

Cuba – ‘The Aggression of an Empire’

Firstly I would just like to thank Labour Youth and Paul Dillon for organising this and inviting me to it. It’s a very important meeting and a very timely one as the next UN vote on the illegal blockade is November the 9th.

Before I start into the talk I would like to make a brief note on the references and resources I have used. It is very important when dealing with a political subject, and this is a political issue, to note your sources. I use anecdotal evidence from my own visit there and from friends and family, I use the UNHR index, the American Association for World Health report, and a number of other health reports, I also use Cuban govt reports. It is as varied a mix as I could get with the time I was given.

This blockade can’t be seen or viewed in isolation it is part of imperialism’s attack, it is attached to the occupation of Guantanamo, it is a part of the continued imprisonment of 5 freedom fighters in the US, it is a part of a consistent campaign to destroy a people.

A small note must also be made on my use of the word imperialism. While economics are at the base of imperialism, politics, culture, human pride all play an important part. Cuba represents both a market and a resource to the US as well as currently a great embarrassment to their designs. We must not be economist in analysing global affairs, we must appreciate and understand all aspects of the imperial system.

Cuba did represent and continues to represent the weak link in the chain of imperialism in that region. And today that chain is buckling all around it and Cuba is playing a leading role.

We in Ireland of course understand this position within imperialism as for many years we represented the thorn in the side of the British empire and we too had our revolution. Sadly however we couldn’t follow it through with the success of the Cuban society. We also know too well the viciousness of decaying ideologies, while we have loyalism the Cubans have the Miami mob and Mafia, both represent those whose material interests are tied to empire and resent any national and social freedom.

‘Three times after 1902 the US had intervened in Cuba to protect American investments... Americans owned 80% of Cuba’s utilities, 40% of its sugar, 90% of its mining wealth and occupied the islands key strategic location at Guantanamo Bay... Cuban life was controlled from Washington... Washington directed the economy.’ That is a quote from Ambrose and Brinkley. ‘Rise to Globalism.’ And believe you me they are no friend of socialists!

Cuba was the plaything for the elite in social, political and criminal circles. It is in this context, and for this reason Cuba’s social struggle is very much a national struggle for freedom too. As the present Cuban Foreign Minister Roque says “I should like to make it very clear that the government and people of Cuba have a very clear understanding that they are currently waging a hard struggle for their right to self-determination, their right to independence.”

We in Ireland understand this very well and today see the imperial control of our island in both the antique forms of occupation and the modern form capital movements and political subjection, north and south.

Cuba had had its national revolution in the 1890's but remained subjected. a national change of rule without a corresponding social revolution, without a transfer of power from the parasitic leaches who ruled to the ordinary labourers, changed nothing. In 1959 and thereafter the people demanded power and they seized it. From early in the revolution land was nationalised and socialised, control and ownership of industry was transferred to the new democratic state. This is where the major conflict with the US began. People's democracy and all it requires did not sit right with the US. While many of these companies were offered compensation few US or Cuban elite's took instead they swore to destroy the new state by whatever means necessary and it is here we see the beginning of the offensive, the economic blockade being just one aspect of this.

The trade embargo began with the first nationalisation of basic industries. And so an embargo of sorts, getting ever more complicated and in constant expanse, has been in place since the early 1960's.

In 1992 the Cuban Democracy Act was put in force. In the era of the 'end of history' it was felt all resistance to capitals exploits should be finished off once and for all. This legislation brought in a ban on subsidiary trading, brought in the individual licensing for each act of trade. But arguably most importantly it greatly increased the monitoring and execution of a ban on ships that have been in Cuba from loading or unloading in US ports for 180 days. This was crippling at a time when Cuba had just lost its greatest ally and trading partner in the Soviet Union.

In 1996 the Helms/Burton Act came into a force. An act sponsored by and drafted by two of the most reactionary representatives in the US houses, both known for their opposition to the civil rights movements, to equality and workers rights in the US and with a history of support for US acts of aggression overseas and at home. The main aim of this Act is to punish 3rd party countries and executives. They can now, and have been, brought to US courts for trading or dealing with Cuba. It is a very significant trade development, But as ever the economics of imperialism is very much part of the politics. The Act also increases support for 'prodemocracy' movements. Section 109 and 115 say 'The President is authorised to furnish assistance and provide other support for individuals and organisations...'

Let us make no mistake this is not an embargo, like Iraq or Libya, this is a blockade. A blockade of such intensity no other country in history has ever had to suffer. A few short anecdotes I think will suffice to show this.

My brother Paul, an environmental scientist and doctor, attended a conference on organic farming a few years ago in the US. Cuba is known for its organic farming and is fully engaged in the 'green revolution' and hence the keynote speaker at the conference was a Cuban scientist however at the last moment he was denied a visa to attend the conference. This was entirely due to the Helms/Burton Act.

More recently the UN sponsored a children's art event on the environment and the winner was a 12-year-old Cuban girl. The prize was a top of the range Nikon digital camera. The UN were not 'allowed' award the Cuban the prize! She won and was presented the certificate however the prize could not be given.

Canada has a law that makes it a criminal offence to abide by the blockade, that is, not trade with Cuba for the reasons in the Helms/Burton Act is an offence. An American citizen with a company based in Canada wishing to trade with Cuba was indicted by the US govt, when he stopped his trade he was then indicted by the Canadian govt. He now faces fines either way. He can do nothing.

These are the blockade. As you can see it is much more than an embargo and much more than any nation should rightfully put up with.

We must also remember whether its is democrats or republicans in the White House, it makes little difference. Kennedy invaded in 1961 and Kerry in his presidential race made commitments to overthrowing socialism in Cuba. It is the US State that is imperialistic.

However, post 9/11 Bush used the political scenario and climate to strengthen his interests across the globe, Cuba included, as did across the US too. In June 2004 the Helms/Burton Act was strengthened and a number of changes made. The number of visits allowed to Cuba was greatly reduced, the number of Cubans who can receive remittance was greatly reduced, 59 million was given to radio propaganda, the amount US visitors to Cuba can spend was reduced from \$164 to \$50 per day and further restrictions have been applied to academic exchanges and cultural visits. This all served to strengthen the scope of the blockade.

The EU it should also be mentioned has increasingly supported the blockade although its member states vote it illegal on a regular basis in the UN! Besides a bit of rhetoric from parliament they have done little to stand up for sovereignty and justice, but sure why would they when they erode our sovereignty every single day!

The Cuban government estimates that the blockade has cost them 70 billion dollars in trade and investment. This is incredible in itself but to consider that Cuba lost its most important ally, its biggest investor and its biggest market in the early 90's and yet has still maintained the highest economic growth rates in the Caribbean attached to the highest life expectancy and lowest infant mortality in the region makes in even more impressive.

The humanitarian aspect cannot be forgotten. The American Association for World Health reports that it is only the Cuban government's commitment to health that has prevented a 'humanitarian catastrophe'. They point to the increase in anaemia, to low wait babies and to low risk infectious diseases as being caused by the blockade. But the negative impacts aren't all one way. Cuba has for years invested resources in the biotech industry, into cancer treatments and into organic farming and is recognised to have made tremendous advances that we would definitely benefit from, only the blockade has prevented this.

The opposition to the blockade has come from essentially 3 groups. One: from people standing up for independence and sovereignty. Two: from US business's looking to invest in the island economy. And 3: from states, for good and bad reasons, who believe US global dominance is negative and who wish to express their sovereignty by trading with who they like.

The first can be seen foremost in the struggle of the heroic Cuban people who through it all, through the attempted invasions and terrorist actions, have continued to build a socialist state and democratic society.

Opposition to the illegal actions of the US government can also be seen in the regular UN vote in favour of Cuban sovereignty, now only 3 countries oppose the motion that the blockade is illegal and must be opposed, they are the US, Israel and the Marshall islands!

The second group opposed to the blockade are business in the US who see Cuba as an untapped market and resource in which they should have the bourgeois 'right' to invest. It is here that the argument clearly takes a legal turn. The blockade does indeed breach international trade laws, the GATT, the WTO, and even US trade laws. However, as most will know the capitalist notion of free trade in reality doesn't exist and we live in a world of unfair trade and corporate welfare.

A good example of this is Chiron a subsidiary of a US company who wished to sell 2 child vaccines to Cuba but has been prevented. They continued a lobbying campaign to go through with their proposed sale, and to date they have been successful with one through a UNICEF program but unsuccessful with the other vaccine. It was only their corporate lobbying power that achieved this success.

Finally, the third group is countries China, Vietnam, Spain, Canada, Russia, Venezuela and increasingly other Latin American countries like Bolivia, Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, and Brazil. These countries represent part of the 79 foreign direct investment projects from 26 different countries that Cuba has running at the moment, these also contribute very importantly to mining and explorative industries.

However, the Cuban search for foreign direct investment is very different to our one. Where we have sold our economy almost entirely to the highest bidders and lost, reflectively, much political independence in the process, the Cuban government and Cuban workers through their trade unions retain control over all areas of employment even within the foreign direct investment projects. Cuban workers won't suffer the way the Turkish Gama workers did here in Ireland.

As I mentioned in the introduction the blockade is only one part of imperialism's offensive against the people of Cuba. Although that is the topic of today's discussion the other areas of aggression must also be mentioned for us all to have a fuller understanding of the position Cuba finds itself in.

Foreign Minister Roque describes it as, "40 years of ironclad economic, financial, and commercial blockade, of aggression, terrorist acts, more than 600 assassination attempts on the life of the Cuban President... decades of incitement to subversion, illegal

emigration, sabotage, activities by armed groups...” And of course not to forget the attempted invasion of Cuba in April 1961 known in Cuba as Playa Giron and here as the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Terrorism emanating from and supported by the US government has killed 3478 Cuban Men, Women, and children, and a young Italian tourist in a Hotel car bomb. The men who have been found guilty in courts now walk freely in the US, like Orlando Bosch, protected by US law and given special presidential pardons by a regime fighting a ‘war on terrorism’!

In response to these attacks, and after the US state ignored requests and pleas for action against the Miami terrorists and counter-revolutionaries, the Cuban state acted in the same manner as any decent society wishing to protect its citizens, they infiltrated the terrorists and reported their actions. The 5 men saved lives, never once did they commit a crime except that of being a foreign agent on US soil, of which the US has thousands illegally across the globe. These 5 heroes are now locked up in the highest security prisons with rapists and murderers, but their struggle is international and their struggle for justice will be victorious just like the struggle 50 years ago in the sierra maestra, the struggle for liberty and equality.

They have had their appeal and await a retrial however in the current climate of overtly political injustice sadly we do not dare hold our breaths. The men remain up beat and positive and in Ramon Labion’s own words ‘History will rectify this verdict...’

Before I finish this part on imperialism’s aggression it is necessary to mention one particular act of terrorism that shows the utter ruthlessness of these counter revolutionaries, the ones Bush calls the Cuban democratic movement. We of course remember Reagan’s description of Bin Laden and the mujahadeen as freedom fighters.

In 1981 a Cuban ‘dissident’, a Cuban terrorist, introduced a virus, an act of gruesome chemical warfare, onto the island that killed 158 people, 101 of them were children. Eduardo Arocena admitted to this in a New York trial years later. This was a typical description of the virus: ‘a 5 year old female patient, with a history of good health and well nourished, has been in a state of fever associated to headache and suffering from pain all over the body. She is vomiting and has slight abdominal pain...’ This young girl died 27 hours after being admitted to hospital.

Why all these actions, why all this effort from the US government, why support these terrorists in Miami? Are they not an embarrassment to the ‘war on terrorism’? Why? Because Cuba is a beacon of light. Cuba is a living functioning alternative. It is not perfect, it has problems, but it is a living state that makes poverty history every day of its existence.

Cuba actively and energetically encourages movements across Latin America for social justice. They organise and cooperate in the Trade Treaty of the Peoples and the Bolivarian Alliance of the America’s, both alternatives to the much-hated NAFTA. They, with Venezuela and Argentina, have organised an alternative TV station with the real truth of the struggle for emancipation. And anyone who has seen that great Irish

documentary on Venezuela will understand the incredible role media and TV in particular can play.

Cuba provides free health care to every citizen in the country. It provides free and supported education at all levels to its citizens. Cuba's largest export is doctors and educators, the US's biggest export is weapons. Cuba's doctors are all over the world risking their own lives to provide emergency care often in conflict zones like Haiti. Cuba takes in and trains, at its expense, 7000 international students of medicine from 79 different countries.

These are the reasons Cuba is attacked on many levels by the US and its allies. These are the reasons Cuba is a rogue state and part of the axis of evil. Because Cuba makes poverty history and to do that you have to challenge those who control the means of alleviating poverty, the imperial states, the US, Britain, and the European Union.

The blockade must be defeated and Cuba must be defended and supported if we wish to realise another world, another ideal. It is realising poverty history.