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**Cuba Seeks Revolutionary Renewal, Part Two:  
Economic Reforms Fuel Cuba's Battle of Ideas**

**By John Riddell and Phil Cournoyer**

*(Part One of this article appeared in Socialist Voice #84.)*

In a November 17, 2005, speech at the University of Havana, Cuban President Fidel Castro outlined measures to counter corruption and theft that are bleeding the Cuban peoples' resources into the hands of a layer of new rich.

Castro also indicated that the economic principles underlying the recent reorganization of electricity supply will be applied to the economy as a whole. The government has raised electricity rates while simultaneously raising salaries to compensate. "Subsidies and free services will be considered only in essentials," he said. "Medical services will be free, so will education and the like. Housing will not be free. Maybe there will be some subsidy, but the rents ... need to come close to the actual cost."

The thinking behind this change was explained by Francisco Soberon Valdes, head of Cuba's national bank, in a December speech to the National Assembly. "It is of utmost importance that the distribution of goods and services is clearly and directly linked ... with the effort of each from the position they occupy in our economic structure," Soberon said.

The Special Period, he said, "moved us away from this strategic objective." The Special Period is the Cuban term for the economic crisis brought on in the early 1990s by the rupture of economic ties with the Soviet Union.

In capitalist society, talk of "effort" is used to justify paying corporate chieftains, who produce nothing, many, many times the salaries of manual or intellectual workers. Within the Cuban state economy, however, salary levels have always conformed closely to the goal, reaffirmed by Soberon, of assuring "as equal a distribution as possible."

**‘To each according to their work’**

In Cuba, the prices of many basic necessities like housing have long been subsidized. These subsidies unduly benefit those Cubans who have an ample supply of money. This creates an unwarranted drain of economic resources into the hands of the privileged, including those with access to dollars from abroad. The end result is to reinforce trends towards greater inequality.

Meanwhile, the subsidies system assures working people of only a minimum subsistence. For a worker today, Soberon explains, “the money he earns ... is not enough to buy products that are also necessary but that are sold at market prices.” The result is a decay of the work ethic.

**“The salary no longer truly motivates him.”**

The worker is launched into “a struggle to obtain material goods, as much as possible, for him and his family regardless of his contribution to society.” This trend is “particularly damaging” when the person “has authority over important material wealth.”

Moreover, some are able to choose not to work “without affecting [their] standard of living,” a situation that is “simply catastrophic” for the economy and “morally unacceptable.”

Soberon advocates extending the solution applied in the electricity industry. “This formula gradually reduces the inequalities created or increased during the Special Period,” he said. The policy also is in keeping with “what Marx explained more than a century ago: each should use to the full his capacities and receive according to his work.”

**Battle of ideas**

The new policy outlined by Castro and Soberon aims to rein in the diversion of state resources to privileged layers and increase the overall efficiency of the economy, which will, in turn, promote greater productivity.

But the Cuban leaders do not project an increase in production as a solution in itself. Rather, their proposals aim to help Cuban working people through enhancing the real value of the salaries and pensions they receive from the state. Cuba’s electricity reforms, discussed in Socialist Voice #67, pursue other social goals as well, such as reducing inequality, easing the burden of household labour on women, and encouraging energy conservation.

Such measures are intended to strengthen the hand of Cuban workers and their state against the surrounding capitalist world and its presence within Cuba. As such, the measures are part of what Cuba’s Communists term their “battle of ideas”—an extended, concerted effort to demonstrate the superiority of a struggle for socialism over proposals for a retreat to a capitalist order.

The nature of the ideological challenge was spelled out in the address of Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque to the National Assembly on December 23. “To some degree, historical memory has been lost; a comparative understanding of what is happening in the world has been lost.” Some people in Cuba “have illusions about capitalism,” he said. They think that if the “Yankees” take over some day, “they’ll get the capitalism of an advanced European country,”

when in reality “they’ll get Haiti or the Dominican Republic, a poor Third World Country converted into a U.S. neocolony.”

In his November 17 speech, Castro underlined the centrality of the Cuban revolutionaries’ effort to counter such illusions. Referring to Cuba’s imperialist enemies, he declared, “They can never destroy us.” But, “we can destroy ourselves, and it would be our fault.”

He then asked, “What ideas and what level of consciousness can make the overturn of a revolutionary process impossible?”

### **Rectification**

The effort to use economic policy to promote socialist consciousness and strengthen the working class has a long history in the Cuban revolution. Perez Roque recalled Cuba’s campaign for “Rectification” in the 1980s, which included in its goals opening up scope for worker initiatives and volunteer projects in economic construction.

“Rectification was unfortunately cut short ... when the Special Period began, and many of [its goals] could not be realized,” the Cuban foreign minister said. But “we are rescuing many of those plans today, with more experience and on a more solid and better foundation.”

While not using the term Rectification, Fidel recalled one of its themes on November 17, saying, “Some thought that socialism could be constructed with capitalist methods. That is one of the great historical errors.... That was why I commented that one of our greatest mistakes at the beginning of, and often during, the Revolution was believing that someone knew how to build socialism.”

### **Che’s economic writings**

The Cuban leaders’ recent statements echo themes going back to the revolution’s first years, in the 1960s, when Ernesto Che Guevara stressed the importance of “moral”—that is, political—incentives in economic construction, alongside the “material” incentives represented by piecework, bonus programs, and the like. Che also warned of the consequences of relying on capitalist methods of encouraging production in words that now seem prophetic of later Soviet collapse:

“The pipedream that socialism can be achieved with the help of the dull instruments left to us by capitalism (the commodity as the economic cell, profitability, individual material interest as a lever, etc.) can lead into a blind alley.... Meanwhile, the economic foundation that has been laid has done its work of undermining the development of consciousness. To build communism it is necessary, simultaneous with the new material foundations, to build the new man.” (*Man and Socialism in Cuba*)

It is noteworthy that a manuscript by Guevara that provides a critical assessment of the Soviet economic model has just been published for the first time by Ocean Press, in association with the Che Guevara Studies Center of Havana, Cuba. A collection of documents from Cuba’s debate on economic policy in 1963-64, in which Che was a central figure, has also just appeared. Both books are in Spanish and will be widely available in Cuba.

### **Lessons from the USSR**

Guevara's ideas link up with the interest among many Cubans today in the lessons of the Soviet experience. Fidel's November 17 speech took up this topic with regard to the foreign policy of the Soviet state and Communist Party.

"A tremendous vice was created," he told the University of Havana students, "the abuse of power, the cruelty, and in particular, the habit of one country imposing its authority, that of one hegemonic party, over all other countries and parties."

These historical events "influenced the idea that for a communist the end justifies the means," undercutting the importance of the ethical factor in the struggle for socialism.

"Today we can speak of this subject because we are entering a new phase."

Fidel explained his view with reference to international policy of the Soviet Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s. He condemned the 1939 alliance of the USSR with fascist Germany as "a very hard blow" that left communist parties "to politically bleed to death." He also assailed the policy that led the Cuban Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s to ally with the dictator Fulgencio Batista: "The order came from Moscow: organize the anti-fascist front. It was a pact with the devil."

Subordination of workers' struggles to supposedly progressive capitalist politicians like Batista was a hallmark of the Soviet CP's policy of "anti-fascist unity" in the mid-to-late 1930s.

Fidel contrasted to this record the Cuban Communists' relations with Latin American revolutionary movements: "It has never even occurred to us to tell anybody what they should be doing."

### **Cuba and the world struggle**

Castro's comments on the international dimension of the Soviet experience illustrates the central role that the Cuban leaders assign to Cuba's intimate involvement in the experiences and liberation struggles of working people around the world. Cuba's internationalism is rooted in the thought of the leader of its independence struggle, Jose Marti, who famously said, "Patria es humanidad"—humanity is our homeland.

The proportion of Cuba's resources devoted to international humanitarian aid dwarfs that of far richer economies, such as Canada. To promote this effort, Cuba has built a medical system whose capacity is far greater than the country's needs. Where mass movements have scored significant breakthroughs, as in Venezuela and Bolivia, Cuba has rushed to provide support.

Furthermore, Cuba's medical solidarity is not restricted to Latin America and the Caribbean. Cuban medical teams, for example, played a significant role in helping the Pakistani people to cope with death, disease, and destruction provoked by last year's earthquake.

When Cuban leaders discuss economizing resources, few put this commitment in question.

Based as it is on respect for the recipient countries' independence, integrity, and right to autonomous development, Cuba's foreign aid program is a welcome contrast to those of

imperialist powers. It serves as a material demonstration of the superiorities of Cuba's social system and wins massive sympathy for the island in its struggle against the U.S. blockade.

And the greater margin of flexibility enjoyed by the Cuban economy today is in large measure due to gains in the struggle against imperialist domination in Latin America and parts of the Middle East, and due also to China's growing world role.

Cubans seek to exchange ideas with anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist thinkers of many viewpoints from all over the world. Hardly a month goes by without a significant international conference in Havana. Cubans are traveling abroad in ever increasing numbers, one recent example being the huge Cuban delegation to the World Social Forum in Caracas.

Cuba's revolutionary leaders have understood from the beginning that the long-term survival of the revolution depends on the success of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles in other lands. That is why the advances of the revolution in Venezuela and the victory of the indigenous majority in Bolivia have had such an exhilarating impact on Cuba. Cuba's destiny is intimately linked to the outcome of struggles across Latin America and on other continents. And, it should be stressed, advances in Cuba will favor struggles in Venezuela, Bolivia, and beyond.

Cubans act on this understanding, and we must do the same. Cuba's capacity to survive and freely build its future depends in no small measure on what we can do internationally to build solidarity with this heroic, embattled people.

Socialist Voice #87, March 12, 2006

## **Socialists Must Oppose Anti-Muslim Bigotry; Where *The Militant* Goes Wrong on Cartoon Protests**

**By Sandra Browne and Robert Johnson**

*Editors' Note: Protests against the anti-Islamic caricatures published in Denmark have been widely supported by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. However, capitalist media claim that these actions endanger freedom of speech, and some socialist groups echo this view. Sandra Browne and Robert Johnson analyze the views of one such current, the U.S. Socialist Workers Party. Both were prominent activists for several decades in the SWP's Canadian sister organization. — Roger Annis and John Riddell*

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*“People are no longer willing to pay taxes to help support someone called Ali who comes from a country with a different language and culture that’s 5,000 miles away.” —Flemming Rose, the editor who commissioned the caricatures for the newspaper Jyllands-Posten, quoted in the Feb. 12 New York Times*

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*“To Muslims, the caricatures vividly brought back the scenes of Israeli bulldozers demolishing Palestinian homes in Jenin, the invasion of Afghanistan, the fall of Baghdad, terrors of Abu Ghraib and humiliations of Guantanamo Bay.*

*“Cultural arrogance was added to political aggressiveness. Muslims have grown used to the torrent of terrifying images that associate them and their faith with the most horrifying of practices, from violence and cruelty to fanaticism and oppression. When it comes to Islam, all boundaries and limits could be dispensed with. The unacceptable becomes perfectly acceptable, proper and respectable.*

*“The truth is that today racism, intolerance, xenophobia, and hatred of the other hide behind the sublime façade of free speech, the defence of ‘our’ values and protection of ‘our’ society from ‘foreign’ aggression.*

*“Let us not be deceived about this rhetoric of liberalism and free speech. The Danish cartoons have nothing to do with freedom of expression and everything to do with hatred of the other in a Europe grappling with its growing Muslim minorities, still unable to accept them.” —Soumaya Ghannoushi writing for Aljazeera.net*

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*“Muslims have, in effect, been vilified twice: once through the original cartoons and then again for having the gall to protest them. Such logic recalls the words of the late South African black nationalist Steve Biko: ‘Not only are whites kicking us, they are telling us how to react to being kicked.’” —Gary Younge, “The Right to be Offended,” The Nation, February 27*

In the weeks following the publication of the anti-Muslim caricatures by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, many large actions of protest have taken place around the world. The mobilizations have been particularly massive and sustained among the Arab and Muslim peoples, the direct targets of the caricatures. But other fighters against racism and chauvinism have joined the protests.

Meanwhile, the imperialist rulers and their ideological followers are doing everything they can to dampen and discredit the mobilizations. This has led to a sharp polarization of political opinion and action. It has also posed a test for socialists. Many have rallied to the defense of Muslims. But others have echoed ruling-class themes.

The February 27, 2006, issue of *The Militant* provides a particularly blatant example of this. The newspaper expresses the views of the U.S. Socialist Workers Party, and its stand on this issue illustrates how far the SWP leadership has retreated from revolutionary Marxism on the struggle of oppressed nationalities against imperialism.

### **1. Turning the victims into the criminals**

As Soumaya Ghannoushi explains, the publication of the caricatures and the reaction they provoked had nothing to do with the issue of free speech and everything to do with the mounting tide of war, oppression, chauvinism, and racism that has been particularly directed against peoples and nations who are Muslim.

This international context includes:

- The rise of racism in Denmark spearheaded by the Danish government and the record of xenophobia and anti-Muslim incitement of the publishers of *Jyllands-Posten* where the caricatures first appeared. Their publication was a deliberate provocation.
- The presence of Danish troops in the imperialist armies occupying Afghanistan and Iraq.
- Recent European Union decisions aimed at preventing or delaying Turkey's adhesion to the EU because of its large Muslim population.
- Afghanistan has been invaded and occupied by imperialism. Iraq has been invaded and occupied by imperialism. Palestine is occupied by the Zionists. In all of these countries imperialism has brought nothing but death and destruction. The social fabric of these societies is being destroyed. The U.S. has been building and reinforcing military bases in other countries of the Middle East and Central Asia. The threat of a war against Iran grows ever closer.
- In the imperialist countries the ruling class seeks to justify its current and coming aggressions with a fierce ideological campaign, an important component of which is directed against Muslims at home and abroad. The campaign is multifaceted, but an underlying theme is that Islam is an aggressive, backward, warlike religion whose adherents must be conquered and "civilized." Official racism is instituted through the immigration laws, operations of the secret police, secret trials, "rendition" to ensure that detainees will be tortured, the Guantanamo concentration camp, etc. Rightist and openly

racist forces are emboldened in this context, take the bit between their teeth and push much further.

- This is the reality that immigrants in this country who come from the countries under attack face, as they do in the U.S. or Western Europe. The situation is much worse for those who live under imperialist occupation or threat of attack.

The protests against the caricatures occur against this backdrop. They are an expression of deep outrage at all of these aggressions and indignities heaped upon the toiling masses, many of whom are Muslims. At their most basic level they are a cry for dignity and equality, and a sign that there are many among the protesters who are willing to fight against the warmongers and merchants of hate.

### ***The Militant's view***

*The Militant presents an entirely different view of the protests.*

The coverage is presented in a lengthy article by Sam Manuel, "Imperialist powers use reactionary demands on banning Danish cartoons to attack rights, boost support for war," and an editorial "Censorship hurts working class." (See references, below)

Nowhere in either the article or the editorial does the paper acknowledge that the published caricatures including the one depicting Muhammad as a terrorist are anti-Muslim, xenophobic and intended to deepen racist suspicion toward Arab peoples. Nowhere do the writers acknowledge the rightful anger of millions worldwide at such affronts and their legitimate demands for an end to them. Nowhere do they recognize that the victims of these attacks and working people are right to strenuously protest such treatment by the imperialist rulers.

Surely *The Militant* does not prefer that Muslims turn the other cheek in the face of such an outrage. Why then is it unable to utter a single word of support to the protests? Why are words such as "racist", "anti-Muslim," and "chauvinist" entirely absent from its coverage?

The character of the paper's treatment of the issue is exemplified in the first paragraph of the front-page article by Manuel:

"WASHINGTON—Washington, London, and other imperialist powers are taking advantage of often violent protests against controversial cartoons, including one showing Prophet Muhammad with a lit bomb in his turban, to expand popular support for their wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and threats against Iran and Syria."

The caricatures are characterized as "controversial cartoons." The choice of words is no accident since the editorial repeats the same expression. The concept that the drawings were a chauvinist provocation is foreign to the coverage.

Moreover, the author smears the mobilizations by calling them "often violent protests." This again turns the victims into criminals. Nearly all of the deaths and injuries associated with the demonstrations occurred when the police and armies of pro-imperialist governments attempted to quell the protests by force. (Later in Manuel's article he does acknowledge the lethal role of the security forces in two countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan. He then resumes his narrative

portraying the protests as reactionary.) The article also makes a point of mentioning the torching of the Danish and Norwegian embassies in Syria. Apparently the editors consider this instance of destruction of private property to be especially noteworthy, but they do not explain why.

*The Militant states on its masthead that it is “published in the interests of working people.” That statement is contradicted by its refusal to express solidarity with the protests in any way. This refusal is a profound disservice to the paper’s readers.*

Instead the paper attempts to portray the protests as a reactionary mass mobilization, one which aids U.S. imperialism in its war drive and which favors censorship.

This is itself a crude caricature unsupported by the facts. It turns reality on its head and amounts to what Malcolm X called “turning the victim into the criminal.”

### **Censorship, the working class, and the mass protests**

To be sure, Marxists oppose any attempt by capitalist governments to stifle political, cultural, religious or other forms of expression. The working class can only advance toward taking power through the free exchange of ideas. History has shown that capitalist governments do not hesitate to direct their powers of censorship and “anti-hate” laws against the labor movement when it suits their purpose, particularly in times of social crisis. This why, for example, Marxists oppose the recent jailing of the right-wing author David Irving in Austria for denying the Holocaust in his 1989 speeches. Such ideas must be vigorously opposed, but they cannot be defeated through repressive thought-control laws.

The most effective way to respond to rightist ideas and provocations is through debate and effective mass mobilization. Indeed, by repeatedly mobilizing in the streets in their many tens of thousands from Tangier to Jakarta, Muslims and their supporters have struck a powerful blow against the racists and xenophobes.

In the semicolonial world many pro-imperialist governments sought to suppress the protests, often violently. But others recognized the depth of anger the caricatures triggered and sought to direct the protests into channels that did not threaten their rule. Some political and religious leaders of the protests did indeed call for censorship. It is correct and necessary for socialists to oppose such demands. But this can and should be done in the context of supporting unambiguously the mass mobilizations against the caricatures.

### **NDP calls for protests**

Even the reformist New Democratic Party has a better position than the SWP on this issue.

On February 14 Alexa McDonough issued a statement on behalf of the NDP entitled “NO TO ISLAMAPHOBIA [sic]. NO TO ANTI-SEMITISM. NO TO RACISM OF ANY KIND.” Not surprisingly the statement leaves much to be desired. It attempts to place equal emphasis on freedom of expression and religion on the one hand and opposition to hatred and intolerance on the other. It calls on all sides to avoid excesses.

Yet for all that, the NDP states unequivocally that the cartoons are “abhorrent depictions” that should be protested and says that “(i)ntentionally denigrating Islam or any other faith is offensive, destructive and understandably inflammatory.”

Given this stand, it would certainly be logical to invite the NDP to speak at future protests and to expect to be able to draw NDP supporters to participate in it. This would provide aid and comfort to the embattled Muslim community; they have been attempting to forge a broader front against racism, but they are opposed by powerful forces and their success has been limited to date.

The SWP, in contrast, opposes the protests from the sidelines.

## **2. Revising Marxism, abstaining from struggles**

Faced with imperialism’s drive to terrorize, occupy and impose its political will on the Arab and Muslim world, workers and socialists of the oppressor nations have a special responsibility today to defend and to give all possible aid to the struggles of the oppressed for their liberation.

This is not a new question for the labor movement. Since the beginning of the imperialist era over 100 years ago, some of the sharpest debates and divisions among socialists have been over this very issue. In its early years the Third (Communist) International expressed the common interests of the workers in the imperialist nations and the masses struggling for their freedom from imperialism in the strategic slogan, “Workers and Oppressed Nations of the World, Unite.”

This strategic line formed part of the historic program of the SWP, which applied it for more than 50 years to many of the burning issues of the day including the fight against colonialism in Africa and Asia, the fight against the Vietnam War, struggles in Palestine and Ireland, and solidarity with Cuba.

To cite one such example, in 1982 the military junta of Argentina, its hands dripping with the blood of tens of thousands of Argentine workers, students, and others that it had murdered in its “dirty war,” sought to prolong its highly unpopular rule. It invaded the Malvinas, a group of islands that historically belong to Argentina but were occupied by Britain. In the ensuing war the Socialist Workers Party unconditionally supported Argentina; the Cuban government did likewise and campaigned to rally Latin America to the cause of Argentina, even while it was led by the murderous generals.

Yet today when the targets of the chauvinist caricatures rise up to proclaim their revulsion and their human dignity, *The Militant* harshly denounces the protests and denies their role as part of the fight against imperialism and national oppression.

The concluding paragraph of the editorial must be read in that light. It states:

“The opposite is true. Muslims, like other believers, are divided into classes. Among the swelling ranks of working people—from the Middle East to North America, from Europe to Africa, Asia, and the Pacific—there is a growing convergence among those who recognize the need to safeguard and extend democratic rights in order to defend the life and limb of the working class and its allies, and to fight for a world without class exploitation, national oppression, or sex discrimination.”

This passage fails to recognize the oppression that imperialism is today systematically directing against Arabs and Muslims on the basis of their race and religion. This oppression has not only a class but a national character. The chauvinist outcry against the Dubai Ports World deal clearly illustrates the fact that capitalists who are Muslim can also become targets of the mounting rightist propaganda of imperialist rulers. (Of course the burden of such oppression falls most heavily on the workers, farmers, and other toiling layers in the semicolonial world and among the immigrant populations in countries like the U.S. and Canada.)

The conclusion of the editorial is a shameful revision of revolutionary Marxism. It contradicts not only the historic program of the SWP but the teachings and practice of such revolutionaries as Malcolm X, Fidel and Che, Lenin and Trotsky.

A further point should be noted. *The Militant's* refusal to call for protests against the racist caricatures mirrors its longstanding failure to promote protests against the war in Iraq. It condemns virtually all acts of resistance by Iraqi fighters to the occupation of their country. The paper abstains from and criticizes virtually all of the major protest actions against the occupation organized in the U.S., Canada, and other countries. It justifies this stand by citing its disagreements with the leaderships of these actions. The SWP appears to have lost the ability to join in united fronts and to support actions that objectively weaken U.S. imperialism's stranglehold on Iraq, whatever may be the political positions of the forces leading such actions.

*The Militant does not mention the considerable and growing opposition to the war among the U.S. troops stationed in Iraq. This omission is all the more striking in light of the SWP's record of leading work among GIs against the Vietnam war and orienting the antiwar movement in this direction. The paper is also silent on the large and growing opposition to the war among the U.S. population as a whole.*

Similarly, *The Militant* has utterly failed to systematically defend Iraq's sovereignty and expose the colonialist oppression of the Iraqi people. The war and occupation have brought dreadful living conditions, many Iraqi deaths, checkpoints, curfews, raids, jailings, torture and political interference, all imposed with imperial arrogance by the U.S. and its allies. This information is credibly documented elsewhere, but is kept out of the pages of *The Militant*.

In statements and editorials the party and the newspaper occasionally repeat their call for the U.S. to withdraw from Iraq. But *The Militant* gives no indication that the SWP is carrying out any practical activity to further that goal. It does not report on any antiwar campaigning by the party whether in the factories and mines, on the campuses, outside military bases, or elsewhere. Yet the party does not hesitate to sharply criticize those who protest or resist the occupation.

This course of conduct is also in complete contradiction to revolutionary Marxism and to the outstanding record in earlier years of the SWP and *The Militant*.

### **3. Growing divergence with Cuba's leadership**

For several decades after the victory of the revolution in 1959, *The Militant* was the best source of information in English on events in Cuba and the views of the leaders of the revolution.

Speeches by Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Raul Castro, and other leaders appeared in the newspaper in a timely way; many of these were then published in book form by Pathfinder Press.

This is no longer the case. The SWP and *The Militant* are still partisans of the Cuban revolution, but their approach and coverage has become highly selective and disconnected from many of the big issues of the day. Articles on Cuba in the paper deal with almost exclusively with historical themes and with Cuba's humanitarian and internationalist aid to other countries. Publishing projects that involve Pathfinder are also reported. While this information is certainly of some interest, *The Militant* has chosen not to report on many key statements by Cuban leaders and on other developments related to Cuba that are vitally important to fighters around the world.

In fact, for Cuba 2005 has been a "wonderful, triumphant year", as John Riddell reports in *Socialist Voice* #67. Important advances have been registered both domestically and internationally, and the forward motion is continuing. Fidel Castro and others have given many talks in recent months about changes and challenges inside Cuba, Cuba's view of the world situation and what the Cubans and others are doing to advance the international struggle. Much of this material is available, in English, on the Web.

So far *The Militant* has been silent about these important developments. Fighting workers and youth can no longer look to the paper to learn what the revolutionary leaders and people of Cuba are doing and saying. They must find this information elsewhere.

The reason for this silence is not hard to understand.

Mesmerized by its greatly exaggerated appraisal of the strength of U.S. imperialism, bewailing the leadership challenges faced by our class, and dismissive of the masses in the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere who are rising up in new waves of struggle, the SWP's view of the world is very different from that of the Cubans. Moreover, our Cuban comrades are acting boldly on their assessment of the new objective possibilities, and are reaching out to build the most powerful anti-imperialist united front that they can. They are forging ever-stronger ties with Venezuela and have embraced the election of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia, offering concrete aid to the Andean country in every possible way.

In their support for struggles for justice around the world and for Latin American unity against U.S. imperialism, the communist leaders of the Cuban workers state are in fact applying the strategic line of "Workers and Oppressed Nations of the World, Unite" and adapting it to today's conditions.

Moreover, they explain what they are doing in no uncertain terms, to all who will listen. All of this means that as the objective situation improves for our class and the possibilities for struggle grow, the chasm between what the Cuban comrades are doing and saying, and what the SWP stands for, grows larger.

The SWP's rejection of the national liberation struggle, so clearly captured in their opposition to the international antiracist protests, is also a rejection of the communist course of the Cuban leadership.

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*Sandra Browne and Robert Johnson were members and subsequently organized supporters of the Communist League and its predecessor organizations for more than three and four decades respectively. Robert Johnson was a central leader of the organization through the mid 1960s to the early 1980s. The Communist League is the sister organization in Canada of the U.S. Socialist Workers Party.*

Socialist Voice #88, March 14, 2006

## **The Kirpan Ruling: A Victory for Public School Integration**

**By Richard Fidler**

On March 2, the Supreme Court of Canada overruled a Montreal school's ban on a student's right to wear the Sikh ceremonial dagger, or kirpan, on school property.[1] The judgment was not just a victory for freedom of religion. It was also a major step forward in the ongoing struggle to integrate non-Francophone ethnic and racial minorities as full citizens of the Quebec nation through the public school system.

Gurbaj Singh Multani was rapidly learning French as a student in the École Sainte-Catherine-Labouré in 2001 when he accidentally dropped his kirpan in the school yard. His parents were told by the school authorities that he could not wear this symbol of his orthodox Sikh faith, which is normally concealed in his clothing, on school property. In response, they pulled him out of the French-language public school system and enrolled him in a private school that allowed the kirpan, and that also happens to be Anglophone — with the result that Gurbaj Singh Multani speaks almost no French today.

“I like learning French,” he told a press conference following the Court's judgment. “But this affair prevented me from doing so. Now that we have won this case, the young [Sikhs] like me will have no further problems. They will be able to learn French.”[2]

Gurbaj's parents had initially agreed to an accommodation with the school board that would allow him to wear the kirpan sealed inside his clothing. This was rejected by the school. The Quebec Superior Court supported the Singh Multanis, but the Quebec Court of Appeal upheld the ban. The case then went to the country's highest court.

The Supreme Court judgments (there were three separate opinions, although all eight judges concurred in the result) were limited to the conclusion that the school's ostensible reason for the ban — that wearing the kirpan violated the school's ban on carrying “weapons” — was not rationally supported by the evidence. After all, some judges noted, “there are many objects in schools that could be used to commit violent acts and that are much more easily obtained by students, such as scissors, pencils and baseball bats.”

The Singh Multani judgment was a victory for the principle that public schools cannot exclude students who wear symbols of their personal religious beliefs. But there are broader implications as well.

The kirpan case is the latest event in the ongoing efforts in Quebec to build an integrated public school system that does not impose religious beliefs — or non-beliefs, in the name of a supposed “secularism” — on minorities. Until recently, under the Canadian Constitution, Quebec had two distinct public school systems distinguished by religion, one Catholic (and largely French), the other Protestant (and largely English). Non-Christians and non-Francophone immigrants overwhelmingly sent their children into the Protestant stream, where they were educated mainly

in English and in many cases emerged with little or no knowledge of the mother tongue spoken by more than 80 percent of the province's population.

Declining demographics of native-born Quebecers and rising immigration levels tended to increase the influence within Quebec society of English, long the language of privilege of a wealthy economically dominant minority based in Montreal. The divisions in the public school system reproduced and reinforced the distinctions between the linguistic solitudes.

Establishing a unilingual French public school system became a key goal for the rising nationalist movement and a major component of Quebec's efforts to modernize and enhance its educational system beginning in the 1960s.

A major step toward that goal was achieved in 1997, when the *Constitution Act, 1867* (formerly the *British North America Act*) was amended to exclude Quebec from the requirement to maintain "denominational" (sectarian) public school systems. Since then, there is one, secular or non-denominational public school system in Quebec, although there is a sub-component of English schools within that system for children with at least one parent who was educated in English. All other parents must send their children to a French public school or, failing that, to a private school at additional expense to them.

The reform is still incomplete. Apart from the "grandfathering" rights of Anglophone parents, the Quebec government still provides generous funding to the province's private schools. Just a year ago, Quebec Premier Jean Charest announced the government would give full public funding to private Jewish schools — only to abandon his plan a week later in the face of massive public opposition. Religion classes are still an option in some public schools, although they are being phased out.

But since the mid-1970s two generations of immigrant children and many from old-stock English families as well have been educated in the French-language public school system. This has produced a broad layer of young Québécois adults of non-Francophone ethnic origin who are fluent in French and comfortable in a French Quebec. They are often referred to as the "Bill 101 generation," after the legislation, the Charter of the French Language, that required most Quebec students to attend French-language schools. This has been one of the great achievements of Quebec's nationalist upsurge since 1960, a cornerstone of the new multi-ethnic Quebec nation in which French is the common language of public communication and discourse.

### **Accommodate, don't discriminate**

Underlying the school integration movement, as it was known, was the understanding — or at least the implicit logic — that religious beliefs and practices are fundamentally individual matters, and that in modern, pluralistic, democratic societies the majority has no right to impose its religious beliefs on others. This principle of separation of church and state, or secularism as it is often described, is strongly supported by most progressive-minded people in Quebec and Canada.

Much less understood, however, is its corollary: that a democratic society, in the interest of integrating minorities with full rights into the larger society, must be prepared to accommodate

particular beliefs and practices of minorities that the latter consider vital to their cultural self-definition, provided those beliefs and practices do not threaten the rights or safety of the society as a whole. Many such beliefs and practices are all too often singled out as grounds to ghettoize and otherwise discriminate against minorities, especially visible minorities.

The kirpan incident illustrates how progressive secularism can work in practice, allowing room for the expression and practice of individual beliefs within public institutions in order to ensure that those institutions are responsive and available to all.

Implementing this principle requires developing a knowledge of how and where to draw the line between public and private. What are legitimate concerns of the collectivity, and what are not? When the Montreal school characterized the kirpan as a “weapon,” that is, a threat to society and not a religious symbol, it made a false distinction. Although the Supreme Court judges do not speculate on the school authorities’ motives, it is not hard to detect the odour of racism in the school’s decision.

Judging from the furor over the Court’s ruling that is being expressed on hot-line radio shows and in letters to the editor, many Québécois are having a hard time understanding and accepting these implications of an integrated public school system. But imposing “secular” dress codes could drive many immigrant kids away from the French school system and point Quebec backwards to the ethnic self-identity that divided its population and ultimately tended to undermine the status of French as the common language of the nation.

It must be said that the Canadian Court’s verdict compares favourably with such manifestations of imperialist arrogance as the French government’s recent ban on the wearing of ostensible religious symbols of personal faith in the schools, otherwise known as the “hijab ban.” In effect, the French state told staunch Muslims that they must abandon or redefine their religion if they wish to join French society. This is what goes by the name of “secularism” in contemporary France and indeed in much of Europe. The violent protests that shook France’s immigrant ghettos last summer were surely fuelled in part by resentment of this xenophobic contempt for the beliefs of a beleaguered minority.

Closer to home, many feminists and otherwise liberally-minded individuals were quick to line up last year in opposition to a modest proposal by some Muslims to bring their faith-based private family arbitration system under the ambit of Ontario’s *Arbitration Act*. Advocates of this proposal argued that not only would it respect the particular religious beliefs of many Muslims, but it would help protect vulnerable women and children and reinforce the rights of all parties engaged in private arbitration, especially when coupled with the recommendations in a report by Marion Boyd, a former Attorney General, to reform the Act and related legislation.[3]

Opponents of the proposal warned darkly that it would undermine family law reform and be the thin edge of the wedge to impose “sharia” tribunals in place of Canadian courts.[4] Even the Quebec National Assembly weighed into the debate with a motion unanimously supported by federalists and sovereigntists alike condemning the Boyd report and the proposed reform in Ontario — although none of the honourable members had evidently read the report or knew anything about the real issues involved!

Feminist opposition to faith-based arbitration was particularly troubling, in my view. Feminists understand the importance of choice in other contexts (e.g. a woman's right to abortion). Why deny Moslem women the option of faith-based arbitration of private family matters where they so wish?

In the end, wiser heads prevailed. The McGuinty government's Bill 27, which just passed the Ontario legislature (the NDP opposed it), effectively implements the bulk of the Boyd recommendations.[5] There is nothing in the bill that would bar Muslims from conducting arbitrations under the reformed Arbitration Act, provided they are duly certified as having the requisite knowledge of the applicable Ontario and Canadian laws. That was in fact what most of the Muslim advocates of private family arbitration were asking, as Boyd's report clearly documented.

The Supreme Court's kirpan judgment and Ontario's *Arbitration Act* amendments are a useful reminder that those who control the vital institutions of the Canadian state are more sophisticated than many on the left are often prepared to acknowledge. While the rulers are certainly willing to inflame racist passions where it is useful to them, and are thoroughly committed to loyal participation in imperialist ventures around the world — witness their current military and police operations in Afghanistan and Haiti — they also have a well-honed understanding of the need to accommodate difference within the body politic where such difference does not threaten their class rule and where the recognition and calibrated accommodation of difference can reinforce citizens' sense of identification with the state. It is their skill in navigating the shoals of these social tensions that earns them their status as a "ruling class."

Those of us who aspire to build a movement that can some day replace that class and institute a government truly of the people and by the people would be well-advised to study the lessons to be learned from incidents such as the kirpan ban or the Muslim family arbitration issue. And to learn how to build effective bridges of solidarity around such issues with our Sikh, Muslim and other sisters and brothers who are now, through immigration, becoming an increasingly important part of the working class in this country.

We need to demonstrate, in action, that their real allies are not the capitalist rulers, who concede such rights only reluctantly, but the working people, who can only gain in strength and political consciousness through identifying with these struggles.

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Socialist Voice #89, March 26, 2006

## **‘Canada and the World Must Recognize the New Reality in Haiti’**

### **Interview with Haitian political rights leader Patrick Elie**

*Patrick Elie has been a leading figure in the popular movement in Haiti since his youth, during the years of the Duvalier tyranny. He was a minister of the first government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, 1991-96. He helped found a political rights organization in 2004 called Sant Obsèvasyon Sitwayen, “SOS” (Citizens’ Watchdog Center). Its motto is “Politics is too important to be left to the politicians alone.”*

*The following interview was granted by Patrick Elie in Vancouver, Canada on March 21, 2006 to Roger Annis, co-editor Socialist Voice. At the time of this interview, Mr. Elie was in the midst of a five-week, 20-city speaking tour across Canada, organized by the Canada Haiti Action Network.*

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**Roger Annis: On February 7, the Haitian people elected René Préval as president. He promised deep-going reforms in favor of the poor majority of Haiti. How do you view the election and its outcome?**

**Patrick Elie:** The election is a very positive sign for Haiti’s future. For despite the fact that it was rigged, held under a regime of foreign occupation, the people managed to take hold of it and use it to advance their struggle for social justice.

There were many obstacles that blocked the peoples’ participation. They had to obtain a computerized registration card. There were only 800 polling stations, compared to 12,000 in the 2000 election that elected President Aristide. And, of course, the counting of the ballots was in the hands of those who wanted to use the election to choose a candidate of Haiti’s elite.

But the people intervened at two decisive moments. First of all, they mobilized massively to get out and vote on February 7. They voted for the one candidate, René Préval, who represented their historic struggle for a just society. Then, six days later, they mobilized again in massive numbers to block the theft of the vote. It was this action that forced the election authorities to accept the reality — that Mr. Préval had won an overwhelming victory.

These actions by the Haitian people are a testament to their courage, their ingenuity, and their deep understanding and commitment to democracy.

**RA: What are the prospects, then, for a return to the constitutional rule that was overthrown in 2004?**

**PE:** Well, the future is very uncertain, fraught with danger. The occupation power is still in place and shows no sign of leaving. Legislative elections, supposed to be held in March, have been postponed. Mr. Préval needs a elected legislature before he can assume the presidency, and the legislature must be composed of candidates that support his program if he is to be able to carry it

out. The last time he was president, from 1996 to 2000, opponents in the legislature blocked many of the policies that he wished to implement.

**RA: What about the occupying powers? Some friends of Haiti are asking why President-elect Préval made statements recently in Brazil and Chile asking for the UN armed forces to remain in Haiti for the foreseeable future. What is your view?**

**PE:** I liken the situation to one where you are sitting in a boat and an uninvited guest jumps in and almost capsizes the boat. You want him out; he is not welcome. But he can't simply jump out and risk, once again, capsizing the boat. It has to be an orderly exit.

If the UN were to pull out overnight, it would leave a power vacuum that the rightist forces are better placed to fill than us at this point. This would create an extreme danger of a whole new round of violence and killing directed at the people. We demand that the UN forces cease their repressive operations and rein in the Haitian National Police. A withdrawal must be done such that the security of the people is assured.

I and other militants have the responsibility to demand that the UN withdraw its occupation of Haiti and return the country to sovereign rule. Mr. Préval and his government has the responsibility to carry this out in a timely and responsible way. The two roles are not identical.

**RA: Would you join a government headed by Mr. Préval?**

**PE:** No, I will not. Not because I would not agree with the government that Mr. Préval will create, but because we must work to strengthen the grassroots movements. We must develop and strengthen organizations to ensure that democracy is not only representative, but also participatory. Otherwise, we stand no chance of winning this struggle.

I will stay out and keep pushing from the outside, if you will. It is our responsibility to defend Mr. Préval's government from threats of coups and from foreign interference, so that he and his colleagues may govern freely. It will be his responsibility to give us the space to organize and strengthen the popular movements.

**RA: We are approaching the 20th anniversary of the popular uprising that overthrew the Duvalier dynasty in Haiti. Since then, it has been a lengthy and difficult struggle for democracy and social improvements. How would you describe these years?**

**PE:** The past 20 years have been a time of constant clash between a people, the majority of whom are poor, and a tiny, wealthy elite. The people are stating very strongly their will to have a democratic system, a system where the terrible gap between rich and poor will be reduced and where social justice will prevail.

The Haitian people have shown their resolve and a peaceful character of their quest. The violence and instability in the country comes from the stubbornness of the rich minority and the constant interference of foreign powers. The first time (1991 coup), it was the U.S. that interfered. But the last time — and I am speaking of 2003 until the present time — a triumvirate composed of the U.S., France, and Canada carried out another coup.

What we have learned over these years is that the resolve of the Haitian people in their quest for democracy cannot be stopped. Depending on how the elite and the foreign powers react to the latest victory of the people, we will move forward or not. They can continue to make us suffer, but they cannot stop the movement.

**RA: What are some of the lessons you draw from this experience?**

**PE:** We have fought against incredible odds. We have faced so much violence against the people, and suffered so many killed. The foreign powers and international financial institutions reduced the financial capacities of our governments to zero. There was no miracle solution to our problems.

Where we have perhaps come up short is in the building and strengthening of the popular organizations — trade unions, women's rights committees, neighbourhood committees working on the social services, and so on. In 1991, for example, we saw the coup against our government coming months ahead of time. We were receiving all kinds of information. But what could we do? We did not control the army, and the popular movements were still quite weak. We did not have the relationship of forces required to stop the coup-makers, as we saw the people in Venezuela do so successfully in 2002.

**RA: Is there a role for a political party in this? Lavalas seems to be more of a social movement or electoral coalition than a political party.**

**PE:** I think that the exact form that the people will give to their political organization remains to be seen. Obviously, in Haiti we will not develop the kinds of political parties that are seen in countries like France or Canada. But definitely, we must move a step forward — to go from being a movement, largely unstructured, to forming a new political leadership out of the grassroots movements.

We must develop something that is attuned to our history and our culture, and that opens the door very wide to the participation of the masses. This is the challenge for the coming five years. It is a tall order, but it is indispensable and I think we can succeed.

**RA: What sort of program would you advocate for a Lavalas party?**

**PE:** First of all, it must be a program where every child must be able to go to school and every citizen has access to education and health care. There must be laws adopted for a better distribution of national wealth. It is intolerable that 5% of the population should control 60% of the collective wealth, and the top 1% controls 50% — while 80% of Haitians live on less than two dollars per day. These are numbers that no society can live with. We've reached the breaking point.

We do have a number of assets, the most important of which is the extraordinary resolve of the Haitian people, their creativity, their very high level of political consciousness. We must also add to this the vital contribution that the Haitian diaspora can make. It numbers two million.

We are developing a people-to-people diplomacy which will allow us to draw support from friendly governments and peoples in the region and from countries like Canada and the U.S.

Until now, Haiti has been very isolated from the other Caribbean and Latin American countries. We must work to break down this isolation and create unity among the peoples.

**RA: Throughout Latin America, popular movements are gaining strength and bringing new governments to power. Does this have an impact in Haiti?**

**PE:** I believe so, if only indirectly at the moment. It's good that you should point out the changes in the region. What we must do in Haiti is establish stronger links to these countries in the region and start learning from each other.

You will note that in countries like Venezuela and Bolivia, the changes did not come about through traditional political parties, but from vast and profound social movements. It resembles a lot what has been going on in Haiti since 1986. So, we have experience that we can share with these brothers and sisters, and they can teach us a few things that we haven't yet experienced.

**RA: What is the attitude of young Haitians to the foreign occupation and repression they have endured?**

**PE:** Their reaction is one of anger. They've been frustrated so much, even though they respected the rules of the democratic game. Anger, but also resolve. These people that you saw in the streets on February 7, voting at the ballot places, then one week later protesting the attempt to steal their votes, voting again with their feet — they are young people. Less than 25 years old. Truly, the young masses have an extraordinary courage and determination.

We have a very serious situation on our hands today with the threat of continued repression in the poor neighbourhoods in Port au Prince, such as Cité Soleil and Belair. The young people there have fought back. Many are armed. It is vital that we find a way to avoid further bloodshed and deescalate the armed conflict.

These young people are called all kinds of slanderous names — “bandits,” “gangsters,” etc. But these descriptions are false. They have been forced to defend themselves over the past two years as any self-respecting people would do. They are the future of our country, and we must act to protect them. The new government and the occupying powers must offer an avenue for social reinsertion that is real and meaningful.

**RA: What is your message to the Canadian government? Recently, after the February 7 election, it hosted an official visit by the unelected prime minister Gerard Latortue. He went on to visit Quebec Premier Jean Charest. Meanwhile, you faced interrogation and harassment from CSIS, Canada's spy agency, when you arrived in Canada for your speaking tour.**

**PE:** My travel problem is an annoyance, a nuisance, but it pales in comparison to the harm that the latest policy initiative toward Haiti has caused for Canada. The Canadian government's support to the coup has really damaged its image, both in Haiti and in the region.

It could have welcomed a visit from the newly elected president, as even the U.S. seems prepared to do. Instead, it hosted a visit from Mr. Latortue, the representative of an unelected and illegitimate government. This is a very bad sign.

We call on the Canadian government to stop imposing a regime on the Haitian people. It's obvious that this will not work. Our message to the Canadian government is the same as to the Haitian elite. There is a new reality in Haiti as of February 7, and it would be best for you to adapt to it and seek to work with the Haitian people and its elected leadership, rather than try, once again, to disrupt the country's progress. If the elite and their foreign backers persist in obstructing democracy, the result can only be disastrous for the country as a whole.

We are calling on the Canadian government to use its influence to pressure for the release of the hundreds of political prisoners. There has been no motion on this since February 7, and this is scandalous.

It is also crucial that the upcoming legislative election be free and fair.

**RA: How is your speaking tour across Canada going?**

**PE:** The tour has been excellent. All across Canada, I am finding a great interest and support for the aspirations of the Haitian people. Attendance at my meetings is high, we have met with members of parliament in many cities, and we are getting some media attention.

This tour is creating new bonds of solidarity that must grow and strengthen in the coming months. With our colleagues in the Canada Haiti Action Network and its local affiliates, we are discussing specific projects to take our work forward. We would like to see more people going to Haiti from Canada to see for themselves what is going on. And we hope to see more speaking tours that would bring Haitian grassroots leaders to Canada.

During the tour, I am introducing a key project for SOS in the coming period, the launching of a "Jean Dominique Popular University."\* a project for educational broadcasts over the radio on matters of social and political importance. Fifty percent of the Haitian population is illiterate, so the airwaves and audio cassette tapes will be the means for us to broadcast the project's educational programs. We are looking for financial support for this project from our friends around the world.

*\* Jean Dominique was Haiti's most renowned and beloved radio journalist, assassinated on April 3, 2000. His killers have never been identified.*