

Interview with Movimiento Libertario Cubano (Cuban Libertarian Movement)

A Las Barricadas

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We're interviewing the Cuban Libertarian Movement (Movimiento Libertario Cubano – MLC), an organization made up of anarchists in exile in different parts of the world. In these days of apparent change, of transition, as the European and North American media would have it, it's of interest to know first hand about what's happening inside the island. The demise of Fidel Castro has opened up all sorts of speculation about the future of the communist regime due to the first measures the new chief, Raul Castro, has taken. Here's the interview:

ALB: Hello friends. Let's begin the interview with some notes on history for our readers. Could you briefly explain the history of the anarchist movement in Cuba?

MLC: Hello! Whoever wants to learn the history of our movement must begin with the work of our comrade Frank Fernandez, Cuban Anarchism, published in various languages. In general, the story is very similar to that of the anarchist movement in the rest of Latin America with the exception of late independence in Cuba, with many of our people involved in the independence struggle. Many of the first Cuban unions had anarchists militants in their midst and such influence continues in several production sectors until the 50s, in open confrontation with the Batista dictatorship. Our participation in the struggles of the day came precisely from these syndicates, from the Cuban Libertarian Association (Asociación Libertaria Cubana) and to a lesser extent through comrades affiliated with the 26 of July Movement (Movimiento 26 de Julio). It is noteworthy that during the 50's the Cuban anarchist movement was one of the most active among its peers in Latin America and took active part in different encounters such as the Anarchist Conference that took place in Montevideo in April 1957, which explicitly supported the struggle by the Cuban people against the Batista dictatorship.

ALB: Something that people in Europe and elsewhere don't know: What was the role of the Cuban anarchists in the Cuban revolution?

MLC: As we have mentioned, we anarchists rose to the task of the anti-dictator struggle to the extent of our capabilities and from our own revolutionary point of view. Indeed, we joined the general jubilation after the defeat of the Batista forces and the dissolution of its army. However, from the beginning, we also maintained an early attitude of mistrust towards the cult of personality and the leadership, nationalist and militarist tendencies incarnated in Fidel Castro and his inner circle. This mistrust was soon justified and reinforced: for example, the direct inter-

vention by Fidel Castro manipulating the 10th Congress of the Confederation of Cuban Workers (X Congreso de la Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba) for the benefit of his group, violating the principles of the worker movement's autonomy. From then on, Cuban anarchists became more radical in their suspicions and adopted a clear stand against the incipient centralization of political power. All this is recorded in a communiqué in which we openly expressed our fears of the attempts to amass control by the Catholic Church as well as by the Communist Party, whose most notorious cadres enjoyed political positions and influence during the Batista dictatorship. We're aware that not everybody in the international anarchist movement shared our critical attitude and more than a few remained optimistic for many years in a process that continued monopolizing a revolution that was by then devoid of any revolutionary spirit.

Today, and for a long time now, we have believed that the positions of those Cuban anarchists of 50 years ago were proved to be completely on target. In short, it was nothing more than the classic position from the 1st International that revolutions are not promoted, encouraged or radicalized by "revolutionary" governments; that within such governments you find the bureaucratic and authoritarian germ that ends up suffocating and annihilating the revolution and imposing itself as the new dominant class in the new state.

ALB: Could you talk about the exile? Was there understanding, support, or on the contrary alienation?

MLC: We can't talk in the past tense yet. There are still many of us Cuban anarchists in exile in many parts of the planet. Our exile is as hard as any other exile in terms of separation and alienation with the aggravation that the first comrades who got out of Cuba didn't have any other choice but to establish themselves in such a hostile milieu as the United States; something not habitually understood but such has been the inexorable destiny to be followed, at least in principle, by Cuban refugees of all times. Most painful was to come face to face with the lack of understanding and alienation we got from certain anarchist groups of Europe and Latin America that would have liked to have seen us participated in [the new Castro regime], that was initially uncritically favored. Not all anarchist groups, of course, reacted thusly and we also received countless displays of solidarity that grew with the years as the Cuban political regime unveiled its true face. Today, those debates from the 60s have been totally overcome and there isn't one sane anarchist that still believes in a libertarian evolution coming from a political regime based on absolute control of its subjects and the super-exploitation of the workers; without autonomous organizations independent of the state acting in the struggle against such "super-exploitation" by the state and capital; remember that there are a multitude of capitalist enterprises based in the Spain, Canada, Mexico, Japan, France, Italy, etc.

ALB: Let's talk about the present; Fidel has retired, leaving in his place his brother. What has changed in Cuba?

MLC: In our last public declaration – Something smells different in Cuba, May 2008 – we tried to clarify that "the changes" happening in Cuba are merely cosmetic and only attempt to generate a "liberalizing" image that doesn't change the basic activities of the regime and the institutional power structure: State capitalism, privileges for the higher echelons of the state bureaucracy and particularly for the armed forces, monopolization by the only party of all the mechanisms of self-expression and decision-making, absolute control over the population, etc.

Nevertheless, what is changing is the general attitude of the people: today you can see that the people are losing their fear of repression and have begun to conquer spaces; the hardships of everyday life can no longer remain hidden and everybody knows it; demonstrations are starting

to be organised to a greater or lesser degree, etc. All this gives us ideas as to what do to next: our expectations lay on them and we harbor no illusions about a regime that is only trying to win more time.

ALB: In Europe there are reports Cubans queuing in order to buy cell phones or to get internet (amongst other things), are they heading towards a spiral of consumerism?

MLC: No, consumerism is not possible in Cuba given that the main worry is to solve the most elemental and immediate things: food, housing, transportation etc. Even more: worker's salaries do not even cover these needs and they must rely on the rationing book with all its scarcities. What we have in Cuba is a surplus of foreign currency in the possession of those who get remittances from their families abroad: this surplus allows for such "luxuries" as computers and cell phones, the purchase of which has only recently been permitted. The regime's economic debacle is of such proportions that at this moment it is quite possible that the remittances of foreign currency surpass the sum total of all of the country's salaries, without exaggeration. This also explains the fact that that approximately 20% of the population of Havana has no interest in getting a job. Why would somebody who receives some economic help from abroad - always more than the US\$20 monthly mean salary - want to work? The regime has no answers to this type of thing and continues in vain to appeal for personal sacrifices and labor discipline in exchange for nothing, while the ruling class have access to the best goods and services available. Paradoxically, there is much unemployment among the historically dispossessed social classes that survive against the current, doing whatever it takes: street peddling, prostitution and expropriation. This - together with a strong institutionalised and cultural racism - explains why Cuban jails are full of young Afro-Cubans.

ALB: Is there hope of bigger change among the people? Are any opposition political groups mobilizing?

MLC: We think that people have lost all hope and, faced with the total prohibition of any alternative form of social and political action, they continue to search for ways to emigrate, seeing that as the only means with which to escape a situation of open anguish. The "visible" opposition, meanwhile, is nothing but a pot pourri without a coherent project, without anything in common but a primitive and visceral opposition to Castro. On the other hand, it is necessary to distinguish the ideological-political profiles of that opposition. It is well known that within this opposition there are sectors ranging from those strongly linked to Yankee diplomacy to those who support a generally self-managed outcome. Obviously, between these two factions there can be no alliance possible. On this point, we anarchists have no choice but to put our hopes in the strengthening of the second option, that it may gain larger spaces among the people itself.

ALB: How do you see Hugo Chavez's influence in the island? He broke the blockade years ago by investing millions in Cuba. Have those investments translated into political influence?

MLC: First we must make clear that the so-called "blockade" is nothing like a commercial closing down of Cuba but a mix of positions adopted by the United States under the name of "embargo" reinforced during republican administrations -with legislation like Helms-Burton and Torricelli's - that stupidly handicap commercial exchanges but do not stop them: lately the United States has had commerce with Cuba to the tune of US\$500 million per year. Cuba's great problem in this area is its almost non-existent ability to pay, which has made it a universal debtor, even with Latin American countries, exporting doctors, teachers, sports coaches and security advisors. This is the type of relationship Cuba has formed with Chavez's Venezuela. It is precisely this export of doctors and teachers that explains the undeniable decay in health and education.

And also the military advisors that, no doubt, are the source of proposals to start up a unique intelligence and counter-intelligence “agency” that would control and coordinate all repressive enterprises, with a network of paid informants and volunteers throughout the country to watch and control all civic activities, in the image of the feared Cuban G2, that is, Castro’s state security. The Venezuelan people have nicknamed this bad imitation “Sapeo Law” - a reference to informants – and even Chavez was recently forced to abolish it. Returning to the question we also have to point out that Cuba has generated a strong dependency on Venezuela, particularly with all things related to obtaining oil. But that dependency has also extended to China’s financing, Cuba’s other large international backer. In terms of political influence we think the Cuban rulers manage it in terms of convenience and at this moment their possibilities of adaptation lean more towards a “Chinese model” than a “Venezuelan model”. However, it is obvious that Cuba will have to follow - kicking and screaming - Chavez’s initiatives in a Latin American context.

ALB: What about the influence of leftist populist ideas from Latin America?

MLC: The surge of populist ideas certainly gives the Cuban political regime some breathing space, but also alienates it from the most lucid and radical revolutionary and autonomous sectors since these harbor no illusions with respect to governments such as those of Chavez, Morales, Correa or Ortega and certainly Cuban diplomacy will be set against popular mobilizations in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador or Nicaragua. On the other hand, one needs to understand the current populist moves in Latin America as only attempts to develop a regional capitalism. It is a fragile cycle still subject to multiple oscillations that doesn’t afford the Cuban government any guarantees long term. This is one of the reasons why we believe that this government is running against the clock and playing for time. Meanwhile, the populist governments act as an ideological-political rearguard but the most pressing problem for the Cuban government isn’t that but the fact that it can’t even provide decent food for the people and it has to solve this problem before such a regional Latin American capitalist block is formed with a minimum of solvency.

ALB: For several years now news from the MLC appear in the international libertarian press. What is your relationship with other anarchists throughout the world?

MLC: The MLC aspires to better relations with the international anarchist movement. It’s now quite a while since we overcame diverse resistance from various angles and we have strengthened many of our alliances. Many groups keep solidarity with Cuban anarchists as a main priority; groups such as Group of Support to Independent Libertarians and Syndicalists in Cuba (GALSIC) and Venezuela’s El Libertario. Frank Fernandez’s historical work about our movement has been published in the Spain by the Anselmo Lorenzo Foundation (Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo), in Italy by Zero in Conduct (Zero in Condotta), in the United States by See Sharp Press and so on. Also, we have worked to make clear our solidarity with anarchist groups everywhere and from the most contemporary currents. This has been possible thanks to the MLC’s configuration which doesn’t exactly follow the pattern of a proper organization but rather has been developing as a coordinating network for Cuban anarchists wherever they may be, and this covers a wide gamut of positions, from anarcho-syndicalism, *especifismo*, neo-platformism, primitivism, insurrectionalism, eco-anarchism and even anarcho-punk; no matter how contradictory or incompatible they might be, since the axis or principal motif of this coordination is the solidarity with anarchist comrades, autonomous and independent syndicalists and counter-cultural collectives with the clear objective of fostering a widespread anti-authoritarian movement that will allow the continuity of anarchist ideals so brusquely pruned –but not severed – by the bourgeois dictatorship of the Castro brothers.

There are probably comrades who still have certain reservations as there are some who still perceive the Cuban state and its governing elite as a revolutionary socialist force. But these cases today are the exception and tend to become merely anecdotal as time goes by. One way or other, the MLC is an integral part of the anarchist international movement at the level of any other and soon nobody will doubt it.

ALB: What do you expect will happen in the island in a few years?

MLC: We have spoken about it in previous interviews. Basically we trust in people's capacity for autonomous organization and there we put our expectations. It's not a matter of waiting for the ripe fruit to fall but rather to join, within our possibilities, those formative processes of revolutionary anti-authoritarian and self-managed currents inside Cuba. We believe the situation has already produced more than enough reasons for this to happen but we also know that the political regime and the elite in power have thus far been able to contain such manifestations, even in their minimal expression. We are not ignorant of the difficulties faced by militant work in that direction and we also know too well the efficiency demonstrated by the state's security organisms – the only efficient aspect of the regime – but we will not stop our efforts because that is our only reason for being.

ALB: Lastly, what is the MLC? What kind of people makes it up?

MLC: We have already commented on this. The MLC is a network of Cuban anarchists. As anarchists we are not different from other anarchists who face the dominant relationships and the webs of power in which they exist except for the fact – certainly unique to us – that we face a hierarchical society and a ruling class that still finds justification in the name of “revolution” and “socialism”. The MLC is made up of people who live off their work and who in our everyday lives conduct ourselves by the incorruptible desire to build relationships among free and equal men and women in solidarity. From a generational point of view, the nucleus that tries to maintain alive the anarchist ethos doesn't exist anymore – due to obvious biological reasons – by the first group of exiles from the 1960s that founded the MLC in the city of New York, but rather by those of us who had to leave the island in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

ALB: Are there anarchists inside Cuba? How about libertarian groups in exile outside the MLC?

MLC: We know of no other anarchist groups in exile outside the MLC, but it wouldn't bother us at all if there were, we would try to find them quickly and explore the possibilities of joint actions. In the 80's two editorial collectives co-existed, one of them around the journal *Guangara Libertaria* and the other with *A Mayor* and both co-existed as a coordinating network under the same acronym. As to the existence of anarchists inside Cuba, we can emphatically confirm that they do exist and have been doing so clandestinely and underground for the last half century.

The big problem in this case is that those who remained in Cuba have been systematically suppressed each time they dared demonstrate publicly as happened with the agricultural syndicalists of the Zapata Group towards the end of the 70's and beginning of the 80's. This is one of the reasons why the anarchists inside have taken great care not to be identified as such and have managed to survive in the shadows. Besides, during the last few years there has been a movement by anti-establishment counter-culture youths that represents an opening for the emergence of a spontaneous kind of anarchism that doesn't yet have possibilities in the literal sense of the word or in the deeper sense of continued collective praxis. The truth is that surely there are in Cuba many more anarchists than we can even imagine: the spontaneous forms of rebellion that happen are the best breeding grounds for it. One of the immediate challenges we have is to achieve

fluidity in these relationships with the “inside”, something that the “prohibitions” continue to present obstacles to.

ALB: What is your relationship with other opposition groups?

MLC: The MLC doesn't keep formal or stable relations with any group of the so-called opposition; among other things because many of them would be our mortal enemies, if we were all active inside Cuba. It is imperative to be clear on this. The image presented by the most vociferous Cuban exiles is nothing but an attempt to re-instate capitalism – that is, to continue the task begun by the government but incorporating it within private Cuban capital accumulation from abroad – and holding democratic elections under a parliamentary and party system. But we are anarchists and if such a project would take hold in Cuba we would also be against it. On the other hand, it is clear that there is a fraction of the Cuban exile that, without self-describing as strictly anarchist, agrees with us in vague terms defending a liberalizing and self-managed line, many times even among former socialists or members of the PCC (Cuban Communist Party), today self-described as Trotskyites, Luxemburgists etc. It is possible there wouldn't be too many problems talking with them, but it is a diffuse and disorganized segment of the exile. Remember also that the exile, in its totality doesn't correspond, in any way, to the image the Castro propaganda shows which only recognizes the so-called “Miami Mafia” which includes ex-Batistians, anexionists, neo-liberals, drug traffickers and ultranationalists. No! The Cuban exile community is composed of a majority of working class people who survive out of the sweat of their brow. We're talking about a noble people genuinely inspired by the establishment of a set of basic freedoms and respect for human rights inside the island: people who do not have a well defined political project but who want to simply be able to write, travel, organize freely, sing, paint, or do whatever they want without needing the state's permission. Or simply people who want to go back, to work without exploiting anybody and live decently. With this type of people –the great majority of those in exile – we maintain fraternal relations in whatever part of the world it is our fate to live. It is not about a shared revolutionary program but about the elementary respect that honest, simple working people in Cuba or anywhere else deserve.

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