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Obama's Cuba speech: "Democratic" veneer for US capitalist invasion

By Bill Van Auken

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Barack Obama's nationally televised speech in Havana, supposed to be the high point of the first trip by a US president to Cuba in 88 years, was overshadowed by the terrorist attacks in Brussels, part of the continuing fallout from over a decade of US imperialist interventions in the Middle East.

US television networks cut from the address without a word of commentary to cover the bloodshed in Belgium, while the American president's Republican critics questioned why he was still in Cuba at all and not returning to Washington to direct the "war on terrorism."

Obama followed up the speech with a hasty meeting with a collection of Cuban anti-government "dissidents" at the US Embassy. Most of them likely picked up their paychecks from the National Endowment for Democracy and the Agency for International Development on their way out.

And, finally, Obama and his family went to an exhibition baseball game between the Cuban national team and the Tampa Bay Rays.

Again right-wing critics of the administration pilloried Obama for the trip to the ballpark in the midst of the terror attacks in Europe. There was nothing casual about it, however. As was also reflected in his speech, Washington is banking on shared cultural ties, along with geographical

proximity and bonds between Cuban exiles in the US and relatives remaining on the island, to give US imperialism a needed boost in its rivalry with China and Russia for economic and political dominance in Cuba.

The night before Obama's televised address, White House officials gathered with a group of corporate CEOs for a brief press conference in which the "human rights" pretensions of the US administration were given short shrift in favor of more pressing concerns for American capitalists.

Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes told the media that the real concerns were the status of the US dollar in Cuba and the unfettered rights of American corporations.

"The step that they took that was certainly high on our list was their announcement that they will be removing this penalty on dollar conversions, which is important," said Rhodes. Without this measure, he added, US corporations moving into Cuba would have been compelled to "switch to euros or other currencies."

"I'd say the two biggest long-term issues we raise with them are the unification of their currency and the direct hiring issue," Rhodes continued.

The US is pressing for an end to the two currency system, based on the Cuban peso paid to most Cuban workers (CUP). The CUP is worth one-twenty-fifth of the Cuban convertible peso (CUC), which is the equivalent of the US dollar and is accessible to more privileged layers and those with jobs in the tourist sector and other foreign-run industries. The creation of a unified currency is expected to lead to a sharp devaluation and likely collapse of a layer of state-owned firms, creating an even larger opening for foreign capital and laying the foundations for the kind of "shock therapy" seen in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

As for direct hiring, the major US corporations want to eliminate the Castro government's role as a labor contractor, creating a "free market" for the exploitation of Cuban workers and consolidating the dominance of capitalist employers.

Obama's speech itself, a 38-minute address to a hand-picked audience at Havana's Teatro Nacional, seemed interminable, loaded with banalities, random phrases in Spanish, hackneyed anecdotes and sanctimonious lies about the glories of US capitalism and its "dollar democracy."

Obama quickly washed his hands of Washington's long record of aggression toward Cuba. "Before 1959," he said, "some Americans saw Cuba as something to exploit, ignored poverty, enabled corruption. And since 1959, we've been shadow-boxers in this battle of geopolitics and personalities. I know this history, but I refuse to be trapped by it."

Mighty big of him! It was Cuba that was on receiving end of an unrelenting campaign by successive US administrations, the CIA and the Pentagon to overthrow the Cuban government and assassinate its leaders. It was Cuba that was the target of the abortive CIA-organized Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, along with countless acts of state terrorism made in the USA, from the 1976 bombing of Cubana de Aviación Flight 455 that killed 78 people, to the bombing of hotels

and restaurants in the 1990s. Obama speaks as if Washington's use of armed violence in pursuit of regime change was something long relegated to the history books.

As for some Americans having seen "Cuba as something to exploit," what exactly does the small army of American businessmen accompanying Obama have in mind, charitable contributions?

In introducing his paeon to "human rights," Obama quoted Cuban independence leader Jose Marti: "Liberty is the right of every man to be honest, to think and to speak without hypocrisy." If this is the case, Obama would have done the biggest favor to liberty by shutting his mouth a long time ago.

He went on to enumerate his supposed beliefs, "American beliefs" that are "universal."

"Every child deserves the dignity that comes with education, health care and food on the table and a roof over their heads," declared Obama, president of a country where roughly one in three children lives in poverty, where 48 million people struggle with hunger and which is rated last among the so-called developed countries in terms of early child education.

"I believe that citizens should be free to speak their mind without fear, to organize, and to criticize their government," he continued. Tell that to Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning or others who have sought to expose the war crimes and wholesale spying of the US government only to be persecuted, jailed or hounded into exile.

He added his belief that "the rule of law should not include arbitrary detention;" this just one day after again rebuffing Cuba's demand for the return of its territory occupied by the Guantanamo Bay naval base, where the US government has imprisoned and tortured hundreds who have never been charged, much less tried, by a court of law.

Obama acknowledged that there are "still enormous problems in our society," quickly adding that democracy was the way in which "we address the inequality that concentrates so much wealth at the top of our society." The effectiveness of this "democracy" as an instrument of the ruling oligarchy is reflected in the fact that 95 percent of all income gains under Obama's presidency have gone to the richest 1 percent.

Cuba's President Raul Castro, sitting in the balcony of the Teatro Nacional, politely applauded the US president's address, while the web site of the ruling party's official daily *Granma* reported his remarks uncritically.

Obama flew out of Havana on Tuesday afternoon, headed for Argentina for a meeting with that country's new right-wing president, Mauricio Macri.