

### The power of Fidel's counter-offensive



In Cuba in the summer of 1994, Cuba's economic panorama was dire, following the disappearance of trade with the Soviet Union, which eliminated the source of more than 70% of the country's foreign currency income: power outages lasted more than 12 hours, a dwindling food supply turned a phrase from a popular soap opera, "Hey girl, say hello to your boyfriend," into a synonym for rice and beans, the most frequently available dish, along with other Creole inventions such as soy meat and goose paste, while access to the few cafes that sold hamburgers was organized by neighborhood Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, with priority given pregnant women and the elderly. Public transportation practically disappeared, to be replaced by the massive use of bicycles, despite caloric intake that was decreasing day by day. Solitary cans of clams in shop windows were the last evidence of a state market in Cuban pesos, which had once satisfactorily complemented food made available to all via the basic supply booklet.

As of July 26, 1993, the dollar had been decriminalized, and the minority with access to USD was a little better off, although the power cuts had the same impact on everyone. The workers' parliaments, as Fidel named them with full class-based intentionality, had approved a series of measures that in the end, would devalue the Cuban peso, which at that time was trading at 150 to the dollar, and would make it possible to begin the recovery. But at the time, despair, irritation and discontent was reaching critical mass for what Miami had been awaiting for decades, and a journalist, who still has the gall to continue publishing articles in media such as El Nuevo Herald, thought he would make a name for

himself by writing a book entitled The Last Hour of Fidel Castro.

For several weeks the hijackings of boats encouraged by radio broadcasts from the United States had created a tense situation in neighborhoods near the port of Havana. On the morning of August 5, 1994, at the provincial headquarters of the Young Communists League (UJC), we were passionately discussing whether or not we should move from denunciation to mobilization, when reality imposed its demands and we decided to go see the National Committee of our organization, at its office located right where the Avenida del Puerto begins.

The first shock came when I saw a woman shouting at someone who passed in front of us on San Lazaro Street, heading for Old Havana, in the sidecar of a motorcycle: "Take off that T-shirt, they're going to kill you."

She apparently thought that, in those circumstances, the revolutionary words on the man's shirt could make the difference between life and death, and I, although wearing a muted striped pullover, had often shouted the same phrase, looked at her for a moment, not without fear, thinking that the logo displayed on the vehicle in which we were traveling could mean the same fate as the one predicted by the terrified passerby for the motorcyclist, who had preceded us through the previously quiet streets of downtown Havana.

Some garbage bins, I suppose placed by those who started the riot, were trying to cut off traffic, but we reached our destination. In the vicinity of the UJC National Committee, at Misiones, Prado and Avenida del Puerto, off Maximo Gomez Park, a crowd of people had formed, who obviously, based on what they shouted, were not on our side. Others, in the role of curious observers, watched silently, and a lone policeman was shooting into the air, while protecting his patrol car, parked next to the Castillo de La Punta.

Those of us gathering there - cadres and workers from different branches of the UJC, including myself - began to move around shouting revolutionary slogans, the most repeated of which was "Viva Fidel!" Still in the minority, we saw how we were gaining ground, some watched in silence and others retreated. Rocks rained down around us, but no one confronted us directly, and as we reached the corner of Prado and Malecón, we saw the arrival of trucks from the Blas Roca Contingent. (We learned later that one of its members lost an eye that day, when he was hit by an object thrown from a nearby building.)

Going up Prado, the situation was confusing. Thousands of people had filled the street, when comments began to be heard about Fidel coming that way. It took only a few seconds before, indeed, three olive green jeeps, covered with cloth and absolutely vulnerable to any violence, arrived in the middle of the turmoil, and the Comandante climbed out of the second. As if by magic, the rocks disappeared and an enormous roar emerged from our throats, now even more certain of victory: "Fidel, Fidel!"

In the midst of that out-of-control melee, anyone could have come within a meter of him, to hurt him and trigger the hatred incited by lies and propaganda, but there he was. Serene, speaking slowly and in a low voice, asking about the situation in nearby areas, saying that it would be preferable for us to suffer the dead, surely already thinking about the counterattack he would launch against the empire, to once again turn a setback into a victory. It was there that he began the systematic offensive against U.S. policy toward Cuba, which would continue in several televised appearances and put Bill Clinton's administration on the defensive, forcing him to sign an immigration agreement with Cuba on short order.

Barely a week later, on August 13, Fidel's birthday, the UJC organized a concert at the same corner of Prado and Malecón, in which several of the participating musicians ended their performances with the same "Viva Fidel!" that resounded days earlier during those tremendous hours.

On the first anniversary of these events, speaking at the same site, the Comandante would close a demonstration that, as part of the International Solidarity Youth Festival, entitled Cuba Vive, had

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marched along the Havana waterfront from G Street to La Punta. He called for the resumption of World Youth and Student Festivals, to advance the struggle for peace and anti-imperialist solidarity. The young participants, like those who participated in Cuba Vive, would stay in the homes of Havana residents, and would share with them a week of political and social activities. Fidel's counter-offensive continued to advance and, as usual, was not limited to resisting imperialism or defeating it within Cuba. The battlefield was the world, and there he would be, as always, disputing U.S. hegemony.

This past July 11, I remembered that August 5, when, on the corner of Galiano and Neptuno, I saw a poster of Fidel raised by someone in the group of us defending the Revolution there, led by decorated Hero of the Republic and national coordinator of the CDRs, Gerardo Hernandez. The cheers and the name shouted 27 years earlier, on the corner of Prado and Malecón, emerged anew last July 11, with the same power. I am not lying when I say that I saw a group - that had just failed in their attempt to take the Capitol - back away, when confronted with the image of the Comandante surrounded by Cuban flags, and think better of attempting to advance along Neptuno Street.

And the fact is that Fidel's counter-offensive is still alive and accompanies us in today's battles. I remembered it again when, at the Tokyo Olympics, boxer Julio César La Cruz shouted the same exact words worn by the unknown comrade who was warned: "They're going to kill you."

Patria o Muerte! Venceremos! (Homeland or Death! We will win!)

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