

Cuba special: 50 years of revolution



Workers must stand shoulder to shoulder with the Cuban people in their heroic defence of Cuban independence and socialism.

New Year's Day is a day for celebrating, not only as it is the dawn of a new calendar year but also as it marks the triumphant day on which the Cuban people ousted the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, so ridding themselves of the shackles of capitalism and setting out on the road toward socialism. This New Year, 2009, is especially significant as it will be the 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution. No doubt there will be big celebrations across Cuba, and these are bound to be mirrored around the world by the masses of exploited and oppressed people who recognise the huge achievements brought about by the Cuban revolution and who hold dear the shining example of the Cuban people, who have demonstrated for half a century what working people are capable of when they take power.

A Spanish colony

Cuba spent some 400 years as a Spanish colony, having been 'discovered' by Columbus in 1492. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, a fierce anti-colonial struggle developed, led by José Martí and the Cuban Revolutionary Party. By 1897, the success of the independence movement seemed within reach, with the Spanish prime minister making the following statement: "After having sent 200,000 men and shed so much blood, we don't own any more land on the island than what our soldiers are stepping on." (Quoted in Prof J Cantón Navarro, [History of Cuba](#)) However, just a few months later, in February 1898, the US battleship Maine blew up in Havana Bay and drew the US into a war with the Spanish. It is widely believed that the attack on the battleship was actually instigated by the US in order to pull Spain into a war for the 'ownership' of Cuba. The US were the victors of that war, and so, in 1899, dominion over Cuba was transferred to the US, which granted nominal independence to the island in 1902, but retained economic control until the revolution in 1959.

A US neo-colony

The first half of the 20th century saw Cuba descend into a haven for drugs, prostitution and gambling, as the US ruling class, with the help of the Cuban comprador bourgeoisie,

turned the small island into an offshore playground. Successive Cuban governments showed themselves to be nothing more than puppets of US imperialism, maintaining the status quo and allowing the wealth of the land to be leached by foreign imperialists while the average Cuban was left to serve the colonisers or starve. Nevertheless, throughout this period, progressive forces continued to mobilise and struggle against the reactionary governments. The increasing strength of the movement was illustrated on 10 March 1952, when Fulgencio Batista, in a bid to prevent a communist candidate winning the elections, seized power by force. Batista had been a military man for many years and had served the establishment well, suppressing uprisings during the 1930s and 40s. In 1940, he served a term of four years as elected president, during which time US trade relations increased and Cuba entered the [second world war](#) on the side of the allies. Following the coup d'état in 1952, Batista ruled Cuba with an iron fist. He abolished the constitution, dismissed the Congress of the Republic and firmly held open the door to US imperialism. [Fidel Castro](#), then a young revolutionary, denounced the coup and called on all Cubans to fight the dictatorship, warning: "once again there is tyranny, but there will also be men like Mella, Trejo and Guiteras [revolutionaries who had fought Spanish and US forces]. There is oppression in the homeland, but there will be a day of liberty again". (Quoted in [History of Cuba](#), op cit)

Moncada Barracks

Following this call to fight, Castro got together with a group of other revolutionaries who had fought in previous uprisings, with the intention of carrying out an attack on the military regime and thus providing a catalyst for further uprisings. The target of this attack was to be the Moncada Barracks, the second-largest barracks in Cuba, located a fair distance from any potential back-up forces, as well as being on the outskirts of Santiago de Cuba, where the independence movement had always been strong. During the night of 26 July 1953, a group of 131 combatants [led in three groups by Fidel Castro](#), Abel Santamaria and Raúl Castro attacked the barracks. Despite extensive and

secretive preparation by Fidel and others, the first attacking column was intercepted by an unscheduled patrol of Batista's forces, sparking a battle and alerting the rest of the barracks to the attack. Almost all the combatants were captured, eight being killed in battle while a handful escaped. The following day, a further 50 fighters were executed as a warning to others. The rest were tried, along with others who had been rounded up but had no involvement in the attack. It was during the Moncada Barracks trial that Fidel gave one of his most famous speeches, now recognised by his final statement: [History will absolve me](#). Fidel used the speech to expose the brutality of the Batista regime, the downtrodden existence of the Cuban people and the need to *fight* for liberty and freedom. He also outlined five revolutionary laws that would have been proclaimed if the attack had been successful. These laws were to "return power to the people", "give non-mortgageable and non-transferable ownership of land to all tenants", "grant workers and employees the right to share 30 percent of the profits of all large industry", "grant all sugar planters the right to share 55 percent of sugar production", and to confiscate "all holdings and ill-gotten gains ... of previous regimes ... Half of the property recovered would be used to subsidise retirement funds for workers and the other half would be used for hospitals, asylums and charitable organisations." The success of the defence team, in spite of limitations imposed on them by the court, meant that only 26 were found guilty, and a large proportion of these were given lenient sentences.

Movement of 26 July

Fidel, however, along with several others involved in the attack, was sentenced to 15 years and imprisoned in Isle of Pines. Two years later, following continued protests for their release, and in the face of increasing unrest, Batista granted the release of Castro and the other imprisoned combatants. On their release, they were greeted with great popular acclaim and determined to continue the work they had started. So, in June 1955, Castro and several other revolutionaries who had attacked the Moncada Barracks held an official meeting and formed the Movement of 26 July (M 26-J). As M 26-J increased its activity, so too did the repressive measures of the Batista regime. By July, Fidel had decided that, in order to effectively organise, he needed to leave the country and train elsewhere.

Mexico and Guevara

Having relocated to Mexico, Castro and several others set up camp, specifically choosing remote terrain similar to Cuba's in order to prepare themselves for the next stage of the struggle. It was here that they met Che Guevara. Che had fled persecution in Guatemala and, having met some of the M 26-J comrades previously, was introduced to Castro, and so began his involvement in the preparations for the Cuban revolution. M 26-J members in Mexico maintained constant communication with the workers' and peasants' struggles taking place in Cuba. Fidel wrote manifestos for the movement analysing the struggle and the tasks ahead, which were distributed in Cuba. While the revolutionaries trained in Mexico, hardships suffered by the Cuban population under Batista increased the support for the goals set out by the M 26-J.

Granma

After a year of mobilising troops and building up the forces both in Mexico and in Cuba, the M 26-J planned coordinated attacks across the country, with the Mexican contingent travelling across the Gulf to reinforce the eastern front. On 25 November 1956, from the port of Tupax, Mexico, the *Granma*, only a small boat, carried 82 members of the M 26-J across the Gulf of Mexico, aiming for Cuba's eastern coast. However, the heavy load on the boat slowed the journey, delaying its landing to 2 December, two days after the attacks of the M 26-J were to be launched. This proved almost fatal for the insurrection as, despite the forces within Cuba mounting uprisings and making some gains, they had not been the outright victors. The delay of the *Granma* meant that Batista's forces were at the boat's landing site within an hour with all the planes and troops they could muster. In the face of this military onslaught, and against all odds, the rebels continued towards the mountains of the Sierra Maestra. However, a large part of their contingent was captured and over 20 executed on the spot. The remaining 10 members moved deeper into the mountains and regrouped, ready to continue the fight against the regime. During the next 24 months, the 10 members of M 26-J in the Sierra Maestra recruited workers and peasants from across the countryside and towns as a fierce war ensued against the regime. As Fidel recounted on the 40th anniversary of the revolution: "the infallible tactic of attacking the enemy when it was on the move was a key factor [to success]. The art of provoking those forces into moving out of their well-fortified and generally invulnerable positions became one of our command's greatest skills." ([Speech made in Céspedes Park](#), Santiago de Cuba, 1

January 1999) By December 1958, the rebel army, with Fidel as commander-in-chief, and Che Guevara, Camilio Cienfuegos, Raúl Castro, Juan Alemida and Celia Sánchez as leaders of the columns, led the forces across the country taking city after city and growing in number by the day. Che Guevara's Column No 8, by this time made up of 300 well-armed and experienced troops, was joined on 29 December by 5,000 recruits trained in the Escambray mountains in the battle for Santa Cruz. This was the dictatorship's last and most powerful stronghold. The rebels captured enemy positions one by one, cutting off communication and finally taking all government troops prisoner and seizing control of the city. At 2.00am on 1 January 1959, Batista fled the country, leaving the rebel army victorious. Thus it was, five years, five months and five days after the attack on the Moncada Barracks, that the programme publicised during the Moncada trial for developing a Cuba for the Cuban people was finally put into action.

Soy Cuba – depiction of Cuban life

For a real flavour of this struggle, it is well worth watching the beautifully filmed and choreographed epic [Soy Cuba](#) (I am Cuba). Using the lives of several Cubans, from a farmer forced to sell all his land to the United Fruit Company to a young girl living in a tin shack having to serve opulent US and foreign 'diplomats', it shows graphically the disparity between the life of a Cuban and that of the foreign and comprador bourgeoisie under Batista. The film aptly portrays the struggle in the towns by the students and workers and how this eventually combined with the guerrilla war led by Fidel, Che, Camilo Cienfuegos and the other fighters and the thousands of recruits who joined the guerrillas from the countryside. The film ends with the triumphant scene of the guerrilla army advancing victoriously towards Havana.

The revolution continues

The revolutionary government began by addressing the poverty, hunger and illiteracy that had plagued the lives of Cubans for the past century. The sentiment of the five revolutionary laws outlined in Fidel's 'History will absolve me' speech was put into action. In May 1959, under the Agrarian Reform Act, Cuba began expropriating land and private property for the benefit of more than 100,000 rural families. Rental costs were reduced by 50 percent. Social security measures were extended across the entire population. The revolution embarked upon creating 10,000 classrooms for the 10,000 teachers without jobs to be able

to teach the 600,000 children not then in school. They also began training voluntary teachers, who were then sent to wherever they were needed, thus becoming part of the campaign to rid Cuba of illiteracy. By 1960, the government had nationalised more than \$25bn worth of private property in Cuba, and on 6 August 1960, Cuba nationalised all US-owned property, as well as all other foreign-owned property. This move unsurprisingly brought the wrath of the already fuming imperialist power. The US government seized all Cuban assets abroad and tightened the embargo that it had imposed following the success of the revolution. Since 1962, the US has maintained a full economic blockade of the country.

Bay of Pigs

Cuba became one of US imperialism's most hated states, not only because it seized assets previously under the control of US corporations, directly hitting the US economy, but also because of the example it set to all the downtrodden exploited masses in the US and elsewhere of what is possible when power is seized by the working class and peasantry. Thus it was that the wrath of [US imperialism](#) was not only felt economically through the embargo but also militarily. In 1961, the US staged an attack on the Bay of Pigs in an attempt to oust Fidel and the Communist Party from Cuba. The invasion was defeated, however, through the coordination of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (who rounded up all pro-Batista and US forces, preventing them from mobilising a coup within towns), combined with a strong military response led by Fidel.

Economic blockade and subversive attack

Having failed to get rid of socialist Cuba by direct invasion in 1961, US imperialism has not relented and continues to this day in its attempts to undermine the revolution. This is done through encouraging and financing counterrevolutionary and terrorist activities against Cuba, from backing Luis Posada Carriles, the self-confessed terrorist who has attacked Venezuela and Cuba and now is protected by the US, to funding Hermanos al Rescate (Brothers to the Rescue [!]), a terrorist group created in the US to attack Cuba. The period from 1959 to 1997 saw "5,780 terrorist actions against Cuba, 804 of them considered as terrorist attacks of significant magnitude, including 78 bombings against the population that caused thousands of victims". ([Fifty years of US terrorism against Cuba](#), Voltaire.net, 15 December 2005) This is in addition to the economic blockade that the

US has held Cuba under for almost 50 years, which prevents a vast number of goods entering Cuba, from food to medicine, affecting every area of Cuban life. Estimates in 2004 calculated the total direct damage to the economy caused by the blockade at \$80bn. ([The US blockade of Cuba](#), Cuba Solidarity Campaign) In 1992, just after Cuba had lost 85 percent of her trade with the Soviet Union following the latter's collapse, the US senate tightened the blockade passing the Cuban Democracy Act[!], known as the Torricelli Act. The act, as outlined by Congressman Torricelli himself, was designed to "wreak havoc on the island", extending the blockade to countries outside the US and thus preventing the purchase of vital goods by Cuba. Then, in 1996, the US passed the equally inappropriately titled Cuban Liberty and Democracy Solidarity Act, aka the Helms-Burton Act, extending the embargo to penalise any foreign company that trades with Cuba. It also called for more active interference in the running of the country, through funding subversive activity as mentioned above and increasing the use of external radio and TV broadcasts into Cuba from Miami, notably Radio Marti and TV Marti. The Helms-Burton Act also further restricted the sale of Cuban goods within the US, which for a moment in 1999 was broken following Cuba's development of a vaccine against meningitis B. After an outbreak in the US, the treasury department finally relented and granted a licence in 1999, having refused to do so for over 10 years. It is in the face of this that the Cuban people, led by the Communist Party of Cuba, have not only survived but made massive strides in improving the standard of living of all Cubans. A Cuban diplomat at a recent meeting of [United Nations](#) member states, at which, for the 17th consecutive year, an overwhelming majority of members (96 percent) voted to condemn the US blockade, stated: "[The US] will never be able to bring the Cuban people to their knees. Neither blockades nor hurricanes will be able to take away our spirit. There will be no human or natural force capable of subjugating the Cuban people". ([UN general assembly condemns US economic blockade against Cuba for the 17th consecutive year](#), Cuba News Daily, 30 October 2008)

Cuban achievements

The Cuban people enjoy a standard of living incomparable in the western world. Incomparable not because of the material goods they have, as these are undoubtedly limited, but because of the freedoms that they benefit from: the freedom that ensures every Cuban lives under shelter, has the right to universal free education and access to a

healthcare system that is not dependant on income. In short, the freedom to live a full life no matter who you are or which family you are born into.

Housing

Decent housing for all is a right guaranteed by the Cuban constitution. Homelessness is unheard of. Housing costs in Cuba have been maintained at a low level, with many either owning their homes outright or paying an average of 10 percent of income towards their homes. This is in stark contrast to the insecurity of many in Britain, one of the world's richest countries, where mortgage rates are such that house repossessions have increased by over 45 percent, with estimations of over 45,000 homes being taken back by lenders by the end of the year. ([Figures from house repossessions soar to 12-year-high](#), The Independent, 8 August 2008)

Education

As for education, the initial ambition of the revolution to rid Cuba of illiteracy has long since been achieved, something not all so-called developed countries can lay claim to. Education is taken very seriously, with 10 percent of Cuba's GDP being spent on providing free, universal education for all. Education is compulsory to ninth grade, with one teacher for every 36.8 inhabitants, as compared to one teacher for every 802 inhabitants in Britain. (Figures from [Eye-witness to socialism: school education in Cuba](#), Proletarian, February 2007) Unlike the increasingly expensive university education that is a privilege rather than a right in the imperialist world, all Cubans can attend any of Cuba's 47 universities free of charge. Scholarships are also open to less privileged students from Latin America, the Caribbean, and even the US and Europe, many of whom study medicine and are encouraged to return to their homelands after graduation to implement their skills there.

Health

Before the revolution, only 8 percent of the rural population had access to healthcare, but today Cuba can boast of a system that provides free healthcare to its entire population, as highlighted in the recent Michael Moore film [Sicko](#). The doctor to patient ratio in Cuba is higher than any other country, with a doctor for every 169 inhabitants. In Britain, on the other hand, the average doctor has to attend to 600 inhabitants. The effect of this is that general check-ups are far more frequent and monitoring for potential illness or

disease is much easier in Cuba. Consequently, Cuban life expectancy matches that of the US or Britain, and is way above other developing countries, yet for a fraction of the cost, since the emphasis is on preventative medicine and full health, rather than the system only dealing with those who are already sick and in need of expensive treatments. The advances in medical research and techniques in Cuba have also been astounding. Not least, the meningitis B vaccine previously mentioned, which was developed in the 1980s, despite the blockade severely limiting the medical supplies that are allowed into Cuba owing to the extent of US patents on treatments. It is to the credit of the well-managed, centrally organised socialist system that it is able to provide treatment and operations for 11.2 million Cubans despite these limited supplies from abroad. Cuba puts paid to myth of the 'inefficiencies of public money' that has been peddled by our bourgeoisie to justify the [dismantling of the NHS](#) in Britain. If the will is there, the funding and results can be found. The difference between Britain and Cuba is not that the doctors and nurses in Britain do not care, but rather that, in a system where profit is the driving force, corners will be cut wherever possible, whether the company in question is making cars or providing healthcare. In socialist Cuba, where people come first, healthcare, education, shelter and security are the focus, and everything else comes second.

Cuban internationalism

The achievements Cuba has made have also benefited hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people across the globe. During the 1960s and 1970s Cuba gave much-needed political and military support to independence struggles in Africa, not least those of Angola and Namibia. In 1979, Cuba's military support to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua assisted them in the defeat of Somoza's dictatorship. Cuba's medical expertise has been shared the world over, with over 25,000 doctors sent to 68 countries. This is in stark contrast to the 'brain drain' of doctors who are tempted away from oppressed countries to serve in the NHS in Britain. Cuba has given support to many afflicted peoples at times of great need. After the south Asian tsunami, Cuba sent teams of medics to give support, as she did also in the aftermath of earthquakes in Pakistan. It is also well known that after the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2007, Cuba was one of the first countries to offer assistance in the form of 1,500 doctors. The US, despite a severe shortage, never accepted this offer. In collaboration with [Venezuela](#), the continent-wide

Operación Milagro (Operation Miracle) has been underway for three years, treating vast numbers of poor people who have lost, or are losing, their eyesight, by providing free ophthalmology operations. Cuba provides the doctors and expertise while Venezuela provides transportation, accommodation and food, in effect giving sight back to over 6 million people in [Latin America](#) and the Caribbean, with the potential for the programme to be extended even further. As part of Alba (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), Cuba and Venezuela have also agreed to share expertise and goods. Cuba is providing doctors, who work in neighbourhoods across Venezuela as part of Mission Barrio Ardentro. In return, Cuba purchases crude oil at reduced rates.

Support socialist Cuba

The developments in Latin America as a whole have been tremendously positive for the small island of Cuba. From the collapse of the [USSR](#) in 1991 until recently, Cuba was an isolated socialist country, struggling alone in the Americas against the might of US imperialism just 90 miles to the north, with a host of US puppet regimes to the south. Now, with Venezuela and Bolivia standing as strong allies, along with several other progressive Latin American countries, Cuba's position has been strengthened. In addition, the increased trade links with China and Russia will also strengthen Cuba's presence and stability in the region. While capitalism is [deep in crisis](#), the example that Cuba sets the working class and oppressed people should be broadcast as widely as possible. Cuba is a country that all progressive people should be proud of. When asked what alternative there is to capitalism, we should outline what the Communist Party of Cuba, supported by the people of Cuba, has been able to achieve in the face of constant imperialist aggression. The proletariat in the imperialist countries must stand shoulder to shoulder with the Cuban people in their heroic defence of Cuban independence and socialism and against US imperialist bullying, trade blockades and threats of invasion and aggression. Celebrate New Year's Day this year with added vigour, remembering what has been achieved in Cuba and what could be achieved by a successful socialist revolution in Britain.

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