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Obama's back from Havana; struggle against Cuba blockade continues



By Richard Grassl

For those who have been involved in the Cuba solidarity movement for years, the meeting between Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro two weeks ago undoubtedly stands as a milestone. It's a powerful symbol of the move toward normalization between the two countries.

But with all the pageantry of the trip - from the awkward press conferences to the baseball diplomacy - it might be easy to forget that a lot of the hard and detailed work to end the blockade goes on behind the scenes and in the halls of power back in Washington. And for all the importance of Obama's visit - and don't get me wrong, it's huge - there is still a lot of work to be done.

Since Obama announced the shift in U.S. policy toward Cuba back on December 17, 2014, meetings between the two sides have progressively grown in importance as discussions take on a life of their own. A case in point: immediately after the President announced in February that he would be headed to Havana, a "Cuba Consortium Conference" was convened in D.C.

Senior officials of the Obama administration, academics, and business people conducted a nine-hour session on "the complex framework of

laws" which make up the U.S. blockade.

Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker recalled her trip to Havana last October, stating openly: "We learned that in Cuba - as in many of our other trading partners around the world - it is necessary to work with state-owned enterprises in order to support the local private sector." Such a recognition, is a good start, but not yet far enough.

In his remarks, Rodrigo Malmierca, the Cuban

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Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment, highlighted three key aspects of the blockade policy which Obama himself still has the power to change: permitting the island to use the dollar in international financial transactions, authorizing Cuban exports to the U.S., and allowing American

Congress has a duty to represent the good of all.

companies to invest in other sectors besides telecommunications.

Understanding the meaning of democracy includes the ability to think critically, to use dialectics to expose the contradiction and folly of U.S. policy toward Cuba. Treasury Department specialist Andrea Gacki did just that at the conference. Responding to a question from a Granma International reporter, Gacki was at a total loss when asked to specifically identify the law which prohibits Cuba's use of the dollar in international transactions. Her response: the issue is being investigated.

In this instance, the ability of people to travel and trade between Cuba and the U.S. is a constitutional protection that has been prohibited by the Helms-Burton Act in contravention of international standards regarding the right of a people to their own self-determination. Cuban and U.S. citizens both are harmed due to illegal, criminal legislation in violation of the sovereignty of independent states.

Why continue supporting a policy

overwhelmingly rejected by the U.S. population while the rest of the world watches in amazement?

Obama's visit to Cuba to advance the process of normalization is a recognition of the fact that the world has changed. But that doesn't mean there aren't still potential hurdles along the way as this process moves forward.

It is clear that the momentum needed to end the blockade - the main obstacle to Cuba's development and the normalization of relations - can't come too soon.

There are signs that the wind may be at the backs of the anti-blockade forces. Attitudes among Cuban Americans are shifting in favor of ending the blockade. The U.S. government must recognize these voices - along with the demands of the farm and agriculture community to trade with their Cuban counterparts.

Congress has a duty to represent the good of all. With rapprochement moving forward, what are we waiting for?



Richard Grassl contributes to Peoplesworld.org

Progressive budget for Illinois would make the super-rich pay

By Bill Knight

Two documents on budget priorities and governing presented in Springfield, Ill., and Washington, D.C., in recent weeks stress helping everyday people instead of the rich and powerful.

The April 1 wave of strikes and protests in Chicago show there is massive support for solving the IL budget crisis without resorting to Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner's "slash and burn" cuts.

To bring IL in line with other Midwest states, the People's Agenda calls for generating new revenue from those most able to afford it. Its package would close corporate loopholes and pass a graduated income tax, a millionaires tax, and a financial transactions tax.

Together, these proposals would generate billions of dollars for state operations, such as providing universal pre-K child-care assistance, reducing violence, and ending homelessness.

The People's Agenda shows current funding needs would support \$323 million in additional activity in other parts of Illinois' economy.

The People's Agenda reform package would invest in communities and create jobs: adequate and equitable funding structure for education, provide for real needs in education and human services, modernize the state tax structure, "end protections and preferential treatment of corporations and Wall Street over working families" and "end predatory financial deals" by reforming bank and financial industry regulation.

The Democratic-run state legislature may consider the People's Agenda, even if Republican Gov. Rauner ignores it. But the agenda's national counterpart, from the Congressional Progressive Caucus, is sure to be voted down in the GOP-run U.S. House, if those solons ever get around to voting on a budget. Their own right wing is rebelling against too much spending on human services.

"The budget is designed to be a fiscally responsible, economically sound, and common-sense blueprint for how progressive policies can spur economic growth," said Isaiah Poole of the Campaign for America's Future.

These proposals would generate billions of dollars for state operations.

Teachers led wave of strikes and job actions in Chicago



By John Wojcik

April 1 is likely to go down in the history books here as labor unions and community organizations representing people from all walks of life staged strikes and job actions from one end of the city to the other.

The unprecedented “day of action” involved dozens of unions, community groups and their allies uniting to reject the assault on budgets that the Chicago Teachers Union and others have said leaves this city “broke on purpose.”

The teachers got the ball rolling when their union’s House of Delegates voted earlier this month to authorize an unfair labor practice strike to bring attention to the need to stabilize the school system and protect teachers and students in the face of attacks on the education budget by Illinois Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner.

The school district has, for more than a year, stalled contract negotiations with the CTU, and has threatened and mandated furlough days, cuts and layoffs. The solution, the teachers say, is not starving the schools out of existence but the development of new revenue sources. Those revenues should come from progressive tax reform that would result in the wealthy paying their fair share in state taxes. That approach will generate \$6 billion in new funds.

The unprecedented part of the strike was that

numerous other community organizations and as many as ten other unions had joined the teachers on the picket lines and staged their own parallel job actions. They all see themselves as victims of reckless budget cutting and see the need for forming a permanent coalition to represent Chicago’s people in a battle against the banks and financial institutions.

Chicago Public Schools CEO Forrest Claypool said the strike was “illegal.”

“CPS is on the verge of collapse,” countered the CTU in a statement. “Instead of threatening educators who are engaging in a historic day of protest to fight to save our schools, Mr. Claypool should join us on this courageous day of action.” “We shut down the schools for a day so we can keep them open in the days to come.”

The actions were not the first time many of these groups have gotten together in Chicago and not the first time Chicagoans have united to do battle with the “1%.” Last year many of them got involved in the elections and forced Mayor Rahm Emanuel into a runoff. In December, they joined together to protest the mayor’s role in covering up the killing by a Chicago police officer of Laquan McDonald. Some of those same groups came together again in the primary elections to oust the States Attorney who had helped engineer the cover-up.

We shut down the schools for a day so we can keep them open in the days to come.

Bernie Sanders is showing the way to stop Trump

By Rick Nagin

It has become increasingly possible that we are witnessing the death throes of the Republican Party as we have known it. The party is hopelessly splintered and there seems no way for it to unite behind a consensus candidate capable of winning in November.

The GOP has no one to blame for this predicament but itself. For decades, since the days of Barry Goldwater, the party has nurtured and cultivated a racist, xenophobic, ultra-nationalist base in order to get candidates elected and benefit its billionaire funders.

These funders are horrified by the fact that the party has been hijacked by Donald Trump. Trump's rise has also raised serious concerns about the danger of fascism. While this cannot be discounted entirely the Trump phenomena seems more in line with Karl Marx's wry comment that "history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce."

Fortunately, we have an important means at our disposal in the campaign of Bernie Sanders, who is moving and, to a growing degree uniting, the entire electorate in a progressive direction.

Sanders is raising consciousness of the real challenges we face, thereby isolating the GOP candidates, all of whom support the right-wing program of war, austerity, curtailment of democratic rights and destruction of democratic institutions like trade unions and public education.

He is exposing the rigged nature of our economic and political system and calling for taxing the billionaires to fund social needs.

Estudios revelan la importancia del voto Latino

Emile Schepers

El primero de Noviembre en esta carrera presidencial, cualquiera de los dos candidatos demócratas que sobreviva tendrá que enfrentar un republicano supremamente peligroso. Hemos estado poniendo atención a la conducta injuriosa de Donald Trump, pero las posiciones de Ted Cruz son igualmente pésimas.

Mucha más gente se está dando cuenta que la prioridad para Noviembre tiene que ser no meramente detener a Trump sino detener al candidato republicano, cualquiera que éste sea. Para efectuar esto, se va a necesitar una movilización sin precedentes de la base, ahora más que nunca ya que los esquemas para suprimir el voto han sido activados por los dirigentes del GOP (Republicanos) a través de las legislaturas controladas por el estado. Un nuevo estudio sobre el reciente comportamiento de los votantes latinos muestra claramente qué es lo que está sobre el tapete y qué trabajo se debe hacer.

Estas primarias han puesto al descubierto dos señales peligrosas. La primera, la movilización de votantes a favor de Bernie Sanders y Hillary Clinton, es menor que la de Trump y la de los otros republicanos. La segunda, diferentes sectores se han movilizado en apoyo de cada uno de los candidatos finalistas del campo demócrata: la juventud en apoyo de Sanders, y las minorías de más edad y las mujeres en apoyo de Clinton.

Para impedir que los Republicanos tomen la Casa Blanca y no vuelvan a tener mayoría en el Senado y ni en la Cámara de Representantes, los simpatizantes de ambos candidatos demócratas, Sanders y Clinton, tienen que ser movilizados al más alto nivel posible de entusiasmo a favor del candidato demócrata finalista. De manera que hay mucho trabajo por hacer.

El posible electorado que tengamos en Noviembre será de alrededor de 226 millones de votos, un incremento del cinco por ciento respecto de la última elección presidencial en el 2012. Se va a presentar un cambio fuerte en la composición étnica del electorado, con un aumento del 6% del electorado Afroamericano, un aumento del 17% en el electorado Latino, un aumento del 16% en el electorado Asia americano, y sólo un 2% de aumento en el electorado blanco no Latino.

Este incremento importante de votantes Latinos se debe a que los ciudadanos Latinoamericanos van llegando a los 18 años de edad por nacimiento, otra parte por naturalización o porque van llegando en grandes números gente de Puerto Rico debido a los problemas económicos que tienen en esa Isla. Por una ley de 1917, todos los Puertorriqueños son ciudadanos de Estados Unidos y pueden votar en elecciones generales si ellos viven en los Estados Unidos continental o en Hawái.