

Cheryl LaBash: What Fidel means to me today

written by Cheryl LaBash
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Cheryl LaBash. Photo: Prensa Latina

Cheryl LaBash's speech on a panel organized by the Cuban Embassy in the United States as a tribute to Fidel Castro's life. LaBash is a co-chair of the National Network on Cuba.

I am humbled and honored to be on this panel today. I do not have a deep personal story like we have heard in the past two years about working together with Cuba's historic leader Fidel Castro whose life, work and example we remember here today. Really I have been the young woman in the back row, who though now no longer young and often no longer in the back row, still tries to absorb lessons from the Cuban revolution, to understand the world and act to change it.

My work in solidarity with Cuba was interrupted when I began a new job in the 1990s. Inspecting Detroit road construction required me to work overtime from April to November — sun up to sun down and weekends, too. But when I heard Fidel was coming to Riverside Church on September 8, 2000, I had to go.

People who know me will not be surprised. Instead of going to work that Friday morning, I got into my car and hit the highway for the 10 hour drive to New York City. Then driving around and around lower Manhattan hoping for a free parking spot, and onto the subway up to Harlem. The mass of people already trying to get in was overwhelming, but I was one of the lucky thousands who did get inside the church. My seat was high in the balcony — to hear Fidel speak to us.

When Fidel physically left us three years ago, even in the U.S. we were able to watch the caravan that returned his ashes to Santiago de Cuba. Live internet television broadcast from Cuba showed us the assemblies in Havana and Santiago. I will never forget hearing Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega asking where is Fidel? And the quiet, mourning crowd answered "here" beginning a chant that became a roar Yo soy Fidel.

I couldn't imagine such technology that would let me see a live broadcast from Cuba when I traveled there for the first time in 1985. At that time Fidel's speeches and interviews explained the external foreign debt was an unpayable burden for developing countries. Then it seemed a topic very removed from daily life in the U.S.

But today it has become very close — it is not only the IMF external debt, Debt extracts the life itself out of workers and families, student debt, credit card debt, mortgage debt, payday lenders — all unpayable. From Puerto Rico to Detroit, we have learned that our debt is very much like what Fidel taught.

More interesting to me in 1985 was Cuba's health care system that demonstrated it was possible to reduce infant mortality with little resources but with maximum will. Detroit was headline news then. Scandalously, in Detroit, a city where nearly 90 percent of the people were Afro-descendent — babies died at a rate more than twice the US national statistics. In 1990, a stunning 23 per 1000 births and in 2017 still 15.5. Now maternal mortality for Black women is rising, too.

Is it a miracle that infant mortality in blockaded developing Cuba is 4 per 1000 live births? No it is Cuba's will to prioritize human beings, in Cuba and everywhere through internationalism and an economic system that makes it possible to do it.

It was there in Riverside Church that Fidel explained how the Latin American medical school and scholarships for U.S. students came about. ELAM — the Spanish acronym for Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina — had been founded not even a year before Fidel spoke that night. He noted there was a "3rd world" inside the U.S. without doctors.

Twenty years have passed since ELAM was founded on Nov. 15, 1999. In those 20 years, 29,749 new doctors from 115 countries have graduated — including 182 from the United States. Of the 466 doctors graduating this past summer from 82 countries, 10 were from the U.S. [go to ifconews.org/medicalschooll]

U.S. students at ELAM volunteered and went to serve in Haiti after the massive January 2010 earthquake. A US graduate raised her own funds and volunteered to fight the West Africa Ebola outbreak.

ELAM is only a part of Cuba's internationalism that encompasses medical, literacy, sports, culture and much more. The Henry Reeve Emergency Medical Brigade mobilized to save lives five years after Riverside, when Hurricane Katrina drowned New Orleans. Blocked by the U.S. government, they went to the Hillsides of the Himalayas after Pakistan's earthquake. The Yo si puedo literacy tool developed by Cubans in Haiti was also explained by Fidel at Riverside.

What Fidel means to me today.

An ideological campaign is being carried out against Cuba. It aims to cast doubt on Cuba's ideals by trying to reflect capitalism's crimes of exploitation, racism, human trafficking on Cuba. It is what Fidel called a Battle of Ideas.

This propaganda campaign zeroes in to discredit the very points mentioned in Fidel's speech at Riverside Church — Cuba's medical internationalism, that Cuba does not torture and disappear people, that Cuba actually practices equal rights for all regardless of gender, gender identity or skin color, and democracy for all to participate in elections and the direction of their country.

It is calculated and intentional, a weapon to justify the very real genocidal blockade. It is a propaganda campaign to create doubt, uncertainty and divide the millions of people who have come to know Cuba, its people, its socialism through going to Cuba to experience it for themselves.

This campaign regurgitates the same lies that permeated popular US culture about Cuba after the revolution, lies refuted by the solidarity movement especially in Black communities each time Cuban delegations and leaders came to the United Nations

in New York.

Those lies cannot be reinserted into the minds of the people who have traveled to Cuba who have studied in Cuba, who have noted that Cuba has no foreign investments, bases or extractive concessions anywhere. Or the climate justice movement that knows Fidel spoke at Riverside about the danger of mass extinction due to climate change. But the lies can push Cuba lower on the list of concerns. It is why we in the U.S. must act in every sector and platform to #unblockCuba.

There are powerful tools in the battle of ideas, not only spoken or written, but deeds. Why else would the U.S. restrict visas for medical professionals to speak at conferences; for Cuban academics to participate at LASA?

The scholarships at the Latin American School of Medicine, the development of medicines to improve human life for example taking away the horror of limb amputation due to diabetic ulcers which is costly and profitable. Is there a working class family whose relative or friend who doesn't have diabetes and fear amputation? The very cities where human services have been cut to push debt service to banks and tax dollars directed to feed the military and police, are looking to Cuba.

Cuban doctors came to Chicago to help improve maternal and infant outcomes. Detroit is investigating health collaboration. And this month New Orleans signed a memorandum of understanding with Cuba.

For me, and I would humbly suggest for us in the U.S., engaging in the battle of ideas is the important message for today.

But why Cuba? The example of Fidel, the Cuban revolution, and the generations who were raised to be like Che, are the powerful antidote to the dehumanizing, divisive, consumer culture driven by capitalism and its mass media.

It is a legacy of Fidel we can all build with for the better world that is possible and

necessary.

Source: [MinRex](#) – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Cuba

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