election by cobbling together its own political party and suggesting that it would end the war against Nicaragua — which had cost Nicaragua tens of thousand of lives and billions of dollars — if people were to vote for its party. This was hardly democratic.

The US has passed a law under which it will refuse to recognise any government as legitimate if Fidel Castro is elected, no matter under what circumstances. However, sober opponents of the Cuban government recognise that the government still commands a very clear majority of popular support. This means that the US would not recognise any Cuban government chosen by democratic means.

Cuba is correctly cautious about allowing the blockade, the terrorist attacks and possibly worse to come to be used in an effort to enforce a vote for a US-backed government.

The electoral system, like other major national issues such as economic reforms, remains an ongoing debate in Cuba. Like most things in Cuba, the context of living under the external threat from the US greatly limits the potential options. It nonetheless has a number of features far more democratic than those of any other countries.

A socialist alternative

Another commonplace in media propaganda is to lump Cuba in with other socialist states such as the Soviet Union. It is usually considered that sufficient information about Cuba's economic and political system can be provided simply by applying the label "communist" — all one needs to know is that it is the same sort of thing as the (also very distorted) image that the media provides of the Soviet Union.

But the Cuban revolution has not degenerated into the same sort of regime as developed in the Soviet Union with the rise of Stalin. Under the Stalinist regimes, government and industrial administrators developed into a layer of bureaucrats which systematically provided itself with privileges far above those of the rest of the population, though still modest in comparison to those of wealthy capitalists. Guarding these privileges required systematic repression and an absence of democratic control.

Unlike many of the Stalinist states, the revolution in Cuba did not develop under the tutelage of the Stalinised Soviet Union. The revolution was led by the July 26 Revolutionary Movement, not by the pro-Moscow Popular Socialist Party (PSP). After all the pro-revolutionary parties merged following the revolution, Castro accused former PSP leader Anibal Escalante and other former PSP leaders around him of undemocratically establishing their own personal power and turning the party into “a nest of privileges ... which tolerates favouritism” as well as colluding with the Soviet embassy. The dispute emerged in the early '60s and again in the late '60s, with Escalante eventually being expelled from the party and arrested.

Cuba's far more democratic political system already says something to mark it apart from the Stalinist regimes. But Cuba also does not have the systematic provision of special privileges for bureaucrats and wage levels are much more egalitarian.

Administrators in Cuba are often paid less than skilled technical workers. In fact, because there is often the provision of certain bonuses to workers on top of their regular wages, it has often been difficult to fill administrative positions because taking such positions would effectively constitute a pay cut for many workers.

Cuba does always face the danger that such a Stalinist system could develop. Many of the distortions of the Stalinist regimes can be found in Cuba, but they remain isolated incidences rather than being part of an established system. In a still very poor country, administrators are often tempted to use their positions to secure privileges for themselves in corrupt and illegal ways.

The PCC has consciously campaigned against the development of bureaucratism. As with other issues, Cuban film has played a leading role in exposing the revolution's problems. Some of Cuba's most famous films, like *Death of a Bureaucrat* and *Plaff* are clearly critical of bureaucratism.

The negative example of Stalinism has been one of the most difficult issues to overcome for socialists trying to convince people that socialism is a viable alternative to capitalism. The capitalist media have distorted this issue to great effect. However, if the information is able to escape through the capitalist media's domination, the example of Cuba helps put paid to this propaganda by demonstrating that there can be an alternative to both Stalinised socialism and capitalism. ■

I Cuba's Economic, Social & Political Alternative



A Havana hospital.

1. Cuba's Path Out of Underdevelopment

An Historical Look at Cuba's Economic Development

By Roberto Jorquera

Since 1959, the Cuban Revolution has been an inspiration to millions around the world. Though a small, underdeveloped nation, Cuba has been able to demonstrate what is feasible with a democratically controlled and planned economy, and to dramatically improve the living conditions of the majority of Cubans. Its successes have been achieved in spite of an economic blockade by the United States since 1960 and the collapse of 80% of its trade (with the Eastern bloc) in 1991.

In its effort to remain loyal to its socialist principles, while also relating to the capitalist world economic order, Cuba's economic and political development since the revolution has gone through various stages. Studying these gives us a better understanding of the challenges now facing the revolution.

Economic principles

The first decade of economic development after 1959 was dominated by the agrarian reform law of 1962, which converted 40% of landed property into state property, distributed a further 40% to small rural producers and left the remaining 20% in the hands of medium and large landowners. The redistribution immediately ended much of the rural unemployment that had plagued Cuba for centuries.

The main industries and the banking sector were also nationalised and a democratic system of workers' participation was introduced, based on a system of elected workplace delegates.

In his roles as head of the National Bank and Minister of Industry, Ernesto "Che" Guevara was a central figure in debates, throughout the early 1960s, over what sort of economic structure was needed to begin Cuba's socialist transition.

These debates on economic policy reflected a wider political debate about the alliance with the Soviet Union. The old guard of the Popular Socialist Party was in

favour of copying the Soviet economic system, but Che and others in the July 26 Movement were critical of Soviet bureaucratic practices, including in the economy.

For Che, the success of the economy had to be measured by more than just statistics. In 1964, in an interview with an Argentinian journalist, Che stated:

“A socialist economy without communist moral values does not interest me. We fight poverty but we also fight alienation. One of the fundamental aims of Marxism is to eliminate material interest, the factor of ‘individual self-interest’ and profit from humans’ psychological motivations.

“Marx was concerned with both economic facts and their reflection in the mind, which he called ‘facts of consciousness’. If communism neglects facts of consciousness, it can serve as a method of distribution but it will no longer express revolutionary moral values.”

Thus, the new socialist economy had to not only encompass new organisational principles that allowed workers to participate in its functioning, but also needed to enhance workers’ socialist consciousness and build the “new socialist person”. In the view of Che and his co-thinkers, this was vital if the revolution was not to degenerate, as the Soviet Union had.

Cuba’s economy throughout the 1960s was based on Che’s budgetary finance system, which stressed moral and material incentives, volunteer work and efforts to promote workers’ consciousness.

At the founding of the Communist Party of Cuba, in 1965, Fidel Castro argued: “Socialism means not only material enrichment but also the opportunity to create an extraordinary cultural and spiritual wealth among the people, and to create an individual with deep feelings of human solidarity, free from the selfishness and meanness that degrade and oppress the individual under capitalism.”

By the early 1970s, however, Cuba’s economy had been forced by the US-imposed blockade and the failure of the campaign for a 10 million tonne sugar harvest to tie itself to the Soviet bloc; Cuba joined COMECON in 1972. Although the economic relationship was generally beneficial for the Cuban economy, it did create political distortions within the economic structures, which were not recognised until the 1980s.

Socialist consolidation

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Cuba consolidated its economic development and introduced the Organs of People’s Power, which substantially democratised decision-making.

Economic observer Carlos Tablada noted, “Between 1960-70 and 1981-85 average annual national economic growth rose from 3.6% to 6.7%. Over the same period the

value of gross investment doubled and annual labour productivity growth rose from 0.4% to 5.2%. The growth rate of industrial output [rose from] 4.8% in 1962-70 to 8.8% in 1981-85.”

Tablada also noted, “Between 1958 and 1989 life expectancy rose from 62 to 74 years ... The number of inhabitants per doctor fell from 1832 to 303 over the same period, reaching 274 in 1990 ... Infant mortality stood at 10.2 per thousand births in 1990 as against 15 for the developed world, 52 for Latin America and 76 in the underdeveloped world ...

“The illiteracy rate was reduced from 23.6% to 1.9% between 1958 and 1989. Over the same period the number of children attending secondary school multiplied 12.2 times, the number of university students 9.2 times. The percentage of the population covered by social security rose from 53% to 100%.”

Further achievements include the only heart transplant program in the underdeveloped world, which, by 1996, had carried out more than 90 operations, free of charge. By 1991, there were 300,000 teachers in the country, giving Cuba the highest per capita rate of teachers in the world. By 1989, Cuba's aid donations to developing nations had reached US\$1.5 billion.

By 1990, 30,000 medical personnel from Cuba had worked in more than 20 countries and treated more than 60 million people. At the time, Cuba had more doctors abroad than the World Health Organisation. Furthermore, between 1982 and 1985, for every 625 Cubans there was one civilian aid worker overseas; in the US the ratio was one aid worker per 34,704 inhabitants.

By the 1980s, Cuba's economic achievements were second to none in the underdeveloped world, and in many areas its achievements had surpassed those of the developed world. Recently, 100 doctors from England went to Cuba to study the success of its health system. In 1995, Fidel Castro visited Harlem in the US where he offered to send Cuban doctors to Harlem or anywhere else in the US in need of medical care.

Early in 2000, the Cuban government presented an official proposal to the US Department of State to send Cuban doctors to poor regions in the US, mainly around the area of Mississippi and to train up to 500 doctors from ethnic and minority groups. This would include 250 Afro-Americans and 250 from Hispanic, native and other underprivileged groups.

Cuba's ability to achieve these gains has been in large part due to the democratically-planned and socially-owned economic system that it had introduced following the victory of the July 26 Movement in 1959. In the following two decades, however, this success faced a stern test.

Cuba survives with principles intact

In the mid-1980s, the objective political and economic situation began to pose major challenges for the Cuban Revolution. The economy was starting to show signs of stagnation and increased bureaucratic practices. The gains that it had made since 1959 were in jeopardy. The prime economic and political challenge for Cuba was to survive while maintaining the principles of the revolution.

Cuba's crisis deepened with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late-1980s and Washington's tightening of the economic blockade backed by the passing of the misnamed Democracy Act (known as the Torricelli Bill) in 1992 and the Cuban Liberty and Solidarity Act in 1996 (known as the Helms-Burton Bill).

These measures extended the blockade, in particular, penalising foreign countries and companies that do business with Cuba. For instance, any ships that dock in Cuba are banned from US ports for six months afterwards and executives of any company that invests in Cuba are denied entry to the US.

The legislation also allows US citizens to sue any company using property nationalised by the revolution. This aspect is aimed at stopping foreign companies from investing in Cuba by allowing Cuban-Americans whose businesses were nationalised to sue them. In fact, this legislation was drafted by lawyers of the Bacardi rum company whose former property has become part of a Cuban joint venture with the French company Pernot.

The attempt to force other countries to abide by the blockade has had the effect of alienating other countries from US policy on Cuba. A motion condemning the US blockade has been put to the UN General Assembly every year, with well over a hundred countries regularly supporting it and with only the US and Israel opposing. However, the US's position as a superpower means such objections against it can't develop into much beyond the condemnations.

The US government hoped Cuba's economic crisis plus the increased economic damage from the blockade would lead to the collapse of the Cuban government and impair the revolution's socialist example. The right-wing, Miami-based Cuban American National Federation (CANF) even appointed a "transitional government" (with US endorsement) in anticipation.

However, the ingenuity of the Cuban people and their ability to adapt has resulted in the revolution surviving for over ten years after the collapse of the eastern bloc. The Cuban government secured more than 80% of popular support in the last national election.

Rectification period

In 1986, the Cuban government launched the “Campaign of Rectification of Errors and Negative Tendencies”. It aimed to increase the people’s participation in the economic and political processes and was a return to the ideas of Che Guevara: relying on heightened political consciousness rather than material incentives and bureaucratic control to run the economy.

In 1987, President Fidel Castro noted: “The most serious error of economic policy between 1975 and 1985 was undoubtedly the reliance upon economic mechanisms to resolve all the problems faced by the new society, ignoring the role assigned to political factors in the construction of socialism.”

In 1991, at the fourth party congress, Castro explained that the “rectification process constituted the revolution’s strategic counter-offensive ... which provoked an extraordinary turnabout in our society, facilitating the revival of the roots, principles and genuinely humane, ideological and ethical values that gave breath and life to our own kind of socialism”.

The campaign also anticipated the economic and/or political collapse of the Soviet Union. By the mid-1980s, the Cuban leadership was aware of the problems that the Soviet Union was facing and Cuba was ready to deal with its collapse.

The rectification campaign’s main purpose was to reverse negative tendencies that had crept into economic practices, rather than fundamentally change economic policies. It did this through improving political motivation and accountability of industrial managers, further democratising workplaces, removing material incentives, improving work norms, increasing investment in key industries, raising the minimum wage and introducing some unavoidable austerity measures.

Frank Fitzgerald, a US-based sociology professor, writes in his book *The Cuban Revolution in Crisis: From Managing Socialism to Managing Survival*: “By December 1986, more than 400 administrators in Havana, including 120 enterprises and work centre managers, had been removed from their posts, as had 85 grassroots party leaders, because of their unwillingness or inability to change their behaviour.”

While overall living standards dropped slightly for most Cubans, the national economy was stabilised and there was more popular participation in politics. Its success reflected the Cuban leadership’s awareness of and willingness to address the problems in a way that the Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy was incapable of doing.

Most importantly, the campaign was a test of the health and popularity of the socialist character of the revolution — a test that was passed with flying colours.

Special period

In September 1990, in response to the deteriorating economic relations with the Soviet Union, increased political and economic pressure from the US and tougher relations with the rest of the capitalist world, Castro announced that the country had entered a “special period in a time of peace”.

Economic relations with the rest of the capitalist world were made more difficult by the worsening terms of trade, and Cuba’s unilateral moratorium on the payment of its foreign debt to capitalist institutions meant it was no longer able to receive long-term loans from these institutions.

At the October 1991 fourth congress of the Communist Party, Castro outlined some of the difficulties:

“Up to the end of September, the Soviets had delivered all the fuel but only 26% of the total goods that they had promised. Almost no foodstuffs had arrived in the first five months of the year, and deliveries had not yet caught up by the end of September: Cuba had received only half of the promised split peas, 7% of the lard, 16% of the vegetable oil, 11% of the condensed milk, 47% of the butter, 18% of the canned meat, 22% of the powdered milk, 11% of fresh and canned fish.”

As well, Cuba had received no detergent, less than 5% of the expected supplies of soap and just over 1% of the spare parts needed to repair Soviet-made television sets and refrigerators. Cuba faced what became known as “the second blockade”. If the revolution was to survive, it needed to become more self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs and products, and find the money to keep its basic industries running.

The Cuban leadership opened a discussion before the fourth party congress that led to an opening up of the economy to foreign investment in order to stimulate domestic productivity and increase funds available to the government.

The system of People’s Power was strengthened and workers’ parliaments were introduced to rejuvenate the local councils that had been set up since 1961. These parliaments were given more responsibility for developing economic policy and in implementing it in local areas.

In the national and provincial assemblies, direct election of delegates was introduced. Previously, national delegates were elected from delegates to the provincial assemblies, and delegates to the provincial assemblies were elected from delegates to the municipal assemblies. Delegates could be nominated by the mass organisations.

According to Fitzgerald: “About one-third of those nominated and ... elected to the provincial and national assemblies were not members of the party or of its youth organisation. Party members still predominated in these assemblies, but the new nominating process opened them to greater numbers of non-party members.”

Economic changes

In 1993, Castro noted: “The essential thing isn’t just to survive but also to develop ... As a matter of principle ... resources must be shared amongst us all ... [if workers are unemployed] we will guarantee a large part of their wage. Nobody will be left without support ... [Cuba has been] deprived of more resources than any Latin American country, but we haven’t closed any schools, hospitals, clinics or medical services at all, and we haven’t thrown anybody out of work with no pay.”

In 1993, after much discussion, the government established Unidades Basicas de Producción Cooperativa (UBPC — Basic Units of Cooperative Production). As a result, the state’s share of total agricultural land fell in 1994 from 75% to 34%, while its share of cultivated land fell from 80% to 25%.

The purpose of the UBPCs was to allow more self-management in the agricultural sector by permitting cooperatives to sell more produce directly to the market. However, a set percentage still had to be sold to the state.

Other measures included the legalisation of holding US dollars by Cuban citizens (this facilitated the inflow of remittances from Cuban families abroad) and the self-financing of industries (with the goal of reducing subsidies from the central government budget).

More resources were pumped into the biotechnology industry, resulting in the value of its exports jumping to US\$800 million in 1990 from zero in 1988.

Foreign investment was encouraged in order to provide the resources and funding needed to keep some industries functioning. Foreign investment was permitted in all sectors except health care, education and arms-related institutions.

In 1993, Cuba’s exports dropped to only US\$2 billion, which was a significant reduction from its peak of US\$6.5 billion in the 1980s. However, Cuba had been able to increase that amount to US\$3.8 billion by 1997.

The 1995 Foreign Investment Law was introduced, allowing some profits to be tax-free and profits could be repatriated in convertible currencies. Investments were guaranteed against nationalisation and free-trade zones were allowed, although the ministry of labour has kept the right to set the minimum wage in the zones.

Ken Cole, in his book *Cuba: From Revolution to Development*, observed: “The more Cuba enters the international economy, and the more dependent it becomes on international markets to rebuild its economy, the more control these market actors will have on the nature of Cuban development.

“As these actors tend to harbor an underlying bias against socialist economic designs, and they have a fairly narrow (and short-term) conception of what constitutes ‘healthy economic fundamentals’, this market control will be in sharp contrast to the

ambitions of Cuba's current policy makers.”

Yet, while Cuba's “relinking” with the capitalist world market is fraught with dangers, it's clear that it would otherwise have been impossible to reverse the economic collapse the early 1990s. As a result of the inflow of foreign capital, growth of the tourism sector, the increase in remittances from abroad and the decline in government subsidies to loss-making firms, the country has managed to achieve an average 4.1% growth rate since 1994.

By the end of 2000, “socialist austerity” had achieved the following economic gains: debt as a proportion of GDP has declined; the state budget deficit has been brought to under 3% of GDP; the money supply, while still vastly excessive, continues to fall; the peso has appreciated from around 150 to one US dollar to 20 to one; labour productivity has risen by 12% in five years; and the unit cost of producing sugar has fallen by 18%. A new progressive income tax system is beginning to function. There have been modest increases in wages, living standards and working conditions but much remains to be done.

Matters have now reached the point where Cuba is being accepted as less of a credit risk by international financiers, with the interest charge of 15-22% previously levied on Cuba and confined to short-term borrowings only being replaced by long and medium-term loans at lower rates. Joint ventures and investment in extensive activities such as mining, tourism, oil exploration and refining, agriculture, perfumes, rum, beer, agriculture and engineering have enabled paralysed and underutilised productive capacity to be set in motion, earning foreign exchange, creating tens of thousands of jobs and providing tax income. This revival has been achieved without any support from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

Many concessions and changes have had to be made by the Cuban Revolution in order to survive. What is positive is that these changes have not been imposed from on high but have been made with the involvement and participation of the majority of the Cuban people. This democratic participation of the vast majority of the Cuban people over the main directions of the Cuban Revolution continues to be the underlying cause of its survival. ■

2. Cuba's Struggle Against Racism

By Roberto Jorquera

Since 1959, Cuba's revolutionary government has embarked on the task of eliminating centuries of racial prejudice dating from the arrival of the Spanish in 1492, when the indigenous people of the island began to be massacred.

To gain a full appreciation of the advances that have been achieved in combating racial prejudice in revolutionary Cuba, it is important to have an outline of the history of race relations in Cuba. The major historical periods are the colonial period, the period of the republic (1901-59) and after the 1959 revolution.

Racism is an ideology that justifies the social practice of racial oppression, of institutionalised inequality based on racial categorisation. The invasion of the Americas following its "discovery" by Christopher Columbus was central to the development of capitalism in Europe. After the invasion it was necessary for the colonial ruling class to develop racist bigotry to justify the oppression of the indigenous people and the later development of the slave trade from Africa.

Since the victory of the revolution, racist oppression has been systematically combated and defeated. However, it would be utopian to suggest that individual racial prejudices do not still exist in sections of the population. The Cuban Revolution laid the economic and social foundations for the effective elimination of racism but, with increasing political and economic attacks by the US, even the gains that have been achieved face pressures.

The history of Cuba is a history of socio-economic discrimination against the overwhelming majority of the population. This discrimination was based not only on race, but more importantly on class, leading many scholars to define the pre-revolutionary period as that of a colour/class system. The post-revolutionary

government, therefore, correctly realised that to overcome racism it needed to overcome the class system itself.

Colonial period

One of the difficulties in looking at the issue of race politics in Cuba is in finding the most accurate statistics on who is, or defines themselves as, black. According to the 1955 Cuban census, negroes or mulattos comprised the following percentages of the population: 55.85% in 1827; 32% in 1899; 25.2% in 1943; and 26.9% in 1953. These official figures are based on a person's own definition, rather than on any objective definition of who is considered black, mulatto or white. While such figures are useful, many other studies suggest that the percentage of blacks or mulattos is closer to 35-40% of the population in the post-revolutionary period.

The 1800s was a period of revolutionary battles, many of which began to raise the issue of race. It was also a time of massacres of the black population, such as that in Aponte in 1812 and La Escalera in 1844. The Cuban revolutionary hero José Martí was one of the most outspoken and aggressive campaigners for the liberation of blacks. The ten-year war that erupted in 1868 was begun by Carlos de Cespedes' act of freeing his slaves, opening the way for a greater political role for blacks.

The right-wing backlash which promoted a "fear of the black" was answered by Martí in 1868: "There can be no race hatred, because there are no races ... What then is there to fear? ... Shall we fear he who has suffered most in Cuba from the privation of freedom, in the country where the blood he shed for her has made her too dear to be threatened ... The revolution, which has brought together all Cubans, regardless of their colour, whether they come from the continent where the skin burns, or from peoples of a gentler light, will be for all Cubans." It was the battles led by Martí and others that led to the abolition of slavery in 1886. The late 1880s also led to an increasing involvement of blacks in the struggle for independence, particularly the wars of independence in 1895-98.

The republic

The 1901 constitution effectively imposed discriminatory practices which hit blacks the hardest. Voting was restricted to males over 21 years of age who could either read and write, or owned property valued over 250 pesos, or proved that they had fought in the liberation army. In response to such practices, the Association of Black Voters was formed in 1908, soon after changing its name to the Party of Colour. Part of its platform stated: "Freedom is not asked or begged for, it is won; and rights are not handed out anywhere, rights are fought for and belong to all. If we go on asking for

our rights, we will die waiting because we will have lost them.”

However, in 1910, the government, in a clear attempt to curtail black political participation, introduced a law banning the formation of political parties on race lines. This led to the race war of 1912 that saw a slaughter of blacks by the military.

By the turn of the century systematic racial oppression was firmly in place in numerous parts of Cuban society. These included the formation of exclusive social clubs, bars, restaurants, restricted beaches, movie theatres and night clubs. Exclusion was also maintained through income levels. Lourdes Casal, in an article entitled “Race Relations in Contemporary Cuba”, writes:

“In Havana, upper class social clubs excluded blacks and mulattos systematically. (Even Batista, during his term as President of the Republic, was banned at the Havana Yacht Club, the most exclusive of the upper class clubs.) These clubs controlled private beaches in Havana which, therefore, excluded blacks. Middle class clubs, especially those organised around professional associations, admitted those blacks who belonged to the respective professional organisations.”

“In Cuban small towns and provincial capitals, segregation was rigidly enforced in formal social life and in the patterns of informal association related to courtship, such as in public parks. The private school system was predominantly, although not totally, white. Elite schools practised racial discrimination but it was hardly necessary because few blacks could afford the high tuition costs and other expenses”, writes Casal.

Racial discrimination was also evident in occupational distribution, with blacks occupying the overwhelming majority of lower-paid and less skilled jobs. The republic's immigration policy encouraged white workers from Spain and promoted an assimilationist policy. The government even went to the extent of introducing a process of reclassification of many mulattos as white, effectively trying to erase Cuba's black history.

Revolutionary period

The victory of the revolution provided the opportunity for a fundamental change in the way in which blacks were treated and the way in which black history and culture was viewed within Cuban society. Casal writes: “The egalitarian and redistributive measures (such as land reform) enacted by the revolutionary government have benefited blacks as the most oppressed sector of the society in the pre-revolutionary social system.”

As early as March 1959, Fidel Castro spoke of the need to begin the struggle against racial prejudice. In a speech on March 21, 1959, Castro said: “In all fairness, I must say that it is not only the aristocracy who practise discrimination. There are very

humble people who also discriminate. There are workers who hold the same prejudices as any wealthy person, and this is what is most absurd and sad ... and should compel people to meditate on the problem. Why do we not tackle this problem radically and with love, not in a spirit of division and hate? Why not educate and destroy the prejudice of centuries, the prejudice handed down to us from such an odious institution as slavery?"

Castro also acknowledged that the "blood of Africa runs deep in our veins. People's mentality is not yet revolutionary enough. People's mentality is still conditioned by many prejudices and beliefs from the past ... One of the battles which we must prioritise more and more every day ... is the battle to end racial discrimination at the work place ... There are two types of racial discrimination: one is the discrimination on the recreation centres or cultural centres; the other, which is the worst and the first one which we must fight, is racial discrimination on the job."

These remarks led to the Proclamation Against Racism: "We shouldn't have to pass a law to establish a right that should belong to every human being and member of society ... Nobody can consider themselves to be of pure race, much less a superior race. Virtue, personal merit, heroism, generosity, should be the measure of men, not skin colour." Castro then denounced racial discrimination and racial prejudice as "anti-nation". "What the eternal enemies of Cuba and the enemies of this revolution want is for us to be divided into a thousand pieces, thereby to be able to destroy us."

It was clear from the start of the revolution that the new government would look at the race issue more from a class perspective than on purely racial grounds. From the start the revolution introduced various affirmative action programs that helped the most disadvantaged sectors of the population, including women and Afro-Cubans.

The revolution has always prioritised socio-economic changes: they abolished the private health care and education system which economically discriminated against blacks. The introduction of free health care and education has particularly benefited the black population, who made up the bulk of the working class of Cuba.

Castro said in March 1959: "There is discrimination at recreation centres. Why? Because blacks and whites are educated apart. At the public grade school, blacks and whites are together. At the public grade school, blacks and whites learn to live together, like brothers. And if they are together at the public school, they are later together at the recreation centres and at all places." The right wing responded with slogans like "neither black nor red".

On the eve of the revolution, roughly 15% of Cuban primary school children and 30% of high school students attended private schools, which were primarily white. The underfunded and poorly-staffed public education sector further enforced the so-

called “colour-class system”. The segregation of the elite also made it difficult for the development of social networks across racial lines. Castro’s comments were a very direct attempt to overcome those problems. Che Guevara also raised the issue in a speech to university students in 1960, stating that the “university must be painted black, worker, campesino”.

A Latin-African people

On a political and cultural level the revolution has opened many doors for greater Afro-Cuban involvement and recognition. In April 1976, Castro became the first white Cuban head of state to recognise the mulatto character of Cuban culture and nationhood, stating in a speech: “We are a Latin-African people.”

Lourdes Casal writes: “Cuban culture, which has slowly been evolving during several centuries, is undoubtedly Afro-Hispanic. In spite of the efforts of the white-dominant class, in spite of their resistance, black cultural elements are integrated into Cuban music, Cuban popular lore, Cuban art, poetry, in such fashion that, without their component of black heritage, they would not be what they are, they would not be Cuban. And this must not be seen as a result of an assimilationist option, but rather as a consequence of true *mestizaje*.”

Greater recognition was given to the Afro-Cuban culture with the 1991 decision to allow religious believers into the Communist Party of Cuba. This change particularly affected Afro-Cubans and further opened the door to political participation through being allowed to be nominated for party membership.

Prior to 1959, blacks tended to be concentrated in the most dilapidated areas of Havana. Once in power, the revolutionary government immediately reduced rents by 50% and eventually ownership was granted to tenants. Thus, more blacks in Cuba now own their homes than in any other country in the world.

One indicator of the level of people’s consciousness on racial issues is that of inter-racial unions. Thirty-nine years of revolution have produced structural changes that have placed young people in daily contact with others of all races, but housing patterns and family ties continue to shape the kinds of inter-racial relationships they form.

Nadine Fernández, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of California, spent two years in Cuba in 1992-93, gathering information on the issue, which culminated in an article titled “The Color of Love: Young Inter-racial Couples in Cuba”. Though Fernández admits that prejudices still exist she makes it clear that since the revolution’s victory there has been a steady increase in the number of inter-racial unions. There are many reasons for this, primarily the increased social mobility that blacks have enjoyed since 1959.

“Parents and grandparents built their lives and families around the revolution, integrating to a greater or lesser extent the revolution’s struggle for racial, class and sexual equality. Often parents and grandparents find themselves holding contradictory views on these issues — caught between a legacy of discrimination and revolutionary ideas of equality”, writes Fernández.

Her study found that there was a level of prejudice among the older generation when it came to inter-racial unions, particularly white women with black men. However, the number of inter-racial marriages varies geographically. In the Carraguo section of Havana, a survey found that 32% of the marriages were inter-racial, while nationwide the proportion is only 14% according to the 1981 census.

The structural changes that the revolution has brought about in the social and economic sectors have fundamentally shaken the social and economic inequalities that had plagued Cuban society during centuries of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Since 1959, the revolution has opened the door to an ever-increasing level of racial integration in all spheres of social and economic life. However, racial prejudice has not disappeared in Cuban society. It is still around, particularly in a section of the older generation, but such views do not receive much attention. The Cuban Revolution clearly provides the example that racism can only be fought and undermined through a fundamental change in the social, economic and political structures of a society along socialist lines. ■

3. Women's Liberation in Cuba

By Nancy Iglesias Mildenstein

The author is a leader of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). The FMC was formed in 1960, following the Cuban Revolution, to organise women and campaign for their rights. It has been involved in many campaigns that have improved the status of women in Cuba, including the literacy campaign in the early years of the revolution, and has played an important part in raising women from 19.2% of the workforce in 1953 to 43.2% in 1999.



Cuban women at the time of the victory of the revolution made up the majority of illiterate people in Cuba, and the majority of the unemployed. Despite their participation in the struggle of the Cuban Revolution, they didn't really have a presence in the politics of the country. But from the outset there was the political will to change that situation, so that equal access and equal rights would be available to all Cubans both male and female. The majority of women took advantage of these opportunities that were given to us by the revolution. Fidel Castro has said that Cuban women have made a revolution within the revolution.

Position of women in Cuba

A national seminar was conducted in 1996 to analyse the situation of women in Cuba and to discuss the implementation of the plan of action of the Fourth World Conference on Women. In this seminar, which was called Cuban Women of Beijing 2000, over 200 recommendations were made about the life of women in Cuba. These were presented to the government, some of them were rewritten and from these recommendations we have created the national plan of action following the Beijing conference. This is a law of the Council of State of Cuba and thus it has legal weight for its implementation.

Abridged from a talk given at the University of Technology, Sydney on July 26, 2000.

Of the 200 recommendations, 90 remained in the plan of action. And these are based on what we yet need to achieve.

In the statistical indicators of education in Cuba, 62% of university graduates are women. Of these, a large number, 49%, are in the sciences. We can see that in non-traditional areas of study for women, such as the natural sciences and mathematics, 52% of graduates are women. In economic sciences it is 64%.

In medical science, something quite peculiar has happened: 74.1% of students are women. So it was necessary to introduce a type of affirmative action for men to get involved in medicine. In pre-university education women tend to have better results than men. For entrance into university two things are considered, the academic results of pre-university education and the results of the entrance exams. Students with the highest results are accepted into university. What happens in medicine is that women are accepted with 97, 98 or 99 points; however, sometimes men receive only 95 but are allowed to enter. This is proof of how Cuban women take advantage of all the opportunities given to them within the education sector.

Within technical and professional education in Cuba, 65% of technical workers are women, often in non-traditional fields of work. For instance, in the sugar industry, which was traditionally a male-dominated field of work, today 73% of graduates are women. Three very important sugar industry enterprises are managed by women. The sugar industry is the number one source of income of the Cuban economy. This proves the effective work of women in sectors that are of priority to the economy.

If we look at graduates in the arts in Cuba we find that 55% of graduates are women in almost all the fields. In music, for instance, you can find women in many groups of both popular and classical music. And there are all-women groups in all kinds of music. This is definitely one of the greatest results of the revolution given that many of us who are professionals in Cuba are children of peasants and workers. If it hadn't been for the social mobility that the revolution was able to provide we would never have been able to be professionals, musicians, scientists or sports people.

For instance, in many fields of sport, most of the people who compete are millionaires, in tennis for instance. However, in Cuba they are children of farmers or workers. This has been a result of the revolution.

In the area of health, we also have very positive achievements. In the sciences 51% of scientific researchers are women. One of the most important scientific institutes in Cuba, where vaccinations are developed, is led by a woman. It is the Finlay Institute and this woman led the researchers who developed the meningitis B vaccination.

In Cuba, thanks to the health care system, the life expectancy of women has increased. As of 1996, the life expectancy of women was 76 years and 72 years for men.

In Cuba, there is one doctor for every 175 inhabitants. In the Cuban health system there is the system known as the Family Doctor program which aims to provide a doctor for every 120 families, and the percentage of people being looked after by these doctors is around 98%. This is what has enabled the infant mortality rate to drop to 6.2 per 1000 live births. Because of the statistics mentioned before about women medical graduates, 72% of doctors in Cuba are women.

Women & political participation

But here we face a contradiction. The majority of doctors in Cuba are women, the majority of scientific researchers are women, the majority of teachers in all levels of education are women, but neither the Ministry of Education nor the Ministry of Health has ever had a female minister. We don't want to oust the current ministers but we expect that in the future there should be female ministers. We have three female ministers in Cuba. They are in very important ministries. Science, Technology and the Environment is headed by a woman. Foreign Investment and Internal Commerce are also headed by women. But we think there should be a greater number of women in these positions and that is part of the recommendations of the national plan of action.

At the levels of leadership and decision making, 32% are women. Of the members of the National Assembly, 27.6% are women. But we think we should continue to increase the number of women in these sectors. If we take into account the fact that there are more women than men in the areas of health and education, then we should also have more women in leadership positions in these areas. In Cuba there is no quota system for women. We are one third of the leaders in Cuba, but we believe we should continue to grow systematically and progressively, and why not over 50%? So these are issues that we should resolve in stages. The national plan of action is based on these expectations.

The FMC was created in 1960. In Cuba there is no ministry for women. The FMC is the mechanism for the advancement of women in Cuba. It is a non-government organisation that has the status of a consultant to the United Nations. Funds for the FMC come from the fees that members pay. We are more than 3.7 million women. This represents 83% of the population over 14 years of age. So we have every possibility and we are willing to continue to have a growing active presence in Cuban society.

Meeting the problems of women's rights

So what are our problems and in what areas does the Federation work? As I was saying, we want to increase the participation of women in power. For instance, to

increase the number of women deputies. According to electoral law in Cuba, 50% of deputies come from the election of delegates of People's Power. Many of you who are here today know how elections are conducted in Cuba. That is, the nominations of candidates for municipal elections are carried out in neighbourhood meetings. The Communist Party does not take part. Electoral propaganda is prohibited in Cuba. Those who are elected are those who have prestige and authority among the people.

What happens to women in these elections when they get nominated? Keep in mind that there is a very strong force of family tradition in Cuba, regardless of the revolution, which is one of the greatest contradictions that we have. Many women who have respect within their community are considered for nomination. Say I think that Elizabeth should be a People's Power delegate, she's an active and respected comrade who could work for the benefit of the community. In the worst case, Elizabeth would say: "No, Nancy, please, I'm married, I have children, that would be too much work for me." In another case, Elizabeth might accept, but then there are those who, without asking her, and even though she had accepted, would say that they would not vote for her because she has too many problems and it would be too much work to give her. So Elizabeth is eliminated without being considered. In other cases people simply don't vote for women.

So what do we do as an organisation of women? I already said that we cannot use electoral propaganda. It would be quite easy to tell women to vote for women but that is not the right thing to do. It's not a matter of just electing women for the sake of them being women, but of choosing the best people for the job. There are women who think like men. We have Thatcher, for instance, who was the worst thing to happen to women in the history of England. It is not a matter of having a woman but a woman who can represent the interests of women.

Within the community we look for those women who can do the job and we can support. We promote them so the community can get to know them, and we support them in activities, in a very subtle way, so they don't tell us that we are undertaking electoral propaganda. So in this way we have been able to increase the number of women at the grassroots level, which in the elections of 1997 went from 17.9% to over 19%. So, as I was saying, we are systematically and progressively promoting the best women.

For instance, in the 1997 elections there was a television advertisement saying "vote for the best". Because nouns have gender in the Spanish language the ad said "vote for the [*el* masculine] best". So we came out with an ad saying "vote for the [*la* feminine] best". So in the last elections we came to an agreement and there was an ad saying "vote for the (*el*) or the (*la*) best". It is in this way we have been able to gain space

and authority.

Among the delegates at the base level of popular power, the largest number of delegates being reelected are women. Within our law, if any delegate does not comply with what the people want, they can be recalled by the community that elected them. We are very proud that none of the women elected have ever been recalled.

It is a universal thing that for us women to be recognised as much as men we have to do things better than men and double the amount. But in Cuba there is real acknowledgement for the work of women and in many sectors, including non-traditional ones, men accept being managed by women. For example, in the case of the sugar industry, and also in the case of building and construction, which are both male-dominated areas.

In order for women to work under better working conditions, there are child-care centres. There are over 1100 child-care centres throughout the country but these are not sufficient. Here the children of working women are placed during the working day. Our society still supposes that the children who go are only those of working women. So, we don't have the capacity for children to go if the mother doesn't work. But this is one of the problems we have, the need for more of these childcare centres to enable the children of all working women to attend them.

Prostitution

Another area in which the FMC works is in one of the issues that causes the greatest sorrow for us: prostitution. In Cuba, following the triumph of the revolution, prostitution was eliminated. But after 1990, following the increase in tourism, and also considering the economic problems that Cuba was facing at the time, this problem reemerged but in a different way to which it existed before. Prostitution, as it used to exist prior to the revolution, was found mainly among illiterate women who sought a way of dealing with their economic problems.

But it is not like this now. They are not illiterate, they don't do it because they are hungry, they don't do it because they have sick child and have to pay for medicine, since health care and education in Cuba are free to everybody. It is a problem that has many causes. It is a problem that has an economic component but that is not the only reason for it. Because if we were to accept that it was simply an economic problem then all poor women would be prostitutes and that's not the case in any part of the world. So there are other causes that are definitely present in our case. In the research that has been conducted on prostitution, many of the women have low self-esteem and believe that by looking pretty and wearing fashionable clothes, things that the Cuban state is unable to provide, they will be able to be better off or feel better. But

this is not true. José Martí once wrote in a letter to his sister that people who worry too much about the outside do not have much on the inside.

What is the work that our organisation does here? On the one hand to participate in the research that is conducted to find out the reasons why women go into prostitution. We ask them to participate in the activities of the organisation. Many are women who left their studies, that is, they are not illiterate, but do not hold any professional qualifications. The work that we do through the orientation houses for the family and women that belong to the FMC is to offer training courses that range from very traditional courses such as sewing or hairdressing to non-traditional trades such as electronics, carpentry or bicycle repair. There are also courses in languages and computers. This is in order for them to be trained and to have a trade that would generate income for them. And in this area we have had quite positive results. Coupled with the upbringing that the girls receive in the home, we offer workshops to improve their self-esteem, in order to enable them to reflect, so that upon reflection they are able to find a personal solution to the problem.

Prostitution in Cuba is not illegal but we believe that the prostitute is in the weakest position. One of the recommendations made by the Federation was to reinforce the penal code and to introduce as a crime pimping or anything that supports prostitution, the prostitution of both male and female because it is not only women.

Women & violence

We also work in the area of violence. In Cuba, domestic violence or intra-family violence is not of the same magnitude as in other places although it does exist. Within the upbringing of the Cuban family, boys are taught not to fight with girls in an effort to protect girls and women. It is discriminatory, but it is not as bad as beating women. Socially it is unacceptable for men to hit women. In Cuba it is seen as an act of cowardice. A man who hits a woman is seen as weak rather than courageous. So what the Federation does to help women (because we do not have refuges to help women) who have been maltreated is, taking into account that it is socially unacceptable, we empower the community to act and criticise the aggressor and also tell women that they should not put up with violence and give them support. In this area we have had positive results.

What is more common in Cuba is what can be called psychological violence: a man telling a woman she's ugly or fat or whatever. In this case we run self-esteem workshops for different age groups. We have also introduced gender workshops. This is one of the recommendations within the national plan of action: to have gender studies introduced into the university curriculum as it is very important and necessary for

lawyers, doctors and teachers, because these professionals are going to be facing these problems in practice.

We think that although we give gender workshops to women, they should also be given to men as well because otherwise, as we would say, we would be cooking in our own juice. Men have to be aware how gender differences are constructed because they also suffer from the social construction of gender. When we say men should not cry, that a father should not kiss a son when he's over eight or ten years old, this mutilates the feelings of men. So both men and women have a lot to learn about the construction of gender. This is one of the recommendations that are outlined right through the plan of action.

Also one of the most important issues is women in the mass media and advertising because of the use of the female body in advertising geared towards tourism, for instance. Programs on television should reflect the real presence of women within Cuban society. In many cases in the drama-type programs on television, there is either an unbelievable superwoman, who's a good party militant, a good worker, a good popular power delegate and everything she does is perfect, or you get the other side: a traditional, submissive woman. Both are stupid and not a reflection of reality. And so we try to work so that the mass media, television and radio can portray the Cuban woman of today. ■

4. Homophobia & Gay Rights in Cuba

I. Revolution Within the Revolution

By Jo Ellis

Pre-revolutionary Cuba was no paradise for gays and lesbians. There were gay bars where homosexual men could meet, but to be a *maricon* (faggot) was to be a social outcast.

Laws made it illegal to be gay and police targeted homosexuals for harassment. Many gay men were drawn into prostitution for largely US-based clients. In this repressive atmosphere, homosexuality was linked to prostitution, gambling and crime.

The 1959 Cuban Revolution improved living conditions for the vast majority of Cuba's people. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, Cuban homosexuals continued to face discrimination. Between 1965 and 1968, homosexual men and others who were considered to be "counter-revolutionary" were incarcerated in UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production) camps where they faced brutality and attempts to turn them into "real" men. Homosexual men were arrested and imprisoned for soliciting sex in public places. Some Cubans lost their government jobs because of their homosexuality and homosexual artists were censored.

A history of homophobia

The Public Ostentation Law was enacted in the 1930s to encourage the harassment of gay people who refused to stay in the closet. In spite of the revolutionary process of re-examining old attitudes after 1959, the government did not repeal this law until 1988.

In 1980, more than 100,000 Cubans (some counter-revolutionaries, some petty

criminals, some homosexuals) left Cuba in the Mariel boat-lift for the United States. Those who left were described by the government media as *gusanos* (worms) and homosexuals.

During the 1980s, Cuba was also criticised for quarantining people with HIV, in what were called sanitariums. These were medical clinics where HIV patients would receive all their treatment. They were only able to leave under supervision and for limited times, sometimes including weekends. After much public discussion in Cuba, the incarceration law was lifted in 1993 and HIV patients continue to enjoy free health care and housing, and full wages if they're able to do some work. In contrast to capitalist countries where most people with HIV struggle to afford decent medication, all HIV patients have always received free, high quality medical care in Cuba.

Why did gays and lesbians in Cuba continue to face discrimination after the revolution? Some of the repression was the result of the deep roots of the Catholic Church in Latin America since colonisation. The women's liberation movement of the 1970s, which challenged sexist and homophobic assumptions, and the hold of the church, had a weaker impact in Third World countries than in the imperialist countries where it arose. Because of the revolutionary transformation that took place in Cuba, however, the status of women was addressed much more there than in other Latin American countries. This has led to abortion being made freely available, divorce easily obtainable and numerous child-care centres continue to be built to facilitate women's full participation in the economy and society.

The Cuban government passed laws in the 1970s requiring men to take equal responsibility for all domestic tasks and to contribute equally to supporting their children. While these changes began to break down the basis of the sexual division of labour in the traditional family unit, the family unit remains stronger in Cuba than the revolutionary government would like. This is primarily because Cuba's poverty does not allow it to completely socialise domestic work and childcare.

Because Cuba does not have the resources to eliminate the material basis of the traditional (heterosexual) family, the sexist and homophobic attitudes that accompany this family form remain and will continue to do so under such circumstances. However, what Cuba has shown is that significant advances can be made in developing people's social consciousness.

As well, the US economic blockade on Cuba, imposed immediately after the revolution, forced Cuba to depend heavily on the Soviet Union for trade. This dependence led to Stalinist attitudes about homosexuality (that it was decadent and bourgeois, a by-product of capitalism) having a greater influence in Cuba.

In 1986, the Cuban government went through a rectification process (dubbed "a

return to Che”) in which it assessed the impact of the social and economic model of the Soviet Union in Cuba. The Cuban leadership made a conscious effort to combat and turn away from what they saw as mistakes the Soviet Union had committed in stifling democracy.

Challenging homophobia

Since 1986, the Cuban state has consciously tried to counter homophobia. Ian Lumsden, in his book *Machos, Maricones and Gays*, says there is “little evidence to support the contention that the persecution of homosexuals remains a matter of state policy”.

In 1993, a sex education workshop was held in Cuba on homosexuality. Cuban physician Celestino Alvarez explained that all laws regarding homosexuality had been repealed and that homophobia was a question of “prejudice, not persecution”.

In 1993, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, a film criticising Cubans’ intolerance of homosexuality, was produced by the government-run Cuban film industry (which can only afford to produce three or four films a year). In 1995, Cuban drag queens led the annual May Day procession, joined by two queer delegations from the US, one from the New York Center for Cuban Studies and the other from Bay Area Queers for Cuba.

The US activists joined with members of Cuba’s Action Group for the Liberation of Sexual Choice and Expression to carry a 10-metre piece of the rainbow flag from the June 1994 Stonewall celebration in New York. They were cheered by Cubans who lined the streets.

The improvement in Cubans’ attitudes to homosexuality are documented in the 1995 film *Gay Cuba*, which combines interviews with gay men and lesbians, government officials and average citizens, with musical performances and gay pride parades. The interviews, which form the core of the film, show that the changes in government policy and the opening of channels for the discussion and celebration of different sexualities have allowed gay Cubans today to lead much more open lives.

The Cuban Revolution was democratic and humane. It threw out a brutal US-backed dictator who had violently repressed the Cuban people. Under the revolutionary government, free health care and education have been provided for all.

At present, Cuba’s poverty makes it very difficult for the government to remove the economic compulsion for people to live in family units. While this provides the basis for the continuation of sexist and homophobic attitudes, since the 1980s the Cuban government has still consciously campaigned against homophobic ideas and practices, and has eradicated laws which discriminate against homosexuals.

For gays and lesbians in Cuba, the revolution has provided a strong basis for achieving justice in all aspects of their lives, even in combating homophobia. By removing private ownership of production and instituting grassroots democratic control over the country's resources, the basis exists for all Cubans to have a real say over decisions which effect their lives.

It is this democracy which lays the basis for combating homophobic ideas and attitudes — the legacies of both capitalist and Stalinist influences in Cuba. As other revolutions advance, freeing resources for the socialist economies, Cuba will also have the financial means to take further steps towards providing its people with much more choice in living arrangements, and thereby weaken the material basis of homophobia.□

II. Cuban HIV/AIDS Care Leads the World

By Karen Lee Wald

HAVANA — On August 13, Reynaldo Morales, aged 42, died of AIDS. Reynaldo wasn't the first but his story is worth telling because it is an allegory of the progression of HIV/AIDS care in Cuba.

When Reynaldo Morales returned from military service as an international volunteer in Angola in early 1986, he was part of the first group of 23 patients who opened the new AIDS sanatorium in Santiago de las Vegas.

In 1989 he and his wife, Maria Julia, (who also became infected) were the first patients at the sanatorium to be offered the option of returning to their home and jobs as out-patients. A few months later they were the first of many to turn this option down.

AIDS sanatoriums

The sanatorium — a sizeable community of attractive, modern one-family homes and duplexes set among lush gardens on an old rural estate on the outskirts of Havana — had become home to Reynaldo and his family.

I first met Reynaldo and Maria Julia at a time when Cuban health officials had

begun talking about patients who had been through the HIV/AIDS education, medical and psychological evaluation programs returning to their former lives.

“If you were given this possibility, what would you do?” I asked them. They both said they wouldn’t leave.

Maria Julia explained: “We have our jobs waiting for us, and we’re getting our complete salary as though we were still working there, and my friends have all shown me a lot of solidarity”, she acknowledged. “But really, this thing affects me psychologically, and I don’t think I could work.”

Reynaldo felt he could be more active, and more useful, inside the sanatorium than outside. “I have a carpentry shop and a small electrical repair shop”, he said. “In the beginning I didn’t have many customers, but now I have more than I can handle ... I feel good here, I’m relaxed.”

“I’m not afraid to face anybody”, Reynaldo assured me, “but I like this peaceful life”. He admitted they were pampered in the sanatorium, adding that he had a great deal of flexibility — he could go out whenever he wanted, to a parents’ meetings at his son’s school, into town for some malt liquor, or to the beach. For Reynaldo, this more than compensated for the restrictions which some of the other younger patients chafed at.

There was also the sense of security the sanatorium provided. “I could go out, work, and come back here at night”, he mused. “Or go out and come back periodically for a check-up. You can never miss the check-ups”, he cautioned, “because what for someone else is just a simple cold is much more for us. We have to come here and tell them so they can deal with it in time.”

“The other reason”, he said, is that “here, I’m working for the sanatorium — and for myself too.”

Although most Cubans saw the sanatoriums created for HIV/AIDS patients as necessary to stop the spread of the virus, the associated restrictions on personal liberties led almost everyone to consider the sanatoriums a necessary evil or, at best, a mixed blessing.

Yet Reynaldo believed that the establishment of the sanatoriums for people with AIDS was the first victory in the struggle for the health, dignity and rights of Cubans with AIDS.

“When we first tested positive, we were a group of strong, healthy young men just back from overseas, eager to get back with our wives or girlfriends, to party, to be back on the streets. Instead, we found ourselves in the naval hospital, with everyone looking very worried.

“Living in a hospital ward you feel very cooped up. So when we got a chance to

move to the sanatorium — to live in real apartments, able to walk around the grounds and have all the visitors we wanted — that was a real improvement.”

The next major victory, he said, was getting the sanatorium administration to institute the same pass system that existed in other hospitals.

“If you are in a tuberculosis hospital, or a general hospital for long-term care, you get to go home on pass for the weekend and still have your bed at the hospital waiting for you”, he explained. “We said we weren’t sick, so we should have the same thing.”

The problem was that then, early 1986, the health ministry had the view that the virus was neither preventable nor curable, and knew that HIV/AIDS was a rampant epidemic in many countries. Its key concern was how to protect the whole population if it granted the request for weekend passes.

A stop-gap measure was instituted. Patients could go home on Sundays but only accompanied by a “chaperone” who could respond to any medical emergency, and oversee the situation to make sure the patient wasn’t endangering anyone else. In addition, patients had to start an intensive AIDS education program along with psychological evaluations.

Once the program was in place, patients deemed “responsible” were eventually allowed to go out on their own. One-day passes became weekend passes, and sanatorium residents soon found they could pretty much go out whenever they wanted.

Patients whose skills could be put to use within the sanatorium were offered jobs — as office workers, doctors, nurses, technicians, accountants, mechanics, cooks, gardeners. Some began going back to jobs outside, or studying at the university.

Patients soon formed neighbourhood political councils within the sanatorium, to resolve their own problems or discuss issues with the administration.

They also helped form GPSIDA, the AIDS-prevention group, to speak to people in the community about how to protect themselves and others. Sero-positive members of GPSIDA inform others of their positive test results, and provide counselling, support and education. Reynaldo and Maria Julia became charter members of GPSIDA and were the first to let themselves be interviewed, videotaped and filmed to help get the word out.

Education

Most people had been ignoring the health ministry’s attempts at AIDS education. But when “normal, everyday” people — women and men, homosexual and heterosexual, old and young — began identifying themselves as HIV-positive at schools, dance clubs, other popular teenage hang-outs, and on local and national TV programs, people started to get the message.

By the time of Reynaldo's death, Cuba's program to prevent the spread of AIDS and care for those who are stricken — arguably the most controversial and most successful HIV/AIDS program in the world — had come a long way.

The internationally recognised positive aspects of Cuba's program include the existence of a well-functioning, national health care delivery system with an emphasis on prevention at no cost to the patient; extensive (but not mandatory) testing of Cubans returning from long periods abroad, and routine testing for HIV when other blood tests are administered to the general population; and highly developed facilities and training of specialised staff to care for people from the time they test positive.

Cuba has achieved the world's lowest rate of HIV infection from blood transfusions by halting importation of blood products while testing the country's entire blood supply and all new blood donations.

It has also almost totally eliminated peri-natal transmission by testing all pregnant women. Because Cuba provides free, safe abortion services many HIV-positive women are able to choose to terminate their pregnancy.

In addition to studying and importing medicines (like AZT, and gancyclovir) the Cuban government has undertaken an extensive research program aimed at finding a preventive vaccine or cure.

Choice in treatment

Today, people testing HIV-positive and those with AIDS may — as before — receive complete residential care in one of Cuba's 14 provincial AIDS sanatoriums or, after a brief period of evaluation and education, they may opt to receive out-patient care from their family doctor, while maintaining most (but not all) the benefits formerly provided them in the sanatoriums.

This new element of choice removes the dark side of a national AIDS care program that otherwise was universally heralded for its effectiveness in slowing the spread of the AIDS virus.

In the past, while the sanatoriums provided optimum overall care, they were also highly paternalistic and imposed restrictions on patients' freedom of movement — less so over time, and for those who were deemed "responsible" — but nevertheless galling to those who felt quite capable of behaving in a mature, responsible way, without supervision and without being held accountable for the irresponsibility of others.

The unwarranted restrictions overshadowed the facts that, through the sanatorium system, people testing HIV-positive have been provided with above-average housing in pleasant surroundings, a high-protein diet, daily access to specialised medical care,

recreational facilities and counselling, all steps to create a stress-free environment.

It was in 1989 when doctors, in consultation with AIDS patients, especially those who formed GPSIDA, devised a solution.

The key factor in the new system, which safeguards public health but also permits ambulatory care for sero-positive patients, is an education and evaluation program that enables the medical staff to demonstrate to health officials — and to a general population nervous about the spread of the virus — that most sero-positive people, once taught about the means of transmission of the virus and how to live with it (including their obligation to avoid placing anyone else at risk) can live normal lives outside the sanatoriums.

This evaluation system was accompanied by a series of other measures - some requiring economic investment not easy to come by in the current period - before out-patient care could be put into effect. Sanatoriums had to be built in each province so that all patients would have access to state-of-the-art care. Family doctors had to be trained in each community where sero-positive people would be living to provide the day-to-day attention the patients had been receiving in sanatoriums.

Social workers and sexual education teams had to educate the communities and workplaces to which sero-positive people would be returning to prevent discrimination against them.

A massive HIV/AIDS education program had to be developed throughout the country so that responsibility for preventing the spread of the virus would not fall exclusively on those who already knew they were sero-positive, but would be shared by the rest of the population. A second aspect of this program would be to teach the population as a whole to welcome and care for people with AIDS.

This last step would have been impossible without the development of the patient-initiated and -run GPSIDA. Under this program, people with AIDS like Reynaldo and Maria Julia went out to spread the word that AIDS is here, that it can be avoided, and that you need not be afraid of people with AIDS but of the virus itself.

Not surprisingly, given the economic conditions, combined with medical and psychological factors, only a small percentage of patients have so far opted for out-patient care. But, combined with the high levels of care, the fact that they can choose makes the Cuban program “the best of both worlds”. As one AIDS activist explained, however, “We will only consider that we have reached the final stage of our program when there is a way to both prevent and cure the virus.” ■

5. Cuba's Green Revolution

By Dick Nichols

What can Australian environmentalists learn from Cuba, a country that still flirts with nuclear power, is besieged by many environmental problems typical of the Third World, and lags behind countries like Denmark and Holland on issues like recycling, green taxes, alternative energy and eco-labelling?

During a recent visit to “the fairest island ever revealed to human eyes” (as Christopher Columbus described Cuba), I searched for the answer. I wanted to understand the impact of the “Special Period in Time of Peace” — the emergency program to save the socialist revolution after the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

After talking to environmental scientists, administrators and activists, and reading recent Cuban writings on ecology, it is clear that there is a lot of debate about how to reverse environmental degradation. It is also obvious that few Third World countries can match the legislative, planning and educational efforts that Cuba is applying in its battle for environmental sustainability.

Moreover, few environmental movements can match Cuba's revolutionaries in government, scientific institutions, education system and emerging non-government organisations in their passion and dedication to the environmental cause.

For centuries, Cuba's natural resources and beauty were sacrificed to Spanish colonial landowners and, later, US corporations. In the early 1800s, the great Prussian geographer Alexander von Humboldt was already lamenting the destruction of Cuba's native forests.

In his book *Dialectics of Nature*, Frederick Engels — Karl Marx's collaborator — could find no better example of the impact of capitalist greed on the ecosphere than the operations of Cuba's Spanish planters “who burned down forests on the slopes of the mountains and obtained from the ashes sufficient fertiliser for one generation of

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highly profitable coffee trees ... what cared they that the heavy tropical rainfall afterwards washed away the unprotected upper stratum of soil, leaving behind only bare rock!"

Through such vandalism, Cuba was transformed into an exporter of sugar, tobacco and coffee. Total forest cover fell from 85% in 1812, 54% in 1900, to 14% by the time of the 1959 revolution. To this crime against nature before the revolution can be added many others, including: rapacious nickel mining (coating a wide expanse of the island in red dust); endemic problems created by monoculture crops; and the gamut of damage that goes with rural poverty.

After the revolution

The revolution and the later development of Cuba's economy as part of the former Soviet bloc was double-edged. The revolution eliminated poverty, unemployment, landlessness and illiteracy and built up basic rural infrastructure, thus attacking the degradation of the countryside at the source. Through sweeping land reform, the leaders of the revolution disproved the myth that degradation is due to the pseudo-explanation, still favoured by World Bank functionaries, of "rural overpopulation". For the first time, and despite continuing population growth, deforestation in Cuba began to be reversed. By 1997, the island's forested area stood at 21.5%, a 7.5% increase since 1959.

On the other hand, the model of industrialisation that Cuba adopted in the 1970s generated (when combined with the continuing reliance on sugar exports) a new set of environmental stresses. Oil spills, coastal erosion, rising salinity, algal blooms and high levels of industrial pollution showed Cuba was paying a high environmental price for industrialisation.

Even though environmental protection featured strongly in the country's law books, the impact on factory managers was often minimal. According to Cuban environment teacher and writer Carlos Jesús Delgado Díaz: "A study carried out by the National Assembly of People's Power at the end of the 1980s reflected the fact that, when faced with the choice of fulfilling the production plan or breaking the law, a significant number of administrators plumped for fulfilling the plan no matter what the cost."

The blame for such decisions should not be laid solely at the feet of the managers. The criminal US economic blockade, which forced Cuba's integration into the Soviet bloc's economic system (COMECON), gave the country no choice but to apply eastern Europe's resource- and energy-squandering technologies.

Cuba's insertion into the COMECON system retarded the growth of environmental consciousness. Miguel Limia David, a senior researcher with Cuba's

Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (CITMA), has stressed “the predominance of an instrumentalist and personally irresponsible attitude to the use, enjoyment and disposal both of natural as well as socially created resources”. Why? For years “we basically aimed at producing more wealth and raising consciousness without paying appropriate attention to the costs of producing that wealth”.

Special period

However, even before the 1989-91 collapse of the Soviet bloc threw Cuba’s model of highly mechanised agriculture into crisis, problems such as growing pesticide resistance and soil erosion had led to the development of alternatives. In the 1980s, some US\$12 billion was devoted to training specialists and developing infrastructure in the areas of biotechnology, health sciences, computer hardware and robotics.

This timely move ensured that when imports of fertiliser, machinery and spare parts fell by 80%, the country was able to devote its scientific knowledge and agricultural research infrastructure to the largest-ever conversion from conventional agriculture to organic or semi-organic farming. This proved vital to maintaining food supplies in very hard times.

However, the 1990s came with many severe environmental problems intact, as identified in the 1997 National Environment Strategy:

- Continuing large-scale soil degradation — erosion, bad drainage, salinity, soil acidity, and compacting;
- the deterioration of health and environment conditions in cities and towns, due to a fall in spending on housing and urban infrastructure;
- fresh and salt water pollution that was undermining fishing, agriculture and tourism, as well as natural ecosystems;
- selective deforestation, which damaged soils, water tables and fragile ecosystems; and
- loss of biological diversity.

The concessions that Cuba has had to make to survive in the capitalist world — such as a large increase in joint ventures in industries like tourism — brings new stresses. Similarly, the growth in numbers of self-employed people and small farmers also threatens to boost environmental decline.

Can Cubans solve their environmental problems? Cuba has the great advantage of having faced facts: the fundamental enemy of global sustainability is capitalism’s production for private profit. Capitalism cannot survive without constantly regenerating an anti-environmental and consumerist ethic, no matter what greenwashing corporations say.

As Delgado Díaz explains: “As a spiritual phenomenon, capitalism has produced ways of viewing life and has equipped modern man and woman with an ethical outlook that is incompatible with the solution of the environmental problem that science has advanced as technically viable.”

Energy specialist Hector Eugenio Pérez de Alejo Victoria notes that it is vital not to leave the definition of key ecological terms like “eco-efficiency” to promoters of the capitalist market. “The search for a definition is subject to great threats, one of which is the continual propaganda of the international media as to the benefits of consumerism, where a satisfied client is supposedly to be found at the end of every chain. In reality, consumerism is nothing more than an infinite cycle of dissatisfactions; satisfaction for a short period of time and almost immediately more dissatisfaction. It is a sort of drug addiction and produces the greater part of the global environmental disaster.”

Humanity-nature relationship

Cuban ecological thinking stresses that the global environmental crisis and the world's social and economic crises are interrelated, in particular through the way the “North” exploits the countries of the “South”. As Garrido Vázquez notes: “It is impossible to conceive of sustainable development without resolving beforehand the problems of extreme poverty, which are nothing but the results of centuries of colonial domination and exploitation, and which have re-emerged in recent times through the application of neoliberal policies.”

A point of reference are the writings on the humanity-nature relationship by Cuba's national hero and martyr, José Martí. These, in the words of Limia David, “refer to the need to develop a harmonious relationship with the universal conditions of life, with ‘first nature’, as well as to build an ordered, pure and cultured ‘second nature’”.

A succinct expression of this outlook came in Fidel Castro's speech to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, and has since been matched by a rapid increase in environmental laws and projects within Cuba. Between 1992 and 1998, the National Assembly of People's Power amended the Cuban constitution to entrench the concept of sustainable development; the National Environment and Development Program was developed (outlining the path Cuba would take to fulfil its obligations under the Rio summit's Agenda 21); CITMA was established; an overarching environment law passed; and a national environment strategy was launched.

Other major initiatives included a national strategy for environmental education; a national program of environment and development; projects for food production

via sustainable methods and biotechnological and sustainable animal food, as well as a national scientific technical program for mountain zones and a national energy sources development program. Each of these programs is composed of smaller projects and initiatives involving local communities, People's Power bodies, universities, schools and mass organisations.

What has been achieved? There have been gains in health, access to water and electricity, education and land reform, which according to orthodox classification methods are not "environmental" but without which no real advances against environmental degradation are thinkable.

Such gains would never be realised if Cuba reverted to capitalism and was obliged, for example, to pay the US\$100 billion debt that Washington estimates Cuba owes for private property expropriated by the revolution. As one environmentalist put it: "The foremost environmental problem we have is making sure we don't fall into the hands of the empire."

Cuba's highly educated people, of whom more than half a million are university graduates, are an invaluable resource base for recent advances such as the conversion to organic agriculture, the thorough surveying of its ecosystems and energy and resource base, the completion of a national biodiversity study, improved methods of water and soil management, and the application of new technologies for treating waste.

Renewable energy & alternative housing

Two fields in which Cuba is making headway against the odds are renewable energy and alternative housing.

Two issues that have focused increased attention on alternative energy are Cuba's high level of dependency on oil imports (around 10 million tonnes annually before 1989) and the fact that its first nuclear reactor has still to come on line, even though work began in the late 1970s.

According to Pérez de Alejo Victoria, the Development Program of National Energy Sources is putting maximum effort into developing energy systems based on sugar cane residues (bagasse), wind farms, micro hydroelectricity plants, solar and photovoltaic technologies as well as on Cuba's unexploited oil reserves.

Cuba's energy goals have been made more difficult by the elimination of some potential energy sources: peat reserves are to be left untouched until environmentally benign methods of peat-burning can be developed and in 1998 the National Assembly of People's Power suspended the construction of Toa-Doaba hydroelectric project, which would have flooded an ecosystem as rare and beautiful as that of Tasmania's

Franklin River.

So far, the energy program can boast the generalised usage of bicycles, the development of kerosene substitutes for cooking, the conversion of boilers to enable straw to be burnt as fuel and the increased use of biogas.

The most promising potential energy source is bagasse. With existing technology, Cuba's annual production of 4.3 million tonnes of sugar cane biomass could reduce oil dependency by 700,000 tonnes. If Cuba can gain access to new Brazilian technology which can gasify sugar cane biomass, the country could increase electricity output per biomass unit by up to 10 times — a huge step forward in reducing oil dependency.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Cuba met its relentlessly rising housing demand by building Soviet-style concrete blocks of flats as rapidly as possible. The enforced end of this model of housing development brought some benefits which in the medium term promise more human-scale, environmentally benign housing.

The non-government organisation Habitat-Cuba is devoted to producing a sustainable housing model that recognises that the concrete required for Cuba's standard housing stock has come at a high (and unaccounted for) cost in terms of greenhouse gas emissions and that the passive acceptance of the standard model has led to bureaucratic blindness and indifference towards alternative building materials in which Cuba is rich.

At the same time, the collapse of housing investment during the special period had seen a rise in the number of unhealthy suburbs, especially in older urban areas. This is an urgent challenge to build environmentally sustainable, healthy settlements, basing design, techniques and execution on consultation with local communities, sympathetic architects and other professionals as well as with the relevant ministries.

Habitat-Cuba has developed bamboo as a housing construction material, as well as the introduction of mud-brick techniques — in the face of initial scepticism by a local community who thought they were being returned to stone-age life! Like CubaSolar, an NGO specialising in alternative energy, Habitat-Cuba has built scores of successful projects across the island as well as having provided training in alternative construction techniques.

Towards a lasting solution

Despite such advances Cuba's environmentalists do not underestimate the difficulties their country's environment faces. Delgado Díaz points out that "it is extraordinarily difficult to break the vicious circle of underdevelopment, environmental degradation and poverty. Phenomena of this type impose an individual economic dynamic that is often resolved at the expense of the environment."

What are the prospects? Pérez de Alejo Victoria said that “the environmental realities are pretty unflattering, especially as regards renewable energy, which obliges me to be tactically pessimistic, even if from the strategic point of view I view the future with optimism”.

Limia David is less hopeful. He thinks environment policy can only work to its full potential if Cuban society overcomes the indifference generated by its paternalistic heritage, conquering “the unsatisfactory degree of involvement of the direct producers in the means of production, that is, the inadequate linkage between everyone’s way of life and the final results of the production process”.

For David, Cuba’s acute environmental problems cannot be solved by political will alone, necessary and important though that is: “They essentially demand not a new attitude on the part of policy generated by the state and the entire political system, but one that arises from the ordinary people, from the local communities and specific labour collectives. It is critical to develop a feeling of responsible ownership when faced with the universal bases of life.”

However, Modesto Fernández Díaz-Silveira, a CITMA specialist in the management of environment policy is more confident: “The sustained economic recovery and institutional changes that are taking place in Cuba provide a solid basis that allow us to advance with optimism in the application of our environmental policy, the norms and methods of application of which will take us to a higher stage in the protection of the environment and the rational use of natural resources.”

The main factor behind this confidence is the mass participation and revolutionary commitment of Cuba’s people and communities in implementing environment policy, an ingredient that no capitalist society can match. Even while Cuba still lags in making use of many of the tools available to capitalist governments (eco-taxes, environmentally adjusted national accounting), participatory democracy gives Cuba the chance to advance towards sustainability while in the rest of the Third World the environment collapses.

This is especially so when combined with the Cuban political system’s capacity to implement integrated plans involving all “players” and its desire to educate its people in humanist and environmental values.

There is a broad debate on the island about how to involve the mass of people in the battle for environmental sustainability. That is far more inspiring and hopeful than an environment policy which consists of Dodgy Brothers flogging us shares in tax-deductable eucalypt plantations. ■

6. Cuba's People's Power Democracy

By Rachel Evans

Ever wanted an accurate description of Cuba's socialist democracy? Or to know how the Cuban People's Power structures work? Then this is the book for you.

Tracing democracy in Cuba from the struggle against Spanish and US colonialism to the present, Arnold August breathes clarity into a discussion distorted by the US propaganda offensive. This book is significant and should be on every revolutionary's bookshelf.

While most other Spanish colonies achieved independence in the early 1800s, the Cuban Creole elite, fearing the 40% slave population, kept the Spanish, and their military might, on side. Hence, the 1868 First War of Independence failed due to the division in its leadership.

August chronicles the 1895 Second War of Independence, under the principled leadership of José Martí, which challenged the inherent conservatism of the Creole elite. However, on the eve of a Cuban victory in 1898, the US entered the war and brought elections under military rule.

The US forced the infamous Platt Amendment on the newly elected Cuban parliament by only one vote, in June 1901. The amendment gave the US the right to intervene "for the preservation of Cuban independence and the maintenance of a stable government adequately protecting life, property and individual liberty".

From 1901 to 1952, Cuba was subjected to farcical US-backed elections in which politicians bribed, beat and rigged their way into parliament. US investment dominated the economy. By 1926, the majority of the sugar crop was produced by US mills.

An edited version of a review of *Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-98 Elections* by Arnold August (José Martí Publishing House, Havana, 1999) which appeared in *Green Left Weekly*, September 13, 2000.

Twenty-two per cent of all land and 90% of all electrical power were in the hands of the US.

The Cuban masses did not take US subjugation lying down. As August explains, the most nerve-racking period for the US was the 1933 uprising. The Popular Socialist Party (PSP) was a significant political force. A strike wave was followed by a military takeover led by Fulgencio Batista.

Strikes continued in the 1940s and 1950s, and both Liberal and Conservative governments lost credibility and the ability to hold back change. In 1952, Batista's behind-the-scenes role ended; he took power and a period of open dictatorship ensued.

In 1953, a group of revolutionaries attacked the Moncada Barracks and the July 26 Movement was born. Fidel Castro, arrested, gave his famous "History will absolve me" speech in the courtroom and inspired the nation to fight its neo-colonial oppressors.

August outlines in his book the democratic structures of the Cuban Revolution as evolving during the struggle against Batista. In the liberated areas in the countryside (1956-59), the revolutionaries adopted new laws and introduced the first Workers' and Peasants' Congresses. Illiteracy in these areas was eradicated and agrarian reform initiated.

Mass participation

After the victory in January 1959, revolutionary militias were formed, the workers and peasants learning military skills. Revolutionary tribunals delivered justice to Batista cronies and army officials. The gradual transfer of economic power into the hands of the people included land reform: holdings were restricted to 1000 hectares, with a few exceptions. Between August and October 1960, 41% of land was expropriated, 95% of industry was nationalised, 98% of construction, 95% of transport, 75% of retail and 100% of wholesale trade.

Castro said at the time, "To the people whose desperate paths through life have been paved with the bricks of betrayals and false promises, we were not going to say: 'We will eventually give you what you need', but rather, 'Here, have it, fight for it with all your might so that liberty and happiness may be yours'."

Between January and September 1959, about 1500 decrees and laws were enacted. Urban rent was reduced 30-50%; telephone and electricity rates were reduced. Cane cutters' wages were increased 15%. The unemployed received jobs, and discrimination against blacks was outlawed.

August explains that masses of ordinary Cubans were involved and leading the revolution; this was made clear in the mass assemblies the provisional government held.

The first, on January 17, attended by more than one million Cubans, called on the people to defend the revolution and to decide what to do with Batista's agents.

The next, on January 22, examined the prospect of elections. More than one million Cubans attended and booed down the elections proposal. August explains: "In the minds of the people, elections were associated with the neo-colonial regime's multi-party system or the even more fraudulent elections under the open dictatorship, the last of which took place in 1958."

The First Havana Declaration, of September 2, 1960, was discussed at another mass assembly. "The National General Assembly of the People of Cuba expresses its conviction that democracy cannot consist only in an electoral vote, which is almost always fictitious and handled by big landlords and professional politicians, but in the rights of citizens to decide, as this Assembly of the People is now doing, their own destiny."

At this meeting another proposal for elections was put to the people. People spontaneously chanted for over seven minutes against the holding of elections. More than one million people voted to approve the Havana Declaration.

Local governments were reorganised, representatives of the mass organisations being elected to local bodies. The Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs), created in September 1960, in the wake of sabotage and US threats, organised and mobilised the people. In 1972, CDRs included 70% of the Cuban population.

Elections

August cites the 1970 failure to meet the target 10 million ton sugar harvest as the catalyst for further institutionalising the revolution.

The Cuban assessment was that workers' decision-making at the local level had been increasingly reduced to a symbolic level. It was acknowledged that the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) had placed too much emphasis on the day-to-day running of the state and economic enterprises to the detriment of its role as a moral and political authority.

August documents the 1970s revamping of mass organisations and a clarification of the PCC's role. In many administrative positions workers began to replace PCC cadre.

After a May 1970 pilot election project in the province of Matanzas, a new constitution was discussed in the mass organisations and in workplaces. After this consultation, a referendum was held in which 98% of the population voted, 97.7% approving the constitution.

Elections took place across the country in 1976. By the 1980s, one-third of the

national economy was under the supervision of local municipal assemblies. Between 1977 and 1983 local industries under such supervision tripled the value of their output.

Mass meetings did not end with the introduction of elections to the Organs of People's Power. Mass workplace meetings took place during the 1986 "rectification" period. During the economic crisis in the 1990s, more than 3.5 million Cubans participated in 80,000 assemblies in which one million speakers took the floor, raising 500 issues.

Local assemblies

The electoral system has a broadly pyramidal structure. Delegates are elected by the people to the municipal (local), provincial (10-15 municipalities) and national assemblies. All delegates are accountable and recallable by the people who elected them.

Most delegates don't receive a wage and continue their original job while working as a delegate. The paid delegates receive an average worker's wage. Hence there are no material privileges in becoming a delegate.

Anyone who is over 16, and neither in prison nor deemed mentally unfit, can vote and become a delegate. All voting is voluntary.

Elections to the local municipal assemblies take place every two and a half years; delegates to the national and provincial assemblies are elected for a five-year term. All delegates to all levels are directly elected; prior to 1992, only municipal delegates were directly elected.

Local assemblies take care of housing, food, health and education and have an important political role: involving the people in day-to-day running of their system.

The local municipal assemblies are subdivided into constituencies for elections. An average constituency in Havana covers six small blocks. Voting takes place in electoral colleges which are small enough for people to come, register and see who is registered to vote. On average there are 300 people per college.

For nomination meetings for municipal elections, constituencies are divided into smaller areas, with 100 or so people. Nominations come from the floor. Meetings are held where people live, in the street, park or meeting hall. Anyone can turn up, but only registered persons can vote.

At least two people must be nominated. Voters can nominate people not in their nomination area. By law, political motivations have to follow nominations.

The nominees submit a one-page biography, including a description of how they view the role of delegate, which is placed in the electoral colleges for all to see. Most of the people in the constituency know the nominees already, and the biographies stand as a reminder. No money enters the elections, and there's no number-crunching

preselection process.

By law, the PCC has no formal role in the electoral process. Contrary to US propaganda, anyone can be elected to the Cuban parliament. People vote for candidates who are known to them, and whom they have listened to and questioned. Candidates are elected on the basis of the role they have played in the community and the work they have done in society.

On election day, Cubans show their identity cards at the electoral colleges, and the vote takes place under the eyes of schoolchildren. In October 1997, 97.59% of the population voted. Only 3.98% of ballots were spoiled and 3.23% blank. Only 47.65% of the delegates were re-elected.

Provincial & national elections

Provincial assemblies oversee roads, childcare, education and health. The National Assembly (NA), made up of 601 delegates, meets twice a year and has permanent working bodies which meet daily or weekly. The NA elects the 31 members of the Council of State, which meets when the NA is not sitting.

Delegates to the provincial and national assemblies are often national leaders in their fields — from sports to journalism to medicine to politics. They are nominated, not primarily by local meetings, but by meetings of mass organisations and workplaces and neighbourhoods. The process is overseen by candidacy commissions at municipal, provincial and national levels.

The National Candidacy Commission, prior to 1992, was headed by someone appointed by the PCC. Now, the head of the Cuban Trade Union Federation heads it. The commissions cannot be headed by anyone who is a candidate. Mass organisations, particularly the CDRs, appoint activists to the candidacy commissions.

The commissions are required to consult as many people as possible. In 1997 there were 60,000 nominations from the consultation process. A list of the 300 people most nominated is taken back to the mass organisations, neighbourhoods and workplaces to see what support it gets. When that process is over, the list is taken to the newly elected municipal assembly and voted upon.

The municipal assembly can reject the 300 nomination slate in full or in part and can nominate other people. All pre-candidates must get 50% or more of the vote; if the 50% isn't reached, then the municipal candidacy commission must propose other candidates.

After the vote, the candidates are allocated districts. Electoral districts are proposed by the municipal candidacy commission; not all delegates live in the district they're assigned.

Some of the candidates are well known, but even if that is the case, all must meet with workers and students, and go to workplace and neighbourhood meetings, so people have a chance to meet and question them. Biographies of candidates are placed in the electoral colleges so people can read them at their leisure.

After almost two months of nominees meeting with the people, election day arrives. There are two ballots: one for deputies to the National Assembly and the other for the provincial assembly. In January 1998, 98.5% of the eligible population voted.

Of the 601 delegates elected, 166 were women, 189 delegates were between the ages of 18 and 40, 374 were between 41 and 60, and 38 deputies were older than 60.

The Cuban revolution has been based upon mass participation in the country's political discussion. Though the economic and political aggression imposed by the United States limits the possibility of Cuba's socialist democracy reaching its full potential, the gains that it has made and the political strength and legitimacy that it has achieved demonstrates its ability to involve the majority of people in the major political and economic discussions. ■

7. Life & Living Standards in Cuba

By Julián Gutiérrez

The average wage in Cuba in 1999 was 213 pesos per month (though wages have increased recently, by up to 30% in the case of teachers). At an exchange rate of about 20 pesos to the US dollar, this works out to an unimpressive figure of around US\$11 per month. Wages vary, but fall within a very small band in comparison to capitalist countries, or even the Stalinised socialist countries. Non-wage earners, primarily the self-employed like small home restaurant owners, can potentially earn considerably more.

Cubans are indeed relatively poor compared to most people in the First World, however, to understand living standards in Cuba the vast difference in the prices of goods must be taken into account, and the fact that the value of needs provided free as part of the “social wage” exceeds the value of wages. The following is edited from a letter posted to the CubaSí email list by a Cuban, describing what living standards are really like under Cuba’s unique social and economic system.

* * *

I want to comment on a topic that it is often used by our enemies to attack us. It even confuses many friends and even Cubans who live in Cuba, who repeat without thinking that their wage is between US\$10-20 per month.

Of course, the topic is very complex and I do not seek to exhaust everything that one could say about it. I would like you to analyse what I explain here and let’s establish an exchange where you give your perspectives and bring up the doubts that you still have.

First, I want to establish some economic concepts. To be able to analyse the financial situation of any person, family and even country, we cannot just take into consideration the nominal value of the capital that they possess, but also the purchasing power of that capital. Applying this concept to a person, it means that the important

thing is not the nominal value of that person's capital (wage), but rather the purchasing power that this capital has. An example of this can be seen in the following. A person who lives in New York or in Tokyo, Japan (two of the most expensive cities in the world), if he or she received a monthly wage of US\$1500 could not live; but if he or she lived in La Paz, Bolivia or Port-au-Prince, Haiti they would have a comfortable situation. The \$1500 would have greater purchasing power in La Paz or Port-au-Prince than in New York or Tokyo.

The second question that I want to look at is: What are the expenses that most impact on the wages of the people in the countries that we are comparing? They are: (1) housing, which covers in most cases around half of the wages; (2) food; (3) education; (4) health; (5) services like transportation, telephone, electricity, water, gas, funeral expenses, etc; (6) social activities like recreation, culture, sport, etc; and (7) taxes.

If we agree on these concepts, we can go on to analyse the purchasing power of the Cuban peso, that is to say, of the wage of any Cuban. Let us consider that the main necessities of the Cubans are the same ones that we set down previously. Then let's analyse what a Cuban or a Cuban family spends on each of them.

Before beginning the analysis of each concept, I want to explain a situation that exists in Cuba which is very different from other countries of the Third World and even of the First World (industrialised countries). In Cuba, in families, all the people of working age usually work and all the pensioners receive a pension. For this reason, in each household there are several incomes. In my house, for example, seven people live: me, my wife, my daughter and son-in-law (ages 29 and 30), their two children (ages four years and one month) and my son (age 27). So five of us are of working age and are working and receiving wages. So the household has five incomes.

Housing

The cost of housing in Cuba is very low. In the first years of the revolution, all housing was nationalised and became the property of the state. This was done to establish the groundwork for the reforms that followed, and in the years since then, different measures have been taken to benefit those [who] live in the houses. Of these measures the most important are the following:

- A 50% discount on rents.
- A second discount on rents, which took the rent down to a maximum of 10% of the lessee's wage (and 6% for those houses built by the microbrigades). For example, in my case the house belongs to my wife who received it new in 1979. She had a house payment of 26 pesos per month, which was around 10% of the wage that she earned at that time.

For each house a value was established that would not be more than what the lessee would have had to pay over 20 to 30 years, depending on the year of construction of the house. After establishing this value, an agreement was then signed between the National Institute of Housing (owner of the housing stock), the lessees and the National Bank of Cuba. Under this agreement, the bank made a loan to the lessees so that these lessees bought their houses and continued paying to the bank the instalments required until completing the total value of the house. Everybody who wanted to could pay for his or her house in small payments, without the traditional bank interest. Starting from that moment, everybody became proprietor of his or her house. Today, more or less 85% of the owners have completely paid off their houses. In my case, when the house values discussed above were established, our house was valued at a little more than 9000 pesos and at that time we had very little left to pay of this total value. Therefore, we decided to pay what we owed immediately and we became homeowners without having to pay any instalments to the bank.

As you can see, for Cubans housing does not constitute a problem in their expenses. Although today all newly constructed houses are valued according to their floor plan in square metres, the monthly payments are never more than 10% of the named owner's wages, even though others in the house may have additional incomes.

Food

This is a very controversial point about which many lies have been uttered, but many truths have basically been hidden. What the revolution has attempted, consistent with its principles, is to ensure that the whole population has adequate food, in calories and proteins, which will be within the reach of any citizen, independent of their wages or the swings in supply and demand on the market. To achieve this, the government decided to establish the so-called notebook of supply (*la libreta*) through which each person is assigned a quota of basic foods at low prices subsidised by the state. Here we can look at several questions:

Is this the only way that these foods can be acquired? No. These foods can also be acquired in the quantities desired, in pesos or in US dollars, but at market prices, in other types of stores.

Is what is provided by the *libreta* enough food without having to buy in the market? No. It depends, for example, on the person's individual needs (if they eat a lot or a little) or those of the family (if there are children who eat less or workers who eat at their work); in my opinion what is received should last between 10 and 20 days of the month (although there are people who say that it lasts them the whole month). To cover the rest it is necessary to acquire foods in the free market in pesos or in dollars.

(If you don't know, any person can buy legally convertible pesos equivalent to the dollar to shop in the stores that take dollars, at an exchange rate that has stayed for some years at around 21 pesos to the dollar.) To give you an idea, I will give you some examples of the products that are subsidised by the *libreta*, the quantities that are received, their prices in pesos and their price on the free market in pesos and/or dollars.

The meat products are not received in a regular way and much depends on what can be made available at the subsidised prices. Right now, we are receiving beef or chicken, sausages, ham and *picadillo* (a Cuban ground beef with garlic, raisins and spices). Each one of them is received, at the present time, every 15 days. That is to say, for example, today, meat or chicken, in 15 days, sausage, in another 15 days, ham, in another 15 days, *picadillo*, and the cycle begins again. Additionally, each person receives a quota of fish every 15 days which at the moment is canned.

In addition to these products, we receive approximately 15 pounds per person per month of potatoes and bananas at 0.40 pesos per pound. In addition to the foods that are received through the *libreta* at subsidised prices, I should also add that all workers have workplace dining rooms, and there they acquire their meals at prices that oscillate around one peso. Also, all boarding school students who do not live at home receive all their meals free and the non-boarding students in most cases receive a free lunch.

Something that I want to clarify here is what happens in those cases when food donations are given, for different reasons, from other countries or international organisations. In these cases the received products are given to the population, with

Availability and cost of selected foods in Cuba

<i>Product</i>	<i>Quantity per person</i>	<i>Price (pesos)</i>	<i>Free market price (pesos)</i>	<i>(US\$)</i>
Rice	6 pounds/month	0.25/lb	3.50/lb	0.67/lb
Beans	20 ounces/month	0.32/lb	7/lb	1.34/lb
White sugar	3 pounds/month	0.15/lb	0.74/lb	
Raw sugar	3 pounds/month	0.10/lb		
Milk	1 litre daily (children 0.25 lt from 0-7 years)	10/lt	1.60/lt	
Eggs	6 every 15 days	0.15 each		
Beef	0.5 pounds	0.70/lb		1.80/lb
Chicken	1 pounds	0.70/lb		1.27/lb
Sausages	225 grams	1.70/225 gm		1.20/225 gm
Ham	0.5 pounds	3/lb		
Picadillo	0.75 pounds	0.60/lb		1.13/lb
Fish	1 can (425 gm)/month	2/can		

the only money charged being the cost of the freight or other costs incurred, but without charging anything additional for the product itself. This has happened, for example, in the case of rice donated by Vietnam or kitchen oil donated by France. As we can see, the topic of food is complex and it can become, in some families, the main expense.

Education

Education in Cuba, as everybody knows, is free, so it is not necessary to explain a lot. I only want to clarify some points that may not be clear as to what free education means in Cuba. Of course, entry is free from first grade through to the graduate degree studies of university students. The education of the whole population, including graduate degree studies, is a duty of the state, established in the constitution. The cost of student uniforms is subsidised. School materials, books, notebooks, pencils, etc. are given free. As I said previously, the food in the schools is free. Many secondary school students, most college students and some university students live at their schools and receive, besides what has already been discussed, their uniforms and everything they need to live (food, bedclothes, products for personal hygiene, etc.) free. University students, considering that at their age they have extra necessities, receive a stipend of 20 pesos per month in first year, 25 in second year, 30 in third and fourth years and 40 in fifth year.

We should add that there are two aspects of education that are not considered seriously in almost any place else of the world. In Cuba there is a program of free special teaching for disabled students that includes schools of special teaching in all the provinces of the country, and in places where there are not enough students to justify a school, specialised teachers exist to give classes to disabled children. So we can say that education is taken to all, including people that suffer from any disability.

All graduate university students the moment they receive their diplomas also receive their work placement. In other words, all graduate students have a work position assured.

On the basis of the above, we see that incurring expenses for education is not a concern for any Cuban.

Public health

This aspect is also very well known, so I don't believe that it needs a lot of explanation, although I would like to explain a few things. In the first place, something obvious, it is free, from primary care, supplied by the local family doctor, who carries out preventative and social work in the community as well as medical work, up to and including the

most complex treatments, which could be a heart transplant, plastic surgery or an infertility treatment. In the event that someone needs to enter a hospital, he or she receives all food and medication or other materials that are used in his/her treatment free. Medicines that are consumed outside of the hospital have to be purchased, but they are sold at prices subsidised by the state. In the case of medications or other medical products that are received as donations, we do the same thing as with donated foods.

Services

On this topic I will speak only of some services, those I consider fundamental.

Public transport. Public transportation is one of the services that was most affected by the Special Period. To get an idea, before 1990, the buses in the City of Havana provided around 20,000 trips daily. In 1994, this decreased to around 3000. Today, trips per day are around 9000. But since the topic we are focusing on here is not transportation but expenses, let's concentrate on that. The cost of a bus [trip] is 0.20 or 0.40 pesos depending on the bus type. On the topic of transportation, I would like to add bicycles. As all of you know, with the advent of the Special Period, the bicycle was looked to as a means of transportation. For this reason thousands of bicycles were sold to workers at a price of 150 pesos and to students at a price of 60 pesos.

Telephone. The cost of the public telephone is 0.05 pesos every three minutes. National long distance calls have similar prices to those of local calls.

Electricity. The cost of electricity is 0.09 pesos per kilowatt.

Water. The payment that should be made depends on the number of people in the family nucleus. For a family of seven people like mine, the first 15 cubic metres per month are paid at 0.25 pesos per cubic metre, the next 10 at 0.50 pesos and from there on the price increases. It is very difficult to consume more than 15 cubic metres in a month. Also, 0.9 pesos monthly is paid for the use of the sewerage system.

Gas. I use bottled gas. For the seven persons in our household a gas container lasts approximately 15 days. A 20 pound bottle of gas costs 7 pesos.

Funeral services. All funeral services are free, which includes, according to the Cuban custom, the viewing in the mortuary, the casket, the transfer of the body to the cemetery, the burial as well as the burial place. The only paid services are those additional services which the family wants to receive. That would include flowers, additional cars to transport the relatives or others to the cemetery, and other services. As you can see, all these services don't have a cost that affects the revenues of a family.

Social & recreational activities, culture & sport

I include this aspect since we have always considered that a person needs these activities for his or her development and, therefore, an objective of the revolution is to make these available to the whole population in the double sense of being able to practice them and to attend them. To be able to practice these activities, the revolution has created inside the educational system an entire series of special schools for art, sport, circuses, etc. In addition, people who are not students at these schools have the possibility of receiving training in these activities, at very low prices in specialised centres. To make recreation, cultural and artistic programs and sports accessible to all Cubans, special prices have been established in pesos. Let us look at each one of them.

Recreation. In this case I will refer to certain places. I attended these places during my vacation, taking my granddaughter. Others not mentioned have similar prices.

- Zoos. In Havana we have two zoos. There is the old one where the animals are all in cages. It has good number of animals, that is to say that it is not small. The cost of the entrance is one peso for grown-ups and free for children. There is another, bigger zoo where the animals are free and you can travel in special transport around what is called the African savannah and also through a pride of lions. The entrance to this zoo is two pesos for adults and one for children. In both cases the price for the tourists is in US dollars and it is the same, that is to say, \$1 and free, and \$2 and \$1.
- The Aquarium. Entrance costs two pesos for adults and one for minors. For tourists it is \$3 for adults and \$1 for minors.

Culture. In this case I will refer to only two areas.

- Cinema. The cost of [of entry to] the best cinemas in Cuba is two pesos. They are not offered in dollars.
- Ballet. In this case I want to point out that, as is known internationally, Cuba has one of the best ballets in the world. In Cuba, we have several companies of international fame, even in different provinces. For Cubans, entrance to this ballet costs five pesos. For tourists it costs \$5.

Sport. For a long time, entrance to sports events was free. Due to the economic situation that faced the country with the Special Period, it was decided to eliminate this free entry as well as others. Starting from that time, the entrance to sports events has increased to two pesos and for tourists to \$2. From my point of view, the cost of all these social activities is low, in accord with the wages of any Cuban. I even consider that the prices for tourists are much lower than what it costs for these activities in their countries of origin. In what place can one see a ballet for \$5 or a ball game that decides the championship for \$2?

Taxes

In Cuba taxes are only imposed on companies, self-employed workers (whose number doesn't exceed 200,000 in the whole country) and on artists who are completing contracts abroad and receiving revenues in foreign currencies. The rest of the people don't pay taxes.

I offer you this series of data so you can make your own calculations and tell me what is the real wage of a Cuban? The one that he or she receives as payment and whose value should be considered as \$10 to \$20? Or the comparative purchasing power of this money on the basis of all I have explained to you here, and which we could say has a value of \$400, \$1000 or \$2000? ■

II

**Cuba's revolutionary
History & Example**



Fidel Castro enters Havana, January 1959.

1. 'History will absolve me': Cuba's Revolution is Born

By Roberto Jorquera

July 26 marks the 46th anniversary of the attack of Fidel Castro's rebel forces on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba. It was this attack that first placed Castro and what was to become known as the July 26 Revolutionary Movement (MR-26-7) onto the political scene in Cuba and also made millions around the world take notice of an unfolding revolution. Though the attack was a military disaster with the majority of the rebel army either killed in combat or captured and later tortured and killed, the events that would follow would be a turning point in Cuba's unfolding revolution.

As soon as they were imprisoned on August 1, the July 26 fighters established a system of communication among themselves which involved the help of other prisoners and sympathetic prison guards. This allowed Castro to keep up with the latest news and record in detail the events that occurred during their imprisonment. He was then able to use this as evidence against his accusers.

On September 25, he was placed in confinement. Unable to communicate with anyone, he dedicated his time to the preparation of his defence. He received a few books that he used to prepare his case. He wrote, read and re-read his testimony to the point that he had memorised it. He was not allowed to present his speech in a public courtroom for fear of the public support that it might receive, rather it was given in private at a military hospital where he was being kept.

When he was finally taken to trial all that he had with him was an extensive summary of Cuba's independence battles. The rest of his notes he left in his prison cell, never to be found again. His speech was to take two hours in front of the judge, courtroom assistant and a few journalists.

Castro (27 years of age at the time) and 25 others were tried for crimes against the

state on October 6 and 16, 1953. Unwilling to accept a defence counsel for himself, Castro delivered his own defence speech which was later published under the title “History Will Absolve Me”, which referred to the final remarks in his defence speech.

His speech not only turned on his accusers for their many crimes but also clarified the program of the rebel army. For this reason it became the official program of the MR-26-7 which was later to organise a guerrilla army that would finally overthrow the Batista dictatorship on January 1, 1959.

Prison

Castro was sentenced to 15 years in jail and sent to the Isle of Pines where, together with his comrades, he set up a small library and began cultural and political studies and classes. In February 1954, Castro was placed in solitary confinement. He used this time to write from memory his courtroom defence speech. The first version of his speech was not able to be released till June 1954.

Throughout their imprisonment, the Moncadistas, as they became known, established a system of communication with their outside supporters and members. Much of their communication was through family letters in which they included Castro’s speech written in between the lines with lemon juice. Once they received the letters they were heated up with an iron or in an oven making the text visible and able to be copied.

In a letter to Melba Hernández, one of the two women Moncadistas who were released in February 1954, Castro, using invisible ink, wrote, “We cannot for one minute abandon our propaganda because it is the heart of all struggles.” He also wrote to her making it clear that the main task for them was to transcribe his speech and distribute it as widely as possible: “Our revolutionary program is made clear in my speech. It is a basic document that clearly outlines where to take the struggle ... I know how important the current situation is for our cause. If we want people to follow us we must provide them with a path and with a dignified goal with whatever sacrifice. What was destroyed with blood must be built with ideas.”

Building a mass movement

In a further letter that outlined what needed to be done with his speech, Castro wrote, “I consider that in the current situation propaganda is vital; without propaganda there is no mass movement, and without a mass movement revolution is not possible.”

In his final letter before the release of “History Will Absolve Me”, Castro wrote, “Our current mission, I want you to be totally convinced of, is not to organise revolutionary cells to be able to recruit a few more people; that would be a major

error. Our immediate task is to mobilise in our favor public opinion. We must spread our ideas and win over the support of the masses. Our revolutionary program is the most complete, our line of march is the clearest, our history the most filled with sacrifice, we have the right to win over the faith of the people, without it, I repeat it a thousand times, revolution is not possible. Before we were anonymous pioneers of these ideas, now we are obliged to fight for them with our signatures inscribed on them, our tactics must be completely new. We must not worry about recruiting 10 or more people when we must create the conditions one day to be able to mobilise tens of thousands of people.”

As part of his defence Castro made clear the program of the Moncadistas, proclaiming five revolutionary laws that would have been implemented if the insurrection had been successful:

- The supreme law of the state would be the 1940 constitution under the control of a new rebel revolutionary government.
- Provide non-mortgageable and non-transferable ownership of the land to all tenant and subtenant farmers, lessees, share croppers and squatters who hold parcels of five *caballerias*^a of land or less and the state would indemnify the former owners on the basis of the rental which they would have received for these parcels over a period of 10 years.
- Grant workers the right to share 30% of the profits of all large industrial, mercantile and mining enterprises.
- Grant all sugar planters the right to share 55% of the sugar production and a minimum quota of 40,000 *arrobas*^b for all small tenant farmers who have been established for three years or more.
- Order the confiscation of all holdings, all ill-gotten gains of those who had committed frauds during previous regimes, as well as the holdings and ill-gotten gains of all their legates and heirs. Establish courts with full power to gain access to all records of all corporations registered in the country in order to investigate concealed funds of illegal origin, and to request that foreign governments extradite persons and attach holdings rightfully belonging to the Cuban people. Half of the property recovered would be used to subsidise retirement funds for workers and the other half would be used for hospitals, asylums and charitable organisations. Castro also proclaimed, “The Cuban policy in the Americas would be one of close

^a A *caballeria* is a measure of land in former Spanish colonies in Latin America varying between 38 and 43 hectares.

^b An *arroba* is a traditional measure of weight equal to about 11.5 kilograms.

solidarity with the democratic peoples of this continent, and that all those politically persecuted by bloody tyrannies oppressing our sister nations would find generous asylum, brotherhood and bread in the land of Martí.

“The new revolutionary government would also establish the maximum amount of land to be held by each agricultural enterprise and would acquire the excess acreage by expropriation, recovery of lands stolen from the state, improvement of swampland, planting large nurseries, and reserving of zones for reforestation ... It would [also] distribute the remaining land among peasant families.”

Other revolutionary laws included the halving of domestic rents, transforming the education system and setting minimum rates of pay for all teachers. Rural teachers would have free use of transportation and all teachers “should enjoy a sabbatical leave of six months with pay so they may attend special refresher courses at home or abroad to keep abreast of the latest developments in their field”. In an anticipated response to the question of how this would be provided, Castro remarked, “When there is an end to the embezzlement of government funds, when public officials stop taking graft from large companies that owe taxes to the state, when the enormous resources of the country are brought into full use, when we no longer buy tanks, bombers and guns for this country ... when there is more interest in educating the people than in killing them there will be more than enough money.”

The accused becomes accuser

“The verdict imposed on my comrades — the verdict now being sought against me — has no justification in reason, in social mores or in terms of true justice”, Castro said. In his defense of the actions of the July 26 Movement Castro turned on the actions of Batista. Castro condemned the coup that had taken place on March 10, 1952 which violated the democratic principles that had been laid down by the 1940 constitution. He condemned Batista’s role and that of his officers and generals in the torture and assassination of captured July 26 combatants.

“The people of Cuba will continue to fight against tyranny, the same way they fought against the Spanish. The people of Cuba will follow in the footsteps of those liberation fighters who gave up their lives for a better world.” In closing Castro said, “The guilty continue at liberty and with weapons in their hands — weapons which continually threaten the lives of all citizens ... I do not fear prison, as I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who took the lives of 70 of my comrades. Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me.”■

2. Four Decades of the Cuban Revolution

By Greg Adamson & Roberto Jorquera

January 1999 marked 40 years since the victory of the Cuban Revolution. During that time the US has tried everything to destroy this revolutionary example. They tried to invade; they imposed an economic blockade; they tried to kill many of its leaders; they have bribed and pressured many other countries to stop trade. They have also funded and supported opposition groups inside Cuba to destabilise and provoke the government and sabotage industry, all under the guise of “human rights”.

Recently, in an amendment to the Helms-Burton Bill, the US increased the amount of money and political support to the “opposition forces” inside Cuba, with the aim of establishing an alternative power base and/or “government of transition”. These sorts of tactics are bound to increase when Fidel Castro retires from the presidency some time in the next few years.

Who made the revolution?

Forty years of revolution have provided many lessons for the socialist and progressive movement. The Pentagon’s Cubologists puzzle over how the Caribbean island was stolen by the “Evil Empire”, and why Fidel Castro became a communist. They cannot accept that Cuba decided to take an independent path from 1959. Further, they cannot come to terms with the reality that because of Cuba’s history, the revolution was something that was waiting to happen.

Cuba was occupied by Spain from the early 1500s until the Spanish-American War of 1898, when the Spanish colonies of Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam were handed over to the US as booty. A major reason for Spain’s loss of these colonies was the civil war fought in both Cuba and the Philippines during the closing decades of

the 19th century. In the last quarter of that century a revolutionary, anti-slavery war of independence in Cuba saw some 30,000 mainly black Cuban troops under the leadership of José Martí and Antonio Maceo defeat a Spanish conscript army of half a million.

It is from this period that Cuba's mass revolutionary traditions spring, not from the Russian Revolution of 1917. In 1992, the Communist Party of Cuba changed its constitution to also acknowledge the contribution of Martí. Martí and Maceo represent two traditions emphasised in Cuba today. Martí is a symbol of unity: as the founder of the Cuban Revolutionary Party he was able to overcome the divisions within the anti-Spanish forces to win victory.

Antonio Maceo is a symbol of intransigence: as the outstanding military strategist of the war of independence, he was the leader the Spanish could neither intimidate nor buy off. Both of these leaders died in the war against Spain and their absence made the US takeover easier. But for Cubans, the idea of fighting a war for independence from foreign domination was never lost. In the early 1960s, writers such as Miguel Barnett collected reminiscences of former slaves who remembered the anti-Spanish struggle, to keep this memory alive.

Cuba's independent road

With its unique revolutionary tradition, it is not surprising that the revolutionary movement of the 1950s developed along lines independent of anything expected either by the US government, the local corrupt Cuban regime or, for that matter, other socialist countries.

The movement was sparked by the 1952 coup of General Fulgencio Batista which pre-empted planned elections in which Castro was a senate candidate. While the traditional parties accepted the coup, a group around Castro planned to seize the major barracks in Santiago de Cuba, the country's second largest city, to force Batista's resignation and hold the planned elections.

The July 26, 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks was a military disaster, with most of the participants killed and the remainder imprisoned. Politically, however, the attack provided a focus for the subsequent revolution. In an effort to win respectability, Batista released the prisoners in 1955, whereupon Castro and the others left the country to organise forces for an armed invasion and uprising.

Returning in December 1956, the forces known as the July 26 Movement included Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl, Che Guevara, and 79 others who arrived on the yacht *Granma*. By January 1959, the guerrilla forces were able to gain mass support throughout Cuba and thus topple Batista's military government.

The current hostilities between the US and Cuba have their origins in the first few months of the revolution. One of the promises of the revolution was to bring to justice the notorious torturers of the Batista dictatorship. In a move universally acclaimed throughout Cuba several hundred of the worst of them were put on trial and, after being convicted on the testimony of their victims or victims' relatives, were executed.

For the US government this was a shock, as some of those executed were their closest allies and friends. While the US later manufactured a number of excuses to break off relations with Cuba, it was this first step which convinced the US that the Cuban revolutionaries could not be bought off.

The first decade

The early 1960s saw a number of moves and counter moves. When US oil companies refused to continue offering credit for oil supplies, Cuba arranged to buy oil from the Soviet Union. US oil companies in Cuba then refused to refine that oil, so Cuba took control of the refineries. The US stopped the import of Cuban sugar and Cuba nationalised some major US investments. The US demanded that Cuba pay for these, which Cuba agreed to, but out of sales of sugar to the US. Since the US was buying no more sugar, no compensation was paid to the companies.

The early 1960s saw extensive preparations for a US war against Cuba. Around 300 counter-revolutionary groups were organised by the US inside Cuba. In April 1961, more than 1500 exiles invaded Cuba at Playa Girón, in a fiasco known as the Bay of Pigs (Playa Girón) invasion. US military intelligence was sadly lacking, and the expected uprising of Cubans in support of the invasion never happened. The operation was meant to establish a beachhead, allowing a "government-in-exile" to be flown in which would have just one job: to call for a US invasion. The speed with which the invaders were met blocked that plan.

In 1962, Cuba asked for and received a promise of major weapons support from the Soviet Union. Thus began the Cuban missile crisis as the Kennedy administration brought the world to the brink of nuclear war over its "right" to be the only one in the hemisphere to possess nuclear weapons.

While counter-revolutionary Cuban organisations continued throughout the 1960s, and in fact are still funded by the US government today, the growing US military involvement in Vietnam prevented it from carrying out a direct mass invasion of the Caribbean island. In the mid-1960s, in an effort to take pressure off Vietnam by opening another front of the anti-imperialist military struggle in the Americas, Che Guevara led a failed expeditionary force in Bolivia, which ended with his capture and execution in October 1967. This led to a major re-evaluation of the forms of Cuba's

international solidarity.

The late 1960s also saw another serious re-evaluation: on the question of Cuba's economic strategy. Early in the 1960s, attempts had been made to move the centre of the economy away from sugar production, which had traditionally distorted Cuba's development. The result, however, was a drop in income from sugar without a corresponding improvement in other areas.

By the late 1960s, there was an attempt to diversify by funding development through a massive increase in sugar production. A production target of 10 million tons was set for the 1970 *zafra* (sugar harvest). The target wasn't reached, which could have been acceptable if the effort expended had not in turn caused havoc throughout the rest of the economy. Castro identified the cause of the failure as the lack of information about what was possible because of the inadequate processes of involvement and consultation.

The 1970s

The early 1970s saw Cuba taking a much lower profile internationally. They were years of consolidation, which some observers, including the US, misunderstood as a mellowing of the revolution's principles. These were years when the US began to show signs of loosening its embargo against Cuba.

Within Cuba itself major changes were underway, designed to incorporate into the institutions of the country the experiences of the revolution. The constitution was overhauled, with the involvement of millions of people. The legal code was updated. The provincial structure was completely altered, with several new provinces created to reflect the demographic distribution of the country and begin to devolve power away from Havana.

A system of local government elections was introduced which laid the basis for the current system of national elections. Finally, in 1975, the first congress of the Communist Party of Cuba was held, marking the final merging of three pre-revolution groups into a single united party.

International observers lulled to sleep by the first half of the 1970s were awakened by Cuba's decision in late 1975 to commit troops to Angola to defend the nationalist forces faced with invasion by South Africa in the south and CIA-organised mercenaries in the east. From then until the Nicaraguan revolution's victory in 1979, Cuba showed that revolution was something that didn't need to be exported, but whose example was unstoppable.

The second half of the decade saw increased US interference, culminating in President Carter's open invitation for those who wanted the "good life" to sail to the

US. While more than 100,000 accepted the offer, for the 10 million who declined 1980 was a year of huge mobilisations and protests.

Economic difficulties in the 1980s

Perhaps the most important feature of the 1980s was Cuba's response to the international economic crisis. Cuba has always been an outspoken advocate of new international economic relations as an essential step towards the survival of the Third World, including a moratorium on Third World debt. It has played a leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement and has been recognised as a leader among Third World countries.

For Cuba itself, however, the issue was not academic. World sugar prices in the mid-1980s, in real terms, were at the lowest level this century. While the Soviet Union had been buying much of Cuba's sugar at fixed prices, Cuba relied on sales to the capitalist world to finance much of its purchase of modern machinery and consumer goods. This resulted in shortages in essential items such as milk and spare parts for buses.

Until 1982, Cuba's economy was exemplary within Latin America. Even in 1984 Cuba enjoyed the fastest rate of growth in per capita income in the region. But by 1987 Cuba's ability to meet its international debt repayments had been eroded.

An article by Daniel Orozco Pastrana in the Cuban daily *Granma* explained the background to Cuba's economic difficulties. Cuba began to experience difficulties with the payment of foreign debts in hard currency in 1982, said Pastrana. This was a result of a sharp rise in interest rates, bad weather and declining prices for sugar exports as the European Economic Community increased its primary export subsidies, and there was no international sugar agreement. While sugar prices averaged nearly 29 cents per pound in 1980, by 1982 they were less than seven cents. While savings were made by the re-export of conserved fuels, there was a 385 million peso fall in export receipts in 1983.

These circumstances, and further problems in the sugar market, made it impossible for Cuba to meet its foreign loan servicing payments in 1984. In 1985 there was a further sharp deterioration in the trade situation with a 136% increase in the trade deficit over the 1983 figure. By 1987, the foreign debt was US\$7.3 billion.

The slump in world oil prices also contributed to Cuba's economic problems. At their peak, reduction of oil use and re-exports of oil imported from the Soviet Union accounted for nearly 45% of all hard currency from Cuba's commodity exports, filling some of the gap left by low sugar prices. According to Castro, hard currency revenue

in 1987 amounted to only a quarter of the 1984 level.

The devaluation of the US dollar against the European and Japanese currencies hit the economy hard. To help cope with the difficult economic conditions, the government announced an austerity program in the last session of parliament in December 1986, an “austerity policy which reduced dollar-denominated imports by half without affecting the standard of living of the population”.

The package included cutbacks in the distribution of subsidised milk, rice, sugar, textiles and electrical appliances; the elimination or curtailment of state-provided meals at workplaces and in schools; further rationing of petrol and kerosene; and increases in the prices of electricity and public transport. The cut in imports resulted in an overall trade surplus of US\$34.2 million in 1987 compared with a deficit of US\$289.3 million in 1986. Overall, the economy shrank slightly in 1987.

In his 1989 July 26 address, Castro said that all efforts must be directed to earning hard currency. He gave the example of lobster exports which were earning the country US\$100 million per year. With each tonne of lobster sold, Cuba can import 20 tonnes of powdered milk, he noted.

Inside Cuba the shortage of foreign exchange could have led to a serious cut in social services. At the time, construction of homes and childcare centres were down.

At that point the government undertook a “rectification” campaign. This had two aims. First, it focused attention on a layer of middle level management which, in the past decade, had grown corrupt and begun siphoning off resources. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it encouraged local initiative in overcoming shortages.

The rectification process was launched at the 1986 congress of the Communist Party of Cuba. “We no longer have the problems that existed 25 years ago”, Fidel Castro said in a speech commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion. “But now we have people who are lazy, sloppy, irresponsible ... People who want privilege and a fast buck, not earned, but made through swindling, profiteering, illicit trading.”

He was particularly hard on enterprise heads, accusing some of “playing at capitalism”. Among the problems listed were a trend to manufacture a reporting of profit through bookkeeping tricks, an emphasis on quantity without quality, and a shortage in industry of raw materials freely available on the black market. “Lack of economic checks and mistaken criteria in enterprises led to growing diversion of resources, embezzlement and fraud of different kinds”, reported *Granma*. In 1987, as a result of 460 audits at state agencies and People’s Power institutions, wastage was valued at US\$19 million.

An associated problem had been the free peasant market, which caused significant

dislocation while providing only about 2% of farm produce. It meant that some farmers sold their products at exorbitant prices, and slowed down the process of setting up cooperatives. The produce often did not enter the cities because a long chain of go-betweens came into existence.

One initiative was the reintroduction of mini-brigades to encourage local construction initiatives. These brigades focused on the most important projects. One of the results was the completion in 1987 and 1988 of 23,000 new childcare places in Havana. No bonuses were awarded. Instead, exemplary workers were given the honour of being congratulated in their neighbourhood, and their relatives were invited to visit the construction site. The brigades could not employ administrative staff totalling more than 10% of the total workforce. While seniority had been the main criteria for promotion, at experimental enterprises, including the Blas Roca contingent, this stipulation was dropped.

In motivating the period, Castro said: "I maintain that this battle for rectification is a battle of ideas, but ideas that can bear fruit and produce basic things for our people's future, which can be transformed into material wealth that can be transformed into goods and services of quality and quantity for our people."

The 1990s: Cuba faces it alone

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 led to dramatic changes in Cuba, due to its reliance on imports from the Soviet bloc. Cuba had to quickly reorganise its economy, because over 70% of its imports were from that region. The sudden halt in trade with the Soviet bloc resulted in the national income dropping by over 55% between 1989 and 1992.

With the US on a political offensive, Cuba was also forced to develop plans to deal with a much tighter blockade. Cuba had only itself to rely on to continue to maintain the gains that it had achieved through the revolution.

1999 marks the 40th anniversary of the victory of the revolution, but it also marks 10 years since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The last 10 years have shown that Cuba was not a Soviet satellite but that it had a popularly supported revolution that had been able to survive and continue to provide outstanding achievements because of its socialist principles.

The US government increased the pressure on the Cuban government through the Torricelli Bill, which was introduced in 1992. The total cost of the blockade to Cuba in 1994 alone was estimated at US\$1 billion, representing 50% of the country's imports for that year. The economic crisis that developed in Cuba during this time forced the government to implement what it termed "a special period in the time of peace". The

challenge was to reorganise the economy to improve efficiency and to reinsert the Cuban economy into the world economy on new foundations.

A discussion paper prior to the 1995 congress of the Central Organisation of Cuban Workers (CTC) stated: “We continue to confront great difficulties, but Cuba stands in Latin America as an alternative to the merciless neoliberal policies, to the weakening and destruction of the trade union movement they pursue, and to the enormous social costs and suffering that they bring.

“What distinguishes our economic transformations is that they are being carried out under the sponsorship and control of the state, and their highest objectives are to safeguard the interests of the revolution and the workers. This includes the aspirations of resuming the construction of socialism when the conditions for doing so are created.”

In spite of all the difficulties that Cuba has to deal with, it has still provided an example to the rest of the world. There is no doubt that Washington will increase the pressure by tightening the blockade and supporting and funding the opposition which will throw even more challenges to the Cuban people about how to deal with such aggression at the turn of the century. ■

III

A Socialist Island in a Sea of Capitalism



Cuban protest against US interference.

1. How Washington Uses Emigration as a Weapon Against Cuba

By José G. Pérez

The following article is edited from one originally posted on the internet during the Elián González affair. Five-year-old Cuban boy Elián González was rescued off the coast of Florida in November 1999. His mother and 10 others had drowned after their boat sank while attempting to reach the US. In violation of international and US laws, US authorities put him in the custody of distant relatives in Miami whom he had never met rather than return him to his father in Cuba. His father waged an eventually successful seven-month battle for his return, supported by massive mobilisations in Cuba and also the majority of the US population.

* * *

The case of Elián González has put the spotlight on US-Cuba immigration disputes and the United States' 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act — Cold War legislation which is used to justify granting nearly all Cubans the right to remain in the US once they reach US jurisdiction.

This policy, on its face, is absurd. If the US wants to take in as many people as wish to leave the island, then it would be logical to simply give a residence visa to any Cuban who wants to come. But the US does not do this. It hands out visas — even simple tourist visas to come to visit a relative — with an eye-dropper, and only after a long and complicated procedure. For example, the US routinely denies tourist visas to parents whose grown sons or daughters have chosen to come to the US, giving only one parent permission to visit, while the other remains in Cuba. This is to discourage people from taking advantage of the US policy under the Cuban Adjustment Act, which legally entitles the couple to stay in the US.

However, if someone steals a boat, hijacks one at gunpoint, or organises a \$1000-a-head alien smuggling operation, *then* the US government receives them with open arms as a “political refugee” fleeing “communism”. This is done despite US immigration law provisions which prohibit granting legal status to people who have committed crimes.

Alien smuggling and entering the US without a visa are crimes, and people from every country except Cuba are automatically barred from obtaining legal status if they come into the US illegally, even if they are otherwise entitled to become residents.

The Clinton administration claims that its hands are tied by the Cuban Adjustment Act, but this is a lie. Simply by enforcing the law against illegal entry, it could put a stop to these insane crossings, in which at least 70 people lost their lives in 1999.

And if it wanted to encourage Cubans to settle in the US, it can just hand out tourist visas liberally in Havana, and have the immigration service meet the arrivals in Miami to hand out instructions on how to request permanent residency.

This is a totally cynical policy to keep the news media full of images of “boat people” and “rafters” who are “fleeing” from a horrible communist dictatorship. The blood of hundreds of Cubans who have died trying to cross the Florida straits is on the hands of President Bill Clinton and his predecessors.

Cuba’s emigration policy

Cuba’s policy on emigration has always been absolutely clear: the building of socialism is a task for free men and women. As a general rule, anyone who wishes to leave, whether it be for political, economic or family reasons, is free to do so, although minors need the permission of both parents, even if divorced, to do so.

There are exceptions where the Cuban government delays permission to emigrate for a period: active-duty military personnel, college graduates who have not completed a mandatory two-year period of national service, people who have had access to state secrets, and hard-to-replace medical specialists (until replacements can be found or trained). According to the US government, there were just over 100 such cases pending in the summer of 2000, a tiny number compared to the more than 100,000 Cubans who had legally emigrated to the US, every last one with Cuban government permission.

What’s more, the revolutionary government has waged battle after battle to force Washington to accept through safe and legal means the migration it constantly encourages. If there are so many Cubans in Miami it is because President Fidel Castro has pushed and even trapped the US government into accepting them, and not at all because the US government has facilitated their arrival.

Since the first days of the Cuban Revolution, the US has used emigration as a weapon against it. Under the Eisenhower administration, the US opened its arms wide to Cuban capitalists, managers, technicians and professionals, confidently predicting that Cuba would quickly collapse.

After two years of this policy, the US tried a different tack. It broke diplomatic relations with Cuba and shut down all the consulates. It now became impossible to go to the US from Cuba, because only consulates could issue visas. The only other option was the “visa waiver”, a document as prized (among some circles) and hard to obtain as the legendary Nazi “letters of transit” in the movie *Casablanca*.

Operation Peter Pan

One little-known reason for the explosion of outrage in Cuba against the kidnapping of Elián González is that he is not the first Cuban child the US government has separated from his family. In the early 1960s, through the kind offices of the Catholic Church in Cuba and the US, the CIA carried out “Operation Peter Pan”, in which nearly 15,000 children were brought to the US without their parents and basically given to anyone who would have them.

By then, the US had developed the basic line of attack it has used ever since — systematically encouraging people to leave Cuba and systematically refusing them visas to do so. The Kennedy administration decided to vary this policy a little to hand out “visa waivers” for all children whose parents wanted to send them to the US, but not for the parents.

To encourage the parents to send their children, a handbill was printed up purporting to reprint a draft law that had been “removed from the office of the [Cuban] Prime Minister”, titled “Law on the Nationalisation of Children”. This fabricated “law” stated that once children were three parents were to hand them over to state-run child-care centres which would become the children’s guardians.

Given the colonial mentality of Cuba’s privileged layers, it seemed credible enough to them at the height of the Cold War. If the communists could do something as unthinkable as expropriating the all-powerful US corporations in Cuba, they could do anything. There were even rumours that the children would be ground into canned sausages and sent to the Soviet Union in exchange for Soviet oil!

The irony is that the charge the CIA fabricated against Cuba was, in fact, what the US was working towards: taking children away from their parents and making them wards of a quasi-governmental organisation, the CIA’s Catholic Charities operation.

Many Peter Pan children were taken in by Cuban relatives or friends, others by well-meaning US couples. Others were warehoused in places that can only be described as concentration camps, the most notorious of which was Matacumbe in south Florida.

Freedom to emigrate

Operation Peter Pan was the beginning of the Cuban Revolution's struggle to force the US to facilitate the emigration of people from Cuba to the US.

In 1965 or so, "someone" in Miami announced they would take a boat to Cuba to pick up relatives whose children were in the US. The revolutionary government agreed and designated the port of Camarioca for the pick-ups.

That is how the Johnson administration was forced to negotiate with Cuba, and out of that negotiation came the so-called freedom flights, which lasted into the early 1970s. Two or three times a week, the US government chartered aeroplanes to Cuba to bring to Miami parents, and eventually other relatives, of Cubans already in the US.

It is worth thinking about what Castro did. By 1965, the revolution was fairly consolidated. The bandit bands in some rural areas and the urban CIA networks had been rolled up. The opponents of the revolution had been crushed and those who were disaffected were under the watchful eye of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution and an ever more efficient intelligence service.

Under those circumstances, and given the US attitude, the revolution could well have decided to force these tens of thousands of doctors, technicians, professionals, administrators and so on to stay and work for the revolution. Instead, Castro used all his political skill to outwit Johnson and force open the door to the US so that the families of all these people who hated the revolution could be reunited and could plot against it with impunity from Miami.

At a time when others were building Berlin Walls and barbed wire fences to prevent people from leaving, Cuba was fighting so that its dissidents could walk out the door. This is the policy Cuba has always followed.

In 1973, the US unilaterally suspended the flights and then, under the Carter administration, it lifted many of the prohibitions on trips to Cuba. Thousands of Cubans from Miami suddenly swarmed over the island with stories about how great life was in the US.

As the years went by, pressure from people who wanted to emigrate mounted and, although the two countries exchanged "interest sections" (low level diplomatic missions), the US issued only a couple of hundred visas a year, instead of the 20,000 allowed by law.

This led to incidents where people who were not dissidents or political activists,

but mostly disaffected young men, would crash into embassies — literally, for example with a hijacked truck — and demand asylum. Cuba warned the Latin American missions that what they were doing by granting asylum was to encourage these attacks, but to no avail.

Finally, in a bus-ramming of the Peruvian embassy, a young Cuban guard was killed. The revolutionary government withdrew its protective cordon around the embassy and soon it was overrun with more than a thousand would-be émigrés.

The stand-off lasted for days. Peru begged the Cuban government to allow it to fly these people out and restore the guards around the embassy. The US government mounted a huge propaganda campaign against Cuba, which made it clear that it was Washington, not Lima, behind the provocation.

Hundreds of thousands of people in Cuba expressed their outrage at the CIA-sponsored embassy crashing by holding “Marches of the fighting people”.

Then someone in Miami remembered the Camarioca boat-lift, and announced that they would take a boat and offer to pick up the embassy people. The Cuban government said: Fine, if that’s why you’re coming, we’ve got no objection to you picking up not just the people at the embassy, but anyone else who wants to go. The storm Washington had provoked inevitably wound up hitting its shores. The Mariel boat-lift began.

By the end, more than 100,000 people had left Cuba. The US put an end to the boat-lift by threatening confiscation of boats used in further operations, and went back to granting only a few hundred visas a year to people in Cuba.

‘Rafters’

In the early 1990s, under the impact of the economic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the pressure to emigrate from Cuba grew again. The new form this took was the hijacking of boats.

Cuba pleaded with the US government not to accept violent hijackers, or at least to punish them once ashore. Washington haughtily ignored the Cuban pleas, instead hailing every new arrival to create even more incidents.

Inevitably, a Cuban border patrol guard was killed and the revolutionary government reacted as it had in the case of the Peruvian embassy. The government announced that it would no longer try to prevent individuals from building rafts to get to the US, thereby setting off the “rafter” crisis.

This time, because the rafts were being built in Cuba by Cubans, there was no practical way for the US to put an end to the wave of emigration except by coming to an agreement with the Cuban government.

Cuba sought two essential goals in the negotiation. The first was to get the US to stop encouraging illegal emigration, to stop granting legal status to those who made it to Florida illegally. The second was to get the US to facilitate large-scale, legal emigration. Cuba largely succeeded on both counts.

First, the US agreed to turn back all illegal immigrants caught at sea. (By and large, rafters did not count on making it to Florida, only to the limit of Cuba's territorial waters where a US Coast Guard cutter could pick them up, having been notified by relatives or friends in Miami of the projected date of the voyage).

The US agreed to issue the legal maximum number of visas, 20,000, every year, and even found a loophole to double that figure for the first couple of years, holding a lottery if not enough people with close relatives in the US applied.

That accord has come under increasing strain in the past year due to the emergence of organised smuggling and changes in US practices. The smugglers are often those involved in the drug trade. They typically charge several thousand dollars a head and use very fast speedboats. The goal now is to get the émigrés to dry land in Florida, because under a new US policy, those who make it to dry land can stay, but those caught in even a few inches of water on the beach are deported. This is commonly known as the "wet foot/dry foot" policy, the latest reinterpretation of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act.

This new element led to highly publicised clashes on the high seas and near shore between the smugglers and the Coast Guard. After an incident in 1999, in which Coast Guard personnel capsized a boat, causing several people to drown within range of TV cameras, the Coast Guard seems to have largely abandoned its interdiction efforts.

At the same time, the US has cut back the issuing of residence visas from 40,000 to 20,000. Because those with close relatives in the US get preference, the number of visas now available to others is relatively small.

That's why the right-wing émigré groups in Miami seized on Elián's case and transformed the boy into a poster child for illegal immigration. That's the reason for the highly publicised birthday party, the trip to Disney World, the shower of gifts, including the heavy gold chain Elián is made to wear, an appropriate symbol of his enslavement.

Camarioca, Mariel and the rafter crisis which led to the current immigration accords represent major battles waged by the revolution to force the US to accept responsibility for the results of its policy of constantly encouraging emigration. Under the current accords, the US is committed to granting at least 20,000 visas for permanent residency a year, and to discouraging illegal immigration by sending those who try to cross by boat back to Cuba.

This is a distasteful issue for many people sympathetic to Cuba who do not know the facts. Given the constant barrage of imperialist propaganda, it is hard to explain to people that it is the Cuban government that has fought for the right of Cubans to emigrate and the US government that has stood in the way. Everyone has seen the pictures of the rafts, and a picture is worth a thousand words. It is our job to tell people that every one of those words is a lie.

As to why so many people would want to emigrate, the real wonder is that so many choose to stay. In addition to the fact that some people are disaffected with the revolution, there simply is no question that the US has a vastly higher standard of living.

Even without the powerful magnet of full legal status, there are millions of undocumented immigrants from Mexico, the Dominican Republic and other Latin American countries in the US. If the US were to treat other immigrants as it does Cubans, immediately giving them full legal status, the number of émigrés would be in the tens of millions overnight. ■

2. ‘Cuba will neither negotiate nor sell out its revolution’

FEDERICO MAYOR: With China, Vietnam and North Korea, Cuba is considered the last bulwark of socialism. Yet, 10 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, does the word “socialism” make sense any more?

FIDEL CASTRO: Today I am more convinced than ever that it makes a great deal of sense.

What happened 10 years ago was the naive and unwitting destruction of a great social-historical process that needed to be improved, but not destroyed. This had not been achieved by Hitler’s hordes, not even by killing over 20 million Soviets and devastating half of the country. The world was left under the aegis of a single superpower, which had not contributed even five per cent of the sacrifices made by the Soviets in the fight against fascism.

In Cuba, we have a united country and a party that guides but does not nominate or elect. The people, gathered in open assemblies, put up candidates, nominate and elect delegates from 14,686 districts; these are the foundation of our electoral system. They make up the assemblies of their respective municipalities, and nominate candidates to the provincial and national assemblies, the highest bodies of state power at those levels. The delegates, who are chosen through a secret ballot, must receive over 50% of the valid votes in their corresponding jurisdictions.

Although voting is not compulsory, over 95% of eligible voters take part in these elections. Many people in the world have not even bothered to look into these facts.

The United States, such a vocal advocate of multi-party systems, has two parties that are so perfectly similar in their methods, objectives and goals that they have

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practically created the most perfect one-party system in the world. Over 50% of the people in that “democratic country” do not even cast a vote, and the team that manages to raise the most funds often wins with the votes of only 25% of the electorate. The political system is undermined by disputes, vanity and personal ambition or by interest groups operating within the established economic and social model and there is no alternative for a change in the system.

When the small English-speaking nations of the Caribbean achieved independence, they put into place a more efficient parliamentary system where the ruling party remains in power as long as it enjoys consensus. This is much more stable than the presidential regime imposed to the rest of Latin America, which copied the US model. And, nothing has changed in almost two centuries.

Under capitalism, it is the large national and international companies that actually govern, even in the most highly industrialised nations. It is they who make the decisions on investment and development. It is they who are responsible for material production, essential economic services, and a large part of social services. The state simply collects taxes and then distributes and spends them. In many of these countries, the entire government could go on vacation and nobody would even notice.

The developed capitalist system, which later gave rise to modern imperialism, has finally imposed a neoliberal and globalised order that is simply unsustainable. It has created a world of speculation where fictitious wealth and stocks have been created that have nothing to do with actual production, as well as enormous personal fortunes, some of which exceed the gross domestic product of dozens of poor countries. No need to add the plundering and squandering of the world's natural resources and the miserable lives of billions of people. There is nothing this system can offer humanity. It can only lead to its own self-destruction and perhaps along with it to the destruction of the natural conditions that sustain human life on this planet.

The end of history, as predicted by a few euphoric dreamers, is not here yet. Perhaps it is actually just beginning.

FM: Forty-one years after the revolution, and despite all of the difficulties it has had to confront, the regime that you established has endured. What could be the reason for this longevity?

FC: The tireless struggle and work alongside the people and for the people. The fact that we have settled for convictions and acted accordingly; that we believe in humankind and in being our country's slaves and not its masters. We believe in building upon solid principles, in seeking out and producing solutions, even in apparently impossible and unreal conditions; in preserving the honesty of those with the highest political and

administrative responsibilities, that is, in transforming politics into a priesthood. This could be a partial answer to your question, setting aside many other elements particularly related to our country and this historical era.

Of course, everybody thought that Cuba would not survive the collapse of the socialist bloc and the USSR. One could certainly wonder how it was possible to withstand a double blockade and the economic and political warfare unleashed against our country by the mightiest power ever, without the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, without credits. However, we managed to achieve this feat. At a summit meeting recently held in Havana, I somewhat ironically said to our guests that it had been possible because we had the privilege of not being IMF members.

There were times when we were swimming in a sea of circulating money. Our national currency experienced an extraordinary devaluation, and the budget deficit reached 35% of our gross domestic product. I could see intelligent visitors almost faint from shock. Our peso, the national currency, dropped to a value of 150 to the dollar in 1994. In spite of this, we did not close down a single health care centre, a single school or daycare centre, a single university, or a single sports facility. Nobody was fired and left on his own without employment or social security, even when fuel and raw materials were most scarce. There was not even a trace of the customary and hideous shock policies so highly recommended by the Western financial institutions.

Every measure adopted to confront the terrible blow was discussed not only in the National Assembly, but also in hundreds of thousands of assemblies held in factories, centres of production and services, trade unions, universities, secondary schools and farmers', women's and neighbours' organisations as well as other social groups. What little was available, we distributed as equitably as possible. Pessimism was overcome both inside the country and outside.

During those critical years, the number of doctors was doubled, and the quality of education was improved. The value of the Cuban peso increased sevenfold, from 150 to the dollar to 20 to the dollar, between 1994 and 1998, and has since remained consistently stable. Not a single dollar fled the country. We acquired experience and efficiency on a par with the immense challenge facing us. Although we have still not reached the production and consumption levels we had before the demise of socialism in Europe, we have gradually recovered at a steady and visible pace. Our education, health and social security rates, as well as many other social features, which were the pride of our country, have been preserved, and some have even been improved.

The great hero in this feat has been the people, who have made tremendous sacrifices and offered immense trust. It was the fruit of justice and of the ideas sowed throughout over 30 years of revolution. This genuine miracle would have been

impossible without unity and without socialism.

FM: In view of the vast movement towards globalisation taking place worldwide, would it not perhaps be advisable to open up more of the Cuban economy to the rest of the world?

FC: We have opened up the economy to the extent that it has been possible and necessary. We have not gone for the same insanity and follies as in other places, where the recommendations of European and American experts have been followed as if they were Biblical prophets. We have not been driven by the insanity of privatisation, and much less by that of confiscating state property to take it over ourselves or hand it out as gifts to relatives or friends. This happened, as we all know, in both former socialist countries and in others that never were socialist, under the pious, tolerant and complicit cover of the neoliberal philosophy that has become a universal pandemic. The West is well aware of where the money is deposited and what has happened to the embezzled or stolen funds, but nobody has said a word about it.

We have not attempted to commit the folly of adapting Cuba to the chaotic world of today and its philosophy. What we have done is to adapt those realities to our own, while fighting alongside many other countries of the so-called Third World for our right to development and survival. This might perhaps be the way for our former colonies to help the minority of very wealthy countries, most of them former colonial powers, to save themselves as well.

FM: Nobody questions Cuba's social and cultural achievements. However, going back to my previous question, would these achievements not be better served by an increase in exchange with the outside world?

FC: It is true that, as you say, we have achieved major social advances that can hardly be denied. There is schooling for all of our children, and no illiteracy. The development of our universities is considerable. We have numerous research centres that carry out important high-quality work. Every child is given 13 vaccines, almost all of them produced in our own country, as is the case with most medicines used. At the same time, thousands of our doctors are providing their services, free of charge, in remote and impoverished areas of Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa as part of comprehensive health care programs. This is possible because we have plenty of human capital.

We have invited the most developed countries to cooperate by sending medications. We are also granting thousands of scholarships to young Third World people to study medicine and other specialties in our universities. In every African country participating

in the comprehensive health care programs, we are helping to establish schools that can eventually train the hundreds of thousands of doctors they need.

No one could imagine what a small Third World country with extremely limited resources could achieve when a true spirit of solidarity prevails. As to your question, there is no doubt that the efforts undertaken by our country could be boosted by an increase in the exchange with the outside world, to the benefit of both our own homeland and other nations.

FM: The demise of the USSR suddenly deprived Cuba of precious aid. In your opinion, what was the United States' purpose in maintaining the embargo despite the end of the East-West confrontation? Did they hope to influence your form of government?

FC: They were not trying to influence the revolution but to destroy it. Just as the Senate in ancient Rome proclaimed the destruction of Carthage in the times of Hannibal, the US administrations' obsessively pursued motto has been: Cuba must be destroyed.

The demise of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the European socialist bloc did not take us completely by surprise. We had even warned our people of this possibility long before. The stupid mistakes and shameful concessions constantly made to their longstanding enemy clearly pointed to what was coming.

In economic terms, Cuba sustained terrible damage. The price we were paid for our sugar was not that prevailing in the unfair world market. We had obtained a preferential price, like that applied by the United States and Europe to imports of this commodity. Supplies of fuel, food, raw material and parts for machinery and factories were abruptly and almost completely cut off. The daily intake of calories dropped from 3000 to 1900, and that of protein from 80 to 50 grams. Some people could not put up with the difficulties but the immense majority confronted the hardships with remarkable courage, honour and determination.

As I said earlier, we managed to maintain important achievements, and some were even improved. Infant mortality was reduced by 40% in this period, and 30,000 new medical doctors with excellent training went to work in our communities. In the field of sports, our athletes continued to occupy a place of honor among the world's best, with the highest number of gold medals per capita in the Olympics, despite the tremendous pressure by the United States and other wealthy countries in an attempt to entice Cuban scientists, outstanding professionals and athletes.

FM: The United States is not the only country imposing all sorts of conditions on your country. The European Union has also tried to introduce a "democracy clause"

in European-Cuban trade relations. What do you think of this action?

FC: It is significant that the European Union shows much less “concern” about other countries, doubtlessly because they are of a greater economic interest than we could ever be. In any case, all conditioning becomes unacceptable when the inalienable principles of our homeland are involved. The political organisation adopted by a sovereign nation cannot be subjected to conditions. Cuba will neither negotiate nor sell out its revolution, which has cost the blood and the sacrifice of many of its sons and daughters.

On the other hand, it all depends on what is meant by “democracy clause”. How many so-called “democratic” states are up to their necks in debt? How many of them allow up to 30% of the population to live in conditions of extreme poverty? Why should countries with tens of thousands of children wandering the streets and countless numbers of illiterate people be treated better than we are? We do not see why this should be so. Cuba will never accept political conditions from the European Union, and much less from the United States. This should be definitely understood.

We do not argue about whether the countries in Europe are monarchies or republics, or whether power is held by conservatives or social democrats, advocates or adversaries of an idyllic third option; swings to the left, to the centre or to the right; supporters or detractors of the so-called “welfare state” used as a palliative for the incurable disease of unemployment. We do not feel the urge to express our views on the actions of the skinheads and the upsurge of neo-Nazi tendencies, although we have our own idea about these and many other issues; but we do not introduce revolutionary clauses in our relations with Europe. We rather hope the Europeans will work things out by themselves.

FM: Since the days of McCarthyism, Washington has tended to consider that the only regimes that are harmful and must be eliminated are the communist regimes. But the White House has tolerated, without blinking, the likes of Somoza, Trujillo, Duvalier and others. What are your thoughts on this “double-standard” approach?

FC: It would be better not to delve into the hypocrisy and indecency of that policy. It would take many hours and lengthy historical references. The market will dry up some day for the industry of lies; it is drying up already. If you really delve into the truth, you will realise that the political conception of imperialism, as well as the neoliberal economic order and globalisation process imposed on the world, is orphaned and defenseless when it comes to ideas and ethics. It is in this field that the main struggle of our times will be decided. And the final result of this battle, with no possible alternative, will be on the side of truth, and thus on the side of humanity.

FM: How far can the privatisation process go in Cuba? As for the “dollarisation” of the economy, is it not an insult to both socialism and the country’s monetary sovereignty?

FC: I have already said that privatisation should be carried out with much common sense and wisdom, avoiding irrational actions. You need to make a clear distinction between different kinds of work. Some tasks are highly individual and often manual and craft-like; their large-scale production and technology are not fundamental. However, there are investments that require capital, technology and markets, in which associations with foreign companies can be highly advisable. The potential oil deposits in the 110,000 square kilometers of the Gulf of Mexico belonging to Cuba could not be explored or exploited by our country without technology and capital from abroad.

On the other hand, within the country, when it comes to obtaining the highest quality and yield in special crops like tobacco — the work of dedicated and almost fanatical lovers of this type of farming, which should be manual and carried out on small plots of land — no machine or big company could replace the individual work. Those people with these special qualities are given the land they need, free of charge, in order to farm it on their own. But, it would be absurd to do the same with huge sugar cane plantations that are highly mechanised.

In the Cuban farming sector, there are different forms of ownership: individual property, cooperatives and various forms of cooperated production. Also procurement and marketing state enterprises have successfully developed.

At the same time, in a wide range of economic sectors, there are production and marketing associations with foreign companies that work perfectly well.

When it comes to privatisation, one should not be simplistic. The general principle in Cuba is that nothing that is advisable and possible to preserve as the property of all of the people or of a collective of workers will be privatised.

Our ideology and our preference is socialist, which bears no relation whatsoever to the selfishness, privileges and inequalities of capitalist society. In our homeland, nothing will pass into the hands of a high-ranking official, and nothing will be given away to accomplices and friends. Nothing that can be efficiently exploited for the benefit of our society will pass into the hands of either Cuban or foreign individuals. At the same time, I can assure you that the safest investments in the world are those authorised in Cuba, which are protected by law and by the country’s honour.

As to the reference you made to the dollarisation of the economy, I should say two things. Firstly, the world economy is currently dollarised. After Bretton Woods, the United States acquired the privilege of issuing the reserve currency of the world economy. Secondly, there is a national currency in Cuba that is not ruled in any way by

the International Monetary Fund. As I noted earlier, that currency has experienced a sevenfold increase in value, and in record time. There is no flight of capital.

At the same time, a convertible peso has been established, on a par with the dollar, whose free circulation was simply an unavoidable need, not the result of an economic conception. I believe that in the future it will never be necessary again to ban the possession of dollars or other foreign currencies, but its free circulation for the payment of many goods and services will only last for as long as the interests of the revolution make it advisable. Therefore, we are not concerned about the famous phrase "the dollarisation of the economy". We know very well what we are doing.

FM: Fidel, you publicly said to me in Havana in 1997: "Federico, today there is no need for revolutions. As of now, the struggle will be for better sharing. Our objective is no longer the class struggle but the rapprochement of the classes within the framework of just and peaceful coexistence." Three years later, do you still think the same way?

FC: I am not sure that I ever made those exact comments. It might be a misunderstanding associated with voice inflection or interpretation, because some of those points are quite distant from my ideas.

I recently attended an international economists' meeting in Havana. Among the participants there were representatives of financially distressed countries where debt servicing accounts for over 40% of budget spending. Previous and acting governments acquired such debts "very democratically". There is clearly a great sense of helplessness in the face of the challenges posed by an inevitable globalisation process marked so far by the fatal sign of neoliberalism. At that meeting, the representatives of the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank defended their points of view with complete freedom, but for many of those present the conclusions were very clear regarding the unsustainable nature of the prevailing economic order.

It is not possible to continue along the path that widens the gap between the poor and the rich countries and produces increasingly serious social inequalities within them all. At the moment, Latin American and Caribbean integration is fundamental. It is only by joining together that we can negotiate our role in this hemisphere and the same applies to the Third World countries vis-à-vis the powerful and insatiable club of the wealthy. I have often noted that such integration and joining of forces cannot wait for profound social changes or social revolutions to take place within these individual countries.

I have also said that because the current world economic order is unsustainable, it faces the very real danger of a catastrophic collapse, infinitely worse than the disaster

and prolonged crisis set off in 1929 by the crash of the US stock market, where stocks had been inflated beyond sustainable levels. Not even the enthusiastic and highly experienced Alan Greenspan, chairperson of the US Federal Reserve — whose sleepless eyes do not stray for a minute from the statistical data emanating from the uncontrollable and unpredictable roulette wheel that is the speculative system, in which 50% of US families have placed their bets and invested their savings — would dare to claim that this danger does not exist. The remedy to prevent it has not been invented, nor can it be invented within such a system.

I tirelessly insist on the need for people to open their eyes to these realities. A collapse could occur before the people are prepared for it. The changes will not spring forth from anyone's head, but the heads must be prepared for these inevitable changes, which will take on a wide variety of forms and follow a wide variety of paths. From my point of view, the changes will fundamentally result from the action of the masses, which nothing would succeed in holding back.

Nevertheless, nothing will be easy. The blindness, superficiality and irresponsibility of the so-called political class will make the road more difficult, but not impregnable.

FM: Is there any hope for the poor to achieve a better life in the next 20 years?

FC: Humanity is beginning to gain awareness. Look at what happened in Seattle and in Davos.

People frequently talk about the horrors of the holocaust and the genocide that have taken place throughout the century, but they seem to forget that every year, as a result of the economic order we have been discussing here, tens of millions of people starve to death or die of preventable diseases. They can wield statistics of apparently positive growth but in the end things remain the same or even worsen in the Third World countries. Growth often rests on the accumulation of consumer goods that contribute nothing to true development and a better distribution of wealth. The truth is that after several decades of neoliberalism, the rich are becoming increasingly richer while the poor are both more numerous and increasingly poorer.

FM: At the recent summit of the Group of 77 held in April in Havana, you put forward a series of ideas to reform the international order. Could you repeat those proposals?

FC: At the summit, I advocated the cancellation of the least developed countries' external debt and considerable debt relief for many others. I also spoke out for the removal of the International Monetary Fund. It is time that the Third World countries demand to be freed from a mechanism that has not ensured the stability of the world

economy. In general, I censured the fatal impact of the hypocritical neoliberal policies on every underdeveloped country, particularly the Latin American and Caribbean countries. I said that another Nuremberg trial was needed to pass sentence on the genocide committed by the current world economic order.

FM: That is a bit of an overstatement!

FC: Perhaps not. It might be a bit of an understatement. For the sake of precision, I shall quote a few paragraphs from my closing speech at the South Summit:

“People used to talk about apartheid in Africa; today we could talk about apartheid throughout the world, where over four billion people are deprived of the most basic rights of all human beings: the right to life, to health, to education, to clean drinking water, to food, to housing, to employment, to hope for their future and the future of their children. At the present pace, we will soon be deprived even of the air we breathe, increasingly poisoned by the wasteful consumer societies that pollute the elements essential for life and destroy human habitat ...

“The wealthy world tries to forget that the sources of underdevelopment and poverty were slavery, colonialism and the brutal exploitation and plunder to which our countries were subjected for centuries. They look upon us as inferior nations. They attribute the poverty we suffer to the inability of Africans, Asians, Caribbean and Latin Americans, in other words, of black-skinned, yellow-skinned, indigenous and mixed-race peoples, to achieve any degree of development, or even to govern ourselves ...

“I am firmly convinced that the current economic order imposed by the wealthy countries is not only cruel, unfair, inhuman and contrary to the inevitable course of history, but is also inherently racist. It reflects racist conceptions like those that once inspired the Nazi holocaust and concentration camps in Europe, mirrored today in the so-called refugee camps in the Third World, which actually serve to concentrate the effects of poverty, hunger and violence. These are the same racist conceptions that inspired the obnoxious system of apartheid in Africa ...

“We are fighting for the most sacred rights of the poor countries; but we are also fighting for the salvation of a First World incapable of preserving the existence of the human species, of governing itself — overwhelmed by contradictions and self-serving interests — and much less of governing the world, whose leadership must be democratically shared. We are fighting — it could almost be demonstrated mathematically — to preserve life on our planet.”

In summary, Federico: it is urgent that we fight for our survival, the survival of all countries, both rich and poor, because we are all in the same boat. In this regard, I

made a very concrete proposal at the Summit concerning a delicate and complex issue: I asked the Third World oil-exporting countries to grant preferential prices to the least developed countries, similar to what was done in the San José Pact, signed 20 years ago by Venezuela and Mexico, which allows Central American and Caribbean countries to buy oil on more lenient terms.

FM: Is your opinion about the United Nations as severe?

FC: Not at all, although I consider its structure an anachronism. After 55 years of existence, it is essential to reestablish the organisation. The United Nations should be worthy of its name: the members should be truly united by genuinely humane and far-reaching objectives. All of the member countries, big and small, developed and underdeveloped, should have the real possibility of making their voices heard. The UN should constitute a great meeting place, where all views can be expressed and discussed. It should operate on truly democratic bases. It is important for groups like the G-77 and the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries to act within the United Nations system.

The United Nations structure should be transformed, so that the organisation can play a major role in today's world. Social development, for example, is presently one of the most dramatically urgent needs in the Third World, and the mission of the World Bank is not to contribute funds to resolve financial crises but rather to promote social development. The absence of such development is the greatest tragedy of our times.

FM: Looking at a world map, what changes would you like to make?

FC: I would be thinking of a world worthy of the human species, without hyper-wealthy and wasteful nations, on the one hand, and countless countries mired in extreme poverty, on the other; a world in which all identities and cultures were preserved, a world with justice and solidarity; a world without plundering, oppression or wars, where science and technology were at the service of humankind; a world where nature was protected and the great throng of people living on the planet today could survive, grow and enjoy the spiritual and material wealth that talent and labour could create.

No need to ask: I dream of a world that the capitalist philosophy will never make possible.

FM: I would now like to address a rather sensitive issue: that of freedom of expression and thought. The Cuban regime is regularly attacked for its repressive policy with

regard to...

FC: I can guess what you were going to say. First, I wonder if it is fair to discuss freedom of expression and thought in a region where the immense majority of the people are either totally or functionally illiterate; it sounds like a cruel joke, but it is worse. Many people in the world not only lack freedom of thought but also the capacity to think, because it has been destroyed. Billions of human beings, including a large percentage of those living in developed societies, are told what brand of soda they should drink, what cigarettes they should smoke, what clothes and shoes they should wear, what they should eat and what brand of food they should buy. Their political ideas are supplied in the same way.

Every year, a trillion dollars is spent on advertising. This rain pours on the helpless masses that are totally deprived of the necessary elements of judgment to formulate an opinion and the knowledge required for meditating and discerning. This has never happened before in the history of humanity. Primitive humans enjoyed greater freedom of thought. José Martí said, "To be educated in order to be free." We would have to add a dictum: freedom is impossible without culture. Education and culture are what the revolution has most abundantly offered to our people, much more so than in a large number of the developed countries.

Living in a consumer society does not necessarily make people educated. It is amazing, sometimes, how their knowledge can be superficial and simplistic. Cuba has raised the average educational level of its people to ninth grade, and this is just the beginning. In 10 years, their average cultural level will be that of a university graduate; and that will be comprehensive, not simplistic knowledge. All of the necessary conditions have been created. No one can prevent our people from achieving the goal of being the most cultivated, in addition to having a profound political culture that is neither dogmatic nor sectarian; a political culture that is severely lacking in many of the world's wealthiest nations. We will place at the service of this lofty goal the great technologies created by humankind, while avoiding commercial advertising.

It would perhaps be better to wait a while before talking about true freedom of expression and thought because that can never be reconciled with a brutal economic and social capitalist system that fails to respect culture, solidarity and ethics.

FM: For several years now, we have seen an embryo of opposition being born on the island; that is, dissident groups are beginning to organise. This being the case, is it not perhaps time for the regime to open up to political pluralism?

FC: The true opposition emerged when the most profound social revolution was made in the continent amidst the Cold War and only 90 miles from the United States,

which has organised and directed it for over 40 years.

The revolution did away with centuries of privilege and affected the interests of the wealthiest and most influential sectors of Cuban society; it also affected the large agricultural, mining, industrial, commercial and service companies that the United States had established in Cuba. Our country has been the target of dirty warfare, mercenary invasions and threats of direct military attacks. We were also on the brink of a nuclear war.

The leader of that enormous counterrevolutionary activity and the economic, political and ideological war that followed was and continues to be the government of the United States of America. The rest is pure fiction, artificially created and always well financed by that superpower, its allies and its lackeys. It is all wrapped up in lies and slander, which constitute the backbone of a system devoid of ideas and ethics in confronting a revolution that has already faced, endured and passed the hardest tests, and a united, combative and politically stronger people.

There will be no such opening. We do not see why we should cooperate with the American strategy.

FM: The majority of your ministers had not been born when the armed revolution triumphed.

FC: That shows that they are young and that the revolution will be around for a while.

FM: What are the dreams of the Cuban people today?

FC: I think there are 11 million dreams.

FM: In what way are they different from the dreams of the previous generation?

FC: Before, they each dreamed of their own happiness, and today, they all dream of happiness for everyone.

FM: Would you not like to link the people more closely to the political decision-making process?

FC: Do you really think that Cuba and the revolution would exist without a maximum degree of participation by the people?

FM: Since the triumph of the revolution, a tenth of the Cuban population has left the island. How do you explain this exodus?

FC: You mentioned figures. I am trying to recall the various migrations and it seems to me that the figures are lower, except if they include those who were born abroad. But

that is not so important.

Before the revolution, the number of visas granted to Cubans was insignificant. When the revolution triumphed, the doors were opened wide. Of the 6000 doctors we had, they took away half, along with a number of university professors and teachers. It was a major extraction of human resources. But, we firmly withstood the blow. No one was prevented from emigrating. It was not we, but rather they who closed the doors on more than one occasion and established quotas for legal emigration.

Their worst crime has been to encourage illegal emigration with the monstrous and murderous Cuban Adjustment Act, by virtue of which any person, regardless of his or her legal background or conduct, who illegally leaves Cuba by any means and arrives in US territory, is given the right to residency in that country. In this way, they have received many criminals, although not all those who do this are criminals, and many people have lost their lives. It was this stupid law, the only one of its kind in the world, created solely for Cubans, that led to the case of the kidnapped boy Elián González, who was not even six years old at the time of the misadventure in which 11 Cubans lost their lives, his mother included.

If the same privileges had been extended to Mexico and the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean throughout almost 35 years, more than half of the people in the United States would be Latin American and Caribbean. Mexico and the United States would not be separated today by a wall much higher than that in Berlin where more would-be emigrants perish every year than those who died in all the years that the other wall existed. Let that privilege be offered in Europe to the people living North and South of the Sahara, and let's see how many emigrate.

It should be said that we have never prohibited emigration from Cuba to the United States, and that 90% of those who have emigrated have done so for economic reasons.

FM: The case of little Elián has inflamed the passions of the Cuban exile community in Miami. What is your opinion of Cuban dissidents, both within the island and in Florida?

FC: I do not see the difference between what you call external and internal dissidents. They are exactly the same thing. They both have the same origin and the same leadership. Both are instruments of the US policy against Cuba, both are pro-imperialist, anti-socialist and in favor of annexation. Those who were promoted as leaders of the so-called Cuban-American National Foundation — an abomination that emerged from the so-called Santa Fe Document, the Republican Party's 1980 political platform with regard to Cuba — were almost without exception former CIA

members or the children of well-known war criminals who had escaped to the United States when the revolution triumphed.

The list of crimes and misdeeds they committed against Cuba is endless, first as individuals recruited during at the time of the Bay of Pigs mercenary invasion, and later as members of the aforementioned Cuban-American mob. One of the goals of Reagan and his team was to have a political surrogate that, supposedly in the name of Cuban representatives, would put forward pieces of legislation or measures related to the blockade and the economic warfare against our homeland. They were granted contracts and privileged economic concessions. They trafficked in everything, including drugs, and amassed huge fortunes. But, one of their most important missions was the inception of a lobby to promote and sponsor allies from the extreme right and the most reactionary people from either of the two parties in Congress in the aggressive policy towards Cuba.

Their arsenal of actions against Cuba included supporting apparently independent terrorist groups to carry out various acts of sabotage against the economy, political crimes, the introduction of pests and biological warfare. They ended up organising their own military apparatus and concocting countless plots to assassinate me whenever I traveled abroad. It was a genuine human hunt, with the full knowledge and tolerance of the US authorities. With the abundant resources available to them, they handed out campaign funds to dozens of lawmakers from both parties, both over and under the table. They managed to put up legislators from their own group and helped to elect others. Official support was unqualified.

It is repugnant to think of everything they have done against our homeland. Their most recent crime was the kidnapping of a child who had not even turned six yet, whom they stole from his legitimate family. As the owners of Florida, they felt they had the right to defy the laws and orders of the federal government itself. They ended up trampling and burning US flags. The enormously stupid misdeed committed in the case of this Cuban boy has been their political Waterloo. It will be very difficult for them to pick up the scattered pieces of the considerable power and political influence they had achieved and to put together something new that will serve them in any way.

The other arm of the American counterrevolutionary strategy is as morally and politically destroyed as they are, that is, the small groupings they have been promoting over the years to create an internal front against the solid and unshakable unity and strength of the revolution. They spur these groups on with funds that arrive by a wide range of means, and support them with all the media within their reach. These groups promote their counterrevolutionary and slanderous campaigns through the subversive radio stations broadcasting out of the United States and the Foundation-controlled

press. They work in close alliance with the Cuban-American mob and are directly coordinated by the staff of the US Interests Section in Havana, by Czech and Polish diplomats and by other officials from the embassies of several countries allied with or subordinated to the United States.

Their essential mission is to obstruct Cuba's diplomatic and economic relations, and to use their provocation to supply publicity material for propaganda and slanderous campaigns aimed at isolating Cuba. In these glorious and heroic years of double blockade and special period, when the survival of our homeland was at stake, the feats achieved by our people will sink them deep down into the swamp of their infamy, and into what is absolutely the most certain and worthy fate for their shameful role: oblivion.

FM: How did you react to the condemnation of Cuba in the UN Human Rights Commission on April 18, 2000, the result of an initiative of the Czech Republic and Poland? You were reproached for violently repressing political dissidents and religious groups...

FC: Regarding the vote in Geneva, it was obviously the case of a new and hypocritical act of US hostility and aggression against Cuba, with the active complicity governments from a few former socialist countries willing to play the American dirty game and the support of their European accomplices which vote as a bloc in Geneva, alongside their powerful ally and boss of the NATO mob.

We did not hesitate to expose this infamous maneuver. Our people condemned it unanimously and we formulated resounding denunciations against those involved in the plot, many of which they have not been able to respond to. The reactions will be increasingly tougher, and the battle against Cuba increasingly difficult.

FM: No one is immortal, neither heads of state nor common men and women. Do you not think that it would be wise to prepare a successor, even if it is only to spare the Cuban people the trauma of a chaotic transition?

FC: I am very much aware that man is mortal but I have never worried about that. In fact, that has been a key factor in my life. When my rebellious nature led me to the dangerous calling of a revolutionary fighter, something that no one forced me into, I also knew that there was very little chance that I could survive for long. I was not a head of state but a very common man. I did not inherit a position, nor am I a king, therefore, I do not need to prepare a successor. In any case, it would never be to prevent the trauma of a chaotic transition. There will be no trauma, nor will there be a need for any kind of transition.

The transition from one social system to another has been taking place for over 40 years. This is not about replacing one man with another.

When a genuine revolution has been consolidated and when ideas and consciousness have begun to bear fruit, no man is indispensable, no matter how important his personal contribution may have been. There is no cult of personality in Cuba. You will never see official photographs, nor streets or parks or schools named after living leaders. The responsibilities are very well shared and the work is distributed among many. A large number of young and already experienced people, together with a smaller group of old revolutionaries, with whom they closely identify, will be the ones who keep the country going. It cannot be overlooked that there is a party here with great prestige and moral authority. So what is there to worry about?

FM: What you are saying is perfectly true. However, precisely by not putting into place right now the individuals and structures, that is, the relief force that can take over when the time comes, do you not think that you are increasing the risk that these social achievements will be questioned?

FC: The relief force, as you have called it, is not only already prepared but it has also been in place and working for quite some time.

FM: Fidel Castro, always the conspirator. Does this image belong to an obsolete past?

FC: On the contrary, it has become such a significant habit of mine that I do not even talk to myself about the most important secret strategies in my revolutionary struggle. I prefer to talk about them on television. ■

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Cuba is generally portrayed by the media in the capitalist world as a repressive “communist dictatorship”. Yet, actual information about Cuba's political and electoral system or its social and economic achievements is practically censored by the same media.

In fact, Cuba is a country with an electoral system with democratic rights not found in the capitalist world; its free health care service and education system are better than in many wealthy First World countries; it has made enormous strides in eliminating racism, sexism and homophobia;

it has outstanding achievements in reversing environmental degradation and alternative energy use; and its economic system stands out from any other Third World nation in providing for the wellbeing of its people.

This collection of articles aims to challenge some popular myths about Cuba by providing some substantive information. It also aims to show that Cuba is not only not the repressive dictatorship that the media would have us believe, but is an impressive, democratic and humane alternative to the rapacious capitalism that the media defend.

Resistance books