

# Cuba: protests raise need for a socialist perspective

Markus Lehner Fri, 16/07/2021 - 10:55

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On Saturday, July 10, several bloggers arranged to meet at noon the next day in San Antonio de los Baños, a suburb of Havana, to protest against the extreme shortage of basic necessities in Cuba. In the course of Sunday, this spontaneous protest in one small town spread, via social media, to Palma Soriano, Holguín, Camagüey, Santiago de Cuba and to Havana. The mass demonstrations echoed those in 1994 on the city's seafront promenade, the Malecón.

Different places saw different forms of protest, from peaceful demonstrations to looting, as well as different slogans. The unifying factor, however, was despair at the lack of basic necessities, frequent power cuts (especially outside Havana) and the increasingly serious pandemic situation, including shortages of medicines.

The protests reached such a scale that the broadcast of the European Championship final on state television was interrupted for a speech by the president Miguel Díaz-Canel. In it, he acknowledged the problems raised by protesters but explained that they were caused by the USA's blockade, intended to provoke precisely such a protest movement.

Accordingly, he called for counter-protests to "save the Cuban revolution" and the security forces were deployed to suppress the protests. The internet and social media were temporarily blocked. A large number of well-known opposition figures (including from left-wing and LGTBQ+ groups) were arrested and detained. These pro-government demonstrations also brought thousands onto the streets and led to the break-up of the less well-organised, anti-government protests.

The USA and the EU immediately sided with the anti-government protests, declaring them to be a movement "for democracy and human rights". The US in particular pretended that its sanctions had nothing to do with the shortages in Cuba which were due entirely to the "mismanagement" of the Cuban government.

Right-wing regimes in Latin America, such as that of the Brazilian president Bolsonaro, also declared their solidarity with the "fight against brutal dictatorship". This, despite the fact that the supply and medical situation in Brazil is far worse than in Cuba. Only Mexico, Venezuela and Argentina promised immediate aid to remedy the acute supply problems. Military intervention by imperialism is not entirely out of the question, but Russia, which is once again the most important investor alongside China, has warned the USA against any intervention in Cuba.

Meanwhile, the Cuban government responded to the protest movement by making some economic concessions; lifting some foreign exchange controls and restrictions on people entering Cuba (especially related to tourism) as well as relaxations of rationing. Some opposition figures were also released, and a

"dialogue" was promised to the protesters.

This shows that the government is seeking to calm the situation not just by repression, but also through concessions and incorporation of sections of the opposition. Whether this will work, or even encourage more mobilisations, is unclear. Fundamentally, the question is which forces in the movement, and the population more generally, will predominate. One thing is certain, however: the social causes that brought thousands onto the streets will not disappear.

## Protest movement

A number of leftists believe that this protest movement can only be a new "colour revolution", a "democracy movement" manipulated by imperialism to overthrow a left-wing government. They can certainly point to several such attempts in Latin America: Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador. What speaks against this scenario, however, is that the movement was certainly spontaneous in its origins, is far too heterogeneous in its makeup and its demands cannot be reduced to an attempt to "overthrow the regime".

While it is clear that this could change, the participation of left, socialist and LGBT+ groups suggests that the movement could also take a very different, progressive direction. The broad protest against the arrest of Frank Garcia Hernández (an activist behind the "Comunistas Blog") also shows that this left current also has real roots, at least in Havana.

Without any doubt, the immediate trigger for the protests is the current economic situation in Cuba. All of Latin America is currently being hit by a severe economic crisis, and Cuba is not exempt from this. In this respect, mass protests across the entire continent are not unusual.

The situation in Cuba, however, has been shaped for decades by the US economic blockade, which was tightened by Trump. In particular, the ban on dollar transfers by Cubans living abroad has made the struggle for daily survival even more difficult for many Cubans. This has now been compounded by the 70 percent slump in tourism, caused by covid which has further depleted sources of foreign exchange.

Ironically, continued tourism, for example, from Russia, has been large enough to fuel a further wave of the pandemic. The shortage of foreign currency is also a problem given the country's high dependence on imports, including some 80 percent of basic foodstuffs. This has resulted in a large foreign debt (\$200 million), which just led to an agreement with creditors in June.

This also explains why the Cuban government has had to resort to rationing and electricity cuts. China, in particular, is proving to be a relentless creditor, insisting on punctual payment or enforcing penalty clauses. The Cuban government thus remains squeezed between the US blockade, pressure from creditors and the growing dissatisfaction of the population. In the week before the protests, the state shops even ran out of flour.

It is therefore clear that the first demand of socialists all over the world must be: an end to all sanctions and blockades against Cuba and cancellation of all foreign debts! In view of the difficult situation, there must also be food aid, with no strings attached, and supplies of the raw materials to facilitate pharmaceutical and vaccine production. Cuba has well-developed production facilities for these, but they are currently heavily oriented to exports, for example, to China. Although Cuba has itself developed two very effective corona vaccines, increased production again requires imports of raw materials. The rapid vaccination campaign planned by the government, which could lead to an easing of tensions, is itself dependent on such imports. Moreover, other countries, especially in Latin America, could also benefit from this vaccine production.

Certainly, therefore, much of the economic crisis in Cuba comes from the outside, but the problems are also a long-term result of the failed model of "socialism in one island". Such a high demand for imports of vital products shows how little Cuba was able to overcome the one-sided, sugar-based economy it inherited from the colonial and post-colonial period, even with the support of "fraternal socialist countries" from the 1960s to the 1980s. It remained dependent on an agricultural monoculture, with continued low development of self-sufficiency for essential agricultural and industrial products.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this unfavourable economic structure has been exacerbated by a heavy dependence on tourism and the export of nickel and its medical products and services. After the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the economic policy of the Castro regime was characterised by zigzags: allowing private entrepreneurship to a certain extent and relaxing monetary policy, "dollarisation", for some, then repeatedly tightening state controls.

The latter were used to patch up the inevitable consequences of the government's ever more extensive market-economy reforms. The increase in social inequality in Cuba, a potent driving force in the protest movement, is thus a result of an economic course that objectively prepares the ground for capitalism, further undermines "socialism" and makes it increasingly discredited.

Ultimately, the bureaucratic planning that continues to dominate the economy, and is the source of government control, remains completely dependent on obtaining foreign currency and servicing foreign debts. The reforms necessary for that mean that certain strata, who can procure foreign currency or work in important export and tourism sectors, can live quite well, while for the rest of the population the supply situation is becoming increasingly difficult.

The core of a solution to the long-term problems therefore lies in a fundamental democratisation and transformation of economic planning. Priorities must be changed to guaranteeing basic services and, for this, a long-term plan democratically drawn up and controlled by the workers must be enforced. It is also clear that such a shift away from dependent development cannot be managed by Cuba alone - such a conversion of the economy will be easier the more countries in Latin America can adopt a socialist path and be won over to a democratic plan of economic reconstruction encompassing the whole region.

In short, the isolation of Cuba from the development of an international revolution must be overcome. There can be no socialism built in one country. If this was not possible in the USSR or China it is a utopia in tiny Cuba. A workers' state founded on workers' democracy, however, could hold out and be both an inspiration and an assistance to revolutionaries worldwide and in Latin America in particular. That is why Cuba must be defended against all US attempts to restore capitalism.

The Cuban CP government will not propose any such radicalisation and democratisation of economic planning even with its "dialogue offer". On the contrary. From the beginning, the Cuban revolution was afflicted with the problem that the party and state bureaucracy monopolised political power, so the workers' state was bureaucratically degenerate from the start. The rule of this bureaucracy is itself an obstacle to further development towards socialism and, as the market economic reforms show, threatens to undermine and destroy even the gains of the revolution.

This is another reason why protesting against the social consequences of this policy is not only legitimate, but ultimately also a prerequisite for real change. Within the movement, which political direction it should take is itself a question of struggle, of political confrontation not only with the forces loyal to the government but also among the disaffected and the protesters.

Especially in view of the crisis of state economic policy, it is to be feared that many will see "more market"

as the easiest solution. However, as the experience of capitalist restoration elsewhere shows, this exacerbates the problems for the majority of the population. The bodies that are now being formed, whether for dialogue with the government or for honest protest against supply problems, must become democratic forums for discussion on the way out of the crisis, on the practical transformation of production and distribution in the factories and neighbourhoods, in short, the basis of workers' control bodies that can also take control of the planning institutions.

Such organs can be the basis for groups like the Comunistas blog, other revolutionary socialist groups or left activists in the LGBTIAQ movement to fight the counter-revolutionary tendencies in the protest movement and to work for the overthrow of the rule of the bureaucracy and for the Cuban revolution to advance towards a truly democratic planned economy.

What is clear in any case, as we experienced during the capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe, is that the bureaucracy is ultimately repressive and unable to defend post-capitalist property relations. The anti-bureaucratic protest movement must build genuinely revolutionary socialist forces, committed to the advancement of genuinely socialist development, or it will become a vehicle for restoration.

In the end, only a political revolution to create workers' democracy, dissolve the bureaucratic caste that rules Cuba, and stop the development of a social counterrevolution under the banner of bourgeois democracy and the expectation of cheap supplies from the world market. What this would mean in practice can be seen from the living conditions of the workers and the rural poor in neighbouring countries of Latin America.

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