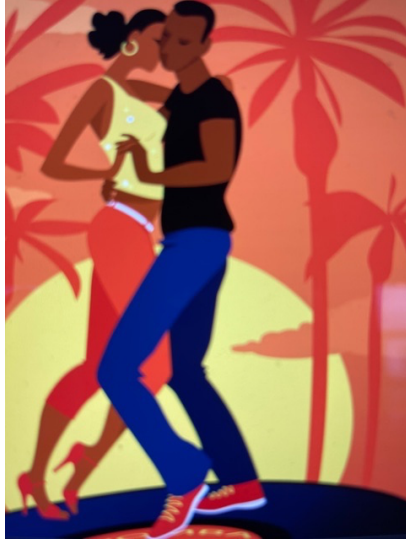


Off The cuff

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Bolshevism in a Warm Climate



CUBA: ROMANTIC, EXOTIC, EROTIC. What a welcome contrast to the old grey communist days in Warsaw, Prague, or Moscow. How much nicer and fun-loving Caribbean communism is today, than that of Beijing, Hanoi, or Pyongyang. At least, that was the picture before Covid-19 put in an appearance. Before the onset of the pandemic, Cuba welcomed somewhere between 2.6 and three million tourists every year. Tragically, in the last sixteen months tourism has collapsed and taken the Cuban economy with it.

Working people across the island are no strangers to this situation. Throughout the 58 years of the Castro's dictatorship, together with the three-year regime of Miguel Dias-Canel, First Secretary of the Communist Party, rationing and ration books have been part of everyday life for Cubans. The state control of farming, manufacturing, and services has been an unparalleled disaster for 62 years. Many will blame the American embargo, which has limited the economic choices open to the Communist Party of

Cuba for 61 years, forcing it to rely upon aid from the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991, and upon Venezuela and Bolivia more recently. This aid came at vast cost to the Cuban people in both blood and treasure, involving the fighting of extensive wars in Africa and the Middle East as the proxy of Moscow (at one time Cuba, with a population of less than 11 million people in the eighties, fielded an army of a quarter of a million soldiers). More recently, this struggle for foreign aid has also involved the dispatch of tens of thousands of doctors and other medical staff to Venezuela in return for oil and other supplies.

None of this aid has pulled Cuba out of the mud of poverty and despair, leaving the communist authorities with tourism as the only alternative; mountain climbing, caving, diving, prostitution and sex tourism, inspired by the old-world charms of baroque architecture, crumbling cities, and pastel-coloured Battista-era automobiles, sparkling in the Caribbean sun, have attracted liberals and the left the world over. Now the pandemic has cut off this option. The tourist dollar has disappeared.

Predicably, many thousands have poured onto the streets in protest at the incapacity and conservatism of the revolutionary state to address their needs, or meet their aspirations. The response of the dictatorship has been swift and brutal. Phones and the Internet have been cut off, while police, troops, and government supporters, have been called onto the streets in order to baton and bash the crowds into submission. People are disappearing, while the jails and prison camps are once again the destination of those brave enough to fight for democracy and freedom in Cuba.

While this is happening many on the British left – the usual suspects – are leaping to the defence of the dictatorship. “The gains of the revolution are under threat” they cry, as “reactionary right-wing Cubans in Florida (those in league with US Imperialism), strive to attack socialism and socialist solidarity.” These British supporters of dictatorship are at a loss to explain what

they are supporting. What are the gains of the Castro Brothers' domination of the lives of working people in Cuba?

No doubt, they will enumerate the high levels of literacy, the low levels of infant mortality, and the excellent health care provided by the dictatorship. They will do this without reference to the fact that even under the gangster regime of Battista in the nineteen fifties, despite corruption, crippling poverty and inequality, Cuba had higher levels of literacy and better healthcare than any comparable Caribbean or Latin American country.

In any event, it is inexplicable why any socialist should support a regime that prohibits the right of working people to demonstrate and organise themselves in pursuit of their interests and desires. It is inexplicable until one ponders the fantasies that have gripped many on the left since October 1917. Ever since, the Bolsheviks seized power in the midst of the Russian Revolution, many on the left have been gripped by the idea that we should pay for a bright future with barbarism and brutality in the here and now.

This is why, Lenin and the Bolsheviks dispersed Russia's elected parliament with troops in January 1918, it is why "the defence of the revolution" and of the iron-grip of the communist party, has always been a priority. Communist rule to this day, is sustained by a permanent reign of terror. From Beijing to Pyongyang, from Hanoi to Havana, 'socialist solidarity and tranquillity' has been maintained by political police, arbitrary imprisonment, the imposition of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, random killings and disappearances, the destruction of free trade unions, and the suppression of freedom of speech, the press, and the prohibition of independent meetings and demonstrations. Even when elections are held the Communist Party vets all the candidates to ensure that nobody 'untrustworthy' is ever elected. The rule of the Party and its police are the order of the day.

With Cuba the left is faced with a manichean

battle between the light of socialism and darkness of capitalism, the story is one of 'David and Goliath', of the struggle between Yankee Imperialism against the working people of the Caribbean.

It is certainly true that the United States has always sought to control Latin America and the islands of the Caribbean. It has always been prepared to support business-friendly oligarchs and the death-squads of dictators in defence of North American interests. Despite loud protestations to the contrary, Washington has not always been a friend of freedom and democracy in the region. Whenever the prospect of socialism or of popular solidarity has reared its head, the immediate instinct of both Republicans and Democrats, north of the Rio Grande, has been to strangle popular movements at birth.

This is what happened when the Castro government passed the Agrarian Reform Law in the early sixties, soon after coming to power. The law took land away from rich US citizens and wealthy companies. The expropriation of private companies and the execution of many of Batista's police and government officials resulted in Washington's unrelenting struggle to overthrow the communist regime on its doorstep. There have been ups and downs over the years, mostly of downs, as the struggle of Cuban expats in Florida, for the overthrow of the communists in Havana, has continued without let-up.

It is a situation in which many left-wing people in Britain can see no other solution than to do what it has routinely done for decade after decade – support the dictators against the Western democracies in all circumstances. Consequently, support for the dictatorship in Havana is *de rigueur* on the left regardless of anything that the communist regime does, or 'actually existing socialism' delivers. This numbskullery largely accounts for the failure of the far-left to inspire working people in Britain with anything other than scepticism and disbelief.

Why should we trust anybody who supports

dictatorship for any reason whatsoever?

What we need, what Cuba needs, is an international campaign and struggle against the economic embargo imposed by Washington on the country. We must demand free trade, and free travel between Cuba and the United States, because this is the only move that will bring down the communist dictatorship and open up options for the Cuban economy to meet the needs and aspirations of her people.

Of course, this would open up the danger of simply being bought and sold by the US, by Americans and America. However, the response of young people in Cuba will have to be the creation of strong free trade unions and strong free political parties, designed to combat the foreign corporate interests that would seek to replace the dictatorship. Young people in Cuba are now shouting *Patria y Vida!* (Homeland and Life!) rather than the truly grim slogan of the communist regime, *Patria o Muerte!* (Homeland or Death), popularised by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

It is time to put an end to dictatorships everywhere, regardless of their ideological colour or hue.