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On the Cuban crisis

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1) The Cuban crisis has entered its fifth year. The cumulated effects of the interruption of exchanges with the USSR and the Comecon, of the reinforcement of the American embargo, of the bureaucratic centralization of the command economy, provoked an economic collapse and a crisis unprecedented in the history of the revolution.

The generalized shortages of the "special peace time period" (a sort of sui generis war communism) in effect since 1990, and the constant aggravation of the living conditions of the population, forced the Castro leadership to begin a process of economic reforms in 1993. The opening to foreign capital, the development of tourism, the legalisation of the dollar were the first decisions adopted to stem the generalized economic recession and the brutal drop in the living standards of the population which was behind the flight of the *balseros* in August 1994.

2) The massive exodus and the demonstrations of August 1994, represented a turning point in the evolution of the situation and stimulated the acceleration of the reforms. For the first time since 1986 the free farmer's markets were reestablished and the prices fixed according to offer and demand. The failure of the food plan, the constant degradation of the quality of food for the population which had been previously assured by the *libreta*, the development of an underground economy and black market in dollars, forced the Castro leadership to retract the decisions that it had imposed in the name of the "rectification process of negative errors and tendencies" decided by the third congress of the CCP.

Private initiative was henceforth reestablished and encouraged, at least for the small peasants as well as for the various artisanal or service activities. The continuing decentralisation was supposed to stimulate the development -on the municipal level- of independent activities and favor the development of an informal sector tied especially to the growth of tourism (for which prostitution is one of the most negative consequences).

The farmer markets assure supplies to the most well-off sectors: the prices are very high but they are set in pesos and therefore accessible (unlike the black market) to those who do not have dollars.

3) the general impoverishment is nevertheless dramatic and the acceleration of the adjustments in process, under the pressure of financial institutions of European and Latin-American governments, have further aggravated the problems of daily life. In addition to the inequalities which have resulted from the reforms, are the consequences flowing from the rationalisation of the State apparatus and of the enterprises that have resulted in around 500,000 lay-offs. The preservation of a portion of previous wages and the possibilities of alternative work under very strict conditions (essentially in agriculture) does not make up for the loss of revenues. As for the social gains in health and education they are not (for the moment) threatened, but the deterioration of the quality of services is considerable. The measures taken to expand labor productivity (suppression of excess personnel, productivity bonuses, bonuses in dollars, increased work discipline) increase the pressure on wage workers without however, involving a compensation in terms of worker control in the enterprises or mass participation in the city governments or neighborhoods.

As for the unions, their role consists in stimulating production, to popularize the economic reforms in the framework of the well-known on-the-job "efficiency assemblies" while softening the consequences of the current changes.

In the mixed enterprises (joint-ventures), the wage earners do not have any other protection than the very limited ones granted the union or the CCP cells but they enjoy better wages and numerous material advantages in relation of the workers of the State enterprises which explains the increase in job seekers in this sector. The Cuban economy now

functions at two speeds.

4) The current change is the result of contradictory political plans. The debates which took place in leadership circles, amongst intellectuals, researchers and professors have resulted in a provisional consensus on the inevitability of the economic opening. But the concepts are different. For some the economic opening must not threaten the political system: But the Chinese "example " which inspires them is not applicable in Cuba if only because Washington will not allow Havana to do what it allows Peking to do.

For the others (inspired by social democracy) the economic reforms must be a prelude to a radical political recasting of institutions. Only a parliamentary democracy and a generalized market economy will be able to bring about the lifting of the American embargo without which according to them, no economic recovery will be possible.

Only a minority of political leaders and researchers consider the current economic opening as a necessary evil given the international isolation of the island, but propose that this "NEP" be accompanied by political changes going in the direction of an expansion of the decision making powers of wage workers, of a rank and file democracy and of an antibureaucratic struggle which would have to involve changes in the current functioning of organs of popular power (OPP). This orientation which would involve giving the population expanded powers of control could allow the limiting of the aggravation of work conditions and the deterioration of the standard of living of the workers on one hand, and the enrichment of bureaucrats involved in trade or of the personel involved with tourism or of commercial agriculture on the other.

5) The current reforms are undermining the social base of the regime; the ideological disarray, the absence of perspectives and especially the erosion of revolutionary legitimacy have had effects as serious as the economic shortages; furthermore, the confusion is aggravated by the absence of debates and encounters which would allow the collective development of a middle term survival plan. Without such a democratisation of political institutions (the OPP) the possibilities to save the revolution are more compromised given the fact that the isolation of Cuba is nearly total in an international context marked by a generalized decline of revolutionary struggles;

It is true that the monopoly of power enjoyed by the Castroists is less absolute, the leadership teams are progressively rejuvenated, the role of the CCP has been weakened and intellectuals can express themselves more freely. But no organized political current is allowed including within the CCP. The written and oral expression of political alternatives to those of the regime remains prohibited in the press or in the media. The repression against dissidents is still in place;

The Cuban people has thus remained the prisoner for more than three decades of a contradiction that it can not resolve on its own: to defend a national sovereignty and hard won social gains by silently accepting the power of the figure who incarnates national and revolutionary legitimacy in the face of imperialist domination; or it can revolt against Castro, the father of the nation and in doing so threaten its independence.

This contradiction is the result of the geopolitical balance of forces which has been extraordinarily unfavourable to the Cuban revolution since the beginning;

6) The survival of the Castro regime is above all threatened by the unremitting harassment by the American government. No country has suffered as long an ordeal. In Vietnam, the US embargo has been lifted. China enjoys most favored nation status and, the US administration has not hesitated to negotiate with the North Korean regime. However, after 35 years of unilateral economic embargo and sanctions increased by the Torricelli law in 1992 and by measures taken by Bill Clinton in the summer of 1994, the new Republican majority is preparing to adopt the bill of Senator Jesse Helms, president of the Senate Commission on Foreign Affairs which aims at blocking foreign

investments on the island, the sole means by which the country can receive capital and technology.

The avowed goal of the US administration is to eliminate Fidel Castro and his regime and to show that any socialist revolution in the Western hemisphere is destined to fail, as was seen in Grenada, Nicaragua and Central America. The fate reserved for Cuba in the event of the fall of the Castroite revolution could be worse than that of Nicaragua and would represent a significant historical setback. The Cuban people know this: their silence expresses the current impasse and the lack of perspectives. There is a risk that the only possibility in the region, that of Latin American economic integration will take place under the domination of Washington; a year after the signing of NAFTA the Mexican crisis shows the effects of a free trade zone running from Alaska to the Southern tip of the continent;

7) We defend the Cuban revolution because we are against the oppression of the weakest by the strongest, for the independence of a small country against the hegemonic will of the leading military power in the world;

The fact that this is a socialist revolution for which the initial project was one of the most internationalist of this century and for which the social gains were amongst the most important ever acquired by a third world country explains why this nation could stand up to North American aggression. Certainly without aid from the USSR the island could not in the context of the Cold War hold out for long. But this aid had dramatic side effects. The "international socialist" division of labor maintained Cuba in a situation of subordination to the Comecon and prohibited the elaboration of autonomous economic development.

Prisoner of its geo-political borders, the country was protected somewhat by the cold war without however, ever being the master of its destiny. The dramatic episode of the missile crisis referred to by Che in his farewell letter was a tragic illustration of this. Like Vietnam, Cuba paid dearly for the squabbles between the super powers.

8) The bureaucratic deformations, the repressive practices and Caudillo-like functioning of Castro likewise contributed to the progressive decline of the influence of the revolution. But a country at war, besieged for 35 years, without energy resources could not be a model of socialist democracy. Socialism on a small island was obviously even more impossible than in the Soviet Union. But this doesn't mean that Castro's failures absolve him from not answering the imperialist campaign around human rights. He is guilty of not dissociating himself from Stalinism after the fall of the Berlin wall.

Our criticism centers on the absence of political pluralism and the repression of democratic rights, but in no case is it to be confused with those who demand "free" elections (with the Miami-based parties) and the restitution of expropriated property in order to assure the "democratic" victory of the counterrevolution like in Nicaragua. Under the current conditions in Cuba, a counter revolution would involve a civil war.

To demand the respect of democratic rights presupposes a struggle for the unconditional lifting of the US embargo which is the most basic of democratic rights, for the halting of aggression and blackmail without conditions. In this fight we are at the side of the Cuban people and the Castro leadership against imperialism.

But this anti-Imperialist solidarity does in no way involve support of the Castro leadership when it deprives its people of all power to protest and self rule. In the resistance-for the time being silent-of the Cuban people against the bureaucracy, we support all struggles for reforms which involve a perspective of defense of the gains of the revolution. The institutions of popular power (from the local level to the National assembly must be democratized to allow the pluralist expression of different currents, the mass organizations must cease being transmission belts for the party, the factory assemblies must have control over the current economic restructuring.

The US aggression favors the preservation of bureaucratic domination. Only the halting of this aggression can

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stimulate the independent mobilisation of the Cuban masses, a necessary condition for the survival of the revolution;

On the other hand, the overthrow of Fidel Castro by the Miami forces will not be the signal of a Cuban revolution, but rather, the victory of the counter revolution.