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May Day in Havana: International Solidarity to Resist the U.S. Blockade

Author Bio: This article was produced in partnership by [Peoples Dispatch](#) and [Globetrotter](#). Walter Smolarek is a Philadelphia-based journalist and activist, covering both political developments inside the United States as well as the international activities of U.S. imperialism. Since becoming involved in the movement against the Iraq War as a high school student, he has also participated as an organizer in social movements ranging from Occupy Wall Street in 2011 to the 2014-2015 wave of the Black Lives Matter movement and ongoing mutual aid relief efforts in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. He is a contributor to BreakThrough News, currently serves as the editor of Liberation newspaper, and is the managing editor of LiberationNews.org.

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[Article Body:]

This year's May Day celebration in Cuba was interrupted by severe storms that knocked out electricity in much of the country. Authorities had no choice but to postpone the traditional mass marches. But for over 150 young grassroots organizers from the United States who had traveled to the country to mark the holiday, this turn of events was just more reason to deepen their efforts to end the U.S.-imposed blockade of the country.

Miya Tada, a brigade participant from New York, explained how this showed that “the biggest obstacle the Cuban people are facing is the repression and economic warfare of

our own government, and that just inspires me to further the struggle against the blockade back in the United States.”

This wide range of activists from nearly 30 states and dozens of organizations was brought together by the International Peoples’ Assembly, a network of left movements and parties around the globe. Members of the solidarity brigade had spent the preceding week taking part in educational panels, discussions with Cuban activists, and youth exchanges as they sought to deepen their understanding of the Cuban Revolution.

May Day Amid a Tightening Blockade

The country is currently grappling with a range of severe difficulties that boil down to a single tremendous challenge—surviving amid a blockade that seems to tighten every day. The U.S.-imposed blockade has been in effect for over six decades, but a series of developments in the past several years has taken its cruelty to new heights.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused havoc in every country on the planet, but the coercive measures on Cuba magnified the crisis dramatically there. The country was able to avoid the kind of catastrophic loss of life experienced in the United States thanks to its world-renowned health system that produced five different vaccines, but the economic consequences were grave. Tourism is a principal source of foreign currency—essential to import vital goods since Cuba is locked out of the dollar-dominated world market—but this industry effectively disappeared overnight. Many other sectors of the economy were severely impacted as well.

“The other pandemic we faced,” Dr. Damodar Peña Pentón of the Latin American School of Medicine explained to brigade members earlier in the trip, “was the administration of Donald Trump. He imposed 243 new measures and used COVID-19 as an ally.”

Over the course of the Trump administration, the mild thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations that took place at the end of the Obama years was completely reversed. Aiming to suffocate the revolution, Trump imposed 243 new restrictions on Cuba designed to totally isolate it from the world economy.

Towards the end of his term, the State Department officially labeled Cuba a “state sponsor of terrorism”—because it had hosted successful peace talks between the Colombian government and the rebel movement FARC! Colombia’s president at the time was celebrated for his efforts with a Nobel Peace Prize, but Cuba’s reward was to be slandered as terrorists in an effort to further deter potential trading partners. This is a prime example of what Johana Tablada, Deputy Director for U.S. Affairs at the Cuban Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, told brigade members the prior week: “The U.S. government has been permanently telling lies to justify its policy.”

Last August, a massive inferno broke out at the country’s main fuel storage facility in the province of Matanzas. A lightning strike sparked a fire that exploded one of the facility’s massive tanks and then spread to three more. Fourteen firefighters tragically died as they heroically battled the blaze.

Such a disaster would badly affect any country, but for Cuba, the blockade had already made it extraordinarily hard to meet its energy needs. Severe fuel shortages ensued, which persist to this day. This disrupts daily life in innumerable ways and makes it extremely difficult to respond to situations like the storm on the eve of May Day.

Just a few weeks after the fire, on September 27th, Hurricane Ian made landfall in the western province of Pinar del Río. The powerful storm destroyed over 50,000 homes and damaged 60 percent of the housing in the province. Construction materials desperately needed for reconstruction efforts could not be imported due to the economic siege of the island.

Ian also had a profound effect on agriculture. Pinar del Río is known for its tobacco production, and Cuba’s cigars are an important way to acquire foreign currency through exports. Food crops being grown in the region were almost totally destroyed.

The cumulative effect of all this was to create an economic crisis that—contrary to the presentation in the major corporate media outlets—is the consequence of the limitless cruelty of the U.S. government, not a failure of socialism.

The United States seeks to cover up this criminal behavior by preventing its own citizens from traveling to Cuba to see the reality firsthand. Despite traveling as part of a licensed, completely legal trip, members of the youth brigade were harassed and held in secondary questioning upon their return home at the Miami and Newark airports. Several young activists had their phones wrongfully searched and seized in a blatant violation of their civil liberties.

Moving Forward Despite Great Obstacles

The slogan of this year’s May Day in Cuba was “Hands and Hearts for the Homeland!” It reflects the urgent need for every Cuban to contribute all their abilities to overcome any challenge.

Any easing of U.S. pressure on the country will be an immense relief as they pursue this task. The blockade of the country has been almost unanimously condemned at the United Nations on an annual basis for three decades. But even short of the full lifting of the

blockade, steps like the revocation of the 243 Trump-imposed measures or the outrageous designation by the State Department that Cuba is a “state sponsor of terrorism” would improve the situation greatly.

“Being here in Cuba has opened my eyes to the dire need in the United States to raise awareness about what’s going on with this blockade and to end it,” explained brigade member Sarah Brummet of Pensacola, Florida. “I’m very inspired to see the solidarity and the struggle of the Cuban people, and it’s our responsibility to take that same energy home and fight the blockade,” she said.