



## Cuba Solidarity Campaign Briefing - October 2003

### A critical time

The Hands Off Cuba campaign has been launched at a critical time in the struggle to defend Cuba's self-determination. 2003 has seen a number of negative developments, particularly in relation to the EU's and the Bush administration's approach to Cuba. However there have also been signs that world opinion has resisted US attempts to demonise Cuba.

### 1. Bush's re-election campaign and the new threats to Cuba

Over the summer there were repeated statements from members and associates of the Bush presidency that point to an escalation of threats against the island. These include a speech by US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roger Noriega, in which he said that the US is moving 'swiftly and inexorably' toward the end of the Castro government. In addition there were comments from Bush's brother Jeb, governor of Florida, that, 'the US should finish with the regime of Fidel Castro'.

Encouraged by the US invasion of Iraq and the new policy of pre-emptive military attack, rallies of right-wing Cuban Americans and their political representatives in Florida have declared: 'Iraq today, tomorrow Cuba'.

George Bush announced in a speech to far-right émigré Cubans on 10 October the creation of a Commission for the Assistance to a Free Cuba, with the aim of removing Fidel Castro and the country's political system. He also declared tighter enforcement of the ban on travel and tourism by US citizens, as part of the 44-year old US economic embargo of Cuba.

The Bush administration includes a remarkable number of senior officials with intimate connections to the far-right, anti-Castro, Cuban groups based in Miami, and key players in the bloody US campaigns against popular movements in Latin America over several decades.

These include Under Secretary of State John Bolton, US ambassador to the UN John Negroponte, Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere Roger Noriega, Secretary of State for Housing Mel Martinez, and Latin American Envoy Otto Reich.

The Cuban government takes the view that the US has been involved in conspiracy with far-right Miami Cubans to provoke a crisis of such proportions that it could lead to an armed intervention in Cuba by the United States.

## **2. The arrests and the aftermath**

One of the biggest prizes in this intensified campaign against Cuba is the support of European Union governments for the aggressive stance of the US administration. After years of a policy of positive engagement with Cuba, EU-Cuba relations deteriorated dramatically with the condemnation by EU leaders of Cuba's jailing of 65 so-called dissidents in April. A worldwide media and propaganda campaign against Cuba was whipped up in the aftermath of the arrests, leading to the European Union threatening sanctions and diplomatic isolation against Cuba.

These so-called dissidents were tried in open courts with legal representatives of their choice, not for their political beliefs but for treason – accepting money from an enemy power – under the Law of Protection of National Independence passed in 1999. No country in the world tolerates or labels domestic citizens paid by, and working for, a foreign power to act for its imperial interests as “dissidents”. This is especially true of the U.S. where under Title 18, Section 951 of the U.S. Code, *“anyone who agrees to operate within the United States subject to the direction or control of a foreign government or official would be subjected to criminal prosecution and a 10-year prison sentence”*.

The Cuban authorities also faced an escalation in terrorist activities including the hijacking of planes and ferries by gangs and individuals seeking to migrate illegally to the US. The Cuban government accused the US of encouraging these hijackings through not issuing their agreed quota of legal migration visas and through treating too leniently those who make it to the US by illegal means.

It was in this context that the Cuban authorities tried three ferry hijackers for terrorism and endangering life, an offence that carries the death penalty in Cuba.

## **3. The UK and the new hard-line European Union position on Cuba**

The EU agreed a new Common position on Cuba following the April arrests in which they supported a policy of diplomatic isolation, political interference and reduced economic ties.

EU politicians have ignored US interference in Cuban affairs and the documented millions of dollars that have been spent by the US government to destabilise Cuba. In the House of Lords on June 16, UK government spokesperson Baroness Crawley claimed that the Cuban view was so preposterous that it would be a waste of time refuting it. Other UK government spokesman claim constructive engagement is still in place.

In Spain, the Government of Jose Maria Aznar has gone further and organised a seminar on Cuba to which representatives of the Miami right were invited along with the former Czech President, Vaclav Havel.

Havel and Aznar visited Miami in September and held high-level talks with the Miami leadership to discuss ways to bring about the overthrow of the Cuban government ‘from within’. A joint statement published by Havel and the former presidents of Poland and Hungary published across Europe in September, argued for the setting up of a ‘Cuba Democracy Fund’ to assist in bringing about ‘transition’ in Cuba.

All of this has the effect of making the Cuban government even more suspicious that there is an orchestrated campaign aimed at turning world public opinion against Cuba as a prelude to possible military action.

Already the Spanish and Czech governments have signed up to the Cuban American National Foundation programme for diplomatic isolation, economic pressure to restrict tourism in Cuba, tightening up on grants, loans and Cuban assets abroad, and political interference in Cuba.

In return for these 'favours' CANF is said to have offered the Europeans a permanent waiver or even removal of aspects of the Helms-Burton Law that affect the rights of European businessmen in the US who have investments in Cuba.

#### **4. Why Britain's position is crucial**

Britain is one of the big players in the EU and is perceived as an opinion leader within the Council of Ministers on many issues. Britain's hard line against Cuba on human rights issues means that other, smaller EU partners follow suit. If the UK government changes its policy towards Cuba, then others would be emboldened to do the same.

Britain is clearly duplicitous in its approach to Cuba. On the one hand Ministers will argue that Britain's policy is one of 'constructive engagement' and spell out in detail the many cultural, sporting and business links that are being developed with the island, but on the other, the British embassy in Havana has opened its doors to the so-called dissidents and the UK government has publicly admonished Cuba for its human rights record. In Europe, the UK has been at the forefront of pressing for the harder line at the Brussels level with Havana. This has led to the withdrawal of EU humanitarian aid to the island and a marked deterioration in relations.

Thus a spiral of decline has been started in relations between Europe and Havana. It is not too late to reverse this process, but a rethink in Britain's position is crucial to that coming about.

In addition, the observation must be made that any military strike against Cuba from the US would be justified on the basis that the Fidel Castro is a tyrant and the Cuban people would be liberated from him. This is how he is portrayed in the US and it is clear that many people in Washington share this view of Castro. What is dangerous is that the Bush administration is saying that the Cuban government is a threat because its biotechnology industry is capable of producing biological weapons. Cuba is already on the list of states that the US accuses of being state-sponsors of terrorism. Of course no evidence exists to support either of these claims.

However, by falling in behind US-instigated provocations aimed at tarring Cuba and Fidel Castro, the UK and Europe are in danger of helping the US create the pretext and justification for military intervention. After so roundly condemning Cuba for alleged human rights abuses, how could the EU argue against the US if it decided to attack Cuba on the basis that the Cuban people needed to be 'liberated' from its government?

In fact, Cuba is not a human rights abuser. No one is tortured there, or killed for being a member of a trade union, or for being a journalist. There are no death squads and the people enjoy a free medical and education system that is provided by the government. US policy on Cuba is based upon, at best gross exaggerations, and at worst downright lies. The really constructive thing for the UK government to do would be to point these out forcefully and publicly to the US and the world, rather than indulge in a policy that only feeds and supports the prejudices of those in the US who would like to see the overthrow, even by violent means, of the Cuban government.

As Seamus Milne wrote in the Guardian on 31 July: "Saddled with a siege economy and a wartime political culture for more than 40 years, Cuba has achieved first world health and education standards in a third world country, its infant mortality and literacy rates now rivalling or outstripping those of the US, its class sizes a third smaller than in Britain - while next door, in the US-backed "democracy" of Haiti, half the population is unable to read and infant mortality is over 10 times higher. Those, too, are human rights, recognised by the UN declaration and European convention....How much of that would survive a takeover by the Miami-backed opposition?"

## **5. Hands off Cuba!**

What we say is that irrespective of one's views of Cuba's socialist system, the Cuban people do not deserve to have been treated the way they have by the US over the past 44 years. If the extremists in Miami succeed in orchestrating 'an Iraq-style' solution for Cuba, it would be a crime of unimaginable proportions.

Our concern is that, following the way in which the Blair government so slavishly followed the US into an unjustifiable war against Iraq, the UK may even support the US if it decided to invade Cuba.

That is why we are asking our supporters to write to their MPs and ask them if they would support such an attack. By asking the question we hope to raise the issue and have it completely ruled out before it is too late.

The UK should now be telling its Washington ally where it stands on Cuba and in no uncertain terms it should be ruling out any support for any military action.

More than that, the UK should be at the forefront of building strong and constructive links with Cuba from Europe, rather than apparently doing the opposite and encouraging the US in its policy of interference in Cuba's internal affairs.

That is why we say now is the time for politicians to declare: Hands Off Cuba!

## **Further Information**

Two recent CSC briefing papers give more detailed information on the background to recent events. These are available on request from the Cuba Solidarity Campaign

The May 2003 briefing explains the arrests of so called dissidents and the immediate aftermath.

The July 2003 briefing gives further information on the Cuban Government position and the increasing aggression against Cuba.

Both these briefings and further detailed information is available at

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