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The legacy of Che Guevara: internationalism today

*Not all youngsters buying a T-shirt with Che's image in the North will immediately connect the image on their shirt with the spirit of the actions staged against the institutions of global capital, in Seattle (1999), in Prague (2000), in Genua (2001), and on other occasions since. Yet a connection there certainly is. Which is borne out by the flags, the banners and T-shirts with Che's image that shape each of those protest events, writes **Dr Peter Custers** in conclusion of an essay serialised in two parts*



AS RECORDED in the literature on the history of socialist

construction in Cuba, for instance by the Cuban economist Carlos Tablada (see Carlos Tablada, *Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism*, Pathfinder, New York, 1990), there existed clear differences within the Cuban government of the 1960s on the approach to be followed. There were two camps, I understand. Both favoured nationalisation of industries. Both upheld the idea of a planned economy. Yet on the degree of autonomy to be accorded to nationalised industries, viewpoints diverged. On the one hand, there were those who argued that government enterprises should control their own financial means. This view was upheld by the current of 'economic accounting'. On the other hand, there were Che and other champions of the 'budgetary finance system'. They argued that financial resources should be allocated by the central ministry (see notably the speech presented by Che Guevara at a seminar held in Algeria on July 13, 1963: 'Economic Planning and the Cuban Experience', in Che Guevara, *A New Society. Reflections for Today's World*, Ocean Press, Melbourne, Australia, 1991, Chapter 12, p 159). Moreover, and this is perhaps the decisive point about his views, Che laid great stress on the need to rely on 'conscious-ness', on a commitment to the cause of socialism by members of Cuba's working class. In this context, Che repeatedly spoke and wrote on the role of material and moral incentives. He argued that no socialism can be built, unless we succeed in creating a 'new man'. Whereas as a realist he did not dismiss the need for material incentives, of encouragements in the form of monetary gains, he argued that this in itself would not suffice (for Che's views on material versus moral incentives under socialism, see Che Guevara, 'The Transition to Socialism', in

Che Guevara, 1991, op-cit, Chapter 13, p 169; and Carlos Tablada, 1990, op-cit, Chapters 8 and 9, p 170 and 1974). Thus, Che the minister himself engaged in voluntary labour, helping to cut sugarcane. And he promoted the formation of workers' brigades, ready to contribute a part of their own free labour to socialist society.

Furthermore, here we note not hostility but wholehearted support extended by Fidel Castro to Che's legacy, even if belatedly. Whereas Fidel Castro has always upheld Che Guevara as a great internationalist, it is true that the path he chose to follow in Cuba from the later part of the sixties onwards, for some time diverged from what had been Che's dream. Thus, after Che's departure and death in combat (1967), the influence of those who veered towards the Soviet model grew. Those who put primary emphasis on formal planning and were wary of 'voluntarism' prevailed. However, in the course of the 1980s, the Cuban government under Fidel's leadership undertook what was termed a 'rectification'. In the speech he presented on occasion of the twentieth death anniversary of Che Guevara, Fidel called on cadres of Cuba's Communist Party to study Che's views on building socialism (see Fidel Castro, 'Che's Ideas are Relevant for Today's World', speech given on October 8, 1987, see Che Guevara, 1991, op-cit, p 9; for a collection of Che's writings on socialist economics published from Cuba, see Ernesto Che Guevara, *Temas Economicos*, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 1988). He specially singled out Che's views on the need to combine reliance on material with reliance on moral incentives. Fidel deplored the fact that the voluntary teams of workers, 'mini-brigades', formed in Che's time, had been 'destroyed' at their very peak. And he proudly announced that the brigades had seen a rebirth, with some 20,000 workers participating in brigades in the capital city of Havana alone (see Fidel Castro's speech in Che Guevara, 1991, op-cit, p 22). Cuba's efforts aimed at building socialism have gone through several more phases since. But as the example cited shows, Fidel Castro has personally worked towards consolidation of Che's legacy.

Internationalism today

IT IS time to return to the story on internationalism, to international solidarity with indigenous people, with peasants, workers and other sections of the oppressed, struggling for their emancipation worldwide. Che's legacy, no matter how grand, would likely have suffered a demise, if not for the fact that internationalism itself has seen a resurgence more than 40 years after his death. Let's then take a look at the history of internationalism, which is the best way we can pay our tribute to Che. Here I wish to start by mentioning how internationalism was originally conceived of, in the days of the First International. It is well recorded in books on the International built by Marx and Bakunin in the sixties of the 19th century that Europe's rulers at that time were scared of its power and influence among the rising class of skilled industrial workers. The new working class had already shown its fighting strength in uprisings staged in individual European countries. Now, with the formation of the international, owners of factories in Germany, France and England were repeatedly confronted with a workers' militancy that was backed up by international solidarity. Herded together in factory compounds, the workers did

not just succeed in taking the offensive in strikes. They also received the support of trade unions based in other countries, via publicity and fundraising undertaken by the First International. For the international strove hard both to prevent strike breaking by migrants, and helped sustain organised groups of workers launching industrial strikes. Such was the shape of cross-border solidarity in the era when modern internationalism was born (on the First International, see for instance Julius Braunthal, *Geschichte der Internationale*. Band I, Verlag JHW Dietz, Hannover, Germany, 1961; and the essay of Marcel van der Linden in Peter Waterman, ed, *The old Internationalism and the New*, The Hague, the Netherlands, January 1988, p 6).

It is worthwhile to recall the internationalism of Marx's time in the era of globalisation, i.e. at a time when capitalism has spread to all parts of the globe. For this underlines the fact that in various periods of modern history, internationalism has taken different shapes. In the epoch of decolonisation, during the twentieth century, mutual support between organised industrial workers in Europe was transcended in importance by the form of international solidarity embodied by Che. Again the catchword that best expresses the internationalism prevalent today is 'globalised resistance'. This catchword, as will by now be clear, refers to direct actions staged in protest against gatherings of world leaders. Against world leaders taking decisions about the world economy without regard to the interests of the world's poor and without regard to the need to protect planet earth. Conferences of the WTO, the World Bank/IMF and the G-8 are dominated by the US and other hegemonic states. But they also are events that bring together throngs of journalists from all over the world. Thus, they have become the chosen moment for activists eager to express their sense of urgency, and their spirit of internationalism. Most recently, in December last, the Climate summit in Copenhagen was targeted by global activists. Not all youngsters buying a T-shirt with Che's image in the North will immediately connect the image on their shirt with the spirit of the actions staged against the institutions of global capital, in Seattle (1999), in Prague (2000), in Genua (2001), and on other occasions since. Yet a connection there certainly is. Which is borne out by the flags, the banners and T-shirts with Che's image that shape each of those protest events.

Let me conclude with a personal note. Prodded to give an interview by eager high school students from Amsterdam recently, I was moved not just to write my tribute to Ernesto Che Guevara, but also to personally look back. When Che died in the Bolivian jungle in 1967, I myself had just graduated from a high school in the South of the Netherlands. Subsequently, via debates staged at Dutch universities at the time of the Paris revolt, a lifelong commitment grew towards Che's ideal of internationalism. This commitment carried me to Bangladesh in the post-liberation period, when I worked here as journalist and engaged in peasant organising from 1973 until 1975/1976. The story of my own engagement with internationalism can be interpreted as a mere footnote of the saga of Che Guevara's heroic life. Surely, I never succeeded in becoming a hardened revolutionary the way Che did. Yet, my own story confirms, as does the account of internationalism before, with and since Che, that there are numerous ways in which to express one's feelings of international solidarity, one of which being a commitment to those who are so often overlooked in leftwing discourse, i.e.

marginalised peasant women and women belonging to the working class [see Peter Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising. Rural Poor Women and Revolutionary Leadership (1946-47)*, Nayaprakash, Kolkata, 1987 and (in Bengali translation) Gana Sahitya Prakashani, Dhaka, 1992); and Peter Custers, *Capital Accumulation and Women's Labour in Asian Economies*, Sage and Zed Press, New Delhi and London, 1997 and (in Bengali translation) Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1999]. In any case, as the world is faced with the threat of a climate catastrophe, there is a need as never before to uphold Che's spirit of internationalism. Only a new and powerful wave of internationalism, one that combines the vibrant energies of the young and enraged worldwide, can help to timely and radically bring down greenhouse gases emissions and help avert a catastrophe.

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