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Cuba

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The formal resignation of Fidel Castro as President of Cuba opens up a new chapter in the history of Cuba and its revolution.

Since his original illness in 2006 (an intestinal problem) intense discussion has been engendered about Castro's role, linked to the future of Cuba. His resignation now signifies that he is unlikely to recover and that the Cuban government is seeking to prepare the Cuban population for his death, maybe soon. When this happens, it will be marked publicly by mass demonstrations, particularly throughout Latin America. Despite any shortcomings and mistakes of Fidel Castro, he is recognised by the downtrodden masses worldwide as a monumental figure who tenaciously fought against their capitalist and imperialist oppressors.

This time, however, in capitalist circles, from Bush to the millionaire Cuban exiles in Miami – salivating at the expectation of juicy profits from their 'returned' property – there is little speculation, unlike 2006, about the imminent collapse of the island's system. Then, through the mouthpiece of Bush, US imperialism expected rioting in Cuba's streets, a quick 'regime change', not just of the government of Cuba but in its social system – a planned economy – as well.

Conversely, millions of working-class people and the poor worldwide wished the opposite; that Cuba and the social gains of the revolution would endure, even if Castro was to die from his illness. No doubt, his considerable presence will still be felt, but his resignation denotes his inability to wield the power that he did previously, which will now probably be exercised by his brother, Raúl.

Since 1959, the Cuban revolution has faced a savage embargo imposed by US imperialism. There have been 600 assassination attempts against the person of Castro. However, through its planned economy, Cuba gave a glimpse of the great possibilities for humankind, if the straitjacket of landlordism and capitalism was eliminated. Heroic figures, like Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, exercise a profound influence upon many young people and workers throughout the world.

The reputation of Cuba on social issues, such as

housing, education and, particularly health, if anything, has soared recently. In Michael Moore's incredible film 'Sicko', the contrast between the brutal, profit-driven health system in the US and the free health care provided by Cuba is starkly emphasised. Ordinary Americans who lost their homes through illness, including one through developing cancer, as well as a woman worker who participated in the rescue operations on 9/11, were denied affordable health care by the shameful, private insurance company-driven system that exists in the US. However, they were given succour and treatment, to their delight, free of charge, when Moore took them to Cuba.

Moreover, last year, eight American students graduated from the Cuban medical school after six years of free tuition. One of these American graduates stated: "Health care is not seen as a business in Cuba." This is precisely why the US ruling class and its stooge states in Latin America, in the past, did everything to try and destroy the example of the planned economy that arose from the Cuban revolution. It provoked the opposite reaction of support from the masses of Latin America. This is particularly so in the recent period, given the brutal neo-liberalism on the continent. They compare the achievements of Cuba to the dismal record of landlordism and capitalism in the region, as well as in Africa and Asia.

Achievements of revolution

In a revealing new book, 'Fidel Castro – My Life', in which Castro collaborated with the writer Ignacio Ramonet; Castro sets out the impressive achievements of the revolution. He comments: "We now have more than 70,000 doctors, plus another 25,000 young people studying medicine... Our neighbours to the north [United States] can only send helicopters, they can't send doctors, because they don't have enough to solve any of the world's problems. Europe, that "champion of human rights", can't either; they don't have even 100 doctors to send to Africa, where there are 30 million or more people infected with AIDS... I believe within ten years, we'll have 100,000 doctors, and we may have educated 100,000 more from other countries. We are the largest educators of doctors [in the world]; we can now educate ten times more doctors, I think, than the United States – that country that

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carried off a good number of the doctors we had and did everything possible to deprive Cuba of doctors. That's our answer to that.'

Between 1959 and today, life expectancy in Cuba has risen by 19 years. Following the social counter-revolution in Russia, in the early 1990s, it fell for men to 56 years! Could there be a greater contrast between the claims of social revolution and the barbarism of capitalist counter-revolution? And this has been achieved in the teeth of a massive economic decline in the early 1990s following the spiteful withdrawal of aid, particularly oil supplies, firstly by former Russian president Boris Yeltsin and continued by Vladimir Putin, as Castro explains in his book.

While the historic achievements of free education and medical attention were preserved in Cuba, nevertheless, a brutal austerity programme was inflicted on the great mass of the population. The regime was forced to make concessions to the 'market', that is, to capitalism. Through 'dollarization', a parallel economy developed, which resulted in relative privileges for those involved in tourism, where they were paid in dollars, and in sectors involving 'joint ventures'.

Unfortunately, those who remain firm supporters of the planned economy, such as doctors, teachers, etc, continue to be paid in the Cuban peso and suffer accordingly. Even the state monopoly of foreign trade, according to the well-known left-wing author, Richard Gott, was formally abolished in 1992. But essentially, Cuba remained a planned economy, with foreign enterprises requiring authorisation from the ministry of trade to perform their operations. Decentralisation took place with hundreds of enterprises permitted to import and export on their own authority. However, Fidel Castro declared that "nothing will be privatised in Cuba that is suitable for and therefore can be kept under ownership by the nation of the workers' collective".

Yet, it is not true, as Fidel Castro has also argued in the past, as well as in this recent book, that bureaucracy and inequalities do not exist in Cuba. Fidel Castro is not, as his capitalist opponents have tried to picture, in the mould of Stalin. No state-sponsored cult of the personality exists, nor are there portraits, statues and images of Castro in Cuba while he remains alive. Moreover, while he freely admits that he has made mistakes, and has zig-zagged from one policy to another – sometimes causing significant harm – throughout the last 49 years, this has not been comparable to the monstrous crimes of Stalinism: forced collectivisation, big purge trials, etc.

Erratic policies

This book also reveals that Castro could sometimes behave erratically. For instance, during the 1962 Cu-

ban missile crisis, he incredibly proposed to Russian leader, Nikita Khrushchev, that a 'first strike' nuclear attack should be launched against the US by the Soviet Union. Khrushchev replied to Castro: "You propose that we carry out a first strike against the enemy territory. This would not be a simple strike but the beginning of a thermonuclear war." [p281]

Castro sometimes attacks Stalin: "He was to blame, in my view, for the invasion of the USSR in 1941 by Hitler's powerful war machine, without the soviet forces ever hearing a call to arms... Everyone knows about his abuse of force, the repression, and his personal characteristics, the cult of personality." Yet, at the same time, Castro claims that Stalin "also showed tremendous merit in industrialising the country, in moving the military industry to Siberia – those were decisive factors in the world's great fight against Nazism".

He states that Stalin "disarmed himself", in reality, dismantled the defences of the Soviet Union, as the Nazis prepared to attack. But Stalin was not the original author of the idea of the 'Five-Year Plan', and the accompanying idea of industrialisation. It was Trotsky and the Left Opposition who first formulated these ideas. Stalin borrowed them and applied them in a bureaucratic fashion at great, unnecessary costs to the Soviet Union and its people. At the same time, Castro pointedly denies – quite wrongly as Celia Hart has indicated – that Che Guevara had 'Trotskyite sympathies'. Castro states: "I never heard him talk about Trotsky... He was a Leninist and, to a degree, he even recognised some merits in Stalin." Che Guevara, it is true, was not a conscious Trotskyist. Yet, in his last period in Cuba, Guevara became a critic of bureaucratism and particularly in the so-called 'socialist' countries he had visited. Moreover, he had a book by Trotsky in his knapsack when he was killed in Bolivia in 1967.

In these comments, however, Castro reveals, at best, a one-sided understanding of Stalinism from a 'sociological' and political point of view. The blunder of forced collectivisation, the monstrous purge trials, the annihilation of the last remnants of the heroic Bolshevik party, were not just personal traits of Stalin alone or 'mistakes' but flowed from character of the bureaucratic machine which he personified and represented. Stalin presided over a bureaucratic political counter-revolution, as Trotsky brilliantly analysed, which feared the independent movement of the working class and the ideas of workers' democracy. Fidel Castro distances himself and Che Guevara from Trotsky and his criticisms of Stalinism because his regime, in the final analysis, is also ruled by a bureaucratic elite unaccountable to the masses.

Cuba and its revolution had many different features to the Russian revolution, and Castro is not Stalin. How-

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ever, despite its enormous popularity at the beginning, its weaknesses were evident in the absence of democratic control and management, and a clear class consciousness by the working class and the poor. Castro himself says that, at the beginning, there was 'not yet a socialist awareness'. Throughout his book, moreover, there is no clear perception of the role of the working class – as explained by Marx – as the main agency of the socialist revolution, nor of its role in controlling, together with the peasant poor, the workers' state that is thrown up by the revolution.

He speaks about 1968 but is completely silent about the working class movement in France that year, the greatest general strike in history. He also shamefully passes over the massacres of students, during the same year, in Mexico. At the time, because of diplomatic ties with Mexico – the only state in Latin America to recognise Cuba, at that time – Castro did not say a word about the Mexican government's murderous actions.

Character of Cuban state?

The consequence of this is that the state presided over by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, in the first instance while enormously popular because of the carrying out of a revolution almost in the jaws of the US monster, was not controlled by workers' and peasants' councils, as was the case in Russia in 1917. This historically put its stamp on the Cuban state and kind of society that subsequently emerged.

This is reflected in Castro's thinking about the character of the state he presided over. Under questioning from the author Volker Skierka, Castro bluntly stated: 'I don't believe it is really necessary to have more than one party... How could our country have stood firm if it had been split up into ten pieces?... I think exploitation of one human by another must disappear before you can have real democracy.'

However, without real workers' democracy, the transition to socialism is impossible. The ending of the one-party monopoly, fair elections to genuine workers' councils with the right of all those (including the Trotskyists) to stand in elections, strict control over incomes and the right of recall over all elected officials, are minimum requirements for a democratic workers' state. Without real control and management of the state and society, a bureaucratic machine will inevitably take hold, which ultimately threatens the very existence of the planned economy. This would be a real possibility even in a highly advanced developed economy after a revolution, let alone one like Cuba, which has a gross domestic product just 0.3% the size of the US.

It is true that in the early 1990s, faced with a deteriorating economic situation, an open discussion on the

constitution ensued in Cuba, and constitutional amendments to the national assembly, including a form of direct elections, were proposed. However, this was still on the basis of only one candidate for each seat in parliament. It was a form of 'democracy', which allowed voters to select the candidate from a list but from just one party. In the recent elections of January 2008, there were 614 candidates for 614 seats! At the same time, members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Politburo, and the Council of State, were ultimately subject to the veto, if necessary, of Fidel Castro.

In *My Life*, Fidel Castro seeks to counter the idea that he has such control when commenting on the execution of the army chief Arnoldo Ochoa for alleged drug trafficking. He states: "It was a unanimous decision by the Council of State, which had 31 members... The Council of State has become a judge... The most important thing is that you have to struggle to ensure that every decision is made with consensus of all its members." The fact that in such an important and highly-controversial case a unanimous decision was arrived at by the Council of State says something both about the character of this body and also of the power wielded by Castro.

In the introduction to his book, even Ramonet declares that Castro "makes all the decisions, big and small. Although he consults the political authorities in charge of the party and the government, very respectfully, very professionally during the decision-making process, it is Fidel who finally decides". Castro defends himself against this charge: "Many people treat me like a neighbour, they talk to me." Ultimately, power is wielded, in any state, by leaders and parties. But every leadership, every party, and particularly, in a healthy workers' state, needs strict control to be exercised by the masses from below.

In a healthy workers' state, as existed in Russia between 1917 and 1923, that power was wielded by soviets (councils), with strict limitations in wage differentials, with the right of recall, etc. Unfortunately, that does not yet exist in Cuba. Therefore, the dilemma which confronted the Soviet Union, but on a smaller scale and without the monstrous Stalinist heritage also exists in Cuba. Leon Trotsky posed the question 70 years ago in relation to the Soviet Union: "Will the bureaucrat devour the workers' state, or will the working class clean up the bureaucrat?... The workers fear less, in throwing out the bureaucracy, they will open the way for capitalist restoration."

Growing discontent

For big sections of the population in Cuba, this probably sums up the mood today. Discontent is growing, particularly amongst the new generation; 73% of

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Cuba's population were born after the triumph of the revolution in 1959. The alienation of the new generation risks a 'revolution with no heirs'. The replacement of Fidel Castro by his brother Raúl will not solve the underlying problems. He is associated with the Cuban army, as defence minister.

In the early 1990s, Raúl, faced with austerity conditions, sought to use the army in some 'free-market' experiments; officers were sent to learn hotel management techniques in Spain and accounting in Europe. Raul has visited China, on a number of occasions, to study Beijing's economic policies. Hans Modrow, the last prime minister of the former East German state, the GDR, is currently visiting Cuba to discuss the experiences of his country's transition to capitalism. Raul has also slashed the size of the army, and pushed innovations, such as farmers' markets, self-employment for plumbers, hairdressers and other small-time entrepreneurs. It is through measures like this that the elements of capitalism have already been reintroduced into Cuba, while not yet being in a position to destroy the main features of the planned economy.

There are, undoubtedly, divisions within the bureaucratic elite that controls Cuba. There is a section that wishes to 'open up' to capitalism in a 'democratic' form. Their difficulty is the brutal US Helms-Burton Act. Even those bureaucrats who wish to see the dismantling of the planned economy face the prospect of the Miami refugees under the benediction of US imperialism returning to Cuba: "To hold auctions for state enterprises, selling to the highest bidders" (Wall Street Journal). Unlike East Germany after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, these brutes would forcefully demand the return of all 'their property', including houses occupied by workers and peasants today. Moreover, they would not hesitate to resort to massive bloodletting against anyone associated with the Castro regime.

Events, and particularly the US presidential elections, could have a profound effect on Cuba. Barack Obama has already indicated he will adopt a softer line to America's traditional foes: Cuba, Iran, etc. He or even Hillary Clinton – despite her recent bellicose statements towards the Cuban regime – could act to limit or completely dismantle the embargo. In Florida, the US economic recession is biting, with rows of empty properties. Even the new generation of Miami refugees have softened their previously implacable opposition to ending the embargo.

There is already considerable pressure from farmers, from the tourist trade, not to say McDonald's, for the barriers to come down, so they can take big profitable bites out of Cuba. One hundred US congressmen demanded the embargo is lifted. It is this which is the greatest danger to the remaining elements of the

planned economy in Cuba. Millions of US tourists flooding Cuba, with even a devalued dollar in their pockets, could strike a blow, perhaps a mortal one, at the remaining elements of the planned economy. As Leon Trotsky commented, the real danger to an isolated workers' state lay not in so much in a military invasion but via "cheap goods in the baggage train of imperialism". This 'invasion' of Cuba today would probably take the form of tourism, as well as capitalist investment, if the regime 'opened up' under Raúl or any other leader in the future. This may remain an unlikely prospect, as long as Fidel Castro lives. But a real danger of capitalist restoration, nevertheless, still exists.

Venezuelan oil is a vital lifeline at present for Cuba. But what if the price of oil collapses, as it could with the onset of the world economic recession? Venezuela would be profoundly affected and, consequently, Cuba, as well.

There is, undoubtedly, another wing of the Cuban leadership and the bureaucracy who will fight to maintain a planned economy. Marxists, as Trotsky advocated, while critical, would seek a principled bloc with this layer of the Cuban leadership and the bureaucracy, and seek to mobilise mass Cuban resistance to any threat to return to capitalism.

Workers' democracy

Those, like the British Member of Parliament George Galloway, have a point when they argue that it is the capitalist embargo of Cuba that is an important factor in the lack of democracy on the island. All revolutions – even in the US Civil War – when faced with armed counter-revolution refused to allow its opponents freedom of action under the signboard of 'democracy'. But we are not arguing in Cuba for freedom for the counter-revolution to organise to forcibly overthrow the revolution. Given the advantages of the planned economy – and, especially, if these were spread through a democratic socialist confederation of Venezuela, Bolivia and, perhaps, Ecuador – capitalist counter-revolutionaries, wishing to return to the barbarism of the landlordism and capitalism that exists on the Latin American continent, would find little support.

However, while the prohibition against right-wing capitalist parties wishing to return to capitalism can be a subject of debate, the question of workers' democracy should not. All those who support the planned economy – including Trotskyists and others – should be allowed to operate in Cuba. This should be part of preserving and extending the planned economy. Without workers' democracy, Cuba could be thrown back decades and, with it, the expectations of the socialist revolution in Latin America and world-

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wide could suffer a severe blow. The maintenance of this revolution should not be placed in the hands of one man, no matter how steadfast and courageous, or a group of men and women, but in an aroused, politically-conscious Cuban working class, linked to the masses in Latin America and elsewhere.

This cannot be achieved from above, as the mistakes of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela have shown. Steps should be undertaken now to organise a mass campaign in Cuba to prepare the ground for real workers' democracy. The worldwide crisis of globalised capitalism and the revolt against neo-liberalism in Latin America strengthen the prospect of defending and strengthening the gains of the Cuban revolution. But no time must be lost in the fight for workers' democracy and socialism in Cuba, Venezuela Bolivia and elsewhere.

Fidel Castro – My Life by Fidel Castro, Ignacio Ramonet (Editor) and Andrew Hurley (Translator), Allen Lane, London, 2007 £25.00