

FEATURE

¡Socialismo o muerte!

BY ALEX BOSTON

"SOCIALISM OR DEATH!" Fidel Castro's most recent inspirational slogan is graffitied across Cuba's eroding walls and written on the determined faces of most Cubans.

This challenge is an ultimatum to the U.S. government which has for over 30 years sought to destabilize Cuba through bacterial warfare, criminal sabotage, assassination attempts and even armed invasion.

"YANKEE IMPERIALISMO"

Last fall a U.S. military exercise launched 200 sorties which swooped down upon Cuba simulating an invasion. In late December the CIA was implicated in a plot to once again terrorize the Cuban public by bombing cinemas, destroying roads and bridges.

U.S. Congress continues to pour millions into radio broadcasts from Florida urging sabotage and negligence. A similar \$30 million attempt for T.V. was eventually deemed illegal by the International Telecommunications Union.

By labelling this failure "the Electronic Bay of Pigs" and denouncing the tactics of "Yankee Imperialismo," Castro has been able to further consolidate support for the revolution.

In the aftermath of the Cold War such U.S. antagonism seems strategically ignorant. Yet a lobby of wealthy, right wing Cuban exiles intent on forming Cuba's next government is the latest windfall for Congressmen's election campaigns. Bureaucratic inertia and redemption from a humiliating three decade David and Goliath struggle is also sufficient motivation for George "Globocop" Bush to strangle Cuba.

ECONOMIC WARFARE

The gravest threat is the globalisation of a trade embargo the U.S. has inhumanely imposed on Cuba since 1961. The U.S. has recently strong-armed Japan into foregoing a sweet deal which would have brought millions to Cuba in exchange for sugar. U.S. pressure halted a contract in which Cuba was to assist Brazil in producing meningitis B vaccine.

Congress legislated foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies to cease trading with Cuba. Canada, which must be commended for its independent position on Cuba, defiantly told the U.S. to stop meddling in Canadian domestic affairs.

U.S. aid has forced Russia to move from barter exchanges to hard currency deals only. Hard currency shortages have forced Russians to threaten sugar riots, and Cubans to suffer from crippling oil shortages. Until recently eighty per cent of Cuba's industrial inputs were provided by the erstwhile Eastern Block. These have now been reduced to sporadic trickles.

The former Soviet Union once sunk a quarter of its foreign aid budget into Cuba.

LINING UP LATIN AMERICAN

Rafael Rodriguez, a senior member of the Cuban politiburo, said, "What hitherto could have been the result of military destruction or the blockade, can now also be the consequence of difficulties in our relations with our old suppliers."

The once-reputable pharmaceutical industry is barely operable because of the dire need of chemical inputs. Cubans are unable to secure even antibiotics and aspirin.

A bumper tomato crop virtually rotted in the fields because the resources were not available for canning or to transport produce to urban areas.

The majority of Cubans, born under the revolutionary government, are not accustomed to the food shortages and economic stagnation which persistently plague other Latin American countries. In the rest of the region 60 per cent of the population lives in poverty, the average infant mortality rate is 55 for every thousand births, nearly one-third are illiterate, street kids run rampant, almost one-quarter are permanently unemployed, and the economy and political climate are determined by foreign business interests.

STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

In the early 80s, Latin American squalor was entrenched by a debt crisis forcing countries to accept International Monetary Fund dictates. Aggregate demand was curbed, reducing inputs and conserving foreign exchange. The strategy deepened the recession, increased unemployment, decreased wages, cut health and education programs and aggravated social upheaval.

Cuba, in contrast, reduced demand in only fuel, electricity and T.V. programming, succeeding in maintaining high levels of economic activity and near full employment. Social



PHOTO: RAOULO ARROCHE

"We are developing our own brand of democracy consistent with our own history, culture and ideology"

costs were equitably shared and lower income groups actually received wage increases.

Cuba is responding to the present crisis under the banner, "the Special Period during Peacetime". Where possible industrial slow downs are responded to by collectively reducing hours and salaries, rather than lay offs. In January, a ten day holiday was declared because factories could not function. Burgeoning line-ups at street corners indicate the presence of tightly rationed soap, milk and even bread.

In the agricultural sector several thousand oxen have replaced many tractors. In urban areas, bikes imported from China, an increasingly important trading partner, have replaced many cars.

In order to purchase oil, Cuba is generating hard currency through intensifying the tourist industry. Exclusive access to posh hotels, ritzy restaurants, and the world's finest rum have regrettably established a tourist-Cuban apartheid. Still, most agree with Castro, "This is the price we must pay to save the revolution."

THE CUBAN MIRACLE

Cuba still has lower fertility and infant mortality rates, and higher literacy and life expectancy rates and nutrition levels than Washington, D.C. The articulate shapely men and women doing the salsa on any dance floor attest to the success of Cuba's health and education systems. These free programs are comparable to those of any industrial country.

The degree of social and economic equality is unsurpassed in the world. In Havana, several families of diverse backgrounds modestly occupy 18th century colonial mansions—once belonging to wealthy plantation owners living abroad.

According to Fernando Vasimo, Minister of Advanced Education, the degree of racial equality can be attributed to, "two peoples who shed the same blood in a struggle to gain independence and abolish slavery."

Nevertheless, forms of discrimination do exist. Openly gay men and lesbians jeopardise their education and career prospects. Women have not fully broken the glass ceiling in the political hierarchy. Rebecca Gutiérrez, from the Federation of Cuban Women, explains, "The deeply-rooted machismo in Latin and African culture is only beginning to be addressed." As evidence of Cuba's progress Gutiérrez points to the construction of over 100 daycares in Havana over the past several years.

DEMOCRATISATION

Cubans, proud of their achievements, are committed to perfecting socialism. "We are developing our own brand of democracy consistent with our own history, culture and ideology," says Ernesto, a taxi driver. He has a biology degree and boasts of helping liberate Namibia. "North Americans do not have a monopoly on democratic processes."

He acknowledges the system presently filters out reformers and is participatory only in the sense Cubans are integrated into party strategies from the top-down. Yet he is convinced the Party leadership has worked towards opening the process. At its last Congress the Communist Party recommended the National Assembly be elected by universal adult suffrage.

A BASTION OF HOPE

Castro, above all socialist dictators and perhaps all state leaders, is uniquely committed to his people's welfare. He is still broadly recognized as the only figure who can successfully pull their great country through its present challenge.

True, some human rights activists sitting in jail will attest to his heavy handed disrespect for freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. However, the Cuban's have learnt from the Sandinistas' demise, any liberalization on U.S. terms means right wing organisations and a media subsidised by millions of Republican dollars.

As the western hemisphere's only independent political economy in a unipolar world, Castro's benevolent autocracy offers a glimpse of hope for everyone concerned about international justice.

When Advanced Education Minister Vasimo was asked by a young American liberal what do Cubans need most, he replied, "More important than any product is support for national independence. We're only 30 years old and we're building our own socialist and democratic society, and we need the solidarity of all people, regardless of ideology."

Alex Boston recently returned from a study tour in Cuba co-organised by the Canadian Federation of Students, The Cuban University Students' Federation and the U.S. Students' Association.