50 years since the murder of Che Guevara

Including a republication of <em>Castroism and the Politics of Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism</em>

By Bill Van Auken
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October 9 marked 50 years since the murder of the Argentine-born guerrilla and co-leader of Cuba’s 1959 revolution, Ernesto Che Guevara, who was captured after the collapse of a disastrous 11-month-long attempt to foment a guerrilla war in Bolivia.

The anniversary has been widely marked by the media as well as in speeches and ceremonies in Cuba, Bolivia and elsewhere. Much of the press coverage serves to deliberately obscure the political significance of Guevara’s life and death, while those marking the anniversary have, for the most part, exploited the occasion as a means of lending a left cover to their reactionary politics and masking their own betrayals.

The <em>New York Times</em> published a lengthy feature article Monday on the anniversary, interviewing witnesses to Che’s capture and subsequent assassination by Bolivian soldiers. Notably absent from the piece was any mention of the presence at Guevara’s execution of the CIA agent Felix Rodriguez, a Bay of Pigs veteran assigned to hunt down the guerrilla leader. Rodriguez went on to participate in the Operation Phoenix assassination campaign in Vietnam and the Iran-Contra affair. This professional killer subsequently claimed that his intention had been to transport the guerrilla leader to Panama for interrogation and, undoubtedly, torture, but that the order to kill him had come down from the Bolivian army command.

This omission amounts to a form of historical revisionism that defies innocent explanation. Rather, the attempt to write the CIA out of what constituted a criminal assassination is in keeping with the close ties between the <em>Times</em> editorial board and the US intelligence apparatus.

The anniversary was marked in various ways in Latin America. Among the most hypocritical and absurd was the observing of a minute of silence by the corrupt politicians of the Mexican House of Deputies, a proposal made by a leading member of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), a political formation deeply implicated in the disappearance and presumed mass murder of the 43 Ayotzinapa teaching students three years ago.

In Bolivia, President Evo Morales marked the anniversary by traveling to the site of Che’s murder and sleeping there in a tent. He used this stunt to launch his campaign for a fourth consecutive term, despite a 2016 popular referendum rejecting a repeal of the Bolivian constitution’s term limits. The move has sparked widespread demonstrations under conditions in which the Morales government, part of Latin America’s so-called “left turn” begun at the end of the 1990s, has come into increasing confrontation with the working class.

In Cuba, the main event marking the anniversary was held in Santa Clara, the site of a mausoleum containing the remains of Guevara, which were transferred from Bolivia to Cuba in 1997. Miguel Díaz-Canel, first vice president of Cuba’s Councils of State and Ministers and the expected successor to the presidency when 86-year-old Raul Castro steps down next year, gave the main speech, sounding the familiar themes of Guevara as a kind of secular saint and inspiration for Cuban youth based on his upholding of “the sanctity of study, work and fulfilling one’s duty.”

He said Che had taught that “imperialism cannot be trusted, even a bit,” adding that recent events had borne out this advice. He was apparently referring to the
recent moves of the Trump administration to roll back
the rapprochement initiated between the Obama
administration and the Castro government, which has
thrown into crisis the plans of Cuba’s ruling elite to
solidify their privileged position by forging closer
relations with US capitalism.

In Venezuela, President Nicolas Maduro, confronting
the country’s deepest economic crisis, a mounting
corruption scandal, growing popular hostility to his
government and threats of intervention from
Washington, delivered a statement on the anniversary
proclaiming, “Today we revolutionaries, the
guevaristas-chavistas of this time, can say that 50 years
ago, a man did not die, but a myth was born.”

Neither Maduro nor any of the others issuing such
tributes have cared to delve too deeply into the precise
content of this “myth,” which has been promoted not
only by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalists in
Latin America, but also by a host of middle class and
pseudo-left groups in Europe and North America, most
notably the Pabloite revisionist tendency that broke
with the Fourth International.

In their heyday, these tendencies openly embraced
the Guevarist conception that guerrilla war waged by
small bands based in the countryside represented a new
road to socialism, eclipsing the revolutionary role of
the working class and the necessity of forging its
conscious vanguard through the building of
independent mass revolutionary parties.

The attempt to implement this retrograde guerrilla
perspective led to a series of catastrophic defeats in
Latin America, separating a layer of revolutionary
youth from the working class and helping to pave the
way to decades of military dictatorships.

While the successor organizations to the Pabloite
groups that promoted guerrillamism in the 1960s and
1970s have long since moved on, entering capitalist
governments and supporting imperialist regime change
operations, some of them still exploit the image of Che
as a kind of phony revolutionary window-dressing for
their reactionary operations. None of them have
attempted a serious reappraisal of Che’s legacy, not to
mention their own reprehensible role.

The following lecture on these questions was
delivered in January 1998, in the aftermath of the 30th
anniversary of Guevara’s death, when the slain
guerrilla leader’s remains were returned to Cuba.

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Che’s revival

Proletarian socialism versus petty-bourgeois
nationalism

The political role of the petty bourgeoisie

The roots of the Cuban Revolution

Castro and Castroism

The myth of guerrillamism

• Popular forces can win a war against the army.
• It is not necessary for all conditions to be present to
make a revolution; the insurrectional foco [term for
guerrilla unit] can create them.
• 3. In the underdeveloped Americas the terrain of the
armed struggle must be primarily the countryside.[3]

The fiasco of Guevarism

Cuba and the Fourth International

Pabloism and the crisis of leadership

Balance sheet of guerrillamism

Cuba today

Summation

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