

Healing the sick, sharing the oil wealth

Revolutionary Cuba and Venezuela show a better, socialist world is possible!



The story begins on April 13, 2002. A people power revolution restores Venezuela's leftist president, Hugo Chavez, to the presidency after a US-backed military coup. Breaking ranks with the generals, junior officers and soldiers unite with hundreds of thousands of Venezuela's poor, who stream down from the shanty-towns of the capital, Caracas, and surround the presidential palace in a successful revolution.

It's December 2002. In a desperate bid to overthrow Chavez's revolutionary government, Venezuela's corporate rich lock out oil workers and paralyse the economy. Venezuela, with the world's largest oil reserves, is dependent on oil exports. Having purged the armed forces of the pro-capitalist officers who'd conspired against him, Chavez sends in the army to help workers defeat the bosses' strike and restore production.



Left: Hugo Chavez returns to the presidential palace, April 13, 2002. Above: Cuban doctors perform eye surgeries. Top right: Mission Miracle, "A solidarity vision of the world".

Having wrest control of the country's vast oil wealth from the transnational oil companies and Venezuela's corporate elite, Chavez's revolutionary government begins to use this wealth to fund free health care and education, subsidised food, housing and other social programs to alleviate the poverty of the three-quarters of the population who lived in poverty. But there's a problem. Venezuela's middle-class professionals mostly refuse to work for the poor, and there aren't enough of them to do the job.

So Cuba's Fidel Castro offers to send tens of thousands of Cuban doctors, nurses, teachers and sports trainers

willing to serve the poor, having been educated in a spirit of solidarity rather than selfishness, thanks to Cuba's humane socialist revolution. Cuba also opens its universities to thousands of Venezuelan students. In return, Venezuela sends Cuba cheap oil. Out of this collaboration Cuba and Venezuela launch ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, a socialist alternative to the neoliberal "free trade" agreements that benefit US corporations at the expense of workers and the planet. ALBA, with nine member states, is founded on the principles of solidarity, mutually beneficial collaboration and respect for national sovereignty.

One ALBA project is Mission Miracle. Funded by Venezuela, people with curable eye conditions who cannot afford medical care in their own countries are flown together with a relative, free of charge, to Cuba to have their sight restored. Clinics are being set up throughout Latin America so that the operations can be done locally. This ambitious program aims to wipe out curable blindness in the entire Western hemisphere. The offer extends to US citizens, but the US government rejects such humanitarian aid because it would undermine the US corporate elite's efforts to demonise Cuba and Venezuela as "dictatorships".

As Fidel Castro says, "Our country is not just Cuba, it is also humanity". Socialist Cuba has sent more doctors to serve in other Third World countries than the UN World Health Organisation. In most cases this aid is paid for by Cuba — a small Third World country subject to US trade sanctions. Cuba is training around 800 East Timorese medical students free of charge in Cuba, while Cuban doctors are the backbone of East Timor's health system. Australia's contribution? Eight scholarships. Cuba shares what it has rather than what it has left over. That's the spirit of solidarity. Imagine if Australia, with its far greater resources, had a foreign policy like socialist Cuba's! ALBA, centred on Cuba and Venezuela, is a glimpse of a radically different, and better, socialist world.

Why a Cuba-Venezuela Solidarity Club?



By Marce Cameron

Hi, I'm Marce Cameron. I'm a 3rd year Arts student and the President of the Sydney Uni Cuba-Venezuela Solidarity Club.

If you're new to university, you may soon be wondering if there's more to uni life than lectures, assignments and drinking beer, important as these activities are, particularly the latter.

Where's the passion and sense of common purpose that previous generations of uni students enjoyed? Where are the protest marches? Are we all just here to purchase a degree and become compliant cogs in the capitalist machine?

I hope not, because if this country and the whole planet needs anything urgently, it's a youth rebellion. A contagious spread of that spirit we saw in Egypt, where the young generation said, "We've had enough. This system offers us no future. We have to fight for a better one". Three weeks later, a people's revolution forced the hated dictator to leave office.

Half a century ago in 1959, another people toppled another US-backed dictatorship. In little Cuba, a Caribbean island just 150km from the US coastline. Fidel Castro, who led the revolution, was just 32 years old; Raul Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara — who became a symbol of the global youth rebellion of the late 1960s — were in their late 20s.

Today, the world needs changing more than ever — soon, while there's still a half



Participants in the July 2010 Australian Youth-Student Revolutionary Tour of Cuba and Venezuela, initiated by the Sydney University Cuba-Venezuela Solidarity Club. Second from right is Liudmila Alamo, secretary of Cuba's Union of Young Communists.

decent planet capable of sustaining civilisation and the fragile ecology we share this cosmic oasis with. Scientists are discovering Earth-like planets around other star systems. But they are unimaginably far away. This "pale blue dot" is the only home we've got.

A truly frightening scenario is unfolding: climate change is already wreaking havoc, yet far worse is to come if carbon emissions are not cut drastically, starting yesterday. The world spends \$1.5 trillion a year on warfare yet nearly half a billion people suffer chronic hunger. Poverty still casts a dismal shadow. The instability of global capitalism is revealed in the global economic crisis, which Australia has largely escaped — for now.

Who would be foolish enough to say that big, radical social changes are not brewing

in this utterly irrational, unsustainable system? We're led to believe that capitalism is the pinnacle of human civilisation and that there is no viable and attractive alternative. The Cuban and Venezuelan socialist revolutions are living proof that there is another world worth fighting for. They show us a glimpse of that other, possible world.

Events in Egypt remind us that people power can still change the world. In Cuba and Venezuela the revolution has gone much further: it has taken power. Over there, democracy is not about voting for parties that run the country for the corporate rich while we, the vast majority, have no real say over the big decisions that affect our lives.

Cuba's and Venezuela's revolutionary socialist democracies are the closest thing on Earth to government of the people, by the people and for the people. They are far from

the institutionalised disempowerment that is capitalism. Millions of ordinary people are participants, not just atomised voters, in the gigantic task of building a new society — a socialist civilisation in which human happiness and ecological sustainability, rather than corporate profits, are the goal.

We have a choice. We can succumb to feelings of powerlessness and resignation. Or, we can take seriously what Hugo Chavez says: "The only way to save the world is socialism". Let's help spread this message, which means spreading awareness of the real and inspiring revolutionary changes taking place in Cuba and Venezuela. It's not just about two Third World countries over there on the other side of the world. It's about how the example of these two revolutions can inspire people here to get together to change our own society for the better. Or even, dare I suggest it, make our own revolution. The way things are going we're going to need one soon. Perhaps a revolution is already long overdue.

The Cuban and Venezuelan revolutions are surrounded by hostile global capitalism. This is why they need our support, our solidarity. To endure, they must spread: the revolutionary tide in Latin America must surge across the planet. These revolutions are anything but dull, grim, regimented. They are celebrations of the human spirit. They embody hope for our species in these times of planetary crisis: ecological, economic, ethical. Being an active participant in a vast movement to build a new society and a new world free of exploitation and oppression brings out the best in people, the noble and generous side of our humanity. This is the beautiful, subversive truth. Need I say more?