

NYC meeting salutes the 70th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution's beginning

written by Stephen Millies
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Cuban UN Ambassador Gerardo Peñalver speaking at the Shabazz Center in New York City, July 29. SLL photo: Stephen Millies

Hundreds of people packed the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and

Educational Center in New York City on July 29 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba. They came to denounce the cruel U.S. blockade of Cuba and salute socialist Cuba's achievements.

Called National Rebellion Day in Cuba, the courageous action on July 26, 1953, against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista was the beginning of the Cuban Revolution. It inspired the July 26th Movement led by Fidel Castro that overthrew the U.S.-backed Batista on New Year's Day, 1959.

The meeting opened with the singing of Cuba's national anthem.

Ike Nahem of the New York / New Jersey Cuba Sí Coalition welcomed the large delegation from Cuba's mission to the United Nations.

Nahem and other speakers pointed out that the meeting was held on hallowed ground, where Malcolm X had been assassinated on Feb. 21, 1965. Malcolm X defended the Cuban Revolution and met with Fidel Castro in Harlem at the old Hotel Theresa in 1960.

Rosemari Mealy, J.D., Ph.D., a leading member of the Cuba Sí Coalition, has written a vivid account of this historic meeting in "Fidel & Malcolm X: Memories of a Meeting."

Nahem paid tribute to four remarkable defenders of Cuba who had passed: Frank Velgara, long-time Puerto Rican activist and a founder of the ProLibertad Freedom Campaign; Pat Fry, a member of the Communist Party, the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism, and a union activist in 1199SEIU; Chris Che Matlhako, staunch internationalist and central committee member of the South African Communist Party; and the activist Jane Franklin, author of the classic "Cuba and the United States: A Chronological History."

Co-chairs of the meeting were Andreia Vizeu, educator and Brazilian democracy activist, and Nancy Cabrero of Casa de las Américas.

Vizeu compared the attack on the Moncada barracks to the people power that freed “Lula” (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) from jail and brought him back as president of Brazil. Cabrero paid tribute to Fidel Castro’s determination and compared his leadership to the spirit of José Martí, the apostle of Cuban independence.

Steve Clark, editorial director of Pathfinder Press, which has published 40 books on Cuba and a member of the Socialist Workers Party national committee, described the sacrifices of those who stormed the Moncada. While five revolutionaries were killed in the military assault, 56 were murdered after being captured.

Fortunately, Fidel Castro survived. Clark told how Fidel’s great speech, “History Will Absolve Me,” was smuggled out of prison. Twenty thousand copies were distributed throughout Cuba.

Cuba’s UN ambassador speaks

The meeting’s highlight was the talk given by his excellency Gerardo Peñalver Portal, Cuba’s ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations. Peñalver is also Cuba’s Deputy Foreign Minister.

“Dear friends, today, more than ever, the solidarity received from you takes on special significance because Cuba is under heavy siege ... tied to the blockade, [that] continues to be the central element that defines the policy of the United States to Cuba, ” said the ambassador.

Referring to the lying designation by the U.S. government of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, Ambassador Peñalver said, “The consequences of such a designation are extremely harmful for a small nation like ours.

“It gravely damages international financial and commercial transactions ... in short, it is a measure that ... reinforces the blockade against Cuba. It should not be forgotten that the U.S. government used the COVID-19 pandemic ... in its efforts to increase the siege of Cuba. This included actions aimed at preventing our access to basic medical supplies ... just at a time when the world needed solidarity more than ever.

“We are pleased that Cuba was able to successfully develop three ... COVID-19 vaccines ... we were able to vaccinate more than 90% of Cubans in spite of the blockade,” said Ambassador Peñalver.

He continued, “Dear friends ... the government of Cuba has expressed its willingness ... to foster civilized ... relations [with the U.S.] based on mutual respect. ... We will continue to promote and facilitate the closest possible ties with numbers of sectors of this country that want to build bridges with Cuba. ... Cuba will never renounce its socialist system of social justice. ...

“We have the support of many good people in the world like you ... who have been tireless defenders of the lifting of the blockade and the right of our people to live in peace and to decide their own destiny.”

The representative of revolutionary Cuba concluded by declaring, “Cuba will not give up and we will continue to resist and overcome. Long live the Cuban solidarity movement in the U.S.!”

New York says NO! to the blockade

Andreia Vizeu led the audience in chanting “Cuba sí, bloqueo no!” She introduced Baba Zayid Muhammad of the Malcolm X Commemoration Committee.

Muhammad pointed out the significance of the meeting being held at the Shabazz Center. “This stage was built on Malcolm’s blood,” he said, referring to the spot of

the Black leader's assassination, adding that Malcolm was killed in front of his wife and four daughters.

Baba Zayid Muhammad recited a fiery "praise poem" about Malcolm X and quoted Assata Shakur, a Black revolutionary given asylum by Cuba. The FBI has placed a \$2 million ransom on Shakur's head but the Cuban people protect her.

A stunning demonstration of drumming was given by members of the Mapuche nation, who described their struggle in Chile and hailed the Cuban Revolution. Alegna Cruz from the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party demanded an end to the U.S. blockade of Cuba.

Nancy Cabrero announced a raffle of artwork with portraits of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party leader Pedro Albizu Campos, who was tortured in a U.S. federal prison by radiation experiments.

Speakers commented on the New York City Council, representing over 8 million people, passing a resolution calling for lifting the U.S. blockade of Cuba. Many organizations, including the Communist Party and the Democratic Socialists of America, worked to achieve this.

Ninety city councils and labor unions representing millions of people across the U.S. have passed similar resolutions demanding peaceful relations with Cuba. The National Network on Cuba has helped coordinate much of this work.

Vinson Verdree of the December 12th Movement emphasized the hard work it took to pass the New York City resolution. It was important, he said, that it demands Cuba be taken off the bogus State Sponsors of Terrorism list.

Council member Charles Barron played a key role in pushing the resolution through the council. Barron rightfully wants the United States on a list of terrorist countries.

Verdree paid tribute to Cuba's aid to African liberation. Over 2,000 Cubans died alongside their African comrades in defeating the fascist armies of apartheid South Africa.

Several people, including Gail Walker, Executive Director of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, were recently arrested for merely asking to speak to U.S. Senator Robert Menendez about Cuba. Menendez is chair of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee and a hardline supporter of the cruel blockade of Cuba.

One of those arrested was Calla Walsh, a co-chair of the National Network on Cuba, who spoke at the rally. Walsh said that when she and the others were released from jail on June 22, one of the first things she heard was that the New York City Council resolution condemning the blockade of Cuba had passed.

Across the United States, the struggle is heating up. Hands off Cuba!

