



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

‘A zone of peace, saving lives: that’s what Cuba stands for’

written by Cheryl LaBash
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Cuban health care workers went to South Africa and many other countries to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

Testimony by National Network on Cuba co-Chair Cheryl LaBash at the International People's Tribunal on U.S. Imperialism, Cuba country hearing, on June 10.

Thank you to the organizers of this timely International People's Tribunal on U.S. Imperialism focusing on targeted sanctions and blockades that inflict such pain on millions of innocent people.

Greetings and solidarity, too, to our colleagues from Cuba who represent the

resistance and resilience of the Cuban people.

We recognize that the unilateral U.S. coercive economic measures – the blockade – hurt the Cuban people and their aspirations for a better world, first and foremost. We know and recognize that the blockade is extraterritorial; it attacks foreign banks and businesses, Europeans who enjoy vacations in Cuba, Cubans living in other countries, and many others in numerous ways.

However, today I want to recognize that the policies of the U.S. government also hurt the people of the United States – ordinary working class and poor people, migrants, and farmers and growers who want to conduct business with Cuba – in short, the majority.

I want to speak about the pandemic, about travel, and show that the U.S. government is out of step with the people of the United States who, when they travel to Cuba or learn about the blockade, do not support these measures.

This is the reason the U.S. government hides its intentional plan to create hardship and desperation among the Cuban people, making its actions unseen, “as adroit and inconspicuous as possible.” The State Department’s Mallory-Rubottom memo, written on April 6, 1960, says it just that way.

The U.S. tries dangerous smokescreens like the Wall Street Journal fabrication of a China-Cuba spy center. In his quick rebuttal, Deputy Foreign Minister Carlos Fernández de Cossío pointed out previous false accusations used to intensify the economic war: alleged acoustic attacks against U.S. diplomats, the falsehood of Cuban military troops in Venezuela, and the lie about imaginary Cuban biological weapons plants.

The only foreign military installation in Cuba is the illegal U.S. occupation of Cuban territory in Guantanamo. Why won’t the Wall Street Journal write about the Zone of

Peace initiated by Cuba and Venezuela through the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States in 2014?

Drawn to Cuba's example

A Zone of Peace. Saving Lives. That is what Cuba stands for. Is it any surprise people – especially youth – are drawn to Cuba's example? We have found the generation born in this century quickly sees through the lies.

Imagine you are 20 years old. What does the future hold? Disastrous climate catastrophes; unaffordable education, health care, and rent; holding down multiple gig jobs just to exist; frequent mass shootings and police repression, combined with racist, homophobic, and transphobic state government initiatives.

On May 3 and again on May 7, a total of 19 travelers returning from May Day in Cuba were pulled aside at four U.S. airports for additional scrutiny and intensive questioning. This treatment has not been widely experienced since the Obama administration re-established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Cuba in 2015 and opened direct flights on U.S. carriers from U.S. airports, making travel to Cuba “legal” within certain changing rules.

Our experience this year follows the FBI visits to the Puerto Rican Cuba Solidarity Committee when they returned from July 26 celebrations last year. If the intention was intimidation, it only made the injustice of the blockade more real to these activists. It fired their will to fight harder. Their enthusiasm was not dampened.

The stepped-up intimidation at the borders is particularly troubling in light of the recent raids and indictments of the African People's Socialist Party for their political views and the raid on the Atlanta Bail Fund for assisting the Stop Cop City protests.

Although travel is said to be a right, travel to Cuba has been severely limited by the U.S. government. In 1964, Black revolutionaries had to first travel halfway around

the world to Czechoslovakia to reach Cuba.

Some of the earliest Venceremos Brigades traveled by ship to and from Canada, having all their writings and literature seized on return at the U.S. border. Aggressive FBI visits to parents and employers followed. Later, indirect travel was okay if the trip was fully hosted and no U.S. money was spent.

Much about travel has changed. Now U.S.-based airlines fly regular routes to Cuba. Airlines, travel agencies and companies like Airbnb enforce the travel regulations under the threat of fines or loss of U.S. license to do Cuba-related business.

Every traveler, including non-U.S. citizens – another example of extraterritoriality – must sign a document declaring one of 12 “categories” under which they travel to Cuba. Without it, you cannot board the plane unless the traveler understands that a record of their full schedule of activity must be kept for five years in case a federal agent wants to know how they spent their time in Cuba.

Vacationing is strictly forbidden, as is staying at a hotel, drinking the wrong cola, or even buying a book from an entire Cuban publishing house. Honestly, the U.S. government spends our tax dollars making detailed lists of what is forbidden in Cuba. Such is the unique “freedom to travel” to Cuba.

Often, we hear first-time travelers comment that Cuba is the first place they feel free. They experience shock returning to the land of advertising, anxiety, isolation, and stress. Every week people email us to get on the list for the 2024 May Day trip.

And it is because the life experiences of working people in the U.S. sharply contrast with Cuba’s human-centered priorities, as demonstrated by Cuba’s medical internationalism.

Medical internationalism

In 2005, how many lives could have been saved when hurricanes Katrina and Rita drowned New Orleans if the U.S. government had accepted Fidel Castro's offer of 1,586 fully-equipped health workers? They sat ready at the former Coast Guard base that is now the home of Cuba's Latin American School of Medicine – only 1.5 hours away by plane.

Of course, then we had no way to hear about it until a horrified world asked why Cuba wasn't helping, and Fidel explained the offer was not accepted. How different it is now, with instant communication! In 2005, there was no way for us to know what Cuba had prepared and offered until later.

Even before vaccines, from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuba's public health organization kept deaths to a minimum. From the first recorded case in March 2020 until December 2020, only 146 Cubans died. In Michigan, a state with about 1 million fewer people, some 9,269 died. In Detroit, a small city with less than 700,000 people, 1,500 people died in four months.

Unlike 2005, in 2020 we watched the Cuban television reports and saw Dr. Duran giving daily COVID reports. We saw how Cuba was fighting for every life. There was still no vaccine then, but a robust public health organization had everyone cooperating to save lives. We could see the Henry Reeve Brigades, named during the mobilization for Katrina, now going wherever they were called.

Not only would the U.S. government not call for Cuba to help Detroiters, but it then used the pandemic as a weapon against Cuba, doubling down on the blockade measures.

Like travel, Washington intended for information technology to be used as a weapon against Cuba's self-determination and sovereignty. But it is also a powerful tool in our hands. Imperialism's lies can be torn to shreds before they become embedded in the public consciousness. And the solidarity movement can unite its voice across this

very large country of many time zones.

Resolutions challenge blockade, SSOT

Like the false accusation leveled against Cuba and China by the Wall Street Journal this week, the anti-Cuba strategists are using old playbooks in Congress.

Hoping that Cuba seems unimportant to the rest of the country, Rep. Salazar from Florida has introduced HR314, the FORCE Act, in the House of Representatives, while Senators Rubio, Cruz, and Scott introduced S538, Fighting Oppression until the Reign of Castro Ends.

Talk about detached from reality. Don't they know that Miguel Diaz-Canel is president of Cuba?

These bills would freeze Cuba permanently on the list of state sponsors of terrorism until a president determines that a "transition [to capitalist] government is in power in Cuba." Using the Helms-Burton Act model, It is an attempt to checkmate any possible action by President Biden to use his executive authority to remove Cuba from the State Department list. Because that's all that is needed.

The National Network on Cuba recognizes through our activity that the U.S. government is out of step with the people of this country about Cuba. Even in the U.S. capital, Washington, D.C., the governing District Council unanimously passed a strong resolution calling for Cuba to be removed from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, to end the blockade, and for relations with Cuba to be normalized. They are not alone.

Ninety resolutions by elected bodies representing an estimated 45 million people - city councils, county commissions, state legislatures, school boards, and labor unions - oppose U.S. policy on Cuba. Nearly one-third of those resolutions have been passed in the last six months.

This movement is growing, especially among young workers like the Amazon and Starbucks organizers who are fueling a unionization wave.

We call on President Biden to heed the voices of Cuban Americans, labor organizations, and local elected officials calling for Cuba to be taken off the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism and for an end to the unilateral U.S. blockade.

President Biden has the authority to send a letter to Congress declaring he is removing Cuba from the State Department list. Being on the list is a switch that automatically sets into motion many additional hurdles to economic activity related to Cuba. It is harder for Cuba to function in the dollar-dominated international financial arena, and it makes it more difficult for U.S. and international solidarity activists, too.

The lies about Cuba that underpin the legal supports for the blockade are weakening. Cuba is a State Sponsor of Peace, as shown by the recent agreement between the government of Colombia and the National Liberation Army (ELN), assisted by Cuba.

We are winning, but we need everyone's help. This series of tribunals is an important contribution to a movement in the United States that is irresistible.

Our first national push to get Cuba off the State Department list is a day of protest on Sunday, June 25, corresponding with the monthly international car and bike caravans inspired by the Cuban Americans of Puentes de Amor and their call in the summer of 2020 to build bridges of love, not hate.

We are carrying that message to Congress with allied groups that specialize in Congressional work. So join us at the White House at 1 p.m. on June 25. If you can't be there, tell us what you can do in your local area. Sign up for news and updates at our website, NNOC.org.

I'd like to end with a quote published recently by Real News from another NNOC co-chair, Shaquille Fontenot from South Carolina.

"There are so many cultural, environmental, and educational exchanges that could happen if relations were normalized. We're in a moment here where people [in the U.S.] are seeing the parallels between our own experiences and what's done in our name to people abroad.

"People here need food, water, shelter—and people in Cuba need those things too. The same institutions are keeping those things from all of us. That's why it's critical for us in the United States to speak up about it. People around the world need to see the truth."

Solidarity cannot be blockaded.

