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Socialist Voice #297, January 5, 2009

Cuba's Revolution: 50 Years of Resistance

'A Revolution of the humble, by the humble and for the humble.' Speech by Raul Castro Ruz, president of the Council of Ministers of Cuba, at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, in Santiago de Cuba on January 1, 2009, "Year of the 50th Anniversary of the Revolutionary Triumph." Translated for Socialist Voice by Ian Angus. Subheads added by Socialist Voice.

Men and women of Santiago, People of Oriente;

Combatants of the Rebel Army, of the underground struggle and of every battle in defense of the Revolution throughout these 50 years;

Fellow Cubans:

On a day like this, our first thoughts are for those who fell in this long struggle. They are a paradigm and a symbol of the effort and sacrifice of millions of Cubans. Together, armed with the powerful weapons of Fidel's leadership, teachings and example, we learned from the struggle to transform our dreams into a reality; to keep our heads cool and our confidence in the face of dangers and threats; to overcome big setbacks; to turn every challenge into a victory and to overcome adversity, no matter how insurmountable it might seem.

Those who had the privilege of experiencing the intensity of this stage of our history are well aware of the truth of the warning Fidel gave us on January 8, 1959, in his first speech after entering the capital:

“The tyranny has been overthrown. Our joy is immense. However, much remains to be done. Let us not deceive ourselves into believing that in the future everything will be easier, because perhaps everything will be more difficult.”

For the first time, the Cuban people had attained political power. The *mambises* [pro-independence guerrillas] finally entered Santiago de Cuba, together with Fidel. Sixty years earlier, U.S. imperialism had revealed its real objective of absolute domination by preventing the Liberation Army from entering this city.

The U.S. intervention caused great confusion and enormous frustration but the Mambí Army, although formally dismantled, always preserved its fighting spirit and the ideas that led Céspedes, Agramonte, Gómez, Maceo and so many other heroes and independence fighters to take up arms.

We endured five decades of corrupt governments and new U.S. interventions, the Machado tyranny, and the failed revolution that overthrew him. Later, in 1952, a coup d'état supported by the U.S. administration reinstated the dictatorship, following the pattern it commonly applied in those years to ensure its dominance in Latin America.

Armed struggle was the only way

It was clear to us that the armed struggle was the only way. Again, the revolutionaries would have to face — as Martí did before us — the challenge of renewing the unavoidable war for the independence that was cut short in 1898.

Thus, the Rebel Army took up again the weapons of the mambises, and after the triumph, was forever transformed into the undefeated Revolutionary Armed Forces.

The Centennial Generation, which in 1953 stormed the Moncada and Carlos Manuel de Céspedes barracks, was inspired by Martí's vital legacy and by his humanistic global vision, which extended beyond the attainment of national liberation.

In historical terms, the lapse of time from the frustration of the mambises' dreams to the triumph of the War of Liberation was short. Early in that period, Mella, a founding member of our first communist party and of the FEU (University Students Federation), was the legitimate heir and the bridge connecting Martí's thoughts to the most advanced ideas.

Those were the years when the consciousness and activity of the workers and farmers matured, when a genuine, brave and patriotic intelligentsia was formed that has stood by their side to this day. Cuban teachers, a loyal repository of the fighting traditions of its predecessors, planted the seeds for the best of the new generations.

A cataclysm of social justice

Right after the triumph, it was clear to every man and woman that the Revolution was a cataclysm of social justice that touched every home, from the large palaces on the Quinta Avenida in the country's capital, to the poorest shanty in the most remote farm or mountain.

The revolutionary laws not only fulfilled the program of Moncada, but surpassed it, as we followed the logical evolution of the process. At the same time, they set a precedent for the

peoples of the Americas, who had been fighting for emancipation from colonialism for 200 years.

In Cuba the history of the Americas took a new turn. No moral virtue was absent from the whirlwind that — even before January 1, 1959 — started blowing away oppression and inequity. It opened the way for the enormous effort an entire people to control their own lives, to lift themselves up with their own sweat and blood.

Millions of Cubans, men and women, have been workers or students or soldiers, and sometimes all three when circumstances demanded.

Nicolas Guillén's masterly verses synthesized what the January 1959 triumph brought to our people. "I have what I was meant to have," he said in one of his poems, referring not to material wealth but to being the masters of our own destiny.

Constant attacks

This victory is twice as worthwhile, for it has been attained despite the hatred and vindictiveness of our powerful neighbor.

The promotion and support of sabotage and banditry; the Playa Girón [Bay of Pigs] invasion; the blockade and other forms of economic, political and diplomatic aggression; the permanent campaign of slander against the Cuban Revolution and its leaders; the October [Missile] Crisis; the hijackings of and attacks on civilian planes and boats; state terrorism that has left 3,478 dead and 2,099 maimed; the attempts on the life of Fidel and other leaders; the murders of Cuban workers, farmers, fishermen, students, diplomats and combatants — these and many other crimes bear witness to a stubborn determination to put out, at any cost, the beacon of justice and honor symbolized by January 1.

One way or another, with more or less aggressiveness, every U.S. administration has tried to impose regime change in Cuba. Resistance has been our slogan and our key to success in every one of our victories throughout this half century of continual fighting. Notwithstanding the extensive and decisive solidarity we have received, we have consistently acted on our own and taken our own risks

For many years, Cuban revolutionaries have abided by Martí's call: "Freedom is most precious and one must either decide to live without it or resolve to pay its price."

On the 30th anniversary of the victory, Fidel said in this square: "We are here because we have been able to resist." Ten years later, in 1999, from this same balcony, he said that the Special Period was "the most extraordinary page of revolutionary and patriotic glory and firmness ... when we were left absolutely alone in the West, only 90 miles away from the United States, and we decided to continue forward." We repeat the same thing today.

Our resistance is based not on fanaticism but on sound convictions, and on the resolution of all of the people that the price of defending those convictions must be paid. Our glorious Five Heroes are a living example of that unshakable determination. (*Applause, cheers*)

Today we are not alone

Today, we are not alone on this side of the ocean facing the empire, as it was the case in the 1960s when in January 1962 the United States of America absurdly forced the OAS to expel Cuba. Only shortly before, Cuba had been the victim of an invasion that was organized by the U.S. administration and escorted to our coasts its warships. It has since been proven that the expulsion was supposed to be a prelude to direct military intervention. This was prevented only by the deployment of the Soviet nuclear missiles, leading to the October Crisis, known to the world as the Missile Crisis.

Today, the Revolution is stronger than ever; it has never failed to stand by its principles, not even in the most difficult circumstances. This truth cannot be changed in the least, even if some get tired or even renounce their history forgetting that life is in itself an eternal fight.

Does that mean there is less danger? No, it doesn't. Let's not entertain any illusions. As we commemorate this half century of victories, it is important to look to the future, to the next fifty years of permanent struggle.

A look at the current turbulence in the contemporary world tells us that the coming years will not be easier. This is simply the truth; I am not saying this to scare anyone.

We should also keep in mind what Fidel told us all, but especially the youth, at the University of Havana on November 17, 2005: "This country could destroy itself, this Revolution could destroy itself, but they [the enemy] cannot destroy it. We could destroy it ourselves, and it would only be our fault," he argued.

In the face of this possibility, I ask myself: what would guarantee that such a horrible thing would not happen to our people? How can we avoid a blow that would take a long time to recover from?

I speak for all those who have been fighting from the moment the first shots were fired on the walls of the Moncada barracks 55 years ago and for those who carried out heroic internationalist missions.

We must never abandon our principles

And of course, I speak for those who fell in the wars of independence and more recently in the War of Liberation. I speak for them all, and for Abel and Jose Antonio, for Camilo and Che, when I say, in the first place that this requires that tomorrow's leaders never forget that this is a Revolution of the humble, by the humble and for the humble. (*Applause*) It requires that that they never be misled by the enemy's siren songs and know that the enemy will never cease to be aggressive, treacherous and dominating. They must never distance themselves from our workers, our farmers and the people at large. It requires that the party members prevent the destruction of the [Communist] Party.

We must learn from history.

If tomorrow's leaders act consistently, they will always have the support of the people, even if they make mistakes, so long as they do not abandon basic principles. But if their actions are

inconsistent with those principles, they may be powerless to correct their mistakes, because they do not have the moral authority that the masses only grant to those who never back away from the struggle. They could end up powerless before internal and external dangers and unable to preserve the achievements that are the fruit of the blood and sacrifices of many generations of Cubans.

Let no one doubt that if that happened, our people will know how to fight, that today's mambises will be in the frontline; that they will never be ideologically disarmed nor will they ever lay down their swords. (*Applause, cheers*)

It is the responsibility of the historic leadership of the Revolution to prepare the new generations to take up the enormous responsibility carrying the revolutionary process forward.

This heroic city of Santiago — and all of Cuba — was witness to the sacrifices of thousands of compatriots. It felt the accumulated rage that for so many lives cut short by crime, and the endless pain of our mothers, and the sublime courage of its sons and daughters.

This was the birthplace of a young revolutionary who was killed when he was only 22, a man who symbolizes willingness to make sacrifices; purity, courage and serenity; and the love for our people: Frank País García.

This eastern land was the birthplace of the Revolution. It was here that the call to duty was made in La Demajagua and on July 26; it was here that we landed in the Granma and started the struggle on the mountains and the plains, the struggle that extended later to the entire island. As Fidel said in *History Will Absolve Me*, “every day here looks like it will be again the day of Yara and Baire.” [the cities where the war of independence began.]

Never again shall poverty, humiliation, abuse and injustice return to our land!

Never again shall pain be felt in the hearts of our or shame return to the souls of every honest Cuban!

Such is the firm resolution of a nation that is prepared to fight, a nation that is aware of its duty and proud of its history. (*Applause*)

We are our own strongest critics

Our people are well aware of every shortcoming in the work they have built with their own hands and defended with their own lives. We, the revolutionaries, are our own strongest critics. We have never hesitated to publicly discuss our flaws and mistakes. There are plenty of examples, past and present.

Following October 10, 1868, disunity was the main cause of our defeats. After January 1st, 1959, the unity forged by Fidel has been the guarantee of our victories. Our people have been able to preserve that unity despite all of the difficulties and the attempts to divide us, and have rightly placed our common aspirations above our differences, crushing pettiness with the strength of collectivism and generosity.

Revolutions can only advance and endure when they are carried forward by the people. Full understanding of this truth and consistent and unshakable action to carry it forward has been

decisive in the victory of the Cuban Revolution over its enemies, and over seemingly insurmountable difficulties and challenges.

As we complete the first half century of the victorious Revolution, let's pay homage first to our wonderful people and to their exemplary decisiveness, courage, loyalty and spirit of internationalist solidarity; to their extraordinary will power, its willingness to sacrifice and their confidence in victory, in the Party, in their leader and, above all, in themselves. (*Applause*)

Homage to Fidel

I know that I am expressing the feelings of my compatriots and of many revolutionaries around the world, when I pay homage to the Commander in Chief of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro Ruz. (*Applause, cheers*)

One man alone doesn't make history, but some men play an indispensable role in influencing the course of events. Fidel is one of them; nobody doubts it, not even his most bitter enemies.

Ever since his early youth he adopted as his own one of Martí's thoughts: "All of the glory in the world fits in a kernel of corn." This thought was his shield against everything superfluous or transient, his way of transforming praise and honors — even if well-deserved — into greater humility, honesty, fighting spirit and love for truth, which he has invariably placed above all else.

He made reference to these ideas 50 years ago in this same square. His words that night are absolutely valid today.

At this very special moment when we think of our past journey and particularly of the long way ahead, when we reiterate our commitment to the people and to our martyrs, allow me to conclude by recalling the alert and call to combat made by the Commander in Chief in this historic place on January 1, 1959, when he said:

"We do not believe that all of the problems can be easily solved; we know that the path is fraught with obstacles, but we are men of faith, we are used to facing great difficulties. Our people can be sure of one thing, and that is that we can make one or many mistakes, but we will never steal and we will never betray you."

And he added:

"We shall never let ourselves be carried away by vanity or ambition, ... there can be no greater reward or satisfaction than the fulfillment of our duty."

On this day, full of significance and symbolism, let's reflect on those ideas, which stand as a guidance for true revolutionaries. Let's do so with the satisfaction of having fulfilled our duty and of having lived a life with dignity in the most intense and fruitful half century of our history. Let's do so with the firm commitment that we will always be able to proudly claim in this land:

Glory to our heroes and martyrs! (*Cheers*) Long live Fidel! (*Cheers*) Long live the Revolution! (*Cheers*) Long live Free Cuba! (*Cheers*) (*Ovation*)

Socialist Voice #298, January 6, 2009

Worldwide Protests Condemn Israel's Assault on Gaza

By Suzanne Weiss

One of the most important protests against the murderous Israeli assault on Gaza took place on January 5 in Kandahar, the Afghan province under occupation by the Canadian army. About 800 Afghan protesters converged in Kandahar city, carrying banners reading "Death to Israel" and chanting anti-Israeli slogans.

According to the *Ottawa Citizen*, the protesters also demanded the immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan of NATO troops, including the 2,700 Canadians stationed in their region. Bismalla Afghanmal, a member of Kandahar's provincial council, reportedly denounced bombing, whether it takes place in Afghanistan or Palestine.

The courageous Afghan protest underlines the aggressive role played by Canada's government in promoting both NATO occupation of Afghanistan and Zionist occupation of Palestine.

The Harper government's complicity in the Gaza massacre was condemned in Canada on January 3 by about 20,000 protesters across the country, including more than 10,000 in Toronto and 5,000 in Montreal. Demonstrators called on the Canadian government to condemn Israel's latest aggression and to cut all political, economic, and military ties with Israel until it complies with international law.

"We are overwhelmed by the support we have received from Canadian civil society," commented Kahled Mouammar, President of the Canadian Arab Federation. "The large number of people on the streets today shows that the Harper government is out of touch with the Canadian public."

International Upsurge

In recent days, Israel's crime against Gaza has spurred demonstrations across the world. It is the largest wave of coordinated anti-imperialist actions since the launching of the Iraq war in 2003.

In Toronto and elsewhere, large numbers of Muslim marchers were joined by participants from the population at large, including groups of anti-Zionist Jews.

According to press reports, up to 700,000 marched in Istanbul, Turkey. Forty thousand in Rabat, Morocco condemned the silence of the Arab regimes, and over 10,000 marched through Jakarta, Indonesia carrying Palestinian flags. Angry dissent was heard in Kashmir, Lebanon, and the Palestinian West Bank.

In Egypt, where the Hosni Mubarak dictatorship has been silent, hundreds of thousands took part in nationwide marches called by the Muslim Brotherhood. Many called on Arab governments to take action to protect Palestinians.

In London, England, more than 60,000 marched at the call of the Stop the War Coalition. Chanting "Shame on you, have my shoe," protesters left hundreds of shoes in front of the residence of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Twenty thousand marched in Paris, and many thousands more made their opposition to Israel heard in the U.S., France, Spain, Greece, Italy, Australia, Holland, Austria, and other countries of the world.

Protests in Israel

Addressing a demonstration of 150,000 mostly Palestinian protesters in the northern Israeli town of Sakhnin, Knesset member Mohammed Barakeh said, “We are determined to stand with our brothers in Gaza to stop the bloodshed and massacre.” There were cries that that Egypt’s Mubarak is a “coward” who is “collaborating with the Americans.”

In Tel Aviv, Israel, 10,000 Palestinians and Israeli Jews marched side by side in a demonstration featuring many Palestinian flags. A prominent banner read, “You want to stop Hamas? Give Gaza hope, not war.” Another giant banner read, “Stop killing! Stop the siege! Stop the occupation!” As the rally drew to the end, police disappeared from the scene, exposing participants to a violent assault by rightist settler thugs.

The revolutionary government of Cuba responded promptly to the Israeli air raids on Gaza. Cuba “strongly condemns this genocidal action by the Israeli government” and calls for mobilization to demand an immediate end to Israeli attacks. The statement reiterated Cuba’s “unwavering support and solidarity with the suffering and heroic people” of Gaza. Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela also expressed “solidarity with the Palestinians against Israeli violence.”

Deadly toll

Ignoring international appeals for a cease-fire, Israel is continuing its ground advance in Gaza, killing an additional 30 civilians on January 5. It is bombarding Gaza City with shells of deadly white phosphorous, supposedly to create a smokescreen for advancing troops.

According to media reports, the death toll from the Israeli invasion, now more than 550, includes women, children, and men from all walks of life. Medical supplies in Gaza are running out; food is almost unavailable; many who venture out of doors are shot.

Adding insult to injury, Israel cynically condemns Hamas for exposing Gaza’s civilians to Israeli artillery and bombing. Canada’s mass media echoes this absurd claim.

The immediate goal of Israel’s invasion of Gaza is to punish Palestinians for resisting Israeli apartheid. More broadly, its long-term subjugation of the Palestinian people aims to occupy the Palestinians’ land, expel Palestinians en masse, and deny Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homes.

Background to slaughter

The run-up to the war in Gaza began in January 2006, when Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) won a decisive victory in elections in the Palestinian territory. The Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, then proposed a long-term cease-fire based on establishment of a Palestinian state, leaving Israel with its 1967 borders. The offer still stands.

Instead of responding, the Israeli government, working with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, engineered the overthrow of the democratically elected Hamas government in the West Bank. But Hamas retained power in Gaza.

Israel then set out to strangle Gaza for the crime of voting for Hamas, against the desires of Tel Aviv and Washington.

Some militants in Gaza responded to the prolonged and devastating siege of their territory by firing rockets into Israeli territory. This ended in mid-2008, when Hamas and Israel agreed to a ceasefire.

However, “during this alleged ceasefire, Israel continued to imposed its brutal siege on Gaza, restricting the flow of aid, medical supplied, fuel and other necessities of life into the territory. For the past two years, Gaza has been undergoing the daily violence of a wide-ranging humanitarian catastrophe triggered by severely reduced access to energy, food and medicines.” (Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid)

When the ceasefire ran out in December 2008, Israel tightened its blockade and set in motion its present assault, using renewed rocket attacks as a pretext. As unionist Ali Mallah told Toronto protesters on December 28, “If there was no occupation, there would be no rockets. Occupation is the worst form of terrorism. People have the right to resist their occupier by any means necessary.”

‘A bigger holocaust’

The present assault, planned over a six-month period, makes real the sinister threat made in February 2008 by Israel’s deputy defense minister, Matan Vilnai. The people of Gaza, he said, would “bring upon themselves a bigger holocaust” if they continued to resist the intensification of the occupation.

This is a clear reference to Hitler’s genocidal actions against the Jewish people 60 years ago. For many years, the Gaza population of 1.5 million Palestinians has been besieged, blockaded, bombarded, and systematically denied the necessities of life. The Israeli government does not intend to kill every Palestinian, but they do aim to wipe Gaza off the map.

In fact, Zionism’s aggression against the Palestinians, over almost a century, can only be understood as an attempt to remove Palestine from the world’s family of nations. That is the Zionist “final solution.”

The Gaza Strip today is strikingly similar to the ghetto built by Hitler for the Jews of Warsaw: an open-air concentration camp, surrounded by high walls and checkpoints, and subject to systematic terror tactics, deprivation, and violence.

Israel’s attack on Gaza echoes Hitler’s assault on the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. But while Hitler’s actions were hidden at the time from the world’s peoples, today Israel acts openly, with the approval of Canada, the U.S., and Britain, while the whole world watches in horror.

Like the Warsaw Ghetto, Gaza is a story of an epic of suffering, destruction, and courageous resistance. The people of Gaza fight, like the Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto, with

whatever they can get their hands on. But their weapons are puny and symbolic compared to the Israeli warplanes, artillery, tanks, and bombs that are razing the city to the ground.

Gaza, the Mideast, and the World

On November 24, 2008, the President of the United Nations General Assembly, Father Miguel D'Escoto Brockman, pointed out to the world's governments how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

“More than twenty years ago we in the United Nations took the lead from civil society when we agreed that sanctions were required to provide a nonviolent means of pressuring South Africa to end its violations.

“Today, perhaps we in the United Nations should consider following the lead of a new generation of civil society, who are calling for a similar non-violent campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions to pressure Israel to end its violations.”

Even more, progressive forces worldwide are challenged to resist Israeli aggression and oppose the imperialist alliance that sustains Israel and wages war across the Mideast.

If Israel extinguishes the flame of resistance in Gaza, it will tighten its grip of imperialist occupation and oppression across the entire region. An Israeli victory would also encourage forces in Canada and other pro-Zionist countries that seek to stifle and repress pro-Palestinian voices and other solidarity movements in this country.

Powerful forces have tried to erase the crime against the Palestinians from the world's memory, but Palestinian resistance continues, with increased sympathy from peoples around the world. The Palestinian resistance today forms part of the vanguard of freedom struggles internationally, and Palestinian solidarity must be central to antiwar efforts in Canada and abroad.

The truth about the crime against the Palestinians must not be silenced.

As the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid (CAIA) stated on December 27, we must pledge to “continue mobilizing to respond to the call by over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations for a comprehensive campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions” against Israel.

Information on continuing solidarity actions is available from the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid and Palestine House. Suzanne Weiss is a member of Not In Our Name: Jewish Voices Opposing Zionism and of CAIA.

Socialist Voice #299, January 12, 2009

Confronting Industry Shutdowns: Multinational's Assets Seized in Newfoundland

By Roger Annis

A Conservative Party provincial premier has presented an unlikely challenge to trade unions and the New Democratic Party across Canada. No, it's not another assault on workers' rights and living conditions. It's a surprising decision to stand up to a corporate giant. On December 18, the House of Assembly of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador unanimously approved a resolution to revoke the access to timber and river water held by paper conglomerate AbitibiBowater in central Newfoundland.

It's the kind of measure that NDP governments in other provinces run away from, fearing big-business backlash and saying it would damage electoral prospects. But Premier Danny Williams' move has received near-universal acclamation in his home province and has been welcomed by working people across Canada and into the United States, especially those in hard-hit, resource-based communities.

Writing for the Quebec monthly journal and website *L'Aut'Journal*, editor Pierre Dubuc says the Newfoundland government decision "sends a message that workers can demand of their governments measures other than habitual compliance."

He contrasts the Newfoundland decision with reaction by the Quebec government to a recent paper mill closing by Abitibi in Donnacona, Quebec that cost 250 jobs. There, the Quebec government shrugged its shoulders and said there was nothing it could do to save jobs.

Paper mill closure

The Newfoundland government's move followed an announcement by AbitibiBowater that it would close its giant paper mill in Grand Falls-Windsor in March 2009. The mill and related forest and hydro-electric operations employ some 900 workers.

As of the mill closing, the government will end the company's access to timber on some four million acres of land and to river-water resources used in electrical generation. The government will expropriate hydro-electric installations run by the company. The mill itself will remain in company hands.

The government will pay the company for its seized assets at a price to be negotiated. Environmental clean-up costs and severance pay for workers will be factored into any final price.

In a feature interview on CBC Radio's *The Current* on December 22, Williams explained his government's decision. "We need to make sure that we properly safeguard our natural resources, and that we enter into proper corporate arrangements with our business partners. I'm the first one to say that businesses should earn a profit, and make a handsome profit if they're able to run their businesses effectively.

“But don’t take, take, take from Canadians, not reinvest, suddenly close down operations, and think you’ll walk away with the goodies.”

AbitibiBowater says it will challenge the government’s moves under the terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement, arguing that a nearly 100-year-old agreement allows it to do whatever it wants with timber and water resources, including selling its access to others.

Williams says Abitibi should tread carefully because its financial relationship with provincial and federal governments in Canada would come under scrutiny during such a challenge and are probably in violation of the treaty because of the extensive subsidies that paper companies receive in Canada.

The *Globe and Mail* national daily published a harsh critique of Williams on the front page of its December 17 edition. Columnist Konrad Yakabuski wrote, “At least Hugo Chavez, Venezuela’s nationalization-happy president, has the decency to call himself a socialist. Mr. Williams just acts like one.”

Popular pressure to act

When Abitibi announced closure of the paper mill, the government came under considerable public pressure to act because the closing was widely viewed as motivated solely by greed and malice. Abitibi served notice earlier in 2008 that it wanted to cut 170 jobs by reducing production and contracting out certain operations. To add insult to injury, it offered no guarantee to workers that the mill would remain open.

The workers, members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) voted in September and again in November to refuse the necessary changes in collective agreements to allow the job cuts.

In a letter to the *St. John’s Telegram* on December 9, the president of CEP Local 63, George MacDonald, explained, “We were prepared to make this mill operate, and we were prepared to discuss anything to make that happen. We brought issues to the local management and were ignored. Do you really believe that we would be so stupid as to vote against saving our jobs and saving this industry, if we were offered a choice?”

He said the union was willing to discuss wage concessions, but the company never asked for any.

MacDonald’s letter continued, “The people of Newfoundland and Labrador need to ensure that if AbitibiBowater is not operating here, it leaves empty-handed.... Our resources cannot be used to benefit an organization that does not continue to invest in our province’s industry and economy.”

Williams echoed the workers’ complaints when he told *The Current*, “The mill itself has been allowed to deteriorate dramatically even though the government was willing to put money into modernizing it.”

‘Tired of the giveaways’

Danny Williams said recently that he got involved in politics because he was “tired of the giveaways” of the province’s natural resources. He’s not alone. Decades of squandering of natural resources made Newfoundland and Labrador the poorest province in Canada ever since it

joined the country in 1949. A deep-seated, popular anger against the “giveaways” is omnipresent in the province.

The waters surrounding Newfoundland were once the richest fishery in the world. Not anymore. Fish stocks have been obliterated by decades of plundering by Canadian and foreign fishing fleets.

In 1992, the Canadian government, which has responsibility for managing the country’s ocean waters, was obliged to declare a moratorium on the fishing of cod, the most lucrative of the species. Thirty-five thousand people were thrown out of work, the largest layoff in Canadian history. The cod have never recovered.

Another resource bungle is the massive hydro-electric installations along the Upper Churchill River in Labrador, built during the 1960s. The Newfoundland government receives very low royalties for the electricity. It signed onto low, long-term royalties with the government-owned electric giant in the neighbouring province of Quebec in exchange for financing of the construction.

Hydro-Québec makes a fortune off the electricity, much of which is sold in the U.S. The laughably low prices that Newfoundland receives are in place until the year 2041. The government estimates that the province is losing out on \$1 billion per year, based on current electricity prices and royalty rates prevailing in other jurisdictions.

The conflict with Abitibi is not Williams’ first conflict with foreign corporations. In 2006, he ended talks with several of the world’s major oil companies over exploitation of the large, offshore oil field known as Hebron. The field holds an estimated 581 million barrels of recoverable oil. An oil consortium headed by Chevron balked at Williams’ demand for a five-percent government ownership stake in the project. Williams was pilloried in the business press and by federal politicians.

The hardnosed strategy paid off. The government and oil majors reached a deal in August of this year on the government’s terms.

At odds with Ottawa, too

Williams has also clashed with the Canadian government, over “equalization” payments that flow to the governments of poorer provinces via federal government coffers and over-management of offshore oil.

Equalization payments are intended to support a common standard of public services across Canada. The federal government wants to reduce payments to Newfoundland as the new-found oil wealth in the province comes onto stream.

It also wants a significant share in oil revenue. Unlike Canada’s other oil-producing provinces, Newfoundland’s oil lies under the sea, a federal government jurisdiction. The provinces of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia claim that the Conservative Party government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper reneged on a deal reached under a previous federal government in 2005 for sharing of oil revenue between the two levels of government.

During the 2008 federal election, Williams urged voters in Newfoundland to vote for “anyone but” the incumbent Conservatives – his own party, no less. The Conservatives were wiped off the electoral map as a result, winning only 16 percent of the popular vote in the province. (In Nova Scotia, by contrast, the party’s seat standing remained unchanged.)

Whose interests to prevail?

Danny Williams insists that he is devoted to business and corporate interests. He does not challenge the decision of Abitibi to close its paper mill in Grand Falls-Windsor. “We understand there are downturns in the paper industry that affect company operations,” he told the CBC.

Nor does he challenge Abitibi’s retaliatory measure in shutting down part of its timber cutting operations following the government’s revocation announcement.

When asked by CBC why Abitibi is closing the paper mill, Williams’ answer was a coy defense of the company’s right to do whatever it wishes with the mill. George MacDonald of the CEP, on the other hand, explained the closure as motivated by Abitibi’s desire to make money by selling electricity from generating facilities that previously served the mill. “There is more money in selling [electricity] than in paper making,” he bluntly told CBC’s *The Current* on December 18.

Williams’ concern is that local business interests receive a larger piece of the pie when multinationals set up shop. In Abitibi’s case, its use and abuse of the paper mill was all “shaft” and no “sharing” of the proceeds.

Williams contrasts his government’s relations with Abitibi to those with the oil industry. He says his government has a “great relationship” with the oil companies.

Implications for workers across the country

Abitibi’s motivations are a familiar story to forestry and mining workers across Canada. In the mining towns of Trail and Kitimat, British Columbia, for example, workers have fought company efforts to shut down lead/zinc and aluminum smelting operations while leaving electrical generation stations in operation to earn fantastic profits.

In the forest industry, workers complain loudly about many lumber companies’ growing preference to close sawmilling and manufacturing operations while continuing to cut timber for export abroad.

But concerns have rarely gone beyond the complaint stage. Few voices suggest that government ownership and management of natural resource industries, that is, nationalization, is required. That may change as a result of the recent move in Newfoundland. We will also see a rougher ride for claims by political leaders that trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) are written in stone and cannot be challenged.

Canada’s business elite are concerned about the rumblings of discontent in the forestry that came to a head in Newfoundland. Forestry is the largest industry by employment in the country. The *Globe and Mail* editorialized December 27, “Canadians need to accept that the days in which forestry acted as a kind of social program for remote communities ... have disappeared. That

outdated attitude found its latest expression most recently in Newfoundland and Labrador, with Premier Danny Williams' expropriation of land and other assets from AbitibiBowater Inc...."

Williams' move against Abitibi adds interest to the upcoming election in British Columbia in May of this year. The New Democratic Party has a good shot at winning. But party leader Carole James is spending much of her pre-election time in soothing business fears.

In a year-end interview with the rabidly anti-NDP *Vancouver Sun*, she said, "People know that I ran (for leadership of the NDP) because of my balanced approach, because of the importance of making sure that business and labour are at the table."

The last elected NDP premier in BC, Glen Clark, resigned from office in 1999 in the face of a vitriolic, media-driven campaign that penetrated the ranks of his own party. Clark was considered anti-business and too cozy with trade unions. He resigned in the face of a police investigation into accusations of small-scale, personal business improprieties on his part. The accusations were later proven entirely without merit.

James has loosened the ties of affiliation of trade unions to the party. She is an enthusiastic preacher of "fiscal responsibility" and "balanced budgets" dogma that serves as justification for inaction on declining living standards happening among the poorest sections of the population.

Supporters of her party in the labour movement will logically expect her to be at least as firm with the resource corporations that pillage this province as the Newfoundland government has been with Abitibi. They may even demand that she assert public control and ownership over what are, after all, eminently public natural resources. That would be the best way that working people could benefit from the unexpected example provided by Danny Williams.

Roger Annis is a trade union activist and co-editor of Socialist Voice.

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Postscript, August 30, 2010

**Williams unrepentant as taxpayers on hook for NAFTA deal with Abitibi Newfoundland
Newfoundland Premier says seizure of AbitibiBowater assets was one of his finest hours**

By Sue Bailey,
Globe and Mail, Aug. 25, 2010

St. John's, Newfoundland—Critics are calling it a rash blunder that will cost Canadian taxpayers far more than \$130-million, but Premier Danny Williams says the seizure of AbitibiBowater assets in Newfoundland was one of his finest hours.

Mr. Williams said he'd do it all again as he confirmed his government won't reimburse the \$130-million Ottawa will pay the pulp and paper giant to settle a messy claim under the North American free-trade agreement.

Nor is the Premier with sky-high approval ratings apologizing for the tab to be picked up by taxpayers across the country.

“We had to protect the assets for the people of Newfoundland and Labrador,” Mr. Williams told reporters outside the legislature Wednesday. “When I look back, of the many things that I’ve done during the terms that I’ve been in government, this is probably one of the actions that I’m the most proud of.”

Mr. Williams led the politically charged expropriation of AbitibiBowater’s water and timber rights in December, 2008, as the faltering company announced it would close a paper mill in Grand Falls-Windsor.

The company, which is incorporated in Delaware though it has its head office in Montreal, later declared bankruptcy and is still restructuring. It filed a \$500-million claim under NAFTA in protest of what it called the illegal seizure of its Newfoundland assets.

It’s up to Ottawa to settle claims against provinces under NAFTA just as Ottawa would receive compensation for cases it wins, Mr. Williams said. It’s part of being a federation participating in an international agreement, he added.

Taxpayer watchdogs didn’t exactly see it that way. “Danny Williams has managed to put taxpayers in Toronto, Weyburn, Vancouver, Kamloops, Halifax on the hook for his big ego,” said Kevin Gaudet of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

“Because he doesn’t do his work in advance, now we’re on the hook. Maybe there would have been better ways to avoid this type of liability issue earlier if he paid more attention.”

Socialist Voice #300, January 14, 2009

The NDP, the Coalition, and the War

Two articles by Paul Kellogg

What this Tory surge exposes very clearly is the folly of the Coalition strategy. A backroom deal with one of Canada's corporate parties did not build the NDP — it built support for Harper and his Tories."

Coalition Gives Harper New Life

We now know that there was nothing spontaneous about the coalition gambit initiated by Jack Layton and the NDP in the dying weeks of 2008. Far from the "grass-roots" affair as it was painted by the NDP press room, the coalition idea was nurtured "on secret NDP 'scenario committees' during the past three federal campaigns." [1] The fact that it was a backroom deal has now exploded in Layton's face.

Had it been driven from the grass-roots, the NDP would have been looking down, responding to its base. But the NDP was doing the opposite. Layton was looking up, to a deal with the Liberals — indistinguishable from the Tories as a corporate-backed party. Part of the deal he had to strike was to put on the shelf both the war on Afghanistan and increasing corporate taxes. This made it impossible for the NDP to appeal to its base — because the base of the party is anti-war and anti-corporate.

But while Layton was looking up and disorganizing his base, Harper was doing the opposite. He knows his base precisely, and in unleashing a vicious Quebec-bashing campaign, he suddenly had an army of reactionaries ready to do battle.

And then Harper found out he didn't need these bigots. A much bigger wave was coming his way, a wave of revulsion. Ordinary people instinctively dislike secretive backroom deals. The smell of opportunism was all over the coalition, and suddenly, this translated into an evaporation of support for the NDP and the Liberals in English Canada, and a sudden surge in support for the Tories.

Three polls done in the immediate aftermath of the coalition announcement had Harper sitting in majority territory. The Strategic Counsel had the Tories at 45 percent nationally, Ipsos Reid had them at 46 percent, and an Ekos poll gave the Tories a crushing 20 point lead over the Liberals. Just weeks before the Tories had managed to win only 37.6 percent of the vote. [2]

The scary thing is — this surge in the polls was in spite of a collapse for Tory support in Quebec. The Quebec bashing in the first Tory counter-attack had the effect of destroying the Quebec base Harper had been trying to build. According to the Strategic Counsel, while Tory support was down to 18 percent in Quebec, it had soared to 53 percent in the rest of Canada, including 61 percent support in the West, and 50 percent support in the previously Liberal stronghold of Ontario. [3]

These numbers won't last. Stephen Harper is unlikely to stay at these levels of support for very long. But what this Tory surge exposes very clearly is the folly of the Coalition strategy. A backroom deal with one of Canada's corporate parties did not build the NDP — it built support for Harper and his Tories.

Footnotes

[1] "Inside a crisis that shook the nation," *Macleans.ca*, December 12, 2008

[2] "Canada's Harper has crushing poll lead on crisis," *Reuters*, December 5, 2008

[3] "Harper's Conservatives versus Liberal-NDP Coalition: What is the State of Canadian Public Opinion", *Strategic Counsel*, December 4, 2008

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Dear Jack: Do you really want this war?

Open Letter to Jack Layton, federal leader of the NDP

Everywhere I go they are burying Canadian soldiers. Walking down Donlands Avenue December 12, there were the cameras and the men in uniform — waiting outside the Metamorphosis Greek Orthodox Church for the funeral of Private Demetrios Diplaros, killed in Afghanistan the week before.[1] Back at work in Peterborough, preparations were underway at Calvary Church for the funeral of Private Michael Freeman, killed in Afghanistan.[2] But this is the war that you say you want to inherit.

Your only Quebec MP, Thomas Mulcair has told the press, "the NDP is putting aside its differences that have existed historically with the Liberals on such issues as Afghanistan." [3] And Jack, your coalition government — if it gets its way — will stay in office till 2011. Will there be another 100 Canadians killed on its watch? Another 200? And how many thousands of Afghans?

Knowing that the NDP was calling for an immediate troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, was an enormous boost of confidence for thousands. Your actions have completely betrayed those thousands.

Last election, young people — the young people I see every day as a teacher, the young people that you and I both saw when we were both teachers at Ryerson University — just didn't care about a choice between Harper, Dion or yourself. They didn't see themselves in any of the parties. But I was able to tell them — in good conscience — that there was a big difference between your party and the others. Your party was committed to bringing the troops home — the troops sent to war by the Liberals, and dying in increasing numbers under the Conservatives. That argument worked. Young people hate this war. So when they were told that there was one party calling for an end to the war, they voted for you.

You have now lost their vote. You have sent them the message that principles like stopping a murderous, barbaric war are not as important — as what? What exactly did you get from your deal with the Liberals? Afghanistan is on the shelf. Taxing the corporations is on the shelf. The only thing you seem to have "won" is the promise of six cabinet seats. A religious man who

greatly influenced me — an anti-war minister of the United Church — would have known what to call this — a mess of pottage. Look it up.

The coalition gambit was a top-down bureaucratic, back-room deal — and has been perceived as such by millions of ordinary Canadians who are recoiling in horror. The terrible effect of this backroom coalition adventure has been to bring Stephen Harper back from the dead — he's soaring in the polls — and to accelerate the arrival of Michael Ignatieff as head of the Liberals — the same Michael Ignatieff who supported George W. Bush's war on Iraq. Do you really want to sit at the cabinet table with Michael Ignatieff in the chair?

The war has come home, Jack. That funeral on Donlands was in your riding in Toronto, the riding that has time and again come out to the polls and sent you to Ottawa. If you say "troops out now" you have something to say to those folks. If you say "we'll talk about it in 2011," you have nothing to say that is any different from the Harper Tories.

Whatever. The movement goes on without you. We'll be demonstrating April 4 in Toronto and in dozens of other cities chanting "troops out now!" You're welcome to join us. There will be thousands of other NDP members there with us. But don't expect a very warm welcome. On those marches, being against the war is a principle, not a bargaining chip.

Footnotes

[1] "A hero's farewell," *Toronto Sun*, December 12, 2008

[2] "Holidays delay Peterborough soldier's funeral," *thestar.com*, January 2, 2009

[3] Murray Brewster, "NDP will not oppose Afghan war while in coalition," *Canadian Press*, December 3, 2008

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Socialist Voice #301, January 19, 2009

Toronto Janitors Organize for Rights, Respect and Justice

By John Riddell

As darkness falls in Toronto and tens of thousands of office workers pour out of the downtown skyscrapers, another army enters the buildings, quietly and unperceived — the night shift that cleans the office towers and readies them for the next day's activity. These buildings house Canada's richest corporations — the banks alone had profits of \$20 billion in 2007 — yet their janitors are among the worst paid and worst treated of Toronto's work force. And they work within an employment structure carefully contrived to render them powerless.

Is resistance futile? Not according to Julio Da Silva, a cleaner for Bee Clean at Scarborough Town Centre and a member-organizer for the "Justice for Janitors" campaign of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 2 in Toronto.

"In my six years as a cleaner," Da Silva says, "it's always the same problem. Wages are low, close to minimum wage. No benefits, no protection against firing. The supervisors have all the power. Yet we brought the workers together and won the vote for a union at Bee Clean."

In Toronto, minimum wage (currently \$8.25/hour) will do little more than pay for your basement apartment, Da Silva says. "You need a second job for food and clothing, and sometimes a third."

"I don't say that Canada is bad," says Da Silva, a recent immigrant from Brazil. "But the work we do is important, and we work hard. We can get more, but only through the union can we obtain the power" for such gains.

Sub-minimum wage

In fact, some of Da Silva's co-workers in office towers get even less than minimum wage. According to a Justice for Janitors fact sheet, "Many cleaners only get work if they become sub-contractors." Arbitrary firings are frequent. Workers coerced into contractor status often get no vacation pay, no employment insurance, no Canada Pension Plan, no job-accident coverage. The Ontario government views them as self-employed businessmen, not workers. "So we have to pay all these taxes," Da Silva says — the employer's share of social benefit deductions.

The wages of such workers "can amount to as little as \$4 an hour, half the legal minimum in Ontario," reported Rita Daly of the *Toronto Star* on March 10, 2007.

Even worse, some jobless workers pay up to \$12,000 to brokers, in return for promises of getting cleaning work as sub-contractors — and often receive nothing in return. The cleaning contractors who impose such conditions range from fly-by-night outfits to huge multinationals. One cleaning firm, ISS World, has 350,000 employees, and is owned by the banking giant Goldman Sachs.

Yet cleaners' working conditions are ultimately dictated not by the contractors but by the owners and managers of the office towers.

Contract system

Time was when office buildings employed maintenance workers, who had reasonably stable jobs, benefits and pension rights, and often belonged to unions. But that all changed in the 1980s, explains Justice for Janitors staff organizer Ritch Whyman. The building managers laid-off their cleaners and started contracting out the work to cleaning companies.

Needless to say, abuses and illegalities flourish in this cutthroat world. In 2006, the Ontario government received 16,000 complaints regarding unpaid wages. Only 450 of the employers were prosecuted; those who were convicted were let off with an average fine of \$360.

“We have written the Ministry again and again, reporting on these abuses,” Whyman says. “They simply do not respond.”

The beneficiaries of this inhuman system, of course, are the building owners and their tenants, among the country’s richest corporations. They succeed in shaving a bit off their overhead costs. “Obviously the building managers know the score” about unethical labour practices, Whyman says. They are aware of what it takes to drive down building maintenance costs to this extent.

Justice for Janitors

The Toronto Justice for Janitors campaign was launched two years ago by the SEIU, which has won bargaining rights for about 900,000 workers in Canada, the U.S. and Puerto Rico during the last decade. With 2 million members, mostly in health care, public service and building maintenance, the SEIU is one of the very few major unions in the U.S. to have grown in recent years.

In building maintenance, as in many other fields where precarious and contract-based employment has become the norm, the conventional model of union organization — based on organizing a single workplace — is no longer viable. If a union organizes cleaners working in a given office tower, for example, building management can switch contractors when the cleaning contract term is up, getting rid of the workers and the union in one fell swoop.

Justice for Janitors has therefore gone back to an earlier model of union organization: organizing an entire industry.

The SEIU has set out to organize the 13 largest building cleaning firms operating in Toronto, with the goal of achieving a master contract governing all contractors and all workers in this economic sector. So far, Justice for Janitors has organized six companies, and about 2,000 workers are now protected by collective agreements.

Out of the darkness

The heart of the union strategy, Da Silva says, is to “take workers out of the darkness and show the owners that we want the union.” Union organizing leaflets feature many portraits of named unionized workers, as a way to demonstrate that they can be effectively protected and to encourage others to take a public stand.

Union get-togethers are held near the workplace, and there are also industry-wide meetings, where union supporters at different workplaces can exchange experiences. Some rank-and-file

members, like Da Silva, are assigned (“seconded”) to full-time union organizing work, with the SEIU paying their regular salary.

Among the cleaning workforce, 78 per cent are women. Justice for Janitors has worked to open the doors for women to play leadership roles in the union local. Women are a majority among those attending monthly city-wide membership meetings and among those seconded to organizing roles. Most union stewards are women. The union is working to eliminate the generalized pay discrimination against women cleaners.

“We can’t remove the sexist dynamic in society that holds women back,” Whyman says, “but this progress is encouraging.”

The union has also built a system of alliances with other unions and social movements, embracing the Labourers’ union (which also organizes in the cleaning sector), the Hotel Workers’ Rising campaign of UNITE HERE, the labour-based Good Jobs Campaign, community development organizations, immigrant organizations, churches and social movements.

Workers rally in public protests against unfair labour practices. The union brings public pressure to bear on cleaning contractors who refuse to meet union standards. Building owners are challenged to get rid of contractors with substandard labour policies.

“We had big problems with an employer called Hallmark,” Whyman says. “We carried a year-long campaign, during which they lost \$6 million in contracts. Finally they agreed not to oppose unionization and to sign collective agreements. We have extended this to Ottawa, where 350 Hallmark cleaners are now under contract.”

The union’s present focus is on Impact Cleaning Services, which stands accused of many unfair labour practices. Campaign supporters are urged to go to its website, www.Negative-Impact.org, join in union rallies, phone the president of Impact and send letters of support.

So long as the majority of the industry remains unorganized, there are narrow limits to what union agreements can achieve. Major wage gains at any one individual employer would tend to price it out of competitive bidding for cleaning contracts. Thus the initial wage gains achieved by the union at Da Silva’s workplace, while encouraging, do not go much beyond 10 per cent. Pay lags far behind the level in Montreal, where the city regulates the building cleaning industry, or in Toronto schools, where unions have been able to block the contracting out of cleaning services.

The Justice for Janitors campaign is limited in the resources it commands and in its scope. But it forms part of a small but promising network of resistance among the most exploited workers, which could in time transform the labour movement.

Da Silva recognizes the magnitude of the task, but is still encouraged by results. “We keep these gorgeous buildings clean, safe and healthy for property managers and multinational tenants that make billions in profits. We’re not getting our fair share,” he says.

“We need to have a say in this industry. Our wages are now decided by the building owners and our employers; we want a say in this,” Da Silva adds.

“Through the union we can get the employers to give us a living wage, benefits, and respect for many immigrant workers like me. Today cleaners have no power. This is a fight to gain that power.”

John Riddell is a Toronto-based activist and co-editor of Socialist Voice. This article was first published by rabble.ca. Visit the Justice for Janitors website for more information on their campaign.

Socialist Voice #302, January 23, 2009

Saskatchewan: Wall's War on the Working Class

By John Conway

Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall has had it pretty easy since defeating Lorne Calvert and the New Democratic Party in the November 2007 provincial elections. And with Calvert's recent resignation as leader, Wall will enjoy a further period of easy living as the NDP goes through a leadership contest. You can call this a honeymoon period for the new Saskatchewan Party government, or you can admit there are just no fundamental ideological differences between the two major parties on which to base an effective opposition.

The Calvert government, desperate to stave off defeat at the hands of the surging Saskatchewan Party, implemented much of the Saskatchewan Party pro-business economic program before its defeat at the polls last November, which is why former NDP finance minister Harry van Mulligan could state that the Saskatchewan Party's first budget was pretty much a replay of earlier NDP budgets. And that is why, at the end of the spring 2008 legislative session, former premier Lorne Calvert concluded that the Saskatchewan Party's legislative agenda was pretty much what an NDP government might have done, with the exception of the attacks on labour.

In such a situation, when there is bipartisan agreement on broad economic and social policy, debate in the Saskatchewan Legislature is reduced to nit-picking and name calling, with both parties vying for the business lobby's support as the party best able to administer the operation of resource-extraction capitalism in Saskatchewan. Wall has proven a shrewd leader so far, focussing his efforts on a few key initiatives he is determined to drive through while continuing to muzzle the social conservative diehards in his caucus for fear of alienating the province's moderate majority.

Wall's first-term goals consist of crippling the labour movement, expanding the uranium industry beyond mining and milling, and institutionalizing the business lobby's policy clout and credibility through the formation of Enterprise Saskatchewan, a publicly-funded, business-dominated agency to "advance economic development goals, strategies and clear measurable targets for economic performance." The political lynchpin in this agenda is the labour movement — the source, in the past, of the most significant resistance to right-wing governments like Ross Thatcher's Liberals in the 1960s and Grant Devine's Tories in the 1980s. Wall knows the labour movement is the only constituency capable of mobilizing an effective opposition to his plans.

Organized labour, with a membership of around 100,000, or one in four workers, is relatively strong in Saskatchewan, thanks to modestly friendly labour laws put in place by NDP governments over the years. Saskatchewan has the fourth highest rate of unionization among Canada's provinces, far ahead of Alberta and even slightly ahead of B.C. To right-wing ideologues and their business lobby bosses, this is not acceptable.

Wall has embarked on a two-pronged attack on labour — the first prong targeting the large public sector, the second targeting the private sector. Most of the attention of the corporate media has been toward the attack on public sector unions contained in the recently passed Public

Service Essential Services Act. Calvert and the NDP opposed the act, describing it as a fundamental attack on the right to strike that gives overwhelming power to employers to designate which workers are deemed essential. Quite simply, it will mean the end of effective legal strikes in the public sector.

Critics maintain that it will not bring labour peace, but will increase conflict and lead frustrated public sector unions to embark on illegal strikes. With this law in place, management in the public sector can laugh off a union's threat of strike action, knowing full well that any strike can be rendered powerless by the imposition of ludicrously long lists of those workers forbidden from participating because they are considered "essential."

Wall's greatest adversary in his effort to shackle public sector workers is the nurses. In the past, regardless of the party in power, nurses have proven particularly adept at holding effective legal strikes, followed, when necessary, by illegally defying back-to-work laws, all while maintaining broad public support. Wall did not want to test his law first with the nurses, nor with the teachers, since governments can't help but lose public support in fights with these two groups.

Hence, Wall's first move was to neutralize the nurses by offering them a sweetheart four-year contract that included hefty pay increases of 35 per cent over the life of the contract for general duty nurses. The 7,200-member Saskatchewan Union of Nurses voted 78 per cent in favour of the deal. This effectively neutralizes the nurses until after the next election. Similarly, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation is currently engaged in contract talks and Wall is expected to do everything he can to ensure a peaceful settlement.

Wall would prefer to first use this law against the often more politicized and militant government workers or hospital workers, should they dare to go on strike. These groups do not have deep support among the public and have to work hard to rouse public sympathy. This is particularly true for government workers.

The first real test of Wall's law will come shortly, as the three unions representing about 25,000 hospital and health-care workers — Canadian Union of Public Employees, Service Employees International Union, and Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union — enter into negotiations in the coming months. These unions will be seeking settlements similar to that achieved by the nurses at a time when the province's coffers are full.

Wall will plead looming poverty in the context of the economic crisis, and may even demand union-crippling concessions, depending on how confident he feels heading into a showdown. If strike action occurs and the Wall government decides to use the Public Service Essential Services Act to break the strike, the law will be tested on the ground as the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour will have to decide whether to follow through on its promise of active solidarity up to and including a general sympathy strike.

The much more serious attack on organized labour, however, is found in the amendments to the Trade Union Act. The new amendments will affect all organized workers, but most significantly those in the private sector with hostile bosses and those workers currently without union representation that might hope to succeed in an organizing drive. The business lobby is delighted with these amendments, proclaiming they will send a clear message to businesses and investors

looking at Saskatchewan that the climate here has finally become “business-friendly.” “Business-friendly,” of course, is simply a right-wing code word for “union-hostile.”

The amendments to the Trade Union Act will make it more difficult to sign members up to a union. Certification will require a compulsory vote in which a majority of those eligible to vote must actually cast ballots before a certification vote can succeed. (By this standard, most municipal governments, and even some provincial governments, would not be able to take office — many only winning elections in which less than 50 per cent of eligible voters actually voted.) Furthermore, employers will now be free to intervene during the certification process, and during collective bargaining, by communicating “facts or opinions” to employees — opinions, presumably, like “if you sign a union card and vote for the union the company may move to Alberta” or “if you go on strike we may have to close down.” In such situations, the line between an opinion and a threat is blurry indeed.

These amendments will not only make it virtually impossible to organize the unorganized, but will cripple unions during contract negotiations. Finally, these pro-business amendments will lead to a series of de-certification drives as some employers embark on aggressive union-busting campaigns. Curiously, the NDP has been virtually silent on this more serious attack on organized labour.

There is no delicate way to put this. The Wall government has declared war on Saskatchewan’s working class. This looming showdown with the labour movement is the first and foundational step in his broader agenda.

Further down Wall’s wishlist

Premier Brad Wall is determined to expand Saskatchewan’s nuclear industry, now limited to uranium mining and milling. By earlier floating a trial balloon about the possibility of a small nuclear reactor at Elbow, Wall has begun a campaign to soften public resistance to further nuclear-related developments in the province. Wall, of course, pleads wide-eyed innocence, since the paper discussing a nuclear reactor was prepared under the NDP and then deep-sixed — until, oops, the Wall government released it.

For a variety of reasons, it is highly unlikely that Saskatchewan will ever build a nuclear reactor. First, it is too costly (more than \$20 billion for a province of only one million people), and even if privately built, the government would doubtless have to provide loan guarantees. Second, Saskatchewan does not need a nuclear reactor; the only purpose would be to put the province at risk in order to export electricity to the U.S. power grid. Third, even the private sector nuclear industry favours Alberta over Saskatchewan should any reactor be built. Fourth, most reactors have, in the long run, proven uneconomical, with cost overruns, construction delays, long delays in start-up as bugs are worked out, and frequent breakdowns after commissioning. And finally, with the spectres of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl still hanging over the issue, public resistance will galvanize if the project ever becomes more than just speculation.

So what is Wall up to? It’s a classic bait-and-switch manoeuvre: he is softening up the public in order to embark on uranium refining in Saskatchewan, something hotly debated and rejected during the Blakeney years. After drawing out and seeking to isolate the anti-nuclear crowd in a

heated public debate on a nuclear reactor, Wall will pull that option off the table and propose instead that Saskatchewan allow the less dangerous, less costly, less risky and hugely profitable (jobs, jobs, jobs; money, money, money) uranium refining business to set up shop.

Wall also wants to leapfrog the cadre of senior civil servants who give expert advice on public economic policy — advice which might not meet his conservative, free-market ideological standards. When the arms-length, unaccountable advisory group Enterprise Saskatchewan is up and running, it will begin proposing economic policies, priorities and strategies directly to the premier and cabinet, bypassing the senior civil service and the senior economic gurus in the Crown sector. Wall will use the agency as a tool to shift the economic policy consensus, which he officially now shares with the NDP, dramatically to the right. A key feature of this shift will be an attack on the Crown corporations and their central place in the province's economy.

Outright privatization proposals will not be entertained since Wall has pledged not to privatize the Crowns. Recent reports on the major Crowns — telephone, power, natural gas, insurance — have been very positive. They are doing well and making large profits for the public coffers. Nevertheless, Saskatchewan Party ministers have commented on how they want the Crowns to stick to their “core” activities; to avoid aggressive expansion outside those cores, especially outside the province; and not to become overly active in competing with private businesses.

Wall has jumped the gun on this, thus sending a clear signal to Enterprise Saskatchewan, by announcing the privatization of eight “non-core” and/or “underperforming” public investments by four of the Crowns. Of the eight, six have provided profits to the public coffers. He wants it to be very clear that public ownership or public entrepreneurship will not be considered acceptable policy goals for inclusion in the province's future economic strategy.

These themes will be picked up by Enterprise Saskatchewan. The Crowns, we should expect to hear, should narrow their focus to their core activities, and thus perhaps shed themselves of some or all of their “non-core” activities; Crowns should not, as a matter of principle, seek opportunities to compete with private-sector entrepreneurs; Crowns should begin to develop a series of partnerships with the private sector as they develop and expand. And, presto, before your very eyes, the autonomous, publicly accountable Crowns, free to pursue broader public policy objectives, will metamorphose into joint ventures with private capital while slowly divesting themselves of many of their current “non-core” (and very profitable) ventures.

Wall will celebrate this as the final step in making Saskatchewan totally “business-friendly;” no longer will fully publicly owned Crowns compete with private capital, frightening investors away. Instead, Saskatchewan will have big, friendly, joint-venture public/private partnerships where we all work in harmony for the greater good (i.e. private profit from public risk). Goodbye Crowns, hello unfettered capitalism.

The NDP has fumbled the public ownership ball badly over the years, satisfied to rest on the laurels of the old CCF innovators. The NDP has largely stopped defending public ownership and public entrepreneurship as a good general economic strategy, embracing private capitalism for everything but the basic Crowns. The fact is that public ownership in a capitalist economy may be just a case of state capitalism, since such companies behave like all other corporations. But

the bottom line is that the Saskatchewan people own the Crowns and are thereby the sole beneficiaries of the profits earned, and the Crowns can be used as instruments of broader social and economic public policies. For such reasons, full public ownership is in the public interest, even if such public corporations must claw aggressively against rapacious capitalist competitors.

The gathering storm

Wall's apparently "modest" and "restrained" agenda (according to his supporters in the corporate media) is in fact very ambitious indeed. This "modest" agenda includes: smashing and taming organized labour, a significant expansion of the nuclear industry in Saskatchewan after more than three decades of strictly limiting it to mining and milling uranium, and the erosion of Saskatchewan's large and autonomous public sector. In other words, Wall is out to remake Saskatchewan according to his right-wing, pro-business ideals.

Wall knows from past experience that in order to pull this off, organized labour in particular — and the working class in general — must be neutralized and, if possible, removed as an active political player in the province. The beginning of the end of both the Ross Thatcher and Grant Devine regimes was first rooted in active resistance from the working class and its organizations. Wall is determined to avoid a similar fate.

Is the Saskatchewan labour movement up to the heavy task history has again imposed upon it? Is it ready and willing to do what has to be done? That is as yet unclear. Saskatchewan Federation of Labour president Larry Hubich has warned of the possibility of a general strike if the Wall government uses these laws to break strikes and shackle trade unions. The federation has launched a constitutional challenge of the two labour laws in the courts on the grounds that they are Charter violations of the right to free collective bargaining and to organize new unions.

The Saskatchewan Union of Nurses has also launched its own legal challenge of the constitutionality of the essential services law, anticipating future battles with the Wall government. The Federation has also filed a formal complaint about the two laws with the International Trade Union Confederation, which could result in official international criticism of the laws by the International Labour Organization, an agency of the United Nations.

But the real political test of the laws will occur when strike action is taken. If the Federation can organize broad solidarity among its affiliates, up to and including some forms of sympathy job actions, and if the labour movement can win the battle for public support, then it could be the beginning of the end of the Wall regime. If, however, such efforts do not occur, or fail if they do occur, and strikes are successfully smashed by the Wall government and offending unions are financially crippled by huge fines, the business lobby's dream of a tame, cap-in-hand working class in Saskatchewan could yet be realized.

Reproduced, with permission, from Briarpatch magazine, December 2008 John Conway is a University of Regina political sociologist and the author of The West: The History of a Region in Confederation. He is also a regular political columnist appearing in Regina's prairie dog and Saskatoon's Planet S.

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Why Cuba Still Matters

Introduction. *This month, Monthly Review published a special issue on Cuba, marking the 50th anniversary of the island's liberation from the U.S.-sponsored Batista dictatorship. The following is the concluding section of the lead article, "Why Cuba Still Matters." The author, Diana Raby, argues that the Cuban people should be honoured not only for a half-century of resistance to U.S. blockade and subversion, not only for their world-leading educational and health systems, but for its new and original contributions to the world struggle for liberation.*

Monthly Review has been a firm friend of Cuba and a close observer of its challenges and successes for the entire 50 years of the Cuban revolution. To subscribe, go to <http://www.monthlyreview.org>.

The full text of this article is available at <http://monthlyreview.org/090105raby.php>. Subheads have been added by Socialist Voice.

By Diana Raby

To argue the relevance of Cuba in today's world it is clearly not sufficient just to defend the country's socialist system against its critics. In the twenty-first century, does the island have anything to offer which is not just a holdover from the past?

The answer is that there are at least two areas in which Cuba has made vital contributions to the emergence of a new socialist or anti-capitalist alternative. One is in environmental issues: initially as a matter of necessity, but now also as a matter of policy, it has undertaken a fundamental switch toward organic agriculture and the adoption of ecologically sustainable practices throughout the economy.

Urban agriculture

For several years now it has pioneered the development of urban agriculture, with small plots on any available land being turned over to *organopónicos*, projects devoted to the intensive cultivation of a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, mostly by organic methods. As a result of this the city of Havana now produces 60 percent of its fruit and vegetables within city limits, and the scheme is now being adopted in Venezuela and other countries.

The "Energy Revolution" has decentralized power generation so that electricity is less dependent on big power plants and more on small local generators which are more efficient and less vulnerable in emergencies. Incandescent light bulbs have been replaced throughout the country and there is large-scale investment in solar and wind power. Cuban officials now state categorically that both capitalist and traditional socialist models of energy-intensive development are unsustainable.

Cuba's role in Latin American revolution

The second vital contribution to the emergence of a new alternative lies in Cuba's support for Venezuela, Bolivia, and other Latin American countries now engaged in the struggle to create a

new social and economic model. Commentators frequently focus on Venezuela's aid to Cuba in the form of cheap petroleum, but the importance of Cuban assistance to the Bolivarian revolution should not be underestimated.

Without the assistance of thousands of Cubans, Chávez would have found it almost impossible to implement the remarkable Barrio Adentro health mission or the Robinson literacy mission. Similarly, Evo Morales would have been unable to implement such programs in Bolivia, at least in the short run – and given the critical political situation in both countries, the short run was and is crucial.

But also in broader political terms, without Cuba, Chávez (and hence, at one remove, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Fernando Lugo in Paraguay) would have had much greater difficulty in gaining credibility for projects of popular political empowerment implemented through the appropriation and transformation of the state. The political disorientation of the global left was such that only a totally unexpected movement like that of Chávez could offer a way forward; and without Cuba's inspiration and support at crucial moments, Chávez might well have failed.

Without Cuba, then, no Venezuela; and without Venezuela, no Bolivia, no Ecuador, and no Paraguay, and no revival (however imperfect) of Sandinista Nicaragua.

It is not, of course, that nothing would have occurred in these countries; but it is all too likely that without the Venezuelan example and without Cuba's inspiration and practical assistance, the powerful popular movements that exist would have been unable to devise an adequate strategy to attain power and to use it effectively to reverse neoliberal policies. This does not mean that Venezuela or the other countries are simply copying Cuba. They are very clear that they are pursuing independent paths, borrowing from and supporting each other and Cuba, but without making the old mistake of trying to impose a uniform "orthodox" template.

Cuba and 21st century socialism

Furthermore, the Cubans have been explicit in saying that they do not regard their own socialism as a blueprint to be copied. What Cuba provided was a living example, a demonstration that contrary to the conventional wisdom of the "New World Order," the state is not powerless and that it is possible to build and maintain a noncapitalist alternative. What was not possible was to reproduce the Cuban strategy of armed revolution, and this was the great contribution of Chávez and the Venezuelans: to devise a new strategy which was neither purely military nor purely electoral, but a combination of popular mobilization, elections, and military support.

As the new project of "twenty-first century socialism" and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) develops, Cuba also ties in with the cultural and ideological inspiration of the Latin American popular anti-imperialist tradition. As we have seen, the original Cuban ideology derived at least as much from Martí and the *mambíses* as from international socialist theory, and in this respect it gels perfectly with Chávez's "Bolivarianism."

It can be argued that, while the Soviet tie was necessary at the time for the revolution's survival in the Cold War context, it did lead to undesirable distortions in Cuban socialism, and that today

Cuba, freed from the Soviet straitjacket and assisted by its Latin neighbours, is rediscovering its originality.

In this context the current Cuban reforms should not be seen as leading in a capitalist direction (at least not necessarily), but as adapting to the more flexible and dynamic project of “twenty-first century socialism” which will eventually find similar (but not identical) expression in Venezuela, Bolivia, and other countries. It will be based on a recognition that socialism can never be perfect, nor completely stable and secure, in an imperialist world, and that its survival and renewal will always depend on popular support and participation.

The role of the state will still be important but it will allow much greater scope for local and grassroots initiative, and indeed, for what previously might have been condemned as capitalist material incentives. But this is based on a recognition that egalitarianism cannot be imposed by decree, and that the best guarantee against a return to capitalism lies in a vigorous culture of collective participation rather than in bureaucratic controls.

Where the central state is and will remain crucial is in providing a coherent overall direction, minimizing the encroachment of global capital, and ensuring diplomatic, political, and military defense against imperialism.

Of course, over the years Cuba has made mistakes, and not all of them are attributable to Soviet influence. The initial economic strategy of crash industrialization soon proved impractical and was replaced by the reliance on large-scale sugar exports as a source of accumulation for more gradual diversification. Then in 1970 voluntarism led to near-disaster in the failed goal of the ten million ton sugar harvest. The 1968 “Great Revolutionary Offensive” led to the precipitous nationalization of small business, with grave consequences for the availability of consumer goods and services. There were also serious errors in cultural policy which have been extensively criticized.

Popular participation

But what saved Cuban socialism was a degree of popular participation rarely found elsewhere, and the continued responsiveness of the leadership to popular concerns and needs. Despite serious and often justified grievances, the majority of the Cuban people have continued to feel that this is *their* revolution and not just a paternalist project of a remote party/state apparatus, and the result is that today the country continues to exhibit both objective and subjective aspects of an anticapitalist alternative.

The Western media have been eager to interpret recent reforms in agriculture, in wage and incentive scales, and in the availability of consumer electronics as evidence that Cuba is embarking on a capitalist transition. But there is no indication that large-scale private employment of labour or a private capital market with a stock exchange and similar capitalist institutions are being contemplated. The government has reiterated its commitment to free universal education and health care and other social services. Cuba has recently signed important new agreements with several countries, notably Brazil and the European Union, which improve its capacity to resist the U.S. blockade without abandoning its socialist priorities.

Finally, the extraordinary generosity and commitment of thousands of Cuban internationalists providing medical and other services in conditions few others would accept is living testimony to the reality of the country's socialist project.

The veteran British journalist Hugh O'Shaughnessy recently offered a moving account of the Cuban missions in Bolivia. He quoted María de los Ángeles, a Cuban doctor working as Director of the Ophthalmological Hospital in El Alto, Bolivia, at nearly 4,000 metres altitude and in harsh conditions: "I think there is always an element of love involved," she said: "Before I left Cuba for Guatemala and Bolivia, I didn't know what real poverty was like."

While Cuba continues to practice solidarity like this, its relevance to the global anticapitalist movement can scarcely be questioned.

But also, this presence in the ALBA countries is further evidence that Cuba cannot be separated from the inspiring new developments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and elsewhere: Latin America today demonstrates that another world really is possible, and Cuba is central to the creation of that world.

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Related reading: "Cuba's Revolution: 50 Years of Resistance." Speech by Raul Castro Ruz at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution *Socialist Voice*, January 5, 2009