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By Workers World Party
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CUBA SÍ: Solidarity against blockades, COVID and empire

The following excerpted remarks were given during a Philadelphia Workers World webinar promoting the upcoming November Caravan to Cuba sponsored by IFCO/Pastors for Peace. Speakers were Gail Walker, executive directive of IFCO; Dr. Samira Addrey, IFCO's ELAM (Latin America School of Medicine) coordinator; and Vijay Prashad, executive director of Tri-Continental Institute for Social Research, with Clancy Murray of Workers World Party facilitating.

Gail Walker: I want to thank you, and I want to thank Workers World for organizing this event. The first thing I want to say is that Cuba is not alone. Cuba, no está sola. And that's so important at this particular time, when Cuba has really been under attack. But the fact is across the globe, Cuba has many friends, because Cuba has been a friend to those who have been neglected, disenfranchised and alienated, particularly by the U.S. and its other associates of the Empire.

And that's why the international Cuba solidarity movement has and will continue to offer its unrelenting support of the Cuban people and the Cuban Revolution. Particularly those of us in the U.S. — in the belly of the beast — have been grateful for all that Cuba has done to support those in need, with its commitment to medical internationalism, running toward the fight to help, whether that be after a natural disaster or an earthquake or a hurricane, whether that be because of a medical emergency, such as what happened in West Africa and the fight against Ebola, or, of course, the fight against the coronavirus.



Cuba's Soberana vaccine against COVID. credit: Granma

In 1992, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's primary trading partner, the island plunged into an economic crisis. During that Special Period, there were shortages of food and fuel, and life was extremely difficult for the Cuban people. That same year, Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), under the leadership of my father Rev. Lucius Walker, organized its first U.S.-Cuba Friendshipment caravan, providing the U.S. people with an opportunity to express their opposition to the U.S. government's brutal sanctions against Cuba, by donating humanitarian aid that the U.S. government blockade prevented them from accessing.

The Friendshipments were broadly supported by all who oppose the U.S. blockade of Cuba. Those earlier caravans consisted of hundreds of people who came together from various walks of life to express their opposition to the blockade by traveling to Cuba without requesting or accepting a license to do so.

Together, we claimed our right to travel to Cuba without asking for government permission. We collected tons of humanitarian aid donated by individuals, community groups and churches in the earlier days, items such as powdered milk, medicines and even used school buses.

Believe it or not, we were banned by the U.S. government. Later, ironically and laughably, the government would claim that the aid we brought in defiance of their blockade was provided to Cuba by them.

Let me tell you a little bit more about the caravan traveling along multiple routes and dozens of trucks and buses throughout dozens of cities. We stopped each night in different communities, educating people about the brutal effects of the blockade on the Cuban people. We held events in churches and schools and people's homes and community centers. Talking about the Cuban reality, collecting material aid and additional vehicles and caravan members, the caravan would eventually converge at the U.S.-Mexico border, where we would cross with our aid, sometimes in confrontation with the border officials, who at times attempted to seize our aid.

One year, they attempted to seize a little yellow school bus that was destined for a school [for children] with special needs, claiming that we were somehow supporting the military. Another year, they seized hundreds of computers destined to support Cuba's medical network. In both cases, we, along with the support of our mass international Cuba solidarity community, won the day. The people at the border engaged in long hunger strikes; and with the support of the Cuba solidarity movement across the country and some friendly members of Congress, we forced the government to back down and to return our aid so that we could continue on a journey to Cuba.

The Friendshipment caravans organized by Pastors for Peace and supported by numerous organizations, including our host tonight, the Workers World Party, strengthened our collective belief that our movement could indeed go up against the U.S. government and win.

Friendshipment 29 years later

Over these last several years, the caravan model has changed a bit. We don't ride in buses and trucks across the country the way we used to, but our goal has remained the same. And that is for people to travel to Cuba to see the reality for themselves, and for the people of the United States to return as ambassadors of friendship and love and to convey to their communities — whether that be in their schools, their families, their churches or wherever they might gather — and also to donate humanitarian aid as a symbolic gesture of

friendship and solidarity and in opposition to our government's antiquated and brutal blockade.

It's important to note that the aid is symbolic. The reality is that the real relief that Cuba needs is to have the boot of the U.S. government off its neck by lifting the blockade once and for all, allowing Cuba to breathe and to provide its people with what it needs. Cuba is fully capable of doing just that. Cuba is a country that is capable of providing support for other nations in times of need and has been able to galvanize its own people to do the same in its own country, such as when they organized caravans of doctors to travel from Havana to Matanzas to combat the surge in COVID cases there.

Just imagine what Cuba could do if given the space and the respect it deserves. Some ask, why is Cuba the target of such a relentless and brutal blockade policy? The reason is because Cuba is a threat. It's the threat of a good idea. The threat of a nation that truly puts people first — a nation that values health and education and housing for all above building up its military, as the government does in this country.

We all remember the vision of planeloads of Cuban doctors and medical professionals landing in China and Italy and South Africa and Surinam and many other countries, all of them risking their lives to help fight the deadly virus. This wasn't the first time Cuba offered this kind of selfless assistance. In fact, Cuba has never wavered in her support of those who have struggled for self-determination across the globe.

Biden no friend of Cuba

But today, Cuba is enduring another difficult moment. Despite his promise to reverse the stranglehold that the Trump administration put on Cuba, Joseph R. Biden and his administration have done the exact opposite. Biden has not only refused to reverse the 243 punitive measures that the Trump administration placed on Cuba, like limiting travel and remittances and downsizing the the embassy, he has even tightened the blockade. He has maintained Cuba on the list of countries that support terrorism.

Cuba is facing severe shortages of fuel, food and medicines, and much of this is a direct result of the U.S. government's blockade policies. And that's why this 31st

Friendshipment Caravan that we're organizing is so important. It's as important, I would argue, as the first one that we organized 29 years ago.

Both the Cuban government and the United Nations have estimated that the blockade has cost the Cuban economy \$130 billion over the past six decades. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimates that the blockade costs the U.S. economy billions of dollars each year as well.

The human toll is harder to quantify, but it's clearly been significant. Human rights experts in the U.N. have called for the U.S. to ease sanctions during the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that such a change will save lives by allowing Cuba greater access to medical supplies and equipment.

Gerardo Hernández, coordinator of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and one of the Cuban Five heroes, certifies that the vast majority of Cubans have been severely hindered by the blockade.

Our 31st Friendshipment Caravan will take place this November, and we're urging you to join us. Our friends need us now more than ever, and we hope you will join us for this life-changing experience. And if you can't come with us this fall, please help us by raising funds to continue this important work.

A special moment to uplift Cuba

Samira Addrey: I just feel like it's a special moment right now, just because of the energy of this group and what we're gathered here tonight to do, which is to uplift Cuba and be there for Cuba, as she has been a friend to so many for so long. Like Gail said, we have to stand with her during the most difficult times. I always say Gail's response is a genetic response to being there for friends in difficult times, because she's continuing to carry the torch of her father, the late Reverend Walker.



Cuba is in the forefront of the fight against COVID worldwide. credit: Granma

The blockade has had its impact. COVID-19 has had its impact, and the economic turmoil on the island also has had its impact, all resulting in a seemingly perfect storm for U.S. intervention. But based on what we saw immediately after the July 11th disturbances and what has been the response of the Cuban people for over 62 years of this cruel and unjust blockade against the island nation, the streets indeed belong to the revolutionaries.

If we pay close attention to history and the voices that have called for an internationalist approach in resolving human problems, we see that the threat of our aspiration to unify oppressed people of the world is the greatest threat to the U.S., Western imperialism, [its] structure and hegemony. Cuba is the internationalist beacon of the world, and we have a lot to learn from her.

We just returned from Cuba [and saw] the tranquillity and resolve of the Cuban people, to move on from that failed attempt to destroy Cuban unity, and the covenant between its people and the revolutionary government. There were no traces of the massive disdain and disruption reported by U.S. media, and we certainly did not find Cubans under heavy military or police occupation and surveillance.

What we did see and hear were the scenes that have continuously played out in Cuba between people. Folks differ in opinions and thoughts all the time, and they seldom hold

their tongues about it. But there is free expression of ideas and hardly any censorship. We saw the Cuban people grappling with everyday problems.

But people continue to meet those challenges with so much grace.

Cuban government resolute in protecting people

We also witnessed the threat, the effects of the pandemic, with higher casualties reported in a daily press conference; and everyone with their hearts in their throats, as children and pregnant women were now described as recently deceased.

For Cubans, hearing the death rate in one-digit form is bad enough. Just think of how people react when those rates are now in two-digit numbers. But the story of Cuba today is not about death. On the contrary, it's about her dedication to the defense of life. Not only have Cubans been killed by several tons of adversity, but they have also overcome those pangs of gloom with passion enough to shut all her enemies up.

The Cuban government remains resolute in protecting its people and involving the whole nation in that incredibly challenging work. I have seen firsthand how the Cuban people have weathered the storms placed in front of them. The natural disasters that wreak extensive havoc in these United States on that island are mitigated by a well-prepared national plan that involves grassroots community at its core. Infectious diseases that have been endemic to that island and to that region have been curbed by well-prepared plans to preserve lives.

The founding of my alma mater, Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina, is a serious weapon to decolonize the way health is guaranteed to people all over the world. ELAM produces doctors of science and conscience and is responsible not only in addressing the health care needs of humanity but also to spread a humanist form of medicine that seeks to preserve life first rather than profits or property.

The Cuban people have supported such a project for over 20 years, having been sensitized to the needs of the world beforehand. When Haiti was struck with an earthquake, Cuba was there and never left. When Katrina happened here, Cuba was ready; but our government refused its help, and we continue to see the negligence of leaders entrusted with the protection of our people.

Cuba vs. COVID

Today, the trending topic is vaccines; while for over three decades, Cuba has been fortifying its biotechnological sector to be able to produce eight of the 11 vaccines used in its national vaccination program. Cuba is surging forward in production of vaccines against COVID-19 to save its population, as well as [of] other countries who have been grossly overlooked in the race to own the vaccine and to make profits from it.

Today, Cuba is the first country in the world to vaccinate children from ages two to 18 to secure a safer educational environment, before resuming in-person classes. Children and parents willingly consent to these vaccines, because there is a culture of scientific acceptance and guidance in Cuba.

Cuba already vaccinated its population with a booster vaccine called Soberana Plus to further protect people who have had COVID-19 and who could contract it again. This is because from the very beginning, their scientists knew that with the unpredictability of viruses, all the various tools necessary to ensure a patient's health have to be employed. Not only that, the sequelae that people have to live with after having COVID-19 have a direct impact on their health and well-being, which translates to the health of families, communities and the society at large.

Cuban scientists have been working on a nasal spray vaccine called Mambisa [named after anti-colonialist Cuban guerillas who fought Spain in the late 1800s], which will be an alternative to injections but also protect the upper airways in a way that none of the vaccines that exist today in the world would be able to do, because they are only geared to protect the lower respiratory system and from severe forms of COVID-19.

I have the honor of bringing together two poles in my training: the political and the social justice-driven work that are represented here tonight by IFCO/Pastors for Peace Executive Director Gail Walker, as well as Vijay Prashad; and the other pole of my training being medicine. And the underlying theme in all these spheres is the call of justice and love to influence the way we approach human relations. As a graduate of the Latin American School of Medicine in Cuba, I know we have been trained to look at all the factors that impact and maintain the health of our people from the individual, the family and community levels.

We have been taught from early on that social determinants are what influenced the health of our people. Social determinants of health are things like safe housing, transportation, safe neighborhoods, racism, discrimination, violence, education, access to nutritious foods, pollution in air and water, language and literacy skills, among others. In Cuba, education, housing, health, safety or human rights [are] guaranteed by the government. Yet the impacts of the blockade on delivering on those rights are immeasurable.

The blockade makes it hard for Biopharma Cuba to access the raw materials needed to produce a medicine like this and more essential medicines like antibiotics, antivirals, analgesics, etc. I make this example to show how the social determinants of economics, in this case the U.S. blockade, impact Cuba's economy, and its access to materials directly impacts the health of the people.

How ELAM decolonizes medicine

I now have the privilege of being the coordinator of the ELAM Scholarship Program at Pastors for Peace, which is entrusted with the responsibility of recruiting, vetting and supporting candidates for the full scholarship to study medicine in Cuba. It is an amazing opportunity that is open to young people from disadvantaged and underrepresented communities between the ages of 18 and 25 who are also U.S. citizens and have completed their college level prerequisites of biology, chemistry, organic chemistry and physics.

And the commitment that is essential to receiving the scholarship is to return to the U.S. and to serve in the communities where they are needed most. We should reach out to the youth of our marginalized communities and encourage them to pursue medicine Cuban style, because it is not entrenched in the culture of profit and rather promotes universal health care as a human right.

This blockade, which is the longest economic war on any country in the world, over 62 years, has severely impacted every aspect of life in Cuba. The pandemic has taken advantage of the vulnerabilities created by the blockade and has created a situation where difficulties are due to compounding factors.

What can we do to help? We must first understand the history of our nations is more interconnected than we realize, and we can benefit from learning from each other.

America does not belong to the United States. It belongs to all the peoples of these continents north and south and the islands in between. We must not allow false notions to divide us, not these borders that have been created by a few and certainly not the languages that the colonial powers have used to separate their property.

We must continue to fight in this struggle for liberation and self-determination of Cuba and understand that if we fight for Cuba, we are fighting for all of mankind. And the example that Cuba has been is strong, and it must be kept alive, just like we must fight for Haiti, Venezuela.

All these nations have been plagued by U.S. imperialism, and the examples are countless. And in the revolutionary spirit that Cuba has always shown us even before 1959, the revolutionary spirit of not wanting to be controlled by any foreign entity, is something that we should hold deep in our hearts and should be what propels us forward. And as Harriet Tubman said, we should not be paralyzed by our fears. We should fight for what's right, and definitely peace and liberation are worth fighting for.

Remove the scourge of imperialism from the planet

Vijay Prashad: I was in Los Angeles in 1988 when Lucius Walker came there because there had been a hurricane, I believe in Nicaragua and perhaps in Bluefields, which I visited later. Lucius Walker was attacked in August of 1988 by the Contras, and he was almost killed. He threatened to sue [then President] Ronald Reagan. I remember that well.

I'm just saying all this because I want people to get a sense that this is not about Cuba. This is a struggle to liberate the planet from the scourge of capitalism.

We are not just nostalgic about Cuba. This is not about the 11 million people on the Cuban island. We are socialists. We want to conquer the world. We want to remove the scourge of imperialism from the heart of Zambia, from the coup against the people in Honduras, the coup in Bolivia — for the whole planet.

Cuba is the front line to defend humanity against imperialism. At the time when the Cuban doctors are all across the Caribbean in the hot COVID wards, what is the United States doing? The United States this summer ran two hideous naval exercises. One was called

Tradewinds 2021. The other was called PANAMAX 2021. That's what the United States government is good for.

The point of Tradewinds was to turn the country of Guyana against Venezuela; it took place in the country of Guyana. This is a hideous way to turn people against each other. And that's precisely what the CIA has been trying to do on the Cuban island: Turn people against their own revolution. Everything that has happened, in the last few years in Cuba, is a consequence of this attempt to break the revolution's soul, to break its back.

That's the reason that Manolo De Los Santos and I edited this book, Comrade of the Revolution, because we picked seven speeches given by a great comrade, Fidel Castro — each of the seven at a time of crisis, when the sugar harvest failed, when the Soviet Union collapsed. When neoliberalism was at its highest, and so on and so forth, Fidel could go into a crisis, analyze the conjuncture and find hope there. And you know, when the Soviet Union collapsed, we learned something, something very interesting, he said. That we will defend ourselves, and he said something very sharp. He said if we were a capitalist country, this country would have collapsed. It's socialism that saved Cuban socialism.

It's the class struggle. This is medicine for the people, not medicine for the rich and medicine for money. The imperialists don't want the example of medicine for the people.

Let's not forget the Cuban troops — they played a heroic role in [the Battle of] Cuito Cuanavale in Angola in 1987. Cuba has only exported itself for the people. Whether the humanity is in a white coat with their doctors or a green coat with a guerrilla fighter fighting against the apartheid forces doesn't matter. White coat, green coat — they export for humanity, but the United States exports to destroy.

This is humanity versus imperialism, and Cuba is the front line of humanity.

Our movement must be humane. It must be caring. We have to look our adversaries in the eyes and tell the truth at all times. We must be gentle people. It's a gentleness that's going to win the planet.

*To join the 31st Pastors for Peace Friendshipment Caravan, go to IFCOnews.org. To request an application for an ELAM scholarship, go to the same site and click on the Medical School tab. **Workers World 30.09.2021***