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Cuba Providing Social Welfare to All Citizens Despite Serious Economic Woes

by LADB Staff
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On Dec. 1 Cuban President Fidel Castro told 1,700 delegates at the Cuban Communist Party's third Congress that workers must produce more to raise living standards. He added that without Soviet aid, the Cuban economy would collapse. Western sources estimate that Soviet assistance totals more than $6 billion annually in subsidies, military and economic aid.

According to the president, Cuba could not afford to purchase all the fuel it consumes if it had to sell sugar on the world market instead of to the Soviets at a controlled price. Current estimates indicate that more than 85% of Cuban trade is with the socialist bloc, while its economy is tied to the socialist common market, COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance). The Congress opened in February and then adjourned for debate at local levels. Delegates were discussing as well social and economic programs to guide the party and nation of 10 million people for the next five years.

Castro emphasized that while the Cuban state has managed to ensure social welfare for all Cubans, the economy is in severe straits. He said the economy is plagued by underemployment, although it is impossible to throw people on the streets as in a capitalist society. In a rhetorical aside, he asked the Congress how any society could expect to raise its living standards if people worked only four hours a day and constantly took coffee breaks.

Despite his concern over material living standards, Castro said Cubans must nonetheless put their "internationalist duties" ahead of efforts to improve material welfare. These duties are various, including sending troops to Angola and teachers to Nicaragua. On Dec. 8, Cuban news agency PRENSA LATINA (PL) provided selected details on the social welfare ensured to Cuban citizens. PL said that in 1985, the average monthly salary was 188 pesos (equivalent to about $188). An average family of four consisting of two employed adults and two small children, then, earned 376 pesos per month in 1985. Assuming one child attended primary school, the Cuban state paid the average 41.8 pesos per month for education. (Average monthly cost per student at the secondary level was 48.18 pesos per month).

Given that the other child spent the day at a nursery, the parents paid an average 35 pesos per month. The remainder of the cost, or 74 pesos per month, was absorbed by the state. Medical care was and is provided free of charge. Hospital costs per patient in 1985 averaged 28 pesos per day (excluding X-rays, clinical analyses, anaesthesia, and other services).

Next, all Cubans are entitled a minimum of basic foodstuffs under the government rationing system. In general terms, adults are guaranteed 2,900 calories and 78 grams of protein per day. Daily rations are purchased at prices below world market levels, and often at less that cost of production. Examples of items obtained under the rationing program are beef and poultry, rice, milk, grains,
butter, cooking oil, sugar, infant compotes and foods, soap and detergent. Other non-rationed foodstuffs, such as eggs and fish, are partially subsidized by the government.

A parallel network of state-run markets sell foods, including rationed foodstuffs, at higher prices. Cubans can avail themselves of these stores, in accordance with purchasing power and supplies. Prices on periodicals, books and artistic performances are quite low. There are no entrance fees to sporting events and museums. (Basic data from UPI, 12/01/86; PRENSA LATINA, 12/01/86, 12/08/86)

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