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**Cuba, Socialism and
the Third World**

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Cuba, socialism and the Third World

A rejoinder to Robin Blackburn

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Responding to Robin Blackburn's contribution to the debate in these pages on Cuba [\[1\]](#), presents us with certain problems. While he himself raises a few factual objections to our account, some of which – including the role of the Communist Party and the working class – are serious and will be considered below [\[2\]](#) the most significant points for him are clearly those of *emphasis*. According to him we dwell too long on Cuba's economic structure, on the regimented and bureaucratised aspects of the regime, and not enough on its popularity, but that judgement depends on *what political task* he regards as most significant. As we shall see there are sharp differences between Blackburn and ourselves here, both as regards workers' revolution and socialism in general and as regards the perspectives for third World revolution today.

Let us take up some of the more factual points first.

Perhaps the most important area of difference is over the tradition with which the working class entered the 1959–61 period and their actual role within it. Our position was – and is – a simple one: the industrial workers' movement became

emasculated and discredited by its cozy relationship with Batista. This was reflected in its abjectly class collaborationist CP leadership, and in its policies of defending its privileges relative to the more numerous rural proletariat and the unemployed. This explains why it played such a *passive* role in the revolution and why any suggestion that Castro's regime is a "workers' state" is nonsense. By contrast we mentioned the example of Chile, which although remaining a bourgeois country in the years 1970–73, went through a period of large-scale factory occupations and threw up powerful organisations (the *cordones*) linking them together. In short we argued that there was not the least material basis – in terms of workers' activity and workers' struggles – for a workers' state in Castro's Cuba.

Against this Blackburn argues that the working class played an active rather than a passive role and that the class's traditions were more those of struggle than collaboration.

As evidence for the activity of the working class Blackburn cites the fact that "There was a nationwide general strike in the first days of 1959 – not even mentioned by Binns and Gonzalez – which prevented an attempt to salvage the old order without Batista". And had the strike been *either* a crucial instrument in the destruction of the Batista state *or* the beginning of the formation of soviets or other instruments of workers' power, he would have been quite right to criticise us. But it was not. Castro ended the strike as quickly as he had begun it.

And just what attempt was there, or could there have been, to "salvage the old order without Batista?" The forces of the Batista state had already been smashed or had melted away *before* the strike began, a point implicitly recognised by Blackburn when he admits that "At the same time it is evident that the revolution was successful without soviets or workers' councils. The old order was sufficiently rotten to be swept away by a popular movement which had not developed the higher forms of proletarian organisation". Quite so. or in the words of one recent commentator:

Thus while the general strike against the Machado dictatorship had played a crucial role in the latter's undoing, the general strike called by Castro after Batista's overthrow was almost superfluous. In fact the completely successful 1959 strike was called to ensure the consolidation of the new revolutionary regime and was aimed against no-one in particular, because Batista and his cohorts had already fled the country, and no-one else dared challenge Castro. It turned out to be a well-deserved revolutionary holiday for the Cuban working class rather than an instrument of struggle, properly speaking. [3]

The only other evidence Blackburn offers us is a reference to the demands that workers were making in 1959–60: “In some cases the demands were highly specific – removal of a personnel manager who had collaborated with the former secret police – in others the demand was simply for ‘intervention’ or nationalisation.”

But what exactly is he referring to here? Are these demands with which workers are occupying factories or even going on strike? Not a bit, they are simply archives of letters received by the ministry in Havana. No doubt the workers *were* well pleased when the main industries were nationalised, but that is not in dispute. What is, is whether the events of 1959–60 constituted a workers' revolution, and for that, nationalisations would have had to have been the act of the working class itself. They were not. As Blackburn admits: “It is quite true that the initiative for these measures, and certainly their programmatic form, came from Fidel Castro.” Quite simply Blackburn has confused the difference between the situations where the workers through their independent organisations follow the lead of a party which expresses their own aspirations and that where they merely passively follow the initiatives of a government they do not control. [4]

And when we move on to Blackburn's assertions about the traditions of the Cuban working class before 1959 it becomes more far-fetched still. He chides us for failing to mention the important role of the Cuban working class in the independence

struggle in the last quarter of the last century, and for not giving enough background for the 1933 general strike. We too would have liked to have gone into this but considerations of space prevented us. [5]

But Blackburn seems to be saying something more than this. He points out the militancy and class consciousness of the working class, 30, 50 or 80 years before the revolution, and then immediately draws the conclusion that *therefore* the working class must have played an active and class-conscious role in 1959/60. Why else does he castigate us so vigorously when we “omit reference” to the above which he indeed refers to as “the class struggles which *decisively* shaped Cuban political culture and *contemporary Cuban political institutions*”?

Unfortunately, history is not so simple. No doubt the massive – indeed probably unequalled – struggles of the German workers in the 15 years before Hitler came to power also helped to shape German political culture, but that did not prevent the rise of fascism. All kinds of other things intervened: the role of the union bureaucracies, the cowardice and sectarianism of the Social Democrats, the twists and turns of the CP and so on. The Cuban working class no more succeeded in making the revolution that Castro led than the German working class succeeded in preventing the rise of Nazism, notwithstanding the strength of its past traditions.

Here the question of leadership is absolutely crucial, and in the Cuban context from 1933–1959, given its considerable size, and its hegemony in the working class, the role of the CP was absolutely central.

Blackburn is at great pains to stress that role. Why? Clearly, the assertion that the Cuban revolution was a workers’ revolution is the key to his whole defence of Cuba. Even he is willing to recognise that a state does not become socialist by declaration of its leaders – that socialism must involve the intervention of the working class *at some stage* even if, as he

recognises, that role later becomes a passive “supporting” one (hence the stress on popularity).

Given the lack of organs of popular power, of active and independent workers’ organisations; and given the undeniable lack of democratic control on the present Cuban state, Blackburn resorts to the kind of “legitimation through hindsight”. In this too, he follows the Cuban regime itself; the first histories of the Cuban revolution written by the official spokesmen contained only passing references to the Communist Party. In 1958, Castro himself had dismissed the Cuban CP as a political force. Yet by the late sixties, the role of the Communist Party in pre-revolutionary Cuba had been expanded miraculously, and official histories now gave it a central role in the development of the struggle pre-1959 (as for example does Rius, in **Cuba for Beginners**).

For Blackburn, the workers’ rising of 1933 is a key event; yet the role of the Communist Party in these events was at best ambiguous, and at worst treacherous. The workers’ rising was not led by the Communist Party; it was largely a spontaneous rising, in which rank and file CP members (the Party had no more than 2000 members at the time) took an active part, but in which the CP itself played no organised role. When it did intervene, it was to adopt the same role as the French CP did in May 1968 – to urge the workers to go back to work. Their calls were ignored. After 8 years of repression the same CP was prepared to sell the workers’ movement down the river in return for recognition from the dictator Machado.

When Grau San Martin came to power in the wake of Machado’s fall, the Cuban Communist Party, locked in the politics of the Third Period, denounced Grau’s government and the range of nationalist organisations that had emerged in the course of the movement which, whether they liked it or not, enjoyed far more real mass support than the Cuban Communist Party. Yet, two years later, the Cuban Communist Party began to make overtures to Batista, the populist demagogue who had

come to power in 1935. These changes of policy correspond to the changing line of the Comintern, as it moved from the sectarianism of the Third Period, abruptly to embrace the leaders they had previously denounced in a Popular Front.

By 1940 the Communist Party was praising Batista to the skies, partly because he had finally legalised the party, partly because two Communists were invited to join Batista's cabinet. The speeches and declarations of that period in the CCP's history state time and again a willingness to renounce any active or agitational role in exchange for a share in power. When in the mid-40s, the CCP came to dominate the Cuban trade union movement through the CTC, it was not as a result of active mass support but the payoff for years of collaboration and agreement with a Batista whose government was more and more nakedly repressive.

At no stage in its history, then, could the Cuban Communist Party claim to be the leadership of an active working class movement, nor the expression of the interests of the class. It could claim to be the leadership in a bureaucratic sense, a bureaucracy which controlled the strongest sectors of the trade union movement. Furthermore, it retained that control on the basis of an explicit agreement with Batista, whereby some economic advantage was gained in exchange for the removal of the CCP from politics. Thus, the role of the Cuban Communist Party in 1933 and subsequently was to *depoliticise* the working class movement, to keep workers from participating in politics through the manipulation of certain economic "incentives". If the membership of the CP rose during those years, which it certainly did, it was because the CP had become part of a career structure in the bureaucracy of the official trade union organisations, and not because its willingness to fight for workers' interests had brought it mass support.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. When, in 1953, Batista banned his erstwhile allies, there were no mass protests; when the 26th July Movement emerged as a force after 1956, the

CCP could do nothing to affect its actions nor to prove wrong a sceptical Fidel Castro who denied any political significance to the Communist Party.

Castro's hostility to the Communist Party continued at least until 1961. If his attitude began to change then, it was not because he felt that through the Communist Party he could gain the support of working people, but because he needed experienced bureaucrats to run the unions, and because the CP, then as now, were most in sympathy with Russian interests and objectives. The irony is that the mass base of the Communist Party today, if it exists, is precisely the result of yet another agreement at the top, this time between Castro and the CP "old guard".

It is interesting that Comrade Blackburn takes up none of these points, but tries instead to argue the legitimacy of the Cuban Communist Party, and thus the definition of the workers' state, on the basis of a continuation from the radical nationalism of Marti. But traditions are made and remade through struggle and concrete attempts to change the world, not through the right of possession of the Holy Grail.

Yet one has the feeling in reading Blackburn's criticisms that this is really all shadow-boxing, that he is committed to the view that Cuba is some kind of workers' state whatever role – or lack of it – the working class played in the revolution. It is certainly difficult to believe that he himself is convinced by it. But then it is clear that he is very deeply confused on what a workers' revolution is and what a workers' state looks like.

In 1970 Blackburn was an enthusiastic follower of Regis Debray, who at the time was the leading figure advocating rural guerrillaism as *the* road to socialism in the modern epoch. At the time, he summed up what he considered correct in Debray's position:

the problem for Latin American revolutionaries is not so much acknowledging the decisive role of force as discovering the *form*

that it should take. This is why Debray opens his argument with an exposition of the *foco* theory as the revolutionary alternative to the attentism and putschism which has plagued the Latin American Left. While the *foco* strategy rejects the reactionary oligarchic tradition of the *golpe d'estado* (*coup d'etat*), it does draw on a long popular tradition of resistance to oppression ...

With the Cuban revolution and the development of the *foco* strategy it was possible to orientate future upheavals in a genuinely revolutionary direction. The guerrilla *foco*, as practised by Fidel and Che, furnished the masses with an alternative to the status quo which was convincing in both social and military terms ...

The guerrilla *foco*, located in the regions of most intense poverty and exploitation, would simultaneously break the monopoly of violence held by the oligarchies, and directly embody the concrete aspirations of the rural masses for land, education and health.

The most shocking feature of the *foco* theory to those who believe in the traditional schemas of revolution is its apparent voluntarism, best summed up in the oft-quoted declaration of Che that "it is not always necessary to wait until all the conditions for revolution are fulfilled – the *foco* can create them." For a long time many revolutionary parties have believed that revolutions are the result only of objectively given social contradictions, which suddenly explode in a general crisis (slump, war etc.). The history of this century has repeatedly refuted this view both negatively in terms of highly revolutionary situations which have not produced revolutions (Europe after both World Wars) and positively in terms of revolutionary situations which have been won only because of the long preparatory struggles of the revolutionaries, well before all conditions were present (Lenin's building of the Bolshevik Party, Mao's defence of the Red bases of China's twenty year civil war). Modern revolutions do not *happen*, they are *made*; and correct revolutionary strategy can help to precipitate as well as to consummate the revolutionary situation. Debray does not present an abstract account of the relationship of class

forces, nor does he regard Marxist analysis as a type of fortune-telling by which a society's future can be divined from its economic entrails. [6]

The logical conclusion from all this, of course, is that there are no objective circumstances, no structural limitations imposed by capitalist society on what is and what is not possible. **Capital** and every other work of Marxist science is irrelevant. And if *this* is true, all the Marxist arguments against reformism fall too. One of these crucial arguments is that of the Permanent Revolution; which takes as its starting point that modern capitalism is in essence *international* in form, and that therefore there cannot be separate national roads to socialism, and that proletarian revolutions that become isolated are doomed. Blackburn, quite consistently and in words which reflect Stalin's, drops this too:

Lenin and the other Russian revolutionaries were all proved wrong when it came to forecasting how a revolution might develop in Russia; they all thought that proletarian revolution in the advanced West would be an indispensable concomitant of proletarian revolution in Russia. Lenin's decisive contribution was rather that he had fashioned an adequate organisation for consummating the revolution once a revolutionary situation developed. (p. 14)

Of course Blackburn and Debray's views are not identical, not even in 1970, but it is important to note that the sole criticism he entertains is purely *military* in form. He tells us that:

The most trenchant critiques of Debray are those grounded in what is undoubtedly the Marxist military science of this epoch, the writings of Mao Tse-Tung. Although we may be sure that a real encounter with the categories of Mao's renewal of Marxism and Leninism would entail a considerable recasting of Debray's theses, this does not cancel his achievement in posing the question of revolution for many thousands of new militants. (pp.21-22)

In other words the *politics* of guerrillaism, with its complete lack of *any* of the fundamental organs of proletarian power – workers' councils, soviets, and so on, is perfectly alright. It's just that Mao or Giap might have been better generals than Fidel or Che.

Worse still are the implications for the advanced West. We are told that the politics of the guerrilla foco is of *universal* significance:

Quite apart from the many incidental merits of Debray's *oeuvre* ... he has contributed significantly to the rebirth of a revolutionary Left in Europe and North America by making available to them the experience of the Latin American guerrillas. It is in the nature of good theory to give a universal meaning to even the most particular of struggles. That is why Debray's essays have been so eagerly read by Berlin students and Black militants in the United States as well as by Latin Americans. (p. 22)

The tragedy is that many revolutionaries ten, twelve years ago, *did* learn their politics from Debray and his ilk, and with quite disastrous consequences. They said yes to the gun but no to proletarian politics. Look at the "Black militants in the United States" who Blackburn refers to, look at the Black Panthers. First of all half of them were slaughtered by the US state, then the other half – seeing how unequal the battle was – became coopted into the Democratic Party. They had never been won over to the politics of the self-activity of the working class, they had no idea that the violence we shall need against the state is not that of a few individuals, but that of the great majority; and that it is our job to build a vanguard in and of the class to make this possible.

Faced with the bankruptcy and failure of non-proletarian terrorism, Debray, like the Black Panthers, moved out of revolutionary politics altogether. With Blackburn the situation is different. Always more cavalier as regards the political theory he currently holds [7], he has never properly come to terms with his own past mistakes. For some, it is true, this is due to the fact that he still believes in them, but for the rest the differences are considerable.

Take the whole question of guerrillaism. Previously he saw this as *the* convincing alternative to bureaucratism in "social and military terms" which would "directly embody the concrete

aspirations of the rural masses”. Now it appears as the other way about: “... some of the prevailing historical conditions have tended to foster a bureaucratic trend ... notably the military methods of the guerrilla struggle ...” And he notes that “from its inception the Cuban revolution was marked, and limited, by the absence of an institutional socialist democracy”. Again he is now at pains to point out – mistakenly as we have seen – a direct working class role in the revolution. That he considers the question a relevant one is certainly an advance, or rather *would* be an important advance if two further corresponding moves were made too. Firstly, one would have to take seriously the proposition that Stalin was wrong and that a workers’ revolution cannot survive in one country alone. Secondly one would have to drop the view that some other body rather than the self-organised proletariat can be the agency of socialism. Unfortunately Blackburn does neither.

Take the first of these. The remarkable thing about Blackburn’s reply to our article is that nowhere in 14 pages does he consider Cuba’s economy. Indeed he goes further than this, complaining that *we do* look at it. It is not that our economics are *wrong* – he nowhere even suggests this – but somehow or other the question is irrelevant. Now this is a view that stands in the sharpest opposition to the whole tradition of Marxism. The effects of the world capitalist economy are central for what is and what is not possible for *any* country. Even in huge isolated revolutionary Russia Lenin referred to it as being something “to which we are subordinated, with which we are connected and from which we cannot escape”. [8] How much more true is this for tiny dependent Cuba? Blackburn’s dismissal of it all is consistent not with Marxism but instead with the Stalinist nonsense of “socialism in one country”.

The same is true unfortunately for his conception of socialism and the workers’ state. Given his attempt to defend the Cuban revolution as one actually made by workers, it comes as a surprise to be told at the end of his article that this is all

irrelevant anyway. For it appears that there is hardly any limit to what a workers' state might look like, and that the self-organised proletariat is therefore presumably just one of its possible forms. He tells us that "history offers us no guarantee that all workers' states will be democratic in their functioning, or unambiguously dedicated to bringing socialism into existence. Bourgeois regimes have included military dictatorships, fascism and representative democracy; why should not proletarian regimes display similar diversity in kind?"

In that case of course, Stalinism emerges triumphant again. For history has shown that, since 1945, the Russian army jackboot has been much more effective in creating Russian type societies than workers' revolutions, a conclusion that a great many former Trotskyists drew in the 1950s by leaving the movement in droves. [9]

And the truth is that Blackburn himself is not so very far from that position either. He tells us that "in the existing Communist regimes the decisive hinge of the system is the party activist. To the extent that the activists are, or become, routinist, cynical and "passive", to that extent the system of planned economy will not be effective". Note that the working class itself has now dropped out of the equation altogether, no doubt to be relegated to some quite peripheral role in the system. This is not Marxism, it is Stalinism; Stalinism with a Maoist tinge, but Stalinism nonetheless.

Note also the persistence of Blackburn's voluntarism, whether it is used to support the guerrilla in 1970 or the bureaucrat in 1980. If there is one consistent strand in Blackburn's writings on Cuba it is this; the absolute refusal – or inability – to analyse, or countenance the influence of, the scientifically objective world within which our political practice must be located.

And that of course is why in our analysis we refused to detach Cuba from the world economy in which it is located, and why we refused also to detach Cuba's politics from its economics.

Given that it is really quite extraordinary that Blackburn – particularly given his own voluntarism – should accuse *us* of failing to “arrive at an estimate of the structural imperatives constraining the initiative and power of, respectively, the party leadership, the activists and the masses”. That, after all, is precisely what the analysis, particularly the economic analysis, *does* enable us to do.

In fact only someone who, like Blackburn, appears to cultivate a blindness towards economics, could possibly claim as he does that for instance unemployment hardly exists in Cuba. Given this year’s collapse of the tobacco harvest, and the 15% decline in sugar production, there has been enormous pressure on labour productivity recently in Cuba. In fact in the next 5 year plan announced in July it is intended to raise it faster than the growth of the economy. [10] Other things being equal, if they succeed, this *can only* give rise to unemployment. In fact it has happened already, though of course it occurs in different forms than in the West.

The first form has received extensive coverage in the Cuban press. It occurred as follows. In 1979 machinery was installed throughout the Cuban economy that ought to have allowed the same production to be maintained with 4% fewer workers. In fact overall productivity only went up by 0.8%, instead of 4%. What went wrong? According to the Cuban press it produced lots of “Mr Softies” – a cartoon figure who appears in a comic strip in **Granma** – instead. Mr Softie is a character who always manufactures a job out of nothing, and he has begun to figure very prominently in recent months, a symbol of the inefficient manager who refuses to cut the workforce to efficient proportions. [11]

The second form is more familiar in the western press – the refugees. Hundreds of thousands have suddenly been permitted – even encouraged – to leave Cuba. It is merely the other side of the coin from Mr Softie. There is no point in driving the Mr Softies from the factory if the state still has to pay for their

upkeep elsewhere. Much better to remove a portion of the workforce altogether so that there will be less tendency for the bureaucrats to create the Mr Softies in the first place.

None of these political facts – the refugees and so on – are at all explicable without a good general understanding of the Cuban economy and the constraints provided by the world economy within which it operates.

Yet it is not just over Cuba itself that we have differences with Blackburn, but also, and more importantly, over the whole strategy of third world revolution today. Here again, the critical issue is that of the role of the working class in the revolutionary process. Blackburn, as a supporter of the Fourth International, would presumably agree to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, according to which the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in colonial and semi-colonial countries – national liberation, agrarian reform, etc – can only be accomplished by the conquest of power by the working class supported by the mass of the working population.

The problem lies in applying and interpreting the theory in conditions very different from those in which it was formulated. In a number of countries, of which Cuba is one – the others are China, Vietnam, North Korea, Kampuchea (after this, things become a big hazy – Angola? Mozambique? Ethiopia? South Yemen? Nicaragua?) – militantly anti-imperialist regimes have emerged which have nationalised the bulk of the means of production and implemented significant land reforms. Is this development a confirmation of the theory of permanent revolution, since these countries have made significant inroads into private property relations? Or does it, on the contrary, amount to a refutation of the theory, since in none of these countries does the industrial working class exercise power in the way in which the Russian proletariat did, however briefly, after October 1917?

What is at issue is the nature of anti-imperialist strategy. Does it lie in the establishment of more regimes on the Cuba model, or along the road taken by the Bolshevik party in 1917? To put it more concretely, in the case of South Africa, will national liberation come through a guerrilla offensive backed by the USSR and its allies or through the development of a powerful working-class movement based in the factories of Port Elizabeth and Durban, the mines of the Rand and Orange Free State? In Nicaragua should revolutionary socialists be busy supporting the left wing of the Sandinista government or developing independent working-class organisation? And so on. While it should be clear that our sympathies are with the second alternative – the seizure of power by the proletariat supported by the mass of toilers and organised into soviets – the issue is one that can and should be argued on its merits.

Here Blackburn's idealism, his refusal to consider the objective conditions within which popular struggles unfold, has the most serious political consequences. He produces no evidence to suggest that Cuba's position within the international division of labour has fundamentally changed since 1959. It may be the Soviet Union is a more benevolent patron than the US (hardly surprising, since Cuba's importance to Moscow is primarily strategic and political rather than economic); nevertheless, the island remains a primary producer, heavily reliant on the foreign exchange earned by its sugar industry. A similar pattern is to be found in those other third world countries which have broken from direct western control. The very process of rapid industrialisation initiated by the new regimes in these countries in some respects increases their dependence on the world economy, since this process requires the importation of plant and equipment from the advanced capitalist countries, and these imports must be financed through foreign borrowing and the expansion of traditional export industries. The gradual opening of the Angolan and Mozambican economies to western capital reflects precisely these pressures. The dilemma is even

more cruel for Ethiopia, which has been forced to concentrate resources on the large capital-intensive farms inherited from the old order at the expense of the small peasants to whom land was distributed after the fall of Haile Selassie, because the former sector is a vital source of foreign exchange needed to repay war debts to the USSR amounting to some two billion dollars. And then, of course, there is Comecon, whose hard-currency debt to the west amounted to 68 billion dollars at the end of 1979. To finance this debt (contracted in the first place to pay for imported western technology) the eastern European economies must sell a growing share of their output to the “capitalist” world, a process which will draw them deeper into the rest of the world economy and make them more vulnerable to its fluctuations. The strike waves in Brazil and Poland this year arose from remarkably similar causes – the Brazilian military regime and the Polish “Workers’ Party” both need to cut real wages as part of their programmes to restore equilibrium to economies burdened with massive foreign debts (50 billion dollars, and 20 billion dollars, respectively).

The trend, then, is towards the greater integration of the Eastern bloc into the Western capitalist economy. The pursuit of economic autarchy in these circumstances amounts to chasing after a myth, and a reactionary one at that. It enjoins the mass of the working population in “post-capitalist” societies to accept a pattern of development – the subordination of consumption to production – which is essentially that of capital accumulation. It also blinds people to the real fault-lines in the contemporary world. These run, not between nations, but *within* and *across* them.

World capitalism has created two world classes – the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The division of these classes into nation-states is no mere deceptive illusion – it reflects the process of competition inherent in the capitalist mode of production which increasingly sets states, as the agents of relatively united national capitals, against one another. But

through this very process of competition, and the movements of capital across the globe which it involves, an international economic order has been created which unites the different national sections of the bourgeoisie into what Marx called a “band of hostile brothers” and sets the workers of all countries against them. Recent events in Poland have illustrated this fundamental reality. Brezhnev, Carter and Schmidt have all sprung to the aid of the Polish regime, offering loans to bail out its ailing economy and thereby preserve the existing balance of power in Europe. A confrontation between Polish workers and Russian tanks would have sent ripples across eastern Europe and into the Soviet Union itself, where only in May car-workers at Gorki and Togliattigrad participated in the biggest strikes since the October revolution.

Unless the essentially international character of the struggle is grasped, the danger is that socialists will end up supporting some more “progressive” national capital against its rivals. The dangers in such a stance were clearly shown last year in Asia when three “socialist” countries – China, Vietnam and Kampuchea – ended up fighting one another. It does not follow that all national struggles are equally reactionary, as “left” communists have argued since Bukharin and Pannokoek clashed with Lenin during the First World War. On the contrary, national liberation struggles in the third world have had a powerful effect in weakening western capitalism, as is most obviously true in the case of Vietnam. It remains the duty of revolutionaries in imperialist countries to support movements for self-determination in oppressed nations (Eritrea and the Ukraine as well as South Africa and Ireland). This does not, however, mean giving what the Second Congress of the Comintern called a “communist coloration” to movements whose politics are essentially bourgeois-nationalist. Economic autarchy in the epoch of imperialism is a chimera. Genuine national liberation presupposes international proletarian revolution and the

destruction of the capitalist world economy which this would entail.

In this sense, Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution remains valid for contemporary capitalism. The major modification that has to be made to the theory – to take account of revolutions such as Cuba's which expelled imperialism without destroying capitalism – requires acceptance of two points. First, capitalist development can take different forms, including that of bureaucratic state capitalism. It is the failure to distinguish between the basic features of capitalist relations of production – the separation of the direct producers from the means of production, competition between capitals – and the different economic forms these can take which leads Blackburn and his like to describe Cuba's road as towards "socialism".

Second, proletarian revolution is not inevitable. It depends, in the last instance, on the consciousness and organisation of the working class. In historical situations where, as in Cuba in 1959, the workers' movement has become passive and incorporated, other social forces may be able to seize the initiative and dispossess the feeble local bourgeoisie. But they cannot build socialism, which involves both the exercise of political power by the working class and the success of socialist revolution on a world scale. The wave of colonial revolutions since 1945 – China, Cuba, Algeria, Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua – without exception arose in circumstances where the working class had been submerged in broader movements and deprived of the initiative. Over the past decade a series of social struggles have taken place in the third world which have been marked by *autonomous* working-class action: Ethiopia and Thailand 1974–6 (in the former case crushed by the military regime Blackburn supports), India before and after the Emergency, Pakistan in 1977, the Brazilian metal-workers' strikes of 1978, 1979 and 1980. This phenomenon, itself a product of uneven and combined development of capitalism over the past 30 years, poses the possibility of permanent revolution

in the authentic sense originally given in by Trotsky after the experiences of Russia 1905–17 and China 1925–27 – in other words, the ability of the working class, even where only a minority of the population, to act as the decisive force in society and open the way to national liberation and socialism. Transforming this possibility into actuality depends upon the development of socialist organisation internationally. A necessary condition of such a development is the elimination of the quite widely held illusions held in countries such as Cuba to which Robin Blackburn gives voice.

Notes

1. R. Blackburn, [*Class forces in the Cuban Revolution: a reply to Peter Binns and Mike Gonzalez*](#), **International Socialism 2:9**; and P. Binns & M. Gonzalez, [*Cuba, Castro and Socialism*](#), **International Socialism 2:8**.

2. Unfortunately a number of other points raised were much less serious and are not worth more than a footnote.

For instance Blackburn cites a point that he considers to be “highly significant” that in April 1961 Fidel declared the revolution to be socialist and that the majority of Cubans agreed. Unfortunately there are all kinds of definitions of socialism, and no doubt the same could have been said for Atlee’s Britain in 1950. In both these cases however the crucial element of workers’ power was totally missing.

Then there is his disagreement with us on the characterisation of the 26th July Movement. For him it was a radical populist movement and therefore not concerned with national economic development and opposition to imperialism. These oppositions are distinctly bizarre for the movement was obviously all of these things. He thus tells us “Fidel Castro’s famous speech *History Will Absolve Me* sums up the ideology of the 26 July Movement and the reader will find no mention of ‘independent national development’ in this passionate indictment of

Cuba's corrupt and repressive political system". There is also, we are told, an "absence of conventional anti-yanqui rhetoric in this speech".

Has Robin Blackburn ever read this speech himself? Turning to page 46 (F. Castro, **History Will Absolve Me**, London, 1968) we read:

More than half of the most productive land belongs to foreigners. In Oriente, the largest province, the land of the United Fruit Company and the West Indian Company join the north with the south coast. There are two hundred thousand peasant families who do not have a single acre of land to till to provide food for their starving children. On the other hand, nearly three hundred thousand caballerias of cultivable land owned by powerful interests remain uncultivated.

Then on page 47 again we find:

Everyone agrees that the need to industrialize the country is urgent, that we need steel industries, paper and chemical industries, that we must improve cattle and grain production, the technique and the processing in our food industry, in order to balance the ruinous competition of the Europeans in cheese products, condensed milk, liquors and oil, and that of the United States in canned goods ...

Obviously then, the radical populism is thoroughly permeated with and depends on anti-imperialism and a concern for national economic development.

Finally there is the quite absurd claim that our article "relies *almost wholly* on emigré experts who have never visited revolutionary Cuba". Only a tiny minority – less than a quarter – of our references could possibly be attributed to such sources. Even if we eliminate all the accounts that are hostile to Castro, an examination of our sources reveals that we are still left with the following result:

- (1) Number of official Cuban sources plus the number of "favourable" other sources that have visited Castro's Cuba – 19
- (2) All other sources (neutral, hostile, mixed; whether or not based on first-hand experience) – 15

The quite wildly inaccurate nature of Blackburn's claims on these points put in question the extent to which his account should be taken seriously and scientifically rather than as ideological impressionism.

[3.](#) S. Farber, **Revolution and Reaction in Cuba 1933–60**, Middletown, 1976, p.202.

[4.](#) On the land the situation was more complex. The occupations of estates by peasants and landless labourers in the Spring of 1959 *did* take place and they provided the background to the 1959 land reform. (Cf. J.I. Dominguez, **Cuba: Order and Revolution**, Harvard 1978, p. 440) But no-one has suggested of course that this reform (unlike the 1963 reforms) might have been a “socialist” measure.

[5.](#) As a matter of fact we did just this in our original draft, but the editors – wisely – cut it out as not strictly relevant. If anyone is interested we would be happy to supply them with a copy.

[6.](#) R. Debray, **Strategy for Revolution**, London 1970, edited and with an introduction by Robin Blackburn. It is from the introduction that this (pp. 10–11) and the following quotations are taken.

[7.](#) In this respect he is of course very much a product of the **New Left Review** grouping. For an explanation of this phenomenon see Ian Birchall’s article in the current issue of this journal.

[8.](#) Quoted in L. Trotsky, **Third International After Lenin**, Pathfinder p. 46.

[9.](#) This is why it is crucial to be absolutely clear on what a workers’ state is or could be. We have noted already that for Blackburn this is quite unclear: apparently a workers’ state might take as many forms as the bourgeois state, perhaps the Russian army jackboot, the rural guerrilla and the workers’ revolution are all of them ways of achieving it. Yet the remarkable thing about Blackburn is that he seems to believe that it is the SWP rather than himself who is unclear on the question. He has this to say: “If the political tendency which Binns and Gonzalez support had elsewhere clarified its positions on these questions there would be less of a force in this objection. But if one consults, for example, the definition of workers’ democracy given in Paul Foot’s **Why You Should be a Socialist**, it apparently boils down to the relationship which existed between orator and masses in the *Cirque Moderne* during Trotsky’s famous speeches there in 1917.”

Now if this were true it would be difficult to see why Blackburn, with his quite breathtakingly eclectic approach to “workers states”, should find this unclear. In fact it looks awkwardly precise, masses of workers

have to be involved, all a bit difficult if the Russian army or the rural guerrilla are possible means of creating it.

But of course Paul Foot says no such thing. He doesn't even mention the Cirque Moderne when he talks about workers' democracy. Instead he says "By contrast, the fundamental unit of workers' democracy is the workers' council", and he goes on to say that "The workers' councils form the core of socialist democracy". The same account can be found in every major publication of the SWP and it is simply ridiculous to pretend otherwise.

10. See **Granma**, Jurd, 1980

11. A typical cartoon is reproduced in **Latin American Weekly Report**, 14.12.79, p. 80.

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