

Cuba: A dangerous and contradictory document

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In preparing, for April 2011, its Sixth Congress, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) has published a document on economic and social questions which, for friends of the Cuban revolution, gives rise to strong concerns, and for the population of island is a brutal and demoralizing blow. Unfortunately, outside of the enemies of the revolutionary process, who have welcomed the difficulties it is experiencing, it is hard to find any analysis or opinions about the course being taken by the Cuban revolution, whose role is decisive for the process of liberation of all Latin America. That is why, within the limits of a short article, I would like to put forward some general considerations, a rapid examination of what seems to me to be most dangerous in the document of the CCP and also some brief thoughts on what could be an alternative orientation to this document.

Subordination of the party to the state

First of all, I consider that to follow with attention and passion what is happening and what could happen in Cuba is not only a right but a duty of every socialist and every Latin American who fights for the independence of our countries and for the national and social liberation of the continent. Because what happens in Cuba is too important and too serious for the discussion to be confined to Cubans.

Secondly, it seems to me that if a congress is convened in April 2011, which is supposed to be the forum for consultation and decision, it is not possible to start already to apply fundamental and irreversible measures in many areas of economic activity, placing everyone before a fait accompli and the congress itself in the dubious role of approving and legitimizing resolutions adopted by some members of the state apparatus. The unfortunate merger of the Communist Party and the state subordinates the former to the latter and makes it adopt the logic of the necessities of state, thus nullifying its role of critic and guardian, let alone its indirect role as spokesperson for workers, expressing their views and their needs.

For, as Lenin pointed out, the state is, even after the revolution, a class instrument, the expression of the continuing influence of the capitalist world market, the values and the methods of bourgeois domination. This means a party (and unions) to defend the special rights of workers including against "their" state and, therefore, not submitting to it. The fact that the economic and social programme that we are examining is exclusively a bureaucratic-state document, that its proclaimed goal is to strengthen institutionalization and the reform of state and government, once again underlines subordination of the party to the state. If institutionalization is understood as the

limitation of arbitrariness and voluntarism, which disrupt the economy and cause waste, mismanagement and loss of control, facilitating corruption and bureaucracy, we cannot forget that the state is not only a bureaucratic-administrative or repressive apparatus, but also a social relationship. Therefore, a reform of the state must give more weight to the organs of direct democracy, to workers who are at the same time consumers, producers and builders of socialism, in other words they are not just subjects or passive objects of resolutions imposed from above. Moreover, by definition, a revolutionary process is not synonymous with institutionalization but implies renovation and profound democratization of power structures, to allow the expression of the divergence that still exists within this ever-present dual power between the revolution (the workers, in the widest sense of the term) and the significant expressions of capitalism (such as the state apparatus, which aims to exert control in the old way).

The fact that the document for the next congress of the PCC, although it is centred on economic restructuring, does not mention the workers (or even the unions which are, in the bureaucratic state apparatus, its transmission belt to the workers) seems to me to be very serious. Moreover, in the 32 pages of the document, the term "socialist" only appears three times, there is no mention of the bureaucracy, of its extension or its divisions (which every Cuban sees as a serious problem), nor of producers' democracy ... It does not even explain who will choose the producers who will be declared "available", whereas no less than 20 per cent of the workforce is concerned. As for the popular, democratic organisms of control and planning, they shine only by their absence.

It is just as serious that this document is not accompanied by a document of the party on the current phase of the world economy, on Cuban society, on the social and political perils of a much greater opening of the free market on the island and on the opening of Cuba to the world market. It would be useful to go over the reasons that have imposed such radical and drastic measures (including, among other things, in a self-critical way, the errors of the party and government, between two congresses, over the last 40 years) and to prepare the party and the workers to cope with dangers that will come from the strengthening of bourgeois sectors and capitalist values, to define perspectives for them - which has not been done. It is undeniable that the brutality of capitalist attacks and the global crisis may make it necessary to abandon conquests and to retreat. But there is no need to conceal such retreats or even less, to present as if they had been negative the egalitarian gains that we are forced to abandon because of the oppression of the world market.

A break... in the bureaucratic continuity

What does the document presented to the Sixth Congress of the PCC say? I will try to briefly summarize the 32 pages of text.

Point 17 states that they will try and get rid of the rigid economic functioning governed by the budget. Point 19, that the incomes of workers in the state sector will depend on the results obtained by their respective companies (or on the ability or inability of the respective leaders and Ministries and on the profitability of their business from the point of view of the market).

Point 23 stipulates that each enterprise will set the prices for its products and services and will be able to offer discounts (which opens the road to fierce competition between enterprises and between regions and every sort of favouritism and cronyism); point 35 announces the municipal decentralization of production, which will now be subject to municipal administrative councils (but it does not say who will select and monitor them). Point 44 states that it will be necessary to reduce the expansion of services, which will now depend on the general functioning of the economy; point 45, that it will be necessary to reduce imports of production goods and products for industry and

that imports will depend on the availability of foreign exchange.

Among the principal economic decisions, the document says that the problem of the circulation of two currencies (the Cuban peso and the CUC) will have to be studied and that the decision will be made when the state of the economy makes it possible (let us remember that the Cuban economy has been in crisis for thirty years). It is also said that subsidies and free services as the norm will be eliminated (or it will be a question of eliminating policies that support the consumption of the poorest sectors, those who do not receive dollars from abroad and or cannot obtain them in any other way in Cuba, legally or illegally).

In very vague terms the document formulates the necessity and the hope of facilitating access to bank loans and savings, as well as the objective of obtaining from countries that receive solidarity aid from Cuba at least the equivalent of the cost of this aid (which not only transforms solidarity into service provision but also runs counter to the ability of those countries which, like Haiti, suffer from large scale natural or health disasters). Special Development Zones will also be created (we can only assume that those who set up businesses there will benefit from tax reductions or exemptions and other privileges).

Paragraph 65 says that the country will pay its debts promptly (in order to win the confidence of investors and obtain new loans, which suggests that this will be the priority of state finances - not the support of the domestic economy and the standard of living of Cubans). In this context, it is a question of reducing "excessive charges" in the official sphere (leaving the definition of what is "excessive" to the discretion of functionaries). Furthermore, the number of academics will be determined by the performance of the economy and the universities should prepare especially technicians and professionals for the productive sectors of the economy, in relation with the market. Point 142 stipulates that the conditions for workers to study "should take into account the worker's free time and be based on his or her personal effort" (i.e., without grants or scholarships, time off, incentives and facilities).

Point 158 decides to develop services provided by self-employed economic actors - "working on their own account" (without specifying how to help prepare these self-employed workers, how they can obtain premises, something which the housing crisis makes problematic, or how they will be supplied with tools and material to work with). Point 159 adds that "we will develop processes to make people available for work" (that is to say, radical reductions of personnel). Although this document does not state it, additional resolutions on this subject say that a worker with 30 years seniority in a company will receive 60 per cent of their wages for 5 months after being laid off and that those with seniority less will receive less. Point 161 speaks of the need to reduce "unwarranted free goods and services and excessive personal allowances" (who will decide what is unwarranted or excessive?). Point 162 refers to the "orderly elimination" of the ration book (which, according to the document, is also used by those who do not require it and thus "promotes the black market"). Point 164 establishes that workers' canteens will from now on operate with non-subsidized prices (with no extra pay in compensation). Point 169 frees the various forms of (agricultural) cooperatives from state mediation and control. Point 177 specifies that the pricing of most products will depend on supply and demand. Point 184 says that investments will be concentrated "on the most efficient producers" (and not on the sectors that are most socially useful). Point 230 announces that electricity tariffs will be revised upward. Neither self-employed - "on their own account" - workers nor cooperatives will be subsidized. Point 248 calls for measures to reduce the consumption of water by tourists because of the drought (which, incidentally, contrasts with the promotion of tourism - the tourists use the swimming pools, they want the gardens to be watered, they counter the heat by taking frequent showers - and with the decision to establish big 18-hole golf courses, which are voracious consumers of water).

None of the articles mentions the reduction of the costs of the armed forces or those of the top bureaucracy. Ecological projects (organic farming, development of alternative energy sources) depend on the sole responsibility of the state (popular participation in land use is not foreseen and, moreover, there is no question of going beyond the consumption pattern established by capitalism, in other words of using the crisis as an opportunity to experiment with alternative production and consumption).

I think the document I have just summarized speaks for itself. So I will confine myself to counterposing to it an alternative that is democratic and socialist, possible and realistic.

An outline of an alternative

It is certain that this document attempts to “restart” the Cuban economy by eliminating the charges that, in the current situation, have become unbearable, and by correcting the serious voluntaristic errors of the past. But it does it with a conception that is narrowly local, nationalist, abandoning any perspective in world politics. And it does it in a way that is brutal, bureaucratic and undemocratic, abrupt and terribly late, under the pressure of the crisis and not voluntarily, in an arrogant way and without the slightest self-criticism. The document also ignores the social, political and legal consequences of the measures proposed and the need for them to be understood and explained so that people become aware of them. Moreover, such measures strengthen bureaucratic privileges and prepare the conditions for rapid social polarization and the transformation of part of the Cuban bureaucracy into the seeds of a local bourgeoisie, and even the conditions for an interlocking of this bourgeoisie with the world market (and imperialism). Furthermore, the document does not refer in any way to the repressive apparatus and the partisan press, so poor and remote from reality, in other words, to the main instruments of domination.

To live (and to survive the blockade) for twenty years, Cuba spent more than it produced and survived because it was drip-fed by the Soviet economy, which compensated for what was missing. Fidel and Raul Castro, as well as the vast majority of the leaders, made a virtue of necessity because they were convinced that the Stalinized Soviet Union would last forever. The moral and political cost was immense. Cuba supported the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968; Fidel praised Brezhnev as a great Marxist. Imports from the Soviet Union were not limited to weapons and technology but were extended to the training of cadres, in imitation of the ideology, way of life and way of solving problems of inefficient, authoritarian and corrupt bureaucrats that led the “socialist countries” to their ruin and discredited socialism. The country was able to raise to a very considerable degree its level of culture and health, but because of this dependency, it did not create an industrial base or the most advanced technology, with the exception of the medical sector. And voluntarism caused endless waste. It created a simulation of full employment, hiding the existence of a vast layer of unproductive workers and the devaluation of real wages and of labour power, which remains a commodity. Now, when they are forced to confront the reality of the economy, those who are themselves responsible for the disaster not only do not make any self-criticism, but cling to the helm, leaving the victims of the shipwreck to fend for themselves “on their own account.”

What prevents labour collectives themselves reducing production costs, rationalizing and deciding for themselves where to reduce staff and what cuts in wages to make? Why let the market decide wages, according to the profit earned by economic activity, so that, for example, a hotel employee earns much more than a nurse or a teacher, because these essential services are by definition rights and non-profit making activities? Why not reduce the salaries and privileges of the top levels of the state apparatus, civilian and military? If it is not possible to maintain the wages (which are, moreover, ridiculous, not giving access to a decent level of consumption) of millions of people,

unproductive or not very productive, it should also be applicable to the top bureaucracy, so luxuriant and so unproductive. Why not allow local neighbourhood committees, street committees, to have control over privileges, corruption, waste, and smuggling? Why not open up the press to the denunciation of bureaucratic abuses and inefficiencies and to a discussion on how to make less costly and more efficient the distribution of goods of which there is insufficient quantity?

Popular participation is essential, because while the majority of the Cuban bourgeoisie has already left the country, as the Miami rapper sings in El Mariel, now with the new measures there will arise what Lenin called during the NEP “sovietbourgs” which, like the Venezuelan “bolibourgeoisie” will be like radishes, red on the outside and white inside, with their substance well hidden underground. Only rank-and-file committees, organizations of popular control, workers’ councils, generalized social self-management, are capable of effectively combating the crisis and the development of social inequalities. Because these inequalities will be reinforced by the inevitable strengthening of authoritarianism, which is certainly the product of the imperialist blockade of Cuba, but also of the need to compensate for the loss of consensus which is affecting the government, with the loss of people’s hope in the construction of socialism, which could mobilize youth.

Those who oppose democracy do not aspire to socialism, because socialism is impossible without democracy. Those who dismiss self-management and workers’ and social democracy, popular control, favour the demoralizing and destructive power of bureaucracy and technocracy, a power founded on the values of capitalism and not socialism. The nationalization of small shops and the artisan sector was a very serious mistake. This can be remedied, even though it is already very late, by fostering the creation of cooperatives with the assistance of credit and technical facilities. But in order to have an alliance of the state sector with the sector of small production, directed by and towards the market, and to prevent the resurgence of the bourgeoisie within it, the state must offer technical support, a campaign of cultural solidarity, strengthen direct democracy directly, eliminating or minimizing as far as possible the apparatuses and the bosses.

The Cuban people will save itself. It does not need a supreme saviour, on earth or in heaven. What the Sixth Congress of the PCC should develop is a broad debate in all sectors, on the problems, emergencies, priorities, available resources and possible solutions in the framework of democracy and socialism. Without Cubans being fully aware of the role of Cuba in the world and what are the immediate perspectives, without a self-critical assessment of their own past and of “real socialism” and without complete freedom of opinion and criticism, it will not be possible to rebuild the economy or restore public confidence.

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P.S.

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article he wrote in three installments in La Jornada.

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