

Cuba, Socialism and Democracy

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In January 2011, members of the Participatory and Democratic Socialism Movement proposed that the Cuban Communist Party adopt its “Proposals for the Advance of Socialism in Cuba.” (“Socialism and the ‘Citizens’ Demand for Another Cuba,” Pedro Campos, *Havana Times*, June 24, 2012) [[1](#)] These socialist critics of the Cuban regime offered a program of radical democratic proposals including full freedom of speech and press, freedom of association (including parties and unions), freeing of political prisoners and the like—while supporting the continued criminalization of receiving foreign “aid” that seeks to undermine the Cuban “constitutional order.” Not surprisingly, the Cuban party congress—which approved massive lay-offs from the public sector—rejected these proposals.

Many leftist defenders of the Cuban regime argue that such proposals reflect “perfectionism.” – They claim that socialists like those who support *Havana Times* (or *New Politics*) are engaged in a “Platonic” exercise of defining some sort of “ideal” socialist society– and condemning all deviations from that ideal. Is this the case?

The critique of the absence of effective democratic workers power in the post-capitalist societies of the 20th century (and those that survived into the 21st century) is not a “deviation from the ideal,” but an assessment of *the structural root of the crisis and collapse of these societies*. Most of us who have been critical of all of these societies, including Cuba, never argued that only a fully nationalized and planned economy where workers democratically make any and all economic decisions was the only acceptable form of socialism. Instead, we argued that the shifting boundary between planning and market mechanisms—which characterizes the transition to socialism—*must be determined democratically* as should all fundamental economic decisions. In order for working people to be able to determine both the boundary between market and plan and the fundamental goals of economic planning there must be, *at the minimum*, the right to form competing political parties/formations that put forward different proposals, free speech/press for all who *do not take up arms* against the regime, the ability to form independent trade unions and organizations of women, the racially oppressed, LGBT people, etc.

Some have claimed that the repression in Cuba is justified by the demands of fighting the threat of counter-revolution. Since the early 1970s, however, one would be hard pressed to find examples of armed opposition to the Cuban regime that would justify its repression of non-violent political dissidents.

Others cite such institutions as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), the unions, and the elected popular assemblies in the neighborhoods and workplaces as examples of Cuba’s revolutionary democracy. The CDRs are not open to all Cubans who seek to defend the revolution. Instead, they are much more limited in their membership and goals. Only those who are judged “ideologically integrated” by their local Communist Party organizations are permitted to join the CDRs. The main tasks of the CDRs is to root out those who are “ideologically suspect”—whether or not they are engaged in armed political activity—and to aid in the administration of rationing and other social and economic tasks. Many commentators have argued that the CDRs are simply extensions of Cuban State Security (the political police). In any case, participation in the CDRs declined sharply since the 1990s, especially in Havana, as more and more Cubans have had to work

longer hours in official and unofficial jobs to make enough to subsist.

The Cuban unions are almost identical to those that existed in the other dictatorial post-capitalist societies. The Cuban unions, like their Soviet, Eastern European and Chinese counterparts, are not allowed to strike or take other direct action in defense of workers' interests. The question of whether revolutionary socialists would advocate strike action in a democratic workers' state is an important one. However, unions that do not have the right to strike cannot act as an effective counterweight to the state managers and planners—the role that Lenin envisioned for independent unions during the debates with Trotsky (who advocated the bureaucratic “statization” of the unions) and the “Workers’ Opposition” (who advocated trade union administration of the economy) in 1921. Instead, the Cuban unions act as “transmission belts” between the party and the workers—encouraging workers to fulfill production quotas, accept managerial authority and the like. Put simply, the Cuban unions function as an extension of the unaccountable and undemocratic party-state management in Cuban workplaces, not as independent voices of the workers.

Finally, there are the elected popular assemblies created by the Cuban Constitution of 1976. Despite what some have claimed, these assemblies do not mark a radical departure from forms of popular participation that existed in the other post-capitalist societies. Like elected assemblies in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe or China at various points in their history, the Cuban popular assemblies have extremely limited powers. At best, they have “input” into national economic and social decisions (production goals, boundary of market and plan). For the most part, they decide how to implement decisions made “from above” in unelected, unaccountable institutions. In sum, the popular assemblies allow millions of Cubans to participate but not control political and social life. The French students and workers in 1968 understood the difference in their slogan “I participate, you participate, they profit.” In the case of post-capitalist Cuba, the slogan could easily be modified to “I participate, you participate, they decide.” Today, the website *Havana Times* is filled with stories of the repression of the most elemental forms of non-violent free speech and free association on the island. In late May, some sixty left-wing dissidents organized the sixth “National Critical Observatory Social Forum”—the independent Cuban social forum. Raising slogans like “Socialism Is Democracy,” “Kick out the Bureaucracy,” “Down with Capitalisms,” “If You Think Like the Bourgeoisie, You’ll Live Like a Slave,” and “Let’s Make Our Revolution,” these dissidents discussed the looming destruction of guaranteed employment and the need for greater self-organization in Cuba. The authorities, after initially granting the use of state facilities, shut the meeting down early. (“Cuba Social Forum Successful, but Cut Short,” Isabel Diaz, *Havana Times*, June 3, 2012). Access to the internet remains prohibitively expensive for most Cubans (“So Now We Have Internet Access in Cuba?” Daisy Valera, *Havana Times*, May 21, 2012).

In the absence of such minimal democratic controls, what we got in the post-capitalist societies of the 20th century was a form of social production that was able to initiate extensive growth—the multiplication of means of production and labor based on the import of existing technology from the capitalist west. The result was a rapid quantitative increase in both producer and consumer goods. Extensive growth, combined with economic planning and attempts to shield the command economies from international competition, allowed the growth of popular living standards for a period of time, including extensive “welfare states” (guaranteed employment, inexpensive housing, free medical care, etc.)—the concrete gains workers made in these societies.

While the unaccountable officials of the party and state were able to promote extensive economic growth, however, they were unable to translate this into *intensive growth*—the continuous growth of labor productivity through the introduction of new and more sophisticated means of production and the continuous improvement in the quality of producer and consumer goods. Bureaucratic privilege and secrecy systematically undermined the planning process, leading to massive waste of labor and resources and chronic problems of quality. Lacking either the discipline of the market

(competition forces capitalist firms to lower costs through the introduction of labor saving technology) or the democratic control of the producers (workers' have a stake in reducing their labor time through the introduction of labor saving technique), these authoritarian command economies—including Cuba's—experienced economic stagnation beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hyper-centralism in economic planning combined with voluntarist calls for the masses to work harder and sacrifice consumption and working conditions for the "good of the revolution" in the mid-1960s (when Che shaped economic policy), the early 1970s (the "10 million ton" sugar harvest) and again in the late 1980s and early 1990s (the "exceptional period" after the collapse of the Soviet Unions) all failed to produce the sustained intensive growth necessary to support the growth of collective services in Cuba. Faced with a growing economic and social crisis, the officialdom was compelled to reintroduce market mechanisms—greater independence for factory managers in obtaining inputs and selling outputs, the ability of managers to keep "profits" which were often shared with their workers, greater openness to international capitalist investment, etc. These experiments in "market socialism" did little to solve the deepening crisis of these societies. On the one hand, "market reforms" did not bring new, intensive economic growth because individual factory managers were never faced with the possibility of bankruptcy if they failed to "turn a profit." On the other hand, the expansion of the market brought greater social and economic inequalities between the bureaucracy and the workers, between sectors of the economy and among different regions. Combined with continued political repression and the inability of workers to organize their own independent institutions, the "market reforms" set the stage for capitalist restoration in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. Today, the Cuban party-state regime is preparing to abolish *one of the central popular gains of the revolution*—guaranteed employment and income. While massive lay-offs in the state sector are looming, real wages are stagnant and the ration card—which guaranteed consumer goods like tobacco and personal hygiene items outside the marketplace—is slowly being abolished. The regime has begun charging for formerly free workplace-based child-care, and cafeterias are also massively underfunded, leading to a sharp decline in quality. ("The Cat Test," Daisy Valera, *Havana Times*, May 30, 2012).

The absence of workers' democracy—the ability of the working class through formal democratic institutions to effectively control economic and social life—lay at the root of the crises of the bureaucratic post-capitalist societies. The suppression of democratic rights—the right to organize politically, free press, free speech, etc.—did not prevent capitalist restoration in the east. In fact, the repression of all political dissent, whatever its political and ideological complexion, undermined the ability of pro-working class and socialist forces to organize a democratic, socialist alternative. Instead, only pro-market—pro-capitalist—political forces appeared to be the consistent advocate of "democracy" in these societies. In all of these cases, *a wing of the old Communist party officialdom*—not pro-western dissident intellectuals—led the counter-revolution under the banner of "democracy" and the "market".

For many of us, the evidence indicates that Cuba is proceeding along the same lines, toward a party-state led restoration of capitalism. In the past two decades, the party leadership has encouraged the private sector on the island, with the Cuban army (headed by Raul Castro) initiating joint-ventures with European, Canadian and Israeli transnational corporations in tourism, mining and agriculture. Not surprisingly, the Cuban press glorifies the Chinese model of "socialism"—a restoration of capitalism under the repressive leadership of the Communist Party. This reality has not been lost on the leading representatives of U.S. imperialism. In late 2010, Wikileaks revealed [2] that the Obama-Clinton State Department—including the US interest section chief in Havana—had concluded that the pro-Miami exile dissidents on the island had little support and the best hope for capitalist restoration in Cuba was found in the Cuban Communist Party!

Put simply, the absence of any minimal democratic rights in Cuba facilitates the restoration of capitalism, undermining the ability of working people on the island to organize against the Cuban party-state's steps to end guaranteed employment, free health care and open the Cuban economy to the ravages of the world market.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] The Havana Times is not published in Cuba, where censorship of independent sources continues, but outside the island.

[2] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/12/17/us-cuba-dissidents-wikileaks-idUSTRE6BG1NJ20101217>