



Fidel Castro, 1926-2016

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Fidel Castro, one of the leaders of the Cuban revolution, has died aged 90. He will be mourned by millions especially in the majority of the world still exploited by US and European imperialism with its banks, monopolies, wars and occupations. His death will be celebrated not only by the Cuban exiles in Florida but also by all the world's reactionaries, amongst them President-elect Donald Trump.

For socialists it will be a time for reappraising not only Castro's contribution to the epoch of wars and revolutions, but of the whole history of US imperialism in Latin America and beyond. Alone of the many anti-imperialist regimes that came to power in the continent - from Jacobo Arbenz, in Guatemala 1951 and Salvador Allende in 1970, to Hugo Chavez in 1999, Fidel Castro and his comrades were able to hold on to power and defy the North American colossus at the pinnacle of its power.

This fact alone would account for Cuba's popularity with the millions around the world oppressed and exploited by US and European imperialism. Cuba's half-century of supporting various movements opposed to the US and its allies of course adds to this.

Whatever the critical estimate that revolutionary Marxists - Trotskyists - must make of the Castro regime, both in terms of the repression and the lack of political power of the Cuban working class, and the false strategy for revolution it advocated on a global scale, we must also recognise that for several decades its very existence enormously encouraged resistance.

At home, it was able to conduct highly successful literacy campaigns, greatly expand education and healthcare and end much of the poverty and inequality that characterised the pre-1959 regimes.

Despite suffering a near total blockade, organised from Washington and backed by its puppet regimes in South and Central America, it survived and hurled defiance at the hypocritical 'democrats' in the White House.

For a time, it aided guerrilla movements in Latin America and in Sub-Saharan Africa, including those fighting Apartheid, at a time when Margaret Thatcher was doing all she could behind the scenes to prop up the vile racist regime.

It was able to do so, not only because it originated in a revolution, led by the guerrillas of the July 26 Movement, which received huge popular support from the rural and urban workers in its final phases, but also because the United States itself relentlessly drove Castro and his comrades from their original revolutionary nationalist goals towards anti-capitalist actions in order to defend the gains of the revolution.

Washington was waging its remorseless Cold War against all forms of nationalist or Communist-led liberation movements. It organised numerous coups around the world against even mild bourgeois nationalist regimes (in Brazil, Indonesia, Bolivia, Chile etc.). It waged an unbelievably bloody war in Vietnam for twenty years, causing up to 3 million deaths.

The intransigently counterrevolutionary policy of the US played a major role in creating Cuban Communism. In April 1959, Castro had called both communism and fascism different kinds of 'totalitarianism', declaring that the Cuban

revolution was 'humanist - not red but olive green'. His first government included major bourgeois figures. But Castro's attempt to carry out a limited agrarian reform immediately led to sabotage by the big landowners and US companies who controlled large parts of the land and sugar processing.

Castro was obliged to mobilise the rural and urban workers to counter this and his bourgeois ministers resigned. Over the next year or so he had to nationalise more and more of the economy, 80 per cent of industry by the end of 1960. A US trade embargo was then slapped on Cuba. The USSR, seeing a strategic opportunity, stepped in to help. In 1961, a planning agency was created on the Soviet model. Effectively, Cuba had become the first Communist state in the Americas, '90 miles from Miami'.

In so doing, Cuba was saved from collapse or invasion, after the CIA's Bay of Pigs fiasco of 1961 and the missile crisis of 1962. Between 1961 and 1963, the July 26 Movement fused with the Cuban Communist Party. The consequence of this was the creation of a dictatorship not just over the pro-capitalist forces in the island but over the working class, too. The suppression of the Cuban Trotskyists and independent trade unions quickly followed. Although the revolution adopted progressive policies in relation to women's rights, it led to a worsening of the situation for LGBT people, which was to last for decades.

It is indisputably true that, without having expropriated the Cuban bourgeoisie and the North American capitalists who owned much of Cuba, without nationalising the means of production, installing a monopoly of foreign trade and instituting a Stalinist-model bureaucratic plan, independent Cuba could not have survived for long. Not long, that is, unless it had inspired and promoted a wave of proletarian revolutions across the continent.

This the Castro regime did not do, for all its populist trappings and despite Che Guevara's heroic adventures in the mid-1960s. Thus, this bureaucratic dictatorship was, at the same time, an obstacle to proletarian revolution both in Cuba and internationally. Castro revealed himself to be a regular Stalinist during his visit to Chile in 1971 where, despite his rapturous reception, he endorsed Allende's peaceful parliamentary road and warned him against too many 'socialist' and anti-capitalist measures.

Guevara, it seems, did believe that internationalising the Cuban model of revolution was essential but his unshakable belief in the 'guerrilla foco' strategy, doomed his efforts which, in any case, the Soviet Union and Castro himself did not really support. Nevertheless, the Cuban Revolution, alongside the heroic Vietnamese resistance to US imperialism, played a major role, in the 1960s and 1970s, in radicalising new generations of anti-imperialists and revolutionary socialists. Of course, it also played a negative role in reviving the very tarnished revolutionary credentials of Stalinism, given the glamour of Castro himself, Guevara, Ho Chi Minh and Mao. Therefore many of those young revolutionaries took the wrong path and sizeable 'revolutionary parties' and movements ended in disaster.

Last, but not least, the Cuban revolution, as embodied by Fidel and Che, played a role in speeding up the degeneration of the Trotskyist movement embodied by The Fourth International. It had already collapsed into centrism by adapting to Tito and Mao when they fell out with the Kremlin. The majority, the United Secretariat, adapted programmatically to Castroism, abandoning the necessity of a political revolution in Cuba and Vietnam and even refusing to defend the Cuban Trotskyists, the POR, when they were repressed and imprisoned by Castro himself.

For them, Cuba simply lacked 'the forms of proletarian democracy, that is, soviets, which could be added later in a process of reform. In addition, they briefly, but catastrophically, adopted a guerrillaist strategy in Latin America. Most of those Trotskyists who did not fall for Guevarism and Castroism, failed to recognise Cuba as a state in which capitalism had been overthrown and thus defend its gains.

The downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism in China put Cuba between a rock and hard place. The US stepped up its blockade, hoping to promote a similar collapse in Cuba. The anti-US morale of the Cubans, however, sustained the regime, which also relaxed some of its economically hyper-centralised and repressive features.

The "Bolivarian revolution" of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela provided a mutually beneficial opening for Cuba in the form of cheap oil in return for the waves of Cuban doctors who helped the "Bolivarian missions" bring healthcare to the shantytowns of the country. The "pink wave" across the continent also brought Cuba in from the cold. Deals with China also helped.

However, after Fidel handed over power to his brother, Raul Castro, the process of opening up to the capitalist world economy and implementing "market reforms" escalated and growing inequality has been the result. As elsewhere, such a reform process can only have one end; the restoration of capitalism. Raul's bureaucracy clearly has this in mind but prefers the Chinese route to the Russian, that is, with the ruling bureaucracy retaining absolute power.

Barack Obama's visit clearly indicated that a section of US capital now favours a turn from blockade to an invasion of US consumer goods and investment as the quickest route to restoration. Trump has declared his hostility to this opening.

So, if the Cuban proletariat does not carry out a political revolution by ousting the Castroite bureaucracy and in the process create organs of workers' democracy (soviets) then Cuba will end up being re-subjected to capitalism and imperialism and, given geography, probably to the harsh hegemony of the USA once again. It seems sections of young people are opposed to this and it is the task of revolutionary Trotskyists to win them to the perspective of a renewed revolution that defends the gains of 1959-61 against internal counterrevolution and imperialism and spreads this strategy internationally.

Lessons

The bourgeoisie and its media around the world, whether in "balanced" accounts or in anti-communist rants, will take Castro's death as a symbol for the final end of the "century of revolutions". They will use it to make propaganda for the idea that every attempt to overturn capitalism must eventually fail and every country that tries it will revert to capitalism once again, that every social revolution is essentially utopian. Reformist socialists of all varieties will draw exactly the same conclusion.

However, the lessons the working class needs to draw are totally different;

? The Cuban revolution demonstrated that a bourgeois dictatorship, backed by the mightiest imperialist power the world has ever seen, can be defeated by courageous and determined struggle. The working class and rural population can mobilise to defeat an enemy that seems invincible

? Cuba demonstrated that, in order to succeed, the revolution has to take state power, smash the armed forces of the old regime and expropriate the capitalist class, if it wants to make its gains permanent and to defend them against the unavoidable onslaught of counter-revolution.

? But Cuba and Castroism also demonstrate that even the overthrow of capitalism, if it does not lead to the working class itself exercising political power through workers' councils, can create an obstacle to further advances that will eventually undermine the gains of the revolution itself. If power remains in the hands of a bureaucracy, this caste will either lead it to eventual economic and political collapse or restore capitalism itself.

? Cuba's history also proves that, despite the heroism of the masses and real social achievements and even the original intentions of some Cuban revolutionaries themselves, socialism cannot be built in one isolated country. If this was true of vast countries like the Soviet Union and China, all the more so was it the case with Cuba.

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