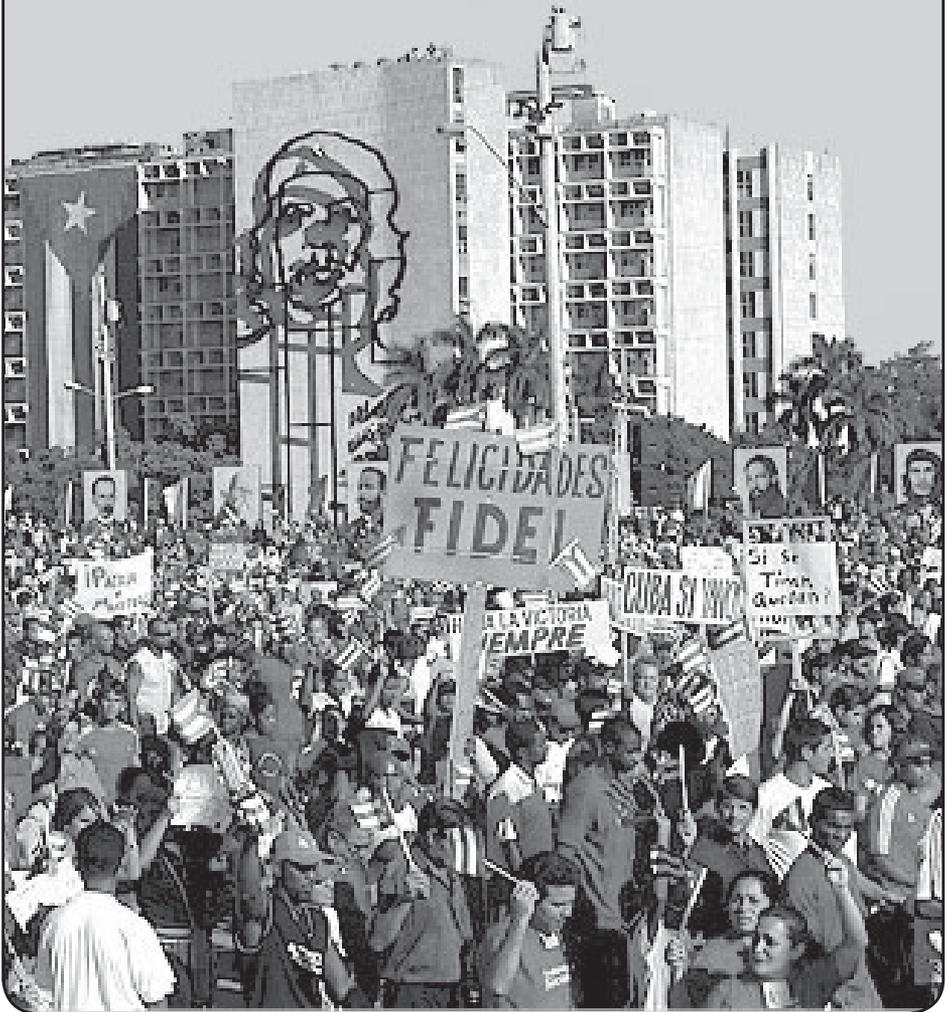


# CUBA

## IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

A Socialist Voice Pamphlet  
by

Fidel Castro • Duroyan Fertl • John Riddell • Phil Cournoyer



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# Socialist Voice

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# **‘My Only Wish Is to Fight as a Soldier in the Battle of Ideas’**

## **A Message to the People of Cuba from Fidel Castro**

*(Granma, February 18, 2008)*

Dear compatriots:

The moment has come to nominate and elect the State Council, its President, its Vice-Presidents and Secretary.

For many years I have occupied the honourable position of President. On February 15, 1976 the Socialist Constitution was approved with the free, direct and secret vote of over 95% of the people with the right to cast a vote. The first National Assembly was established on December 2nd that same year; this elected the State Council and its presidency. Before that, I had been a Prime Minister for almost 18 years. I always had the necessary prerogatives to carry forward the revolutionary work with the support of the overwhelming majority of the people.

There were those overseas who, aware of my critical health condition, thought that my provisional resignation, on July 31, 2006, to the position of President of the State Council, which I left to First Vice-President Raul Castro Ruz, was final. But Raul, who is also minister of the Armed Forces on account of his own personal merits, and the other comrades of the party and state leadership were unwilling to consider me out of public life despite my unstable health condition.

It was an uncomfortable situation for me vis-à-vis an adversary which had done everything possible to get rid of me, and I felt reluctant to comply.

Later, in my necessary retreat, I was able to recover the full command of my mind as well as the possibility for much reading and meditation. I had enough physical strength to write for many hours, which I shared with the corresponding rehabilitation and recovery programs. Basic common sense indicated that such activity was within my reach. On the other hand, when referring to my health I was extremely careful to avoid raising expectations since I felt that an adverse ending would bring traumatic news to our people in the midst of the battle. Thus, my first duty was to prepare our people both politically and psychologically for my absence after so many years of struggle. I kept saying that my recovery “was not without risks.”

My wishes have always been to discharge my duties to my last breath. That’s all I can offer.

To my dearest compatriots, who have recently honoured me so much by electing me a member of the Parliament where so many agreements should be adopted of utmost importance to the destiny of our Revolution, I am saying that I will neither aspire to nor accept, I repeat, I will neither aspire to nor accept the positions of President of the State Council and Commander in Chief.

In short letters addressed to Randy Alonso, Director of the Round Table National TV Program — letters which at my request were made public — I discreetly introduced elements of this message I am writing today, when not even the addressee of such letters was aware of my intention. I trusted Randy, whom I knew very well from his days as a student of journalism. In those days I met almost on a weekly basis with the main representatives of the university students from the provinces at the library of the large house in Kohly where they lived. Today, the entire country is an immense university.

Following are some paragraphs chosen from the letter addressed to Randy on December 17, 2007:

“I strongly believe that the answers to the current problems facing Cuban society, which has, as an average, a twelfth grade of education, almost a million university graduates, and a real possibility for all its citizens to become educated without their being in any way discriminated against, require more variables for each concrete problem than those contained in a chess game. We cannot ignore one single detail; this is not an easy path to take, if the intelligence of a human being in a revolutionary society is to prevail over instinct.

“My elemental duty is not to cling to positions, much less to stand in the way of younger persons, but rather to contribute my own experience and ideas whose modest value comes from the exceptional era that I had the privilege of living in.

“Like Niemeyer, I believe that one has to be consistent right up to the end.”

Letter from January 8, 2008:

“...I am a firm supporter of the united vote (a principle that preserves the unknown merits), which allowed us to avoid the tendency to copy what came to us from countries of the former socialist bloc, including the portrait of the one candidate, as singular as his solidarity towards Cuba. I deeply respect that first attempt at building socialism, thanks to which we were able to continue along the path we had chosen.”

And I reiterated in that letter that “...I never forget that ‘all of the world’s glory fits in a kernel of corn.’”

Therefore, it would be a betrayal to my conscience to accept a responsibility requiring more mobility and dedication than I am physically able to offer. This I say devoid of all drama.

Fortunately, our revolution can still count on cadres from the old guard and others who were very young in the early stages of the process. Some were very young, almost children, when they joined the fight on the mountains and later they have given glory to the country with their heroic perfor-

mance and their internationalist missions. They have the authority and the experience to guarantee the replacement. There is also the intermediate generation which learned together with us the basics of the complex and almost unattainable art of organizing and leading a revolution.

The path will always be difficult and require from everyone's intelligent effort. I distrust the seemingly easy path of apologetics or its antithesis the self-flagellation. We should always be prepared for the worst variable. The principle of being as prudent in success as steady in adversity cannot be forgotten. The adversary to be defeated is extremely strong; however, we have been able to keep it at bay for half a century.

This is not my farewell to you. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of "Reflections by comrade Fidel." It will be just another weapon you can count on. Perhaps my voice will be heard. I shall be careful.

Thank you.

Fidel Castro Ruz

## **Cuba's Revolution Continues**

*(Green Left Weekly, February 29, 2008)*

### **By Duroyan Fertl**

Following the announcement by Fidel Castro on February 19 that he would not stand in the election by Cuba's National Assembly (AN) for the position of president, the Western media coverage has ranged from grudging acknowledgement of Cuba's social gains in the face of 50 years of US aggression, to outrageous claims of "dictatorship" and US government plans for a "transition" in Cuba.

The coverage has also been full of speculation that a new president could open the path to restoration of capitalism in Cuba, usually presented as "bringing democracy," via a series of "reforms."

On February 24, the newly elected 614-member AN voted to promote Raul Castro to the position of Cuban president. Fidel, whose image as the quintessential bearded guerrilla came to symbolise Cuba's revolution, led the revolution since the overthrow of the brutal US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

Fidel had been president of the Caribbean island since 1976. He remains an elected member of the AN, and first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP). Despite Cuba's long-standing policy of promoting youthful leadership at different level of government, the Western media have responded to the transition from Fidel as president, begun in 2006, like vultures circling.

The media's flawed approach reduces the Cuban Revolution to a one-man

show, with the Cuban people passive spectators or long-suffering victims. This ignores the actual history of the Cuban Revolution — made and maintained despite bitter hostility from, and a crippling 46-year-long economic blockade imposed by, the world’s most powerful nation just 90 miles away.

Cuba estimates the blockade has cost it US\$89 billion. The UN General Assembly has voted every year for the last 15 years for the US to end its blockade.

It also ignores the actual democratic processes taking place in Cuba, and is a continuation of the propaganda war by the US and corporate interests against the island.

The Cuban Revolution remains an inspiration to millions of people in the Third World for its anti-imperialist struggle and social gains, both of which it has sought to extend globally.

Cuba has sent tens of thousands of volunteer doctors to provide free health care in dozens of countries — currently operating in 68 — while offering free education in Cuba for thousands of students from poor backgrounds globally, including from the US.

One of Cuba’s most famous internationalist ventures was the role of Cuban troops fighting in Angola during the 1970s and ’80s against the invading South African forces, which culminated in a historic defeat for the Apartheid regime that was crucial to its demise.

Speaking in Havana in July 1991, the recently freed Nelson Mandela called the Cuban-led victory for South African forces in Angola a “milestone in the history of the struggle for southern African liberation.”

He explained:

“The Cuban internationalists have made a contribution to African independence, freedom and justice unparalleled for its principled and selfless character. We in Africa are used to being victims of countries wanting to carve up our territory or subvert our sovereignty. It is unparalleled in African history to have another people rise to the defence of one of us.

“The defeat of the Apartheid army was an inspiration to the struggling people in South Africa! Without the defeat ... our organisations would not have been unbanned! The defeat of the racist army ... has made it possible for me to be here today!”

In recent times, alongside Venezuela, Cuba has initiated “Mission Miracle,” a free program that has restored eyesight to more than a million people from across the Americas, including the US.

Before the revolution, Cuba was the playground of the US rich, renowned for its casinos, corruption, prostitution and poverty. Today, Cuba boasts universal and free health and education systems, and has eradicated illiteracy.

Despite its gains, the impoverished island continues to face massive obstacles.

The collapse of its major trading partner, the Soviet Union, in the early 1990s brought a severe economic crisis. The US responded by tightening the blockade — heightening the Cuban people's hardship — and increasing funding to counter-revolutionary forces.

The “Special Period,” as this time of crisis was known, brought with it the return of inequality and other social ills, such as prostitution, eradicated by the revolution. Yet Cuba managed to resist the pressure from the US and survive without surrendering some of its most important social gains.

The depths of that crisis are behind Cuba, with its economy growing 7.5% in 2007, well above the Latin American average.

One of the positive side effects of the Special Period was that, as Cuba could no longer import chemical pesticides and fertilisers, it was forced to develop an organic, environmentally sustainable agricultural system, which now constitutes 95% of its output. Havana, Cuba's capital, produces most of its food in farms and permaculture gardens located within the city limits.

When the World Wildlife Fund released their 2007 Living Planet report, only one country — Cuba — met the requirements for sustainable development.

Cuba's achievements have only been possible because the revolution has broken the hold of corporate interests over its economy and political system, and created an economy planned according to the principle of human need, not private profit.

The revolution has been deeply democratic from the outset, contrary to the widely-accepted myth that the revolution was made by only a small band of guerrillas. In fact, crucial to the overthrow of Batista's dictatorship was an urban mass movement that organised workers, students, professionals and the unemployed in towns and cities, and that ensured the toppling of Batista with a general strike in the first week of 1959.

At critical moments in the revolution — such as during the Special Period — the Cuban people have engaged in vigorous public debate unprecedented by Western standards.

Such a period of debate opened up again about a year ago, in order to determine Cuba's future course and tackle some of the significant problems facing the country that are causing widespread frustration.

More than 215,687 public meetings have been held across the country, in workplaces, communities and universities, resulting in more than 1.3 million grassroots proposals being lodged in the lead-up to national elections, that were held on January 20.

While Cuban democracy is far from perfect, which is not surprising for such a besieged country, it is also far from the dictatorship the media make it to be.

While the CCP remains the only legal party in Cuba, it is forbidden from participating in elections. All elected representatives in Cuba — including the president and ministers — can be recalled at any time by their local

electorates. Women now make up over 43% of the legislature, an increase of 7%, and the proportion of those aged between 18 and 30 has increased from 23% to 36%.

In his closing speech to the AN on February 24, President Raul Castro addressed Cuba's approach to expressions of dissent and disagreement: "We do not deny [opponents of the government] right to expression, provided they do it with respect for the law."

Raul argued: "We shall not avoid listening to everyone's honest opinion, which is very useful and necessary simply because of the sometimes ridiculous noise made every time a citizen of our country says something that the very noise makers would pay no attention to if they heard it anywhere else on the planet."

"The revolution is the work of free men and women and it has been permanently open to debate," he said.

Some of the most strident criticism in recent times has come from Cuba's communist youth organisation, in particular its paper *Juventud Rebelde*, which has cited numerous examples of corruption, inefficiency and social conservatism that are holding the country back.

Raul argued that while Cuban democracy is "participatory as few others are," it is not perfect, and emphasised the need for debate to improve it, stating that the "best solutions can come from a profound exchange of differing opinions, if such an exchange is guided by sensible purposes and the views are uttered with responsibility."

He also announced the reorganisation of the state apparatus, with "a lower number of institutions under the central administration of the state and a better distribution of their functions."

Raul criticised "the tendency to apply the same recipe everywhere," which led to distortions, and argued that in "many respects, local initiative can be effective and viable."

"In summary, our government's work must be more efficient."

While there is a wide-ranging debate about the direction of the revolution — including what type of market measures it may be necessary to introduce to overcome some of the problems that inevitably affect an isolated and impoverished island — those looking for signs of a "transition" away from socialism are likely to be disappointed.

The reform process under way, which is stimulating a genuine debate whose outcome is not predetermined, is designed to strengthen socialism in Cuba, through greater democratic control and improved productivity.

In concluding his defence speech at the end of his trial by the Batista regime following a failed 1953 uprising, Castro famously declared: "Condemn me, it doesn't matter. History will absolve me." In the face of continued US aggression, the Cuban Revolution is continuing its struggle to prove those words true.

## Cuba Stands Firm!

*(Socialist Voice, December 20, 2006)*

**By John Riddell**

Thousands of international guests joined 300,000 Cubans in Havana December 2 celebrating the 50th anniversary of the birth of Cuba's revolutionary army in struggle against the Batista dictatorship as well as Fidel Castro's 80th birthday. Among them were three notable leaders from abroad: Bolivian president Hugo Morales, Nicaraguan president-elect Daniel Ortega, and Haitian president René Preval – all recently elected against the will of U.S. imperialism.

Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, whose government is Cuba's closest ally, stayed home to prepare for presidential elections the following day. When the results came in, he dedicated his victory to revolutionary Cuba and Fidel Castro.

The presidents' tributes, in a time of rising popular struggles across Latin America, symbolized a turn in the road for Cuba: the embattled island no longer stands alone.

Speaking on December 2, Acting President Raúl Castro underlined his government's continued intransigence. Despite Washington's "brazen inference," he said, "popular and revolutionary movements are getting stronger" across Latin America.

The U.S. attempt to "economically annex Latin America by way of the FTAA [Free Trade Agreement of the Americas] was thwarted," Raúl said. Meanwhile, ALBA, the framework for fraternal economic collaboration backed by Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia, "is taking its place ... to benefit the dispossessed masses."

The ailing Fidel Castro sent greetings but did not attend the celebration. Still, the spirit of this event, and everything that has happened since Fidel withdrew from governmental posts, shows that the transition to a new leadership team has not weakened the revolution.

### **Internationalism**

For 50 years, the Cuban revolution has seen its fate as tied to the world struggle against imperialism and for human solidarity. It has committed its slender resources to support these movements. Today, the gains of popular movements in Latin America are opening new prospects for Cuba. And tens of thousands of Cuban working people are taking part in humanitarian aid abroad, including in Venezuela, Bolivia, Haiti, East Timor, Pakistan, and Africa.

Meanwhile, as Raúl noted, the U.S.-led "so-called 'crusade on terrorism' is heading down the path to inevitable and humiliating defeat."

In Latin America, according to Ricardo Alarcón, President of Cuba's national assembly, "the current situation is better than that which the Bolshe-

viks encountered,” referring to the revolutionary crisis that swept Russia in 1917. (*La Jornada*, Nov. 16)

Conversely, Cuba has helped inspire and shape the Latin American upsurge.

## **Achievements**

Cuba’s achievements and creativity in health care, education, sports, and cultural activities, and biotechnology—unique in the Third World—are widely acknowledged.

Less known is the success of the Cuban tourist industry in building the domestic economy by supplying two-thirds of visitors’ needs from within the island, compared to a norm of 10%-25% elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Cuba has also created the world’s most successful model of non-intrusive humanitarian aid, which promotes rather than obstructs autonomous, endogenous development of Third World nations.

The Cubans have carried out major economic retrenchments, as in the sugar industry, by discussing through proposed adjustments with affected workers while guaranteeing them a continued livelihood and fully supported educational opportunities.

Cuba has been lauded by David Suzuki, among others, as the world leader in sustainable and ecologically sound food production, based on assuring to producers security of land tenure.

The World Wildlife Foundation, which compiles the world’s most authoritative comparison of national environmental conditions, has acknowledged, as Castro noted on December 2, that Cuba is “the only country on Earth to meet the minimum requirements for sustainable development.” (See <http://xrl.us/wwfreport>)

Cuba’s progress in such fields has continued in the teeth of 15 years of bitter economic deprivation brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasingly aggressive U.S. blockade—which placed the revolution’s survival in question.

## **Workers’ and farmers’ power**

The Cuban revolution’s resilience rests on underlying strengths:

- It has won and maintained independence in an area that U.S. imperialism regarded and still regards as its exclusive subject domain.
- It has broken the economic grip of Cuban and foreign capitalists, so that priority could go to the people’s welfare, not private profit.
- It has built an army—backed by a massive people’s militia—that is loyal to Cuba’s working people and has a proud record of anti-imperialist combat abroad.
- It has engaged the working population in the exercise of political power, through a process that Alarcón calls “the parliamentarization of society.” (For a full discussion of Cuba’s political order, see “Cuba: A Rev-

olution in Motion,” reviewed in *Socialist Voice*, Sept. 15, 2004. [www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=19](http://www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=19).)

- It has remained loyal to the revolution’s commitment to internationalism, to the world-wide struggle against imperialist domination and capitalist exploitation.
- Above all, for half a century it has maintained a state based on Cuba’s workers and farmers, one whose policies are shaped to defend their interests and to hold open the perspective of advancing toward socialism.

## 50 years of defiance

Despite this, many Marxists and radicals are sharply critical of Cuba. Their analysis focuses not on Cuba’s achievements, but on the features it shares with capitalist society.

Many Marxists also fault Cuba for deviating from the blueprint of workers democracy said to have been realized in the Russian revolution, a standard to which—if truth be told—even the early Soviet republic did not measure up.

There is some validity to such criticisms. Cuba suffers from exploitation by capitalist investors and is under enormous pressure from world market forces. Characteristic capitalist evils such as social inequality and prejudice against Blacks or women, greatly reduced since the revolution, still survive in Cuba. They even regained some ground under the pressures of its economic crisis in the 1990s.

Moreover, the unrelenting U.S.-led campaign to forcibly overthrow Cuba’s government and social order distorts Cuba’s attempt to build a popular democracy, demanding of Cuba that it maintain a posture of full national unity in face of the external foe. The Cuban government justifiably believes the country would be imperiled if it gave free rein to “human rights organizations” or “NGOs” that are in fact inspired, sponsored, and financed by a U.S. government dedicated to subjugating the island.

But in the final analysis, the critics are missing the point. Cuba cannot achieve socialism within the confines of a small and underdeveloped island. It makes no sense to condemn Cuba for not achieving the impossible. What Cuba has done, with unparalleled success, is to end the political rule of the capitalist class, resist capitalist economic pressures, win as much ground as possible for socialist principles of human solidarity and production for human need rather than profit—and help open the door for other countries in the region to take the same path.

This has been acknowledged by Noam Chomsky, himself one of Cuba’s critics. “Cuba has become a symbol of courageous resistance to attack,” he says. Under the most severe conditions [Cubans] are doing things that others can’t do.” He cites “Cuba’s role in the liberation of Africa. It’s an astonishing achievement.” ([www.counterpunch.org/dwyer11032003.html](http://www.counterpunch.org/dwyer11032003.html))

This record is all the more astonishing given that despite errors, false starts, and setbacks, Cuba has persisted in defying imperialism and resisting capitalist pressure for 50 years.

No other revolution in world history has preserved its vitality and creativity over such a span of time. In this respect the Cuban achievement outshines that of the Bolsheviks, who were so quickly divided and undone by a counterrevolutionary bureaucracy.

### **The Special Period**

Still, the last 15 years of hard times have left their mark on Cuba. In 1993, the low point of what the Cubans call their “Special Period in Time of Peace,” the island lost 30%-50% of its production and 80% of its ability to purchase needed inputs abroad. Recovery was steady but painfully slow.

The worst is over now. The daily calorie intake of Cuban citizens, which fell dangerously low in the worst moments, has been restored; power blackouts are much less frequent; travel to work is easier. The economy as a whole is in full recovery. Moreover, the crisis was overcome largely through the Cuban people’s own ingenuity and initiative, and without impairing the country’s independence—good reason for pride.

But for Cuba to survive alone in the 1990s, without allies and despite the blockade, it had to grant significant concessions to capitalist investors from abroad and to small-scale entrepreneurs within Cuba. The gates were not opened wide — private capital and foreign trade remained subject to strict government control — but the result was a marked growth in social inequality, particularly between those who had access to dollars and those who did not.

Even in the worst days, Cuba was able to provide subsidized food and housing, free health care and education, to all citizens—a subsistence minimum. But beyond that, workers and their families had to rely on their own wits to get by.

The resulting pressures have been analyzed unsparingly by Cuban government leaders. In November 2005, Castro stated bluntly that “this country can self-destruct ... and it would be our fault.” He stressed the priols of “thievery [of state property], diversion of materials, and money draining away towards the new rich.”

Francisco Soberón Valdés, head of Cuba’s national bank, explained the following month that for a worker today, “the money he earns ... is not enough to buy products that are also necessary but are sold at market [i.e. unsubsidized] prices.”

During the same National Assembly discussion, Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque described how these conditions undercut the socialist principle that “each receives according to their labour,” stimulating tendencies “to individualism, to saving your own skin.”

Under these conditions, said Pérez Roque, “to some degree, historical

memory has been lost; a comparative understanding of what is happening in the world has been lost.” Some Cubans “have illusions about capitalism”—a comment that applies particularly to youth who know only the Special Period.

### **Economic recovery**

For Cuba there is no escape from the pressure of capitalist market forces.

Cuba needs its flourishing world of family-based enterprise—farmers, tradesmen, restaurant operators, and the like. Indeed the Cuban workers’ state provides uniquely favourable soil for such initiatives, free of exploitation by capitalist banks, franchisers, and suppliers.

Moreover, to speed its economic recovery, Cuba urgently needs investment capital. Its economic partnership with Venezuela provides an inspiring example of non-exploitative solidarity, but as things stand, most of the potential outside investment is capitalist in nature.

Capitalist investors in Cuba are locked into joint ventures that grant them little freedom of action. Even so, their activity encourages some local managers, technocrats, and Cubans with substantial savings to see their own and their country’s future in terms of capitalist, not socialist development. To debate and counter this trend, the Cuban people will need to energetically utilize their popular organizations and democratic institutions.

### **Three principles for resistance**

In his December 2005 address, Pérez Roque proposed three principles to guide these struggles for the revolution’s survival:

1. Leaders must continue to practice “an austere style of life.” Their families “must live in a manner no different from the people.”
2. The people’s support must be maintained “on the basis not of material consumption but of ideas and convictions.”
3. “Ultimately the decisive question is who receives the income. The majority, the people? Or the oligarchical minority, the transnationals, the pro-Yankees? Who owns the property: the people, the majority? Or the corrupt minority that serves the interests of the only policeman in the world who can guarantee their privileges in Cuba—Yankee imperialism?”

To this must be added Fidel’s promise a month earlier: “This nation will have every one of her citizens living fundamentally on their work and their pensions and retirement income,” without having to rely on sideline activities. This is a worthy goal, beyond what even wealthy Canada offers.

Meanwhile, Cuba must confront a U.S. government convinced that given Fidel’s illness, the time is ripe to unleash its plans for destabilization, regime change, and conquest.

Given the revolution’s evident strength, there are many calls in the U.S. for Washington to shift to a more flexible course. But in past decades, every such effort has shattered against the U.S. rulers’ united resolve to overthrow

the Cuban government.

Washington has built a massive bureaucracy for this purpose. It has even named its Cuban proconsul-in-waiting: “transition coordinator” Caleb McCarray. A CIA “special advisor” on Cuba and Venezuela reports directly to the president—a distinction otherwise accorded only to Iran and North Korea. Five interagency groups coordinate the Cuban subversion campaign.

This formidable apparatus is now challenged to prove its worth by unleashing provocations against the Cuban government and people that can feed an orchestrated media outcry about “human rights.”

### **Cuba stands firm**

In the face of these threats, Raúl Castro’s December 2 address celebrated the unity of the Cuban people, their Revolutionary Armed Forces, and the Cuban Communist Party. This unity, he said, is “our main strategic weapon, which has made it possible for this small island to resist and overcome so many aggressions from imperialism and its allies. This unity provides a basis for the internationalist work of the Cuban people and is the reason for the heroic deeds of its children in other countries around the world, following Martí’s maxim that ‘Homeland is Humanity.’”

The message from Havana is clear: Cuba stands firm.

Tens of millions of working people around the world find inspiration in this country that, despite all obstacles, has shown that “another world is possible.”

## **Cuba Seeks Revolutionary Renewal**

*(Socialist Voice, February 21, 2006)*

**By John Riddell**

“The super-powerful empire that stalks us and threatens us [is] awaiting a natural and absolutely logical event: the death of someone. They have honored me by thinking of me.”

— Fidel Castro, November 17 2005

Speaking on the sixtieth anniversary of his admission to the University of Havana, Cuba’s president responded to the imperialists’ “transition plans and military action plans” by challenging his compatriots to develop their own plans for the revolution’s future.

His speech has set off what Cuban Foreign Minister Filipe Perez Roque has called “an intense debate across the entire country,” in factories, work collectives, farmers cooperatives, streets, and neighborhoods.

Although he is now 79 years old, and has been the target of several CIA-organized assassination attempts, Fidel Castro shows no slackening in vigor. Reporters noted his firm stride in the January 24 demonstration of a million

Havana residents against provocations by the U.S. diplomatic mission. And the U.S. imperialists' conclusion that the Cuban revolution cannot be overthrown while Fidel is alive testifies to the failure of their campaign to isolate, starve, demoralize, and crush Cuba.

Fidel mocked the imperialists' hopes of military conquest. "They can never destroy us," he said. But, he warned, "this country can self-destruct ... we can destroy ourselves, and it would be our fault."

Addressing the National Assembly on December 23, Perez Roque elaborated on the nature of the threat:

"We have achieved military invulnerability. We will achieve economic invulnerability ... despite the ongoing blockade. We must also struggle ... to preserve ideological and political invulnerability."

This is not a problem so long as the generation who made the revolution is with us, he said. But the enemy bases its plans on "the idea that those who come after can be confused, defeated, divided, bought, or pushed around."

### **'A wonderful year'**

The opening up of this discussion is the result not of Cuba's weakness but its progress. The year 2005, which the Cubans named "Year of the Bolivarian Agreement for the Americas" (see *Socialist Voice* #26), was a "wonderful, victorious year," according to Perez Roque.

The economy expanded by an impressive 11.8%, and 10% growth is expected this year. (Cuba's measure of economic growth includes social services as well as commercial transactions.) Cuba significantly lessened its dependence on trade with imperialist states such as Canada; Venezuela and China are now Cuba's leading trading partners.

Cuba's renewed economic strength has allowed it to initiate a major investment program to strengthen its electricity supply, and new targeted measures to improve the lives of working people. Substantial salary and pension increases have been implemented, and 100,000 new homes will be built in 2006.

More crucially, Cuba's isolation has eased. Popular movements allied to Cuba scored resounding electoral victories in Venezuela and Bolivia, while candidates identified with pro-U.S. policies lost presidential elections across Latin America. Cuba is taking its place as an influential participant in a continent-wide movement of peoples against imperialist oppression.

### **Humanitarian aid**

Cuba has also won increased moral authority as the world's most effective and dedicated supplier of humanitarian aid. After the Pakistan earthquake disaster, for example, Cuba dispatched 2,200 medical staff to set up field hospitals and clinics. As of mid-December, 3,500 operations had been performed with sophisticated equipment in tents set up deep in the frozen Hi-

malayas.

(Much less technical skill and human commitment was to be seen in the United Nations-led effort, which sent 350,000 non-winterized tents to a region locked in bitter cold, along with a much smaller number of winterized tents that lacked stoves.)

Cuba has become a major supplier of eye care to Third World countries: 170,000 Venezuelans have received eye operations in Cuba in the last year and a half.

More than 25,000 Cuban health professionals serve as volunteers in other countries, usually in poverty-stricken, rural, and remote areas, while 2,400 students from 115 other countries receive free medical education in Cuban universities.

### **Danger signs**

These achievements testify to the moral strength and convictions of Cuban working people. Nonetheless, Castro's November 17 speech focused on danger signs in Cuba's moral commitment to socialist values — signs of "thievery [of state property], diversion of materials, and money draining away towards the new rich."

A study revealed that in government gas stations, "there was as much gas being stolen as sold." Fidel himself had seen a makeshift market where a construction crew, "both the foremen and many of the workers, had put up a market selling cement, steel rods, wood, paint, you name it—all kinds of construction materials."

### **Growth of inequality**

The problem is not new, Fidel said, but "the Special Period aggravated it, because in this period we saw the growth of much inequality, and certain people were able to accumulate a lot of money." (The term "Special Period" refers to the years after the collapse of economic relations with the Soviet Union in 1991.)

"There are several dozens of thousands of parasites," he said, "who earn 40 or 50 times the amount one of those [Cuban] doctors over there in the mountains of Guatemala ... earns."

Perez Roque, who at 39 has carried out almost all his political activity since the 1991 crisis, underlined the impact of the Special Period. Cuba's gross internal product shrank by 35% and its imports by 85% in the space of four years, he said, while reductions in food supply temporarily cut Cubans' average caloric intake from 3,000 to 2,000 calories a day.

"Facing up to those years was a feat whose story will be told and retold," he said. Still, it was during those years that "the vices cited by Comrade Fidel became entrenched" including tendencies "to individualism, to saving your own skin." Such evils "are not nourished in a society where each receives according to their labour." But this principle that was undermined

during the Special Period.

### **Social workers with attitude**

On October 15, the government moved to end the gas diversion problem by assigning thousands of young people in blue T-shirts to substitute for gas attendants at service stations across the country, who were sent home on leave. The youth belong to Cuba's corps of 28,000 social workers, recruited from among school dropouts and the young unemployed. After extensive education and preparation (7,000 are now in training), they work on projects that assist Cuba's most vulnerable citizens.

Referring to the anti-corruption effort, Fidel commented, "We read every day in the opinion polls that people are asking about when the 'kids' are coming to the dollar stores, to the drugstores, or to all the other places." Dollar and drug stores have a reputation as targets for theft. "Everyone is full of admiration for these 'kids.'"

The crackdown on corruption has a social as well as an economic goal: to reduce the gap between privileged and unprivileged within Cuban society. Among the goals of social improvement cited by Castro: "We decided that every [sole-support mother] ... ought to have the possibility to choose ... whether to receive a salary so that she could look after her child, or the state would pay someone a salary to care for the child while she was at work."

The same logic can be seen in Cuba's approach to its chronic electricity shortage. In addition to modernizing its power grid and generating facilities, Cuba has launched a conservation campaign, naming this the "Year of the Energy Revolution." In Fidel's view, two-thirds of the energy now consumed can be saved.

The Cuban electricity program also aims to decrease social differentiation. Electricity prices have been raised, but the cost for small-scale users is less than a tenth the rate paid by high-level consumers — who are often among Cuba's new rich. (The top rate in Cuba is still much less than Ontario workers will pay after the province's coming rate hikes.) Meanwhile, the government is distributing fluorescent light bulbs and energy efficient cookers and refrigerators that will provide practical benefits to working people—particularly in lessening women's domestic labour—while reducing energy consumption.

Recognizing that the increases would have an impact on many working-class families, the government accompanied them by substantial across-the-board wage increases. The minimum wage was doubled last year.

"This nation today, and in a very near future," Fidel said, "will have every one of her citizens living fundamentally on their work and their pensions and retirement income," without having to rely on sideline occupations, second jobs, or foreign remittances. This goal, undermined in Cuba during the Special Period, is achieved by very few workers in the Third World countries, and is far from guaranteed even in wealthy Canada.

Yet Cuba's most authoritative leaders are careful not to nourish illusions

that the revolution can be defended simply by increasing living standards. “Socialism disappeared in Eastern European countries that had a high level of life in material terms,” said Perez Roque. Nor did the overturn of the nationalized and centrally directed economy lead to material improvement. “Only this year has Hungary achieved the living standards that it enjoyed in 1972,” he said, despite billions of dollars in European Union assistance. We must add that the post-1990 record of economies in most of Eastern Europe and in Russia is even worse.

### Three principles

In his address to the National Assembly, Perez Roque proposed three principles to assure the revolution’s survival that have a focus entirely different from that on material goods:

1. “Those who lead must do so on the basis of their example, as has always been the case.... Authority comes from an austere style of life and from dedication to work. The people must know that those who lead receive no privileges except that of greater service and sacrifice, that their families live in a manner no different from the people, that their children receive the same education as the children of workers.”

2. “We must maintain the support of the immense majority of the people, as we do today, not on the basis of material consumption but on the basis of ideas and convictions. I told you how in the socialist countries the people were disarmed and did not go into the streets, did not struggle when their future was torn apart. But we saw how the poor people of Venezuela went into the streets to demand the return of Chavez in face of the oligarchical and military coup mounted by the Yankees. The [Cuban] Rebel Army possessed nothing. Its recruits were farmers and poor workers. Ideas and convictions are decisive, not the notion that people will support us more because they possess more.”

3. “Ultimately the decisive question is who receives the income. The majority, the people? Or the oligarchical minority, the transnationals, the pro-Yankees? Who owns the property: the people, the majority? Or the corrupt minority that serves the interests of the only policeman in the world who can guarantee these privileges in Cuba — Yankee imperialism?”

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# Economic Reforms Fuel Cuba's Battle of Ideas

*(Socialist Voice, March 1, 2006)*

**By John Riddell and Phil Cournoyer**

In a November 17, 2005, speech at the University of Havana, Cuban President Fidel Castro outlined measures to counter corruption and theft that are bleeding the Cuban peoples' resources into the hands of a layer of new rich.

Castro also indicated that the economic principles underlying the recent re-organization of electricity supply will be applied to the economy as a whole. The government has raised electricity rates while simultaneously raising salaries to compensate. "Subsidies and free services will be considered only in essentials," he said. "Medical services will be free, so will education and the like. Housing will not be free. Maybe there will be some subsidy, but the rents ... need to come close to the actual cost."

The thinking behind this change was explained by Francisco Soberon Valdes, head of Cuba's national bank, in a December speech to the National Assembly. "It is of utmost importance that the distribution of goods and services is clearly and directly linked ... with the effort of each from the position they occupy in our economic structure," Soberon said.

The Special Period, he said, "moved us away from this strategic objective." The Special Period is the Cuban term for the economic crisis brought on in the early 1990s by the rupture of economic ties with the Soviet Union.

In capitalist society, talk of "effort" is used to justify paying corporate chieftains, who produce nothing, many, many times the salaries of manual or intellectual workers. Within the Cuban state economy, however, salary levels have always conformed closely to the goal, reaffirmed by Soberon, of assuring "as equal a distribution as possible."

## **'To each according to their work'**

In Cuba, the prices of many basic necessities like housing have long been subsidized. These subsidies unduly benefit those Cubans who have an ample supply of money. This creates an unwarranted drain of economic resources into the hands of the privileged, including those with access to dollars from abroad. The end result is to reinforce trends towards greater inequality.

Meanwhile, the subsidies system assures working people of only a minimum subsistence. For a worker today, Soberon explains, "the money he earns ... is not enough to buy products that are also necessary but that are sold at market prices." The result is a decay of the work ethic. "The salary no longer truly motivates him."

The worker is launched into "a struggle to obtain material goods, as much as possible, for him and his family regardless of his contribution to society."

This trend is “particularly damaging” when the person “has authority over important material wealth.”

Moreover, some are able to choose not to work “without affecting [their] standard of living,” a situation that is “simply catastrophic” for the economy and “morally unacceptable.”

Soberon advocates extending the solution applied in the electricity industry. “This formula gradually reduces the inequalities created or increased during the Special Period,” he said. The policy also is in keeping with “what Marx explained more than a century ago: each should use to the full his capacities and receive according to his work.”

### **Battle of ideas**

The new policy outlined by Castro and Soberon aims to rein in the diversion of state resources to privileged layers and increase the overall efficiency of the economy, which will, in turn, promote greater productivity.

But the Cuban leaders do not project an increase in production as a solution in itself. Rather, their proposals aim to help Cuban working people through enhancing the real value of the salaries and pensions they receive from the state. Cuba’s electricity reforms, discussed in *Socialist Voice* #67, pursue other social goals as well, such as reducing inequality, easing the burden of household labour on women, and encouraging energy conservation.

Such measures are intended to strengthen the hand of Cuban workers and their state against the surrounding capitalist world and its presence within Cuba. As such, the measures are part of what Cuba’s Communists term their “battle of ideas”—an extended, concerted effort to demonstrate the superiority of a struggle for socialism over proposals for a retreat to a capitalist order.

The nature of the ideological challenge was spelled out in the address of Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque to the National Assembly on December 23. “To some degree, historical memory has been lost; a comparative understanding of what is happening in the world has been lost.” Some people in Cuba “have illusions about capitalism,” he said. They think that if the “Yankees” take over some day, “they’ll get the capitalism of an advanced European country,” when in reality “they’ll get Haiti or the Dominican Republic, a poor Third World Country converted into a U.S. neocolony.”

In his November 17 speech, Castro underlined the centrality of the Cuban revolutionaries’ effort to counter such illusions. Referring to Cuba’s imperialist enemies, he declared, “They can never destroy us.” But, “we can destroy ourselves, and it would be our fault.”

He then asked, “What ideas and what level of consciousness can make the overturn of a revolutionary process impossible?”

### **Rectification**

The effort to use economic policy to promote socialist consciousness and strengthen the working class has a long history in the Cuban revolution. Per-

ez Roque recalled Cuba's campaign for "Rectification" in the 1980s, which included in its goals opening up scope for worker initiatives and volunteer projects in economic construction.

"Rectification was unfortunately cut short ... when the Special Period began, and many of [its goals] could not be realized," the Cuban foreign minister said. But "we are rescuing many of those plans today, with more experience and on a more solid and better foundation."

While not using the term Rectification, Fidel recalled one of its themes on November 17, saying, "Some thought that socialism could be constructed with capitalist methods. That is one of the great historical errors.... That was why I commented that one of our greatest mistakes at the beginning of, and often during, the Revolution was believing that someone knew how to build socialism."

### **Che's economic writings**

The Cuban leaders' recent statements echo themes going back to the revolution's first years, in the 1960s, when Ernesto Che Guevara stressed the importance of "moral"—that is, political—incentives in economic construction, alongside the "material" incentives represented by piecework, bonus programs, and the like. Che also warned of the consequences of relying on capitalist methods of encouraging production in words that now seem prophetic of later Soviet collapse:

"The pipedream that socialism can be achieved with the help of the dull instruments left to us by capitalism (the commodity as the economic cell, profitability, individual material interest as a lever, etc.) can lead into a blind alley.... Meanwhile, the economic foundation that has been laid has done its work of undermining the development of consciousness. To build communism it is necessary, simultaneous with the new material foundations, to build the new man." (*Man and Socialism in Cuba*)

It is noteworthy that a manuscript by Guevara that provides a critical assessment of the Soviet economic model has just been published for the first time by Ocean Press, in association with the Che Guevara Studies Center of Havana, Cuba. A collection of documents from Cuba's debate on economic policy in 1963-64, in which Che was a central figure, has also just appeared. Both books are in Spanish and will be widely available in Cuba.

### **Lessons from the USSR**

Guevara's ideas link up with the interest among many Cubans today in the lessons of the Soviet experience. Fidel's November 17 speech took up this topic with regard to the foreign policy of the Soviet state and Communist Party.

"A tremendous vice was created," he told the University of Havana students, "the abuse of power, the cruelty, and in particular, the habit of one country imposing its authority, that of one hegemonic party, over all other

countries and parties.”

These historical events “influenced the idea that for a communist the end justifies the means,” undercutting the importance of the ethical factor in the struggle for socialism.

“Today we can speak of this subject because we are entering a new phase.”

Fidel explained his view with reference to international policy of the Soviet Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s. He condemned the 1939 alliance of the USSR with fascist Germany as “a very hard blow” that left communist parties “to politically bleed to death.” He also assailed the policy that led the Cuban Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s to ally with the dictator Fulgencio Batista: “The order came from Moscow: organize the anti-fascist front. It was a pact with the devil.”

Subordination of workers’ struggles to supposedly progressive capitalist politicians like Batista was a hallmark of the Soviet CP’s policy of “anti-fascist unity” in the mid-to-late 1930s.

Fidel contrasted to this record the Cuban Communists’ relations with Latin American revolutionary movements: “It has never even occurred to us to tell anybody what they should be doing.”

Castro’s comments on the international dimension of the Soviet experience illustrates the central role that the Cuban leaders assign to Cuba’s intimate involvement in the experiences and liberation struggles of working people around the world. Cuba’s internationalism is rooted in the thought of the leader of its independence struggle, Jose Marti, who famously said, “Patria es humanidad”—humanity is our homeland.

The proportion of Cuba’s resources devoted to international humanitarian aid dwarfs that of far richer economies, such as Canada. To promote this effort, Cuba has built a medical system whose capacity is far greater than the country’s needs. Where mass movements have scored significant breakthroughs, as in Venezuela and Bolivia, Cuba has rushed to provide support.

Furthermore, Cuba’s medical solidarity is not restricted to Latin America and the Caribbean. Cuban medical teams, for example, played a significant role in helping the Pakistani people to cope with death, disease, and destruction provoked by last year’s earthquake.

When Cuban leaders discuss economizing resources, few put this commitment in question.

Based as it is on respect for the recipient countries’ independence, integrity, and right to autonomous development, Cuba’s foreign aid program is a welcome contrast to those of imperialist powers. It serves as a material demonstration of the superiorities of Cuba’s social system and wins massive sympathy for the island in its struggle against the U.S. blockade.

And the greater margin of flexibility enjoyed by the Cuban economy today is in large measure due to gains in the struggle against imperialist domination in Latin America and parts of the Middle East, and due also to China’s

growing world role.

Cubans seek to exchange ideas with anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist thinkers of many viewpoints from all over the world. Hardly a month goes by without a significant international conference in Havana. Cubans are traveling abroad in ever increasing numbers, one recent example being the huge Cuban delegation to the World Social Forum in Caracas.

Cuba's revolutionary leaders have understood from the beginning that the long-term survival of the revolution depends on the success of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles in other lands. That is why the advances of the revolution in Venezuela and the victory of the indigenous majority in Bolivia have had such an exhilarating impact on Cuba. Cuba's destiny is intimately linked to the outcome of struggles across Latin America and on other continents. And, it should be stressed, advances in Cuba will favor struggles in Venezuela, Bolivia, and beyond.

Cubans act on this understanding, and we must do the same. Cuba's capacity to survive and freely build its future depends in no small measure on what we can do internationally to build solidarity with this heroic, embattled people.

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## Which Road Forward for the Cuban Revolution?

### Cuba's unique strengths provide foundation for future

(*Socialist Voice*, April 10, 2006)

**By John Riddell and Phil Cournoyer**

Addressing students at the University of Havana on November 17, 2005, Cuban president Fidel Castro asked two questions central to the future of their country and the struggle for socialism worldwide:

1. "Do you believe, yes or no, that our revolutionary process can be overthrown?"
2. "What ideas and what level of consciousness can make the overturn of a revolutionary process impossible?"

Fidel's speech was widely recognized as a turning point for the Cuban revolution. The previous two articles in this pamphlet presented central ideas from this speech and from related addresses by Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and National Bank director Francisco Soberon.

The most extensive discussion outside Cuba of Fidel's speech has taken place in the Spanish-language socialist Internet news service *Rebellion*. Several writers have raised pointed criticisms of the Cuban government's policies, to which a prominent Cuban Marxist has responded. Of particular importance are the views of Heinz Dieterich, an influential Marxist and defender of the Cuban revolution based in Mexico, who argues that Cuba's "historic project," based on state ownership of the economy, is exhausted, and that Cuba must strike out in a new direction. (Dieterich's article is included in his forthcoming book, *El futuro de la revolucion cubana*.)

This article will review the opinions of Dieterich and other contributors to the *Rebellion* debate, and then suggest three questions that receive little attention in the *Rebellion* articles that are critical of the Cuban leaders:

- What are the central institutions that define Cuba's character as a state serving the interests of working people, and how can they be strengthened?
- How can the power of workers and farmers be affirmed and expanded in the contest against other social layers within Cuba?
- What is the influence on Cuba's development of its involvement in struggles for social progress beyond its borders?

### **Bankrupt model?**

Fidel's November address, Dieterich writes, is nothing less than a "preamble to a second 'History Will Absolve Me,' " referring to Castro's historic address in 1953 that provided the initial program for the Cuban revolution. (Dieterich's views appear in three *Rebellion* articles, dated December 12, 2005, and January 3 and March 19, 2006.) The central idea of Fidel's No-

vember talk, Dieterich says, is his call: “Let there never be a USSR situation here”—a collapse of the revolution that would usher in imperialist rule.

But in Dieterich’s view, the Cuban leaders fail to recognize that the “historic project” based on state property and represented by the USSR is exhausted. Cuba must move forward to “21st century socialism,” which will assure the population “a more democratic society and a higher standard of living.” Dieterich identifies three forms of property: private, state/public, and social. In the “socialist countries” like the USSR, he says, “state and social property have been wrongly identified.” The term “social property” is not defined, but appears to mean a much wider delegation of economic power throughout the society, without necessarily eliminating public ownership. The heart of 21st century socialism, in Dieterich’s view, must be a shift from state to “social property.”

Dieterich sees Cuban society as basically similar to the social order that collapsed in the Soviet Union in 1991. True, Cuba stands on “extraordinary achievements”: its resistance to imperialism, its dignity, its excellence in health, education, and science. But these strengths “also existed in the Soviet Union and the GDR [East Germany], in a socio-economic-political framework essentially the same as in Cuba.” (The Soviet Union changed profoundly after Lenin’s death. Dieterich and others do not mention this, but they are clearly referring to the Soviet Union in its final decades.)

Dieterich does not see the longstanding Cuban emphasis on the ethical character of socialism as offering an effective alternative to the Soviet model. Indeed, he faults the Cuban leaders for excessive confidence in the power of socialist ideas. “The idea of a ‘new man’ can win the masses only in transitory phases,” he says, referring to Che Guevara’s conception that socialist construction will be based on a citizenry that has embraced socialist ethical concepts. In Dieterich’s view, the extent of corruption and theft described by Fidel shows that “given extreme conditions of life, firm ethical conceptions will provide armor for only a minority”—possibly 10%-15% of the population.

The world’s “dominant pattern of consumption, that of the First World’s middle class, exerts an irresistible attraction,” and this level of consumption is far beyond the resources of the Cuban economy, Dieterich says. This contradiction can be met, he says, “by an intense public debate, especially with the youth, to build a consensus around a model of consumption that is viable.” Cubans should discuss, for example, whether they prefer “more hospitals, or better transport, or more housing, or more private consumption.”

Dieterich agrees with Perez Roque that control of the social surplus is crucial to the revolution’s survival. “But what is crucial is not only who receives this surplus but who makes decisions [on how to utilize it] and how this is done.”

Developing his comparison of the Cuban with the Soviet order, Dieterich asserts that a “public arena of strategic discussion is lacking” in Cuba, and

“the citizen is converted into a spectator of the economic-political process.” This problem is eased, he says, by the unusual role played by Cuba’s president, who, in the words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez (also quoted by Perez Roque), “simultaneously heads the government and leads the opposition.” But how will this dialectic be institutionalized when Fidel is gone?

### **Social vs. state property**

Several other writers in the *Rebellion* discussion hinge their arguments on similar references to “social property” and “21st century socialism.” The closest approach to an explanation of these terms is found in an article by Roberto Cobas Avivar (January 13, 2006), a Cuban social scientist based in Brazil, which advocates a “mixed” and “inclusive” system of social property; government regulation of labour, business, and finance; acceptance of individual wealth as a source of national prosperity; decentralization of economic decision making to the enterprise level; and limitation of planning to strategic questions of economic development.

Although Cobas Avivar does not point to any existing society as a model, his blueprint seems similar to the social democratic model that, in countries as well-endowed as Sweden, has proven incapable withstanding the tempests of “neo-liberal” attacks on working people.

Narciso Isa Conde, a longstanding leader of the Dominican revolutionary left, has also joined this discussion with an analysis that parallels Dieterich’s arguments. But he stresses the importance of avoiding any effort to copy the perestroika process in the former USSR. “The changes that many revolutionary socialists think Cuba needs have nothing to do with capitalist economic reforms, nor with a capitalist type political liberalization.”

Rather, he argues, the challenge is “to recover the whole originality of the revolution and turn it towards the formation of a great Bolivarian homeland within a clearly socialist renewal. On that course we can overcome the great risks involved in any attempt to perpetuate bureaucratic statism that contradicts the essence of genuine socialism.” His concept of forming a “great Bolivarian homeland” conveys the hope that 21st century socialism will spread across Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Rectification and the Soviet model**

The most extensive reply to Dieterich’s articles so far is that by the Cuban Marxist Jesus Arboleya Cervera (*Rebellion*, January 19, 2006). Arboleya contests the identification of Cuba with the Soviet and East German models, viewing Fidel’s November 17 speech as “a confirmation of a theoretical stand that historically has differentiated the positions of Cuban revolutionaries from those of the leaders of real socialism in Europe.” (“Real existing socialism” was the term used by Soviet and allied East European government leaders during the 1970s and 1980s to describe their societies.) This distinction can be traced back to “Che’s arguments on the need to shape a

‘new man’ as a prerequisite for the socialist process.”

Octavio Rodriguez Araujo (December 30, 2005), a Mexican socialist writer, makes the same point, underlining that the late Soviet Union was marked by “a privileged bureaucracy that enriched itself through corruption,” jailing and executing its critics. “The supposed socialism of these countries was defeated not by imperialism but by a counterrevolution from within.”

Dieterich himself notes that the “Stalinist party-state” responded to “every attempt to discover the historical reality” of these societies with “sanctions including death.” Cuba’s revolutionary record is free of such atrocities.

Indeed the Cuban revolution beat back attempts to force it onto a repressive and bureaucratic course. The character of this extended struggle was illustrated by Cuba’s “rectification” process of the 1980s, cited as a model for today by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque.

Inaki Etaio of the Basque nationalist organization Askapena defines rectification as the correction of the “more than questionable aspects of ‘real socialism,’” including “excessive material incentives, progressive construction of a bureaucratic caste, privileges, subsidies to enterprises running at a loss, etc.” (Rebellion, February 2, 2006)—all of which were prominent features of post-Stalin Soviet society.

As Argentinian Marxist Nestor Kohan noted in Rebellion in another context, “The [Cuban] revolution opened up and created political and cultural alternatives” to the Soviet model, some of which are “forgotten and unknown.”

### **Political and ethical values**

As we have seen, Dieterich recognizes a contradiction between the “irresistible” attraction of the consumption level of the privileged in imperialist (“First World”) countries” and the limited productive forces of a country like Cuba. “Dieterich’s solution is to collectivize economic decision making, so that each person can choose ‘democratically’ from the First World basket,” Arboleya says.

This proposal is actually not so different from Cuba’s present approach, Arboleya notes, but it removes “the political and ethical values bound up in Che’s proposal for the formation of the new man.” It also fails to criticize the “injustice and economic/ecological irrationality” that enables a privileged few to enjoy this pattern of consumption.

Moreover, Arboleya challenges Dieterich’s assertion that “the lack of individual responsibility for collective property, and, consequently, the cause of corruption”—problems highlighted in Fidel’s speech—results from the fact that “productive property is in the hands of the state, not in the hands of the majorities.” Here Dieterich “with a stroke of the pen disqualifies the popular nature of the Cuban revolutionary state,” Arboleya says.

Arboleya agrees with Dieterich that “the better organized the people’s participation is, the better the socialist state will function.” But the legitimacy

of a state, throughout history, depends “not on its democratic functioning but on the interests it serves.” Socialist democracy, he states, “does not depend on the fact that each individual can decide whether the country purchases a bus, builds a hospital, or repairs a baseball field, but rather on the collective capability ... to preserve its class nature and its proper functioning.” He warns that Dieterich’s view could lead the masses outside Cuba to “reject the idea of building their own state,” leaving them “unarmed in the face of the bourgeoisie and imperialism.”

### **How the Soviet Union fell**

The danger of such a negative approach to public ownership and economic direction by the state is evident in the failure of the Soviet working class to play an independent role during the final crisis the Soviet Union, an experience graphically described in David Mandel’s *Labour After Communism*. (See review in *Socialist Voice*, Oct. 19, 2004, [www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=24](http://www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=24))

The USSR collapsed during a time of labour upsurge, when workers were well placed to rally support for a socialist alternative to the wave of “free-market” pillaging that devastated the Soviet economy in the 1990s.

“Most Soviet workers remained wedded to the values of social justice, egalitarianism, and popular democracy,” Mandel writes. But in the absence of any alternative, “the liberals’ concept of economic freedom appeared [to them] as a logical response to the oppressive bureaucratic regime.... Workers found ideas like the reduction of the social wage in favour of a promised higher individual wage quite attractive.” Even the most left-wing labour currents “could not conceive of democratic planning” and did not contest privatization, through which ownership of the enterprises was stolen by Russia’s present rulers. (pages 20-21)

The outcome was a rude awakening: members of the bureaucratic caste gained legal ownership of enterprises; enormous wealth was transferred into their hands; the strength of labour was shattered; workers’ social rights and living standards were devastated; economic disaster swept across the post-Soviet countries.

Cuban leaders warn against this prospect today, pointing out that the revolution’s overthrow would bring the Cuban people not European living standards but Haiti-style oppression and impoverishment.

### **The pillars of Cuba’s workers’ state**

How was it that the Cuban economy, small, poor, and under unremitting assault, was able to survive and recover from the ravaging effects of the Soviet collapse? Clearly, the key reason why the Cuban revolution was stronger is that Stalinism never triumphed there. The leadership remained committed to the interests of the working class and peasants of Cuba, and more broadly to the interests of anti-capitalist forces around the world.

But more concretely, Cuba is protected from the hurricanes of imperialist economic devastation by the Cuban people's successful defense of institutions that together form the fundaments of a workers' state. Specifically:

- While no one would suggest that Cuba's system of political democracy is perfect, it assures decisive weight to workers, peasants, and their organizations, and excludes corrupt political machines financed and directed by imperialism. Socialist democracy in Cuba stresses the vital role of a highly educated and cultured population. (See *Cuba, a Revolution in Motion*, by Isaac Saney, reviewed in *Socialist Voice* #15)
- Military force in Cuba rests in the hands of an armed people and a Rebel Army that, through 50 years of existence, has acted consistently to defend the workers' state and the interests of oppressed peoples internationally.
- Cuba's government retains full control of the country's foreign trade and permits foreign investment only in joint ventures subject to strict conditions. In particular, Cuba's farmers are protected from the impact of competition with highly subsidized imperialist agro-business.
- Public ownership of the decisive sectors of the economy places a large portion of the economic surplus at the government's disposal, giving it broad scope to shape investment and direct the economy's evolution.
- Cuba's publicly owned enterprises form part of a network of national economic planning that directs investment according to politically determined priorities.

These institutions are under intensive, permanent assault by international capitalism, which is not without points of support within Cuba. It would be helpful if Dieterich, Cobas, and other anti-capitalist critics of the Cuban leaders' present policies would specify whether these institutions should be maintained, and if not, what protective walls can be erected that will provide equivalent defense and autonomous scope of action for Cuban working people.

The Cuban leaders are the first to affirm that Cuba's social system is flawed and needs improvement. But surely Cuba's anti-capitalist critics must agree that if these and other foundations of its workers' state are dismantled, there would soon be little left of Cuba's vaunted achievements in health, education, sports, popular culture, and human solidarity and dignity. The problem is bureaucracy and privilege, not public ownership as such.

Whatever there may be of value in Dieterich's call for political and economic changes in Cuba can be totally lost because of his unclarity around the vital role of the pillars of the Cuban workers' state.

### **Strengthening workers' power in Cuba**

The speeches of Cuban leaders discussed in this pamphlet described the growth during Cuba's "Special Period"—the economic crisis triggered by the fall of the USSR in 1991—of inequality, economic privilege, and cor-

ruption. The lives of working people grew more difficult, especially in comparison with those drawing benefits of some sort from the surrounding dollar economy and its points of presence within Cuba. Social tensions in Cuba grew. To some extent, working people were forced to fend for themselves in securing an adequate livelihood, weakening bonds of class solidarity.

In this context, the measures proposed by the Cuban leaders have a consistent class bias: defending workers against capitalist pressures; strengthening the publicly owned economy; reining in private business and corruption—in Arboleya’s words, acting to preserve the class nature and proper functioning of socialist democracy.

Dieterich himself gives a good example of such measures: Cuba’s “workers parliaments” of the 1990s, when workplace assemblies played the key role in shaping Cuba’s response to the Special Period. Among the achievements of these assemblies is the fact that workers’ salaries in Cuba are today exempt from income taxes. Many similar initiatives can be found in the history of revolutionary Cuba.

Without prejudging what measures might be appropriate in Cuba today, clearly it is workers’ and farmers’ democracy in Cuba that must be protected and strengthened. This appears to be precisely the aim of current Cuban government policy: their proposals are imbued with a spirit of class struggle.

## **Cuba in the World**

The Cuban Revolution’s unique commitment to socialist internationalism, humanitarian aid, and cooperation (see *Socialist Voice* #69) has always been a cornerstone of Cubans’ efforts to strengthen workers’ power in their country. Tens of thousands of Cuban citizens are today posted abroad, giving direct expression to their personal commitment to socialist goals of international cooperation.

Through these initiatives, millions of people in other countries learn that there is something in Cuba worth cherishing and defending. Cuba has since the 1960s been in the forefront of mobilizing political support and solidarity with anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles around the globe. This flows from an understanding that workers’ power and socialism cannot thrive unless the struggles of working people and the oppressed move forward on a world scale.

Today a new wind is blowing across Latin America, as movements for democracy and autonomous national development gain strength in many countries. Cuba now has new possibilities for collaboration with progressive governments, as in Bolivia and Venezuela, as well as with more conservative and fully bourgeois governments who are in partial conflict with imperialism, as in Argentina and Brazil.

Cuba has seized these openings and embraced the goal of regional economic integration, independent of imperialism.

Partisans of the Cuban revolution need to integrate this process into the

discussion of the challenges and options Cuba now faces. It offers the Cuban people the greatest current opportunity to strengthen their revolution. Moreover, its success can have great consequences for the world's future.

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