

US and Cuba reopen embassies after 54 years

By Bill Van Auken
21 July 2015

The Obama administration and the Castro government formally opened their respective embassies in Havana and Washington on Monday. The move comes 54 years after US imperialism broke off all ties to Cuba in January 1961 and prepared the abortive invasion of the island nation by CIA-trained mercenaries at the Bay of Pigs three months later.

The formal embassy openings consummated the deal announced by US President Barack Obama and Cuba's President Raul Castro last December 17 after a process of negotiations toward a "normalization" of relations that was initially brokered by the Vatican and Canada. The deal was formalized at the beginning of this month with an exchange of letters between the two presidents. The Obama administration cleared the way for this step with the removal of Cuba from the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, a libelous designation that inverted the real history of CIA-orchestrated terrorism against Cuba.

Monday's embassy reopenings were a study in contrasts. The Cuban government organized an elaborate ceremony addressed by its foreign secretary, Bruno Rodriguez, and attended by some 500 people, including a delegation of state officials and others from Cuba, representatives of the Washington diplomatic corps as well as those of non-governmental groups that had supported closer ties between the US and Cuba.

Also present was a US delegation led by Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson and including Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Benjamin Rhodes and National Security Council Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs Mark Feierstein.

No such celebration was organized at the formal transformation of what had been the US Interests Section in Havana into a US embassy. US officials indicated that Secretary of State John Kerry will visit the island next month.

The divergent responses of the two governments to the restoration of diplomatic relations reflect the different

objectives that they are pursuing. The Castro government and Cuba's ruling strata hope that they can secure their interests by ending the half-century conflict with the US and expanding the capitalist market economy, while maintaining their political monopoly, along the lines of the rule of the Chinese Communist Party.

Washington, on the other hand, wants to return Cuba to the semi-colonial status that prevailed before 1959, while opening up the country to US capitalist exploitation, rather than ceding this potentially profitable market to US competitors in Europe and China. It also is seeking to use the so-called normalization as a means of improving US imperialism's dismal reputation throughout Latin America.

In his speech at the ceremony in Washington Monday, Cuban Foreign Secretary Rodriguez stated that the Cuban government's actions represented a renewal of the rebuffed attempt by Fidel Castro, the leader of the petty-bourgeois nationalist guerrilla movement that ousted US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista, to reach an accommodation with US imperialism. The Eisenhower administration made it clear it was unwilling to accept even the most minimal reforms or even change to the longstanding US treatment of Cuba as a de facto colony, pushing the new Cuban regime to seek Soviet aid.

Rodriguez said that Havana's aim was to achieve a "civilized coexistence" with Washington, adding that the development of such a relationship would contribute to "the stability of the continent." As it has been decades since the Castro government encouraged or aided guerrilla movements in Latin America, this promise of "stability" suggests Havana's willingness to actively assist in containing revolutionary threats to capitalism in the region.

Rodriguez acknowledged that "normalization of relations" represented a "huge challenge," as "There have never been normal relations between US and Cuba" since the latter's formal independence from Spain at the end of the 19th century.

He cited the infamous 1902 Platt Amendment, which

was imposed upon Cuba under conditions of a US military occupation following the Spanish American War, forcing the island's government to accept Washington's "right" to militarily intervene in the country at will and to cede the territory still occupied by the US Naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

Rodriguez insisted that Havana sought a normalization of ties with Washington that would not "prejudice" Cuban independence or sovereignty, while warning against any US attempt to "persist in the attainment of obsolete and unjust goals and only proposing a mere change in the methods to achieve them."

Of course this is precisely the aim of the Obama administration and the way in which the "normalization" is being treated within the whole of the US ruling establishment, after the failure of over half a century of non-recognition and economic blockade to topple the Castro regime.

The White House issued a perfunctory statement Monday on the embassy opening in Havana, saying that under the terms negotiated with Havana, US operatives "will have the ability to engage more broadly across the island." The statement added that "the best way to advance universal values like freedom of speech and assembly is through more engagement with the Cuban people," signaling Washington's intention to continue fostering and bankrolling "dissident" groups in a bid to destabilize the Cuban regime.

Carlos Alzugaray, a longtime senior Cuban diplomat, acknowledged to the *Miami Herald* that, "An American Embassy in Cuba is a problem for us. Remember, it's an asymmetrical relationship." He also noted that the Castro government had accepted the "normalization" under conditions in which the punishing US economic embargo remains in place.

Changes to the US embassy in Havana face significant political hurdles. The Republican leadership of the US Senate has vowed to block the confirmation of any ambassador to Cuba, while a State Department funding bill up for congressional consideration includes a clause blocking the provision of any more funding than was allocated to the US Interests Section.

However, predominant layers within the US ruling class, as well as significant sections of the Republican Party itself, are pushing for the complete lifting of barriers to US economic penetration of the island nation. Separate bipartisan legislation is being submitted to allow US telecommunications and Internet companies to market their services and devices in Cuba. Meanwhile,

Caterpillar Inc., which has its eye on potentially lucrative deals with Cuba's mining and construction sectors, is joining with other major US corporations to press for an end to existing economic bans, fearing that it will lose out to competitors like Sweden's Volvo Group or Japan's Komatsu Ltd.

The move toward full diplomatic relations between Washington and Havana has been accompanied by an aggressive push by European capitalist interests to corner as much as possible of the Cuban market before their American counterparts can gain access.

The past week saw a visit to the island by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who, accompanied by a delegation of German businessmen, signed a series of agreements with the Cuban government and discussed bilateral trade. Steinmeier voiced full support for the so-called economic reforms implemented under Raul Castro.

Similarly, Spain, which is Cuba's third largest trading partner after Venezuela and China, sent a delegation of 75 business representatives headed by Minister for Industry, Energy and Tourism Jose Manuel Soria. The right-wing Spanish official praised Castro's "reforms" for "marking the correct path." They were preceded by an Italian minister and some 150 Italian businessmen pursuing deals. Earlier there were similar delegations from France, Britain and the Netherlands, and, of course, from China.

Another indication of the character of the Castro government's economic "reforms" came with the release of a parliamentary report July 13 announcing the shutdown of 23 Cuban state companies that were cited for reporting economic losses. Fully 56 state firms are to be closed down over roughly the next two years, according to the report.

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