

Is Cuba Socialist?

A Socialist Labor Party pamphlet.

Socialist Labor Party of America
P.O. Box 218
Mountain View, CA 94042-0218
www.slp.org • socialists@slp.org

Preface

The Cuban revolution is commonly regarded as the first socialist revolution in the Western Hemisphere. The following articles, written in early 1979 for the *Weekly People*, challenge this view and demonstrate that Cuba is neither socialist, nor a workers' state building toward a socialist future.

The three articles that comprised the original series on Cuba are presented here together with two editorials published in conjunction with them. The first editorial, from which this pamphlet derives its title, serves as an introduction to the subject, while the second, "On Workers' Government," provides an excellent summary of the views presented.

Introduction

“Socialism has become a word appropriated by so many different champions and causes that it threatens to become meaningless, and a new effort is needed to sort it out.” This was one of the observations made by *Time* magazine last March [1978] in its “special report” on socialism. And while *Time’s* contribution to “sorting things out” was another layer of distortion in the service of anti-Marxism, *Time* touched on a reality that is of crucial importance to Socialists—and workers everywhere. For in a world being brought to the brink of disaster by class-divided societies the world over, the need to establish the relevance and true essence of socialism in the eyes of workers has never been greater.

In a more immediate sense, the use—or misuse—of the socialist label has again been brought to mind by the recent observance of the 20th anniversary of the Cuban revolution.

It was on January 1, 1959, that the guerrilla movement led by Fidel Castro finally forced Cuban dictator and puppet of U.S. imperialism, Fulgencio Batista, to flee Havana. And for many, this event marks the beginning of a series of events that has given rise to a socialist society in Cuba. Yet, to the SLP, the Cuban revolution and the society it has ushered in have little in common with the revolutionary process articulated by Marx and Engels or with the classless, stateless association of producers that alone is worthy of being labeled socialist.

The question of whether or not Cuba is socialist is far more than an idle dispute over terminology. For the SLP, socialism is not a vagary. It describes a society created by the classconscious activity of the workers themselves. It implies a society in which class divisions have been abolished and in which the mass of workers democratically administer all aspects of society through their own classwide economic organizations. It signifies a society in which power flows from the bottom up rather than the top down and one in which the state as an instrument of ruling-class oppression has been eliminated.

Given the purposeful distortion of Marxism by the ruling class, it is imperative that those who presume to speak for socialism not relinquish this label to societies which deviate fundamentally from these Marxist precepts. Only by keeping such precepts unsullied can

Is Cuba Socialist?

Socialists expect workers in the United States and elsewhere to give Marxism a fair hearing.

All too often, those on the left who call Cuba socialist have raised this question to an article of faith that determines one's socialist commitment. Given its progressive aspects and the avowed socialist intent of the Cuban leaders, it is argued, Cuba must be defended as being socialist. However, all social events, even those having progressive aspects, do not automatically merit the socialist label, nor can socialism be equated with this or that "intent." In the final analysis, any society claiming to be socialist must be tested against its material foundation and the extent to which it operates as the democratic expression of the mass of workers.

To question Cuba's claims to socialism is not to deny the fact that the Cuban revolution had a definite progressive character. Even if it did nothing else, the Cuban revolution overthrew a brutal dictatorship and freed the island from the oppressive grip of U.S. imperialism—a necessary step for Cuba to develop economically and move a step closer to the social and economic development prerequisite for socialism.

But, at the same time, to acknowledge the progressive nature of the Cuban revolution is not to establish its socialist credentials. In fact, in noting where its progressive nature lies, the limited socialist possibilities in Cuba necessarily present themselves. For the revolution in Cuba took place against a background of imperialist exploitation that had ravaged the Cuban economy. Cuba possessed neither the large class of socialized wage laborers nor the advanced productive forces that provide the material base for a socialist society. Rather, it was an underdeveloped country dominated by a one-crop agricultural economy.

Given this level of economic development, it is not surprising that the Cuban revolution lacked a fundamental proletarian character from the onset. Far from being a movement born of the workers' desire to establish socialism, it was a movement led by the radical intelligentsia and democratic national petty bourgeoisie. Like all classes whose ascendancy is on the social agenda, this movement presumed to speak for all classes in Cuban society that had an interest in overthrowing Batista and U.S. imperialism, but it never explicitly represented the interests of the Cuban masses. Moreover, the relationship between Castro and the Cuban masses placed the latter in a subservient role, a relationship that has since been a defining characteristic of the Marxist-Leninist forms that have arisen in Cuba.

Of course, many of those who bestow the socialist label on Cuba acknowledge the material limitations that clash with Castro's socialist pretensions. Yet, the argument is made that the proletarian character of the Cuban government is evidenced by the material improvement in the standard of living Cuban workers and peasants now enjoy and by

Socialist Labor Party

the contention that the ruling Communist Party articulates and is responsive to the needs of the working class.

To be sure, one can point to an improvement in the economic lot of the average Cuban. But the extent to which this improvement can be attributed to Cuban “socialism” is questionable at best. Many observers point out, for example, that many of the economic gains that have been realized can be attributed to the removal of the economic distortions imposed on Cuba by imperialism. Certainly, much of the dramatic improvement that took place shortly after Castro took power was undoubtedly due to the fact that, with the defeat of imperialism, the bulk of Cuba’s wealth and resources was no longer being expropriated for the benefit of foreign ruling classes. And in the aftermath of these dramatic economic gains, the Castro government has indeed found it increasingly difficult to reconcile its socialist rhetoric with the material limitations confronted by Cuban society. These limitations have, in fact, increasingly prompted the Castro government to compromise the freedom and material prerogatives of the workers in the name of building up the country’s economic base.

Though the Cuban leadership continues to posture about the egalitarian character of Cuban “socialism,” the contradictions between these claims and the realities of Cuban life are becoming more and more apparent. The Castro-led Cuban Communist Party continues to justify its monopoly on the state apparatus and all economic policy on the basis that it accurately interprets and serves the interests of the working class, but it has taken on all the characteristics of a bureaucratic ruling class. As a result, the Cuban masses find themselves under the heel of an increasingly repressive bureaucracy little different than those in other CP states. Rather than finding themselves in a society over which they have collective, democratic control, Cuban workers find themselves with few remaining rights. The much-heralded working-class institutions and unions in Cuba function as little more than instruments for implementing policies formulated from the top by a party apparatus representing only a fraction of the Cuban people. The militarization of labor to fulfill bureaucratically determined economic goals has claimed the right of workers to strike, severely restricted their freedom of movement and expression and frozen them out of any role in basic decision making.

If the Cuban experience has proven anything, it has confirmed the Marxist contention that only the proletariat itself can effect the socialist transformation of society and that even the proletariat can be successful only when it can draw on the necessary material prerequisites. There is no social force or “leadership” that can substitute for this.

None of this is intended to gloss over the real economic problems facing oppressed classes in countries where the material foundations for

Is Cuba Socialist?

socialism do not exist. But these problems cannot be solved by distorting the content of Marxism and retaining the label. In the final analysis, the solution to the economic limitations of the underdeveloped world is international socialist revolution, and socialist revolution can only be promoted by retaining its fundamental content. To the SLP, Marxism means workers having collective control over their lives. However, as one observer put it, "Marxism in Cuba means what Castro says it means." And as long as this situation exists, the Castro regime will remain a liability to workers everywhere.

I.

When Fidel Castro marched triumphantly into Havana on New Years Day, 1959, he had the support of many Cuban workers and peasants, all of whom had been forced to eke out a bare subsistence living under the corrupt and brutal regime of Fulgencio Batista. But unlike the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the Cuban revolution was not the product of a worker-peasant uprising. The economic organizations of the Cuban workers were poorly developed at best. In the absence of a mass class-conscious labor movement having the establishment of socialism as its ultimate objective, a new bureaucratic administration stepped into the vacuum left by the Batista dictatorship.

Soon after Castro came to power, a massive realignment of class forces took place within Cuba. By late 1960, the revolutionary Cuban government had expropriated 37 percent of the land. Eventually, 80 percent of Cuban land was nationalized, the highest percentage of land to come under state control in any country. Large industries and businesses, oil companies, banks and public services, as well as 61 American-owned sugar mills that accounted for 50 percent of Cuba's sugar production, were also nationalized.

However, the working class did not take command of the land and means of production nor begin to operate them in their own class interests. Rather, a new state apparatus was established that soon exerted its authority and control over every aspect of Cuban economic, political and even social life. In short, state-owned industries and large farms became the new exploiter of Cuban wage labor.

During the 1960s the state apparatus was highly personalized, with Fidel Castro and his brother, Raul, in command and with the upper-echelon positions filled by those who had fought with Castro. The bureaucratic apparatus penetrated every sphere of society, foreclosing the possibility of worker participation in the decision-making process. For example, in 1961 the Ministry of Industry was created to "govern, direct, supervise, and carry out the policy of industrial development of the Nation and administer the industrial companies belonging to the State."

ECONOMIC MISMANAGEMENT

In addition to producing a privileged stratum of bureaucrats, these developments created severe economic dislocations in Cuba and led to

Is Cuba Socialist?

demoralization and cynicism among Cuban workers and peasants. After the failure of the Cuban sugar crop in 1970, Castro delivered a series of speeches that acknowledged these problems and criticized the bureaucracy. He cited the danger of state officials converting “bureaucratic posts into comfortable, stagnant or privileged positions.”

But Castro was to make an even more damning indictment against bureaucratic control of the industries, conceding that the bureaucracy, as a political apparatus grafted onto industry, resulted in inefficiencies in production that were compounded by periodic miscalculations by party functionaries that resulted in shortages of goods and production bottlenecks.

In a revealing editorial, Cuba’s *Granma Weekly Review* also noted that, “One of the greatest damages produced by bureaucracy is in its repercussion on the workers—not only production workers, but also many administrative employees, victims themselves of the bureaucratic system. As for workers and farmers, bureaucracy hits them by affecting production and frequently affecting distribution of consumer articles or the provision of services needed by the worker and his family.”

“What could be worse,” *Granma* asked, “than for a worker or farmer to see problems that he understands and knows how to solve—in many cases simple matters—remain unsolved or badly handled because of bureaucratic functionaries and procedures?”

The solution for such problems of bureaucracy is workers’ self-management of the industries. For the rank and file not only have the working knowledge to run the industries but also have a self-interest in seeing that the economy runs smoothly.

CASTRO’S REJECTION OF WORKERS’ CONTROL

The concept of workers’ control of the industries was certainly not unknown to Castro. In a 1970 report on the Cuban economy, he asked: “Why should a manager have to be absolutely in charge? Why shouldn’t we begin to introduce representatives of the factory’s workers into its management? Why not have confidence? Why not put our trust in that tremendous proletarian spirit of men who, at times in torn shoes and clothes, nevertheless keep up production?”

However, if Castro asked pertinent questions, he also failed to even try to answer them, except to infer at other times that such worker control would impair the efficiency of production—a prime concern to the Cuban leader. After asking the above questions, for example, Castro stated, “And we’ll have to work seriously on the problem of industrial efficiency, based mainly on labor productivity.”

In 1970, Castro launched a campaign to institutionalize the revolution, reorganize the government and delineate the responsibilities of the various state organs, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) and the

Socialist Labor Party

military. During this new stage, Castro proposed a decentralization of the government, a new Constitution modeled after the 1936 Soviet Constitution and self-rule for workers. According to Carmelo Mesa-Lago, one of the more notable academic writers on Cuba, Castro “proposed several measures to decentralize the administration, assign separate roles to key state agencies, allow the workers to participate in enterprise management, democratize and strengthen mass organizations, and establish channels for a more active role of such organizations in national affairs.”

POWER CENTRALIZED IN CASTROS

While administrative reforms were made, they failed to give the rank and file greater participation in decision making and left the Castros even more entrenched at the pinnacle of state power. Fidel Castro is president of the Council of State and of the Council of Ministers, the “foremost executive and administrative” body of the land. According to Mesa-Lago, Fidel is also “first secretary of the PCC, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, general of the Army... and can assume at any time the leadership of any central state administrative agency.” Meanwhile Raul Castro is second in command of the most powerful state organs.

“The only state organ which is not directly controlled by the two brothers is the National Assembly,” writes Mesa-Lago, “but it holds sessions only twice a year and it is difficult to foresee the Assembly confronting or curtailing the Castros’ power.” He adds that “it is ironic that in his speeches closing the first congress of the PCC and inaugurating the National Assembly, Fidel strongly criticized the concentration of political power in one person, family favoritism, and revolutionary cliques, making China the target of his attacks.”

While the state organs in Cuba are similar to those in the Soviet Union, Mesa-Lago claims “there is an important difference between the two politico-administrative systems: a more significant concentration of power in the Cuban model.”

PCC AND VANGUARDISM

As a Marxist-Leninist, Castro subscribes to the tenet that a vanguard is necessary to make decisions on behalf of the working class. Though the PCC was not formally established until 1966, the outlines of its ideological structure were summed up in August 1963 by a Cuban journal that wrote: “The party is the vanguard that guides the masses in the construction of socialism. In order to perform its leading role, it is of no importance whether it be so many more or less members, but only that it will be capable of carrying out the directives from the National Directorate of the Revolution, of applying these creatively to specific conditions, of maintaining a close relationship with the working masses, and of leading them onward.”

Is Cuba Socialist?

The self-appointed task of the PCC is to “coordinate, educate, communicate and control” the working class—in short, to see that workers implement policy handed down from above. As an example of the function of the PCC, Castro said in a speech delivered on March 13, 1968, that plant managers were in charge of seeing that production quotas were met by the rank and file, but that such administrators functioned under the watchful eye of party members. Castro concluded that the party “must immediately call the attention of the superior administrative body to any deficiency, any error of an administrative nature, but the party should never tell the [plant] manager what to do.” Obviously, there is little place in this setup for rank-and-file participation.

NO CUBAN SOCIALISM

While the Cuban revolution did yield material benefits for many persons, especially the poorest sectors of the working class and peasantry, Castro’s Marxism-Leninism failed to place Cuba on the road to building socialism. Rather, it fostered new class divisions that are particularly apparent in Castro’s personal rule over Cuba. According to Mesa-Lago, Rene Dumont, the French agronomist, noted on his visit to Cuba that “the lack of confidence in the base, Castro’s reluctance to delegate responsibility, and the making of all important decisions at the top of the administrative hierarchy had resulted in increasing personalism, paternalism, and authoritarianism.”

“Central controls,” Mesa-Lago added, “had been imposed on the population, the universities, and the press; and there was expanding militarization of education, manpower, agriculture, the economy, and society in general.”

II.

Ever since the 1959 Cuban revolution, workers in Cuba have confronted the historic task of building the material foundation for a socialist society. Because Cuba's economy had been distorted by imperialism and remained largely dependent on agriculture, a full-blown socialist society, in which the economy would be administered by the workers, could not emerge immediately. But though a transition period was necessary, such circumstances did not justify a supposedly Marxist government from discarding the principle that power must be exercised by the workers themselves.

As the SLP pointed out in a recent commemoration of the Paris Commune,¹ the workers' government that was created in Paris in 1871, "the self-rule of the proletariat is the only way a workers' government can survive. Only certain organizational forms and procedures can serve the emancipation of the proletariat and even those must be chosen by the working class, not for it. In the last analysis, this is why Marx said, 'The great social measure of the commune was its own working existence.'"

What is the situation in "socialist" Cuba? Does the self-rule of the proletariat exist? This question is obviously important in determining the nature of the Cuban government, particularly since Cuban officials have often spoken of worker participation in "management councils" and of a "new participatory democracy."

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Despite the rhetoric common to Communist Party-led states, Cuban workers have virtually no voice in the direction of the national economy and little control over the workplace. While the capitalist class has been eliminated in Cuba, a workers' government does not exist. Instead of being socially owned, the means of production are owned by the state and operated through state ministries and state-appointed managers under the watchful eye of the Communist Party.

While many supporters of the Castro regime defend the dominance of the Cuban CP on the grounds that the party's interests coincide with those of the working class, there is, in fact, a conflict of interests

¹*The Commune of 1871, A Landmark in Working Class History*, New York Labor News, 1978.

Is Cuba Socialist?

between state bureaucrats and workers who must sell their labor power to the state in exchange for a wage. As Rolando Banachea and Nelson Valdes, the co-editors of *Cuba In Revolution*, have noted, there is a “strained relationship between the two...[because] the Cuban working class...[has] no decision-making power...[and because] channels are lacking for redressing its grievances or for controlling the production process.” Banachea and Valdes add that the workers’ “views are not even considered when economic plans are made, output standards drawn, wage scales set, discipline established, or workplaces managed. There are no institutions available to criticize, to present a different position, or to change specific policies or procedures.”

Though the interests of state bureaucrats and the labor force are in a constant state of conflict, official Cuban government propaganda proclaims that state administrators and the unions “have the same interests and same objectives.” Summing up the official Cuban position, Raul Castro has stated that “the best union is the State—the workers don’t need unions when they have a friendly government, THEIR government, to protect them.”

UNIONS CO-OPTED

With this serving as the ideological justification for the state to co-opt the trade unions after the revolution, the chief function of Cuba’s trade unions has been “to win the workers for the revolution, fight the counterrevolution, and push production forward,” rather than to fight for higher wages and improved working conditions. Instead of administering the expropriated industries in the new society, the unions were assigned the tasks of increasing productivity to meet the production quotas dictated by state bureaucrats, of disciplining the labor force and of generally acting as a “transmission belt” for edicts issued from above. The trade unions, pressed into service for the bureaucracy and Communist Party, became an extension of state authority over the workshop and were thus stripped of their organizational independence.

In “socialist” Cuba, trade unions do not negotiate on wages, fringe benefits and working conditions in the traditional sense. According to Cuban officials, collective bargaining contracts “have been converted into a very important measure, designed to guarantee the fulfillment and the surpassing of the production plans and an increase in productivity.” Collective bargaining contracts set forth the political and economic objectives for each branch of the national economy—as determined by the state bureaucracy. The contract spells out the obligations of the enterprise and union vis-a-vis the state plan covering production, working hours, fringe benefits, wages, vacations, etc.

The agreements are drawn up by plant bureaucrats and representatives from the national union. While the rank and file is graciously allowed to discuss the “collective” agreement, workers must forward

Socialist Labor Party

any decisions or suggestions to the Ministry of Labor for approval. The Ministry of Labor is also empowered to settle any differences that may crop up between union officers and state bureaucrats. But even if Cuban workers disagree with the final decision handed down, they are denied the right to strike.

While unions are excluded from making decisions in the vital area of industry, the government has deigned to give the unions a few prerogatives. For example, the unions distribute housing on a priority system approved by workers in full assembly. Though heralded by some as a sign of "socialist democracy" in action, the arrangement is, however, more a matter of coping with Cuba's housing shortage, albeit in a more equitable manner than exists under capitalism. The unions also arrange sporting and cultural events.

UNION "REFORM"

During the 1960s, there was speculation that the trade unions would cease to exist altogether, the state bureaucracy and Communist Party contending that they were capable of performing the tasks assigned the trade unions. But in 1970 Fidel Castro and various state bureaucrats began to acknowledge problems within the trade unions, to engage in self-criticism and to speak of reform. According to Carmelo Mesa-Lago, the author of several informative studies on Cuba, Fidel indicated that the trade union movement "should be strengthened and democratized."

In a revealing, self-critical speech, Minister of Labor Jorge Risquet admitted in July 1970 that the co-optation of the labor movement had left workers defenseless against the state apparatus. As Risquet observed, "Theoretically, the administrator represents the interests of the worker and peasant state, the interests of all the people. Theory is one thing and practice another... The worker may have a right established by the revolution [that is not respected or a complaint against the administration] and there is no one to defend him. He does not know where to turn. He turns to the party and it does not know [about the worker's right] or it is busy mobilizing people for production.... [The] party is so involved with the management that in many instances it has ceased to play its proper role, has become somewhat insensitive to the problems of the masses.... If the party and the administration are one, then there is nowhere the worker can take his problem.... The trade union either does not exist or it has become the vanguard workers' bureau...."

Ostensibly to revitalize the union movement, Fidel Castro announced in 1970 that the government was "going to trust the workers to hold trade union elections in every local... [and that] the elections will be absolutely free...." But he quickly made it clear that this pledge did not signal a fundamental break with previous policies. Contradicting the above remarks, Castro went on to say that "only workers who would unconditionally follow the government and party orders would be elect-

Is Cuba Socialist?

ed....” In other words, “workers’ representatives” were still to carry out the orders issued from above. As Fidel put it, each union official “will have the moral authority of his election, and when the revolution establishes a line, he will go all out to defend and fight for that line.”

MEANINGLESS “ELECTIONS”

Under Castro’s “free elections,” union candidates were restricted in advertising their candidacy, and only the electoral commission could publicize the “merits” of the candidates. According to Mesa-Lago, when union members voiced strong criticism of the method of selecting candidates and conducting the elections, Labor Minister Risquet “had to intervene to stop the critics, calling them ‘counterrevolutionaries’ and ‘demagogues’ and warning that such ‘a negative situation [had] to be changed radically.’” Participation in the elections was low, indicating that workers believed it didn’t make any difference who was elected or because they had only one candidate to vote for.

At the same time that the Castro regime was holding elections, the bureaucracy undertook a reorganization of trade unions, which, prior to the revolution, had been organized on the basis of trade. Under the reorganization plan, they were to be organized into “vertical unions” that would embrace all workers employed by a central ministry, regardless of trade. The new organizational structure was placed on an industrial basis to facilitate the bureaucratic administration of the unions by the state.

Despite the “reforms” handed down from the top, however, the primary function of the trade unions as an adjunct to the state bureaucracy remained unchanged. For example, Risquet made it clear that worker representation in the state-owned industries would be sharply limited. “The fact that Fidel and I have suggested that the workers should be consulted,” he stated, “does not mean that we are going to negate the vanguard role that the party should play....[There should not be] expectations or hope for magic solutions....The decision and responsibility [in the enterprise] fall to the management, whose job is to take the daily, necessary measures required by the process of production.... One thing that is perfectly clear is that the management should have—and does have—all the authority to act. It is charged with a responsibility and it has the authority to make decisions.”

Although further reforms were enacted in 1975, participatory democracy in Cuba is more shadow than substance. The working class in Cuba is frozen out of the decision-making process affecting the national economy and has little voice on the shop floor. Rather than moving in the direction of self-governing socialism in which all power rests with the workers, the Castro regime has strengthened the state’s power and tightened the state’s control over the working class.

III.

After the revolution in Cuba, the will of both bourgeois elements and of the working class was subordinated to that of a new ruling hierarchy comprised of the Communist Party and the state bureaucracy. While acting in the name of the proletariat, the Cuban state, rather than the working class as a whole, made the decisions on how the economy was to be operated, how much of the nation's resources were to be used for capital development, the rate of consumption for workers, etc. The entire state apparatus was then mobilized to cajole or, when necessary, compel the Cuban working class to accept and act in accordance with the decisions made by state bureaucrats.

This procedure for determining how the available resources are to be used and how goods and services are to be produced and distributed contrasts sharply with that which would prevail in a society building toward socialism, where such decisions would be made by the workers themselves. For example, if sacrifices are necessary because economic limitations preclude the immediate possibility of producing an abundance, the distribution of the limited goods available would be apportioned under a plan democratically adopted by the workers.

Likewise with decisions that affect workers on the job. The pace of production, the level of output, working conditions, questions regarding safety, etc., would all be the concern of the workers involved. Instead of being subjected to arbitrary conditions and norms handed down by party bureaucrats, the workers, who know far better than any functionary what each job entails and how fast it can safely be performed, would collectively exercise control over the workplace. Only the workers would have the authority to determine whether conditions required an increase in their output. Nor would any other "outside" body apart from the working class have the authority to set work standards or to discipline workers.

STATE COERCION

While the power of the workers to make such decisions would be the hallmark of the workers' government, the Cuban state bureaucracy has unilaterally instituted rationing, established quotas and norms for production, and imposed stringent regulations to control and discipline the labor force. To achieve their objectives, state authorities have, since

Is Cuba Socialist?

1959, subjected workers to schemes, involving everything from moral exhortations to coercion, that should dispel any illusions that the Cuban working class holds state power or that Cuba is laying the foundations for a socialist society.

In 1962, the Castro regime started with a campaign of “socialist emulation.” Workers were to compete with each other to increase production in return for material rewards and official recognition. According to *The Cuban Revolution* by Sam Dolgoff, the campaign was described on February 5, 1963, on a Havana radio station, which noted that “the first regulations of the Socialist Emulation Program... set up strict controls for voluntary work. Under the program, workers were required to sign contracts with the state, agreeing to work a determined number of hours without pay. In early 1963, the CTC [the Cuban Confederation of Labor] decided that the Battalions of Voluntary Workers had to turn in weekly reports giving the names of workers in each battalion and the work record of each volunteer. This was one of the measures instituted to alleviate the shortage of labor and the problem of increasing absenteeism.” However, this campaign was less than successful, a majority of workers refusing to participate in it.

When this campaign failed, the Castro regime resorted to coercive measures. By 1964, a system of norms and quotas had been introduced to force workers to increase their output. Under the system, the wages of workers who failed to meet their production quotas were reduced proportionately. In other words, the Cuban labor force was compelled to meet production standards decreed from above by bureaucrats having little or no firsthand experience in industry. As Rolando Bonachea and Nelson Valdes noted in *Cuba In Revolution*, “More often than not the norms were unjust and impossible to carry out since they were decided arbitrarily without the participation of the proletariat. Rather than ensuring production, the norms ensured only discontent among the workers.”

On October 3, 1964, the bureaucracy took another step to establish its control over the labor force by enacting the “Law of Labor Justice.” This law declared that unjustified absences, the failure to meet work quotas and time schedules, damage to tools, negligence, or disrespect for superiors, fellow workers or visitors were all offenses punishable by public admonition, reduction of wages, or imprisonment in extreme cases. The law was administered by work councils composed of five workers demonstrating complete allegiance to the state. Of course, workers exhibiting any independence could be replaced by the Ministry of Labor.

MILITARIZATION OF LABOR

After a brief period during which the Castro regime shifted back from

Socialist Labor Party

coercion to persuasion, it opted for the militarization of labor. Commenting on this program, K.S. Karol, the author of *Guerrillas in Power*, noted that “the whole country was, in fact, reorganized on the model of the army...Command posts were set up...in every province ...labor brigades were turned into battalions, each divided into three squads, led by a major and a chief of operations...[and] the Che Guevara Brigade [on the agricultural production front]...was under the direct control of the army...”

While this was taking place, more decrees were handed down by state authorities. On August 29, 1969, one of the more infamous of these decrees ordered that a labor file be established on every worker and that each worker carry a workforce control card. The labor file consists of chronological information, political views, discipline record, etc. In addition, each worker must carry a control card to obtain a job, change jobs or receive wages. It is illegal to change jobs without first receiving permission from the bureaucracy; thus, the mobility of labor is severely restricted.

Whether a worker receives social security benefits or an increase in wages depends on the reports written by state bureaucrats and made part of the worker’s labor file. According to Carmelo Mesa-Lago, these reports record each worker’s “merits” and “demerits.” The “merits” that a state bureaucrat may give a worker “include, among other things: voluntary (unpaid) labor in the sugar crop; overfulfillment of work quotas; overtime work without pay; postponement of retirement to continue working; defense of socialist (state) property, and a high level of political consciousness.” On the other hand, “demerits (defined as ‘activities that negatively affect production, disturb labor discipline, and show a low level of consciousness’) to be included in the file are, among others: absenteeism; negligence in handling equipment, raw materials, and fuel; nonfulfillment of work quotas; abandonment of the work in the enterprise without previous authorization; and deserting labor camps before completing the term to which the worker has committed himself. The ‘file’ also registers any sanction applied to the worker by civil, military, revolutionary, and people’s courts.”

WORKERS BLAMED

However, from Castro’s viewpoint, these decrees and penalties failed to achieve the desired objective of raising output and strengthening labor discipline. Indicative of Castro’s thinking was his charge in the late 1960s that there were “some people who, as a result of our economic situation, require a certain amount of coercion to get them to go to work.” (*Cuba In Revolution*)

To Castro, who had no compunction about coercing labor, it was the Cuban worker, not the bureaucratic setup, that was at fault. Ac-

Is Cuba Socialist?

cordingly, new laws aimed at tightening the state's control over labor were put into effect. The laws included provisions to deprive alleged absentee workers of many of the gains made by the revolution. Workers charged with being absent from work were denied vacations, the right to buy durable goods and access to new or better housing. They were also denied access to beaches, free education and hospitalization. According to Mesa-Lago, under the law "absentees for more than fifteen days are in a 'precriminal state of loafing' while recurrent absentees commit a 'crime of loafing.'" These crimes are punishable by penalties that include "imprisonment in a rehabilitation center at forced labor for a period from one to two years."

While state officials were busy decreeing new laws, Fidel Castro and the minister of labor, Jorge Risquet, were urging plant managers to take a firmer stand regarding discipline on the job. For example, at the Sixth Council of the CTC, Risquet said, "We must reaffirm the role of the manager... in demanding that the workers come to work every day; that they make the most efficient use of the workday; that they comply with the established norms with regard to quantity and quality; that the equipment be kept in perfect working order; that no material is wasted; and that every possible measure which will contribute to consolidate work discipline be adopted."

While workers were being pressured by the state, the Cuban trade unions served as ancillary bodies for the state, watching out for "loafers," infractions of the law, and likewise pressing workers to increase their output.

There are, of course, those who try to justify the measures taken by the Cuban state to control the working class on the grounds that they are necessary to guard against counterrevolution and to build up the country's economic base. And, as far as the latter is concerned, there can be no question that Cuba has faced formidable economic problems that have been aggravated by the economic embargo the United States has imposed on Cuba.

While the repressive measures taken by the Castro regime must be seen within the context of the social and material realities that prevailed after the revolution, it is clear that the path chosen by the Castro regime has been dictated by more than "economic necessity." The bureaucratic setup and the dominance of the party over the workers' organizations were the result of programmatic decisions. Castro and his adherents consciously opted for a path that stands in contradiction to worker self-management of the industries and to popular rule in general. Once embarked on the road toward the bureaucratization of society and party-led rule, the regulations and discipline of labor imposed from above followed as a matter of course.

The regimentation of Cuban workers and the attacks on workers'

Socialist Labor Party

rights have actually aggravated Cuba's economic problems and taken the country further away from the socialist path. Instead, the end result of bureaucratic rule has been an economy marked by dislocations and bottlenecks, low productivity and passive resistance on the part of the rank and file.

In contrast, self-management of the industries and the entire economy by the working class would provide the basis for a workers' democracy freed of the restraints which characterize a bureaucratic state. A workers' government would unleash the full creative power of the working class to surmount any economic problems and to overcome the remnants of bourgeois ideology that are an obstacle to the creation of a higher form of society. If the working class is to build the socialist future that has been the goal of generations of revolutionaries, all power must be vested in the working class.

On Workers' Governments

How does one assess the proletarian character and Marxist integrity of a movement that purports to speak for the working class but which comes to power in a country where the economic foundation for socialism does not exist? This question is crucial in assessing the nature of Cuban society and the working-class character, if any, of the Castro government.

As indicated in our January 13 [1979] editorial, "Is Cuba Socialist?" [see Introduction], the SLP considers adherence to a basic Marxist definition of socialism indispensable to any movement hoping to lead workers in an underdeveloped country through the stages of economic development that necessarily precede socialism. A clear understanding of the socialist goal must be fostered among the proletariat and not be confused with other economic stages. Only by acknowledging this distinction and clearly understanding how an existing social formation falls short of socialism can an informed proletariat intelligently come to grips with the problems it will be faced with and make decisions that best serve its class interests.

Regardless of what the SLP has to say about the nature of Cuban society today, there is no denying that the overthrow of Batista in 1959 was a progressive step. With Cuba saddled with a repressive dictatorship and dominated by U.S. imperialism, the Castro movement performed a task that was clearly on the social agenda.

But 25 years later, the criteria for assessing the Castro regime's socialist claims must be more comprehensive than those which dictated support for the Cuban people against the forces of imperialism. True, a period of time was undoubtedly required before Cuba could secure its defeat over U.S. imperialism and overcome its immediate political and economic problems. But it in no way denigrates the achievement of the Cuban people in defeating U.S. imperialism to note that the Cuban government can no longer be uncritically defended simply as a bastion of anti-imperialism—particularly when it has in large measure aligned itself with the imperialist aspirations of the U.S.S.R.

To the SLP, an assessment of Cuba necessarily entails an examination of the extent to which the working class has been able to assert itself within the limitations of a society that does not possess the material prerequisites for its complete emancipation. Only such an exami-

Socialist Labor Party

nation can determine whether a country is in fact “on the socialist road.”

Too often, being on the socialist road has been equated with the socialist posturing of a country’s self-appointed leadership. Using the limited material foundation as an excuse, the leaders of the CP-led states, of which Cuba is one, have restricted the voice and involvement of the class on whose behalf they presume to speak and act.

It has fortunately been noted that an anti-imperialist struggle ultimately holds the seeds of a socialist movement. Though the working-class movement may initially be consumed with the task of defeating its imperialist enemies, success in that struggle is soon followed by the realization that only socialism can resolve the class struggle in the workers’ interest.

Accordingly, the task of any legitimate working-class movement in the aftermath of a successful anti-imperialist struggle is to institute a workers’ government. As the SLP commented several years ago in reviewing the lessons of the Paris Commune, “A workers’ government is not identical with socialism. . . . Socialism implies the complete emancipation of the producers, the abolition of wage slavery, the elimination of all class divisions, the destruction of a repressive state apparatus, the cooperative, democratic organization of production, and the elimination of all social and individual alienation.”²

Granted, conditions in Cuba have not permitted the full establishment of these socialist relations. But in the absence of such conditions, a bona fide socialist movement must do more than simply consolidate its bureaucratic rule. It must, as Marx put it, “serve as a lever for uprooting the economic foundations upon which rests the existence of classes and therefore of class rule.” In short, the workers must successfully establish new forms of revolutionary organization that lay the basis for a socialist future.

This means taking concrete steps to assure that the exercise of power remains with the workers throughout any transition period. The abolition of bureaucratic privilege, universal elections and the right of immediate recall of all officials, workers’ wages for all officials, collective working-class control over the decision-making process—these are the types of steps a professed workers’ government must take if it is to have any proletarian character.

These measures are not luxuries to be handed to the proletariat after state power has been secured by an elite and democracy can be “tolerated”—as in Cuba, where the government in recent years has decided that the country is finally ready for an “experiment” in “socialist democracy.” As the SLP has noted, “the self-rule of the proletariat is the only

¹*The Commune of 1871, A Landmark in Working Class History*, New York Labor News, 1978.

Is Cuba Socialist?

way a workers' government can survive. Only certain organizational forms and procedures can serve the emancipation of the proletariat and even those must be chosen by the working class, not for it."

In contrast, workers in Cuba have not been given the opportunity to determine Cuba's path to a socialist future. Instead, a bureaucratic ruling class has consolidated state power over the workers and usurped the organizations which supposedly give workers a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

If some of the essential elements of a workers' government are absent in Cuba, they are clearly embraced by the De Leonist program of Socialist Industrial Unionism, which reflects the essence of a workers' government—revolutionary organizations to wage the class struggle and to provide the framework of the socialist society, adherence to the democratic organization of the workers themselves, the dismantling of the state apparatus and the passing of all power to the workers' organizations.

One cannot from a distance, of course, pass judgment on all aspects of the class struggle in Cuba. But if it is clear that the Cuban revolution had progressive features, it is equally clear that it has failed to lay the foundation of a workers' government that can steer a road to socialism. This task still confronts the Cuban working class.