



Breaking the Cuba blockade will help the Caribbean weather Trump's onslaught!

For the past 6 decades, the US has maintained a cruel economic blockade on Cuba with the aim of overthrowing that government. With the arrival of the second Trump presidency, the US is applying more of the methods of this blockade to the entire Caribbean. Over the last few months, the people of the region have seen an unprecedented onslaught from the new US administration:

- On 21 February, the US Trade Representative, Jamieson Greer, unveiled proposals to impose fines of up to \$1.5 million on China linked cargo ships that call at US ports.
- On 25 February, Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, fired another salvo when he announced visa restrictions for foreign government officials who are in any way connected with Cuba's medical missions.
- On 24 March, President Trump issued an executive order imposing "a tariff of 25 percent on all goods imported into the United States from any country that imports Venezuelan oil, whether directly from Venezuela or indirectly through third parties".
- On 2 April, as part of his announcement of broad tariffs against countries that trade with the US, Trump announced tariffs of 10% on most Caribbean countries and a whopping 38% on Guyana.
- On 8 April, the US government's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) revoked the license it had granted Trinidad and Tobago to jointly develop, with Venezuela, the Dragon and Cocuina gas fields which straddle the maritime boundary between the two countries.

These measures, taken together, represent an unprecedented threat to the well-being of the people of the entire Caribbean. Addressing this state of affairs and speaking in her capacity as the current chair of CARICOM, Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, described it as "among the most challenging of times for our region". Each of the measures announced by the Trump presidency represents a serious threat to the Caribbean and breaking the Cuba blockade needs to be an important part of the region's response.

Since the region has very little industrial production of its own and weak agricultural production, it imports nearly 90% of its needs. Many of these imports come via the USA. China dominates global cargo shipping and so the proposed fines would inevitably mean a steep rise in the cost of living for people in the Caribbean. Tim Martin, President and CEO of Tropical Shipping, which is one of the major US shipping lines that serve the Caribbean stated that since his company "transports about half of all goods imported to the Caribbean, and Central and South America – poultry, agriculture products, groceries, building materials, medicine, and hurricane relief supplies.....the proposed fees would force Tropical Shipping to double its freight rates". The Caribbean Private Sector Organisation (CPSO) described the likely consequences of the fines as leading to an increase in the cost of shipping

between the Caribbean and the US “with crippling consequences for inflation, shortages, delays, and other supply chain disruptions”. On 17 April, following pleading and lobbying from CARICOM, the CPSO and the US based shipping companies, the US announced exemptions for the Caribbean from the fines regime. Going forward, ships whose routes are under 2,000 nautical miles, or are under 55,000 deadweight tonnes, those which can hold fewer than 4,000 20ft containers and specialised cargo ships including larger vessels carrying chemicals or energy products up to 80,000 deadweight tonnes are exempted from the fines. The CPSO praised the announcement as “a much-needed relief.”

Secondly, the region relies heavily on Venezuelan oil as a result of the now defunct Petrocaribe programme under which Venezuela provided oil to Caribbean countries under preferential terms. The recent Rubio visit was aimed at pushing Venezuela out of the Caribbean oil import market and replacing it with oil from ExxonMobil’s operations in Guyana. In other words, Rubio, as well as fighting for market share for ExxonMobil, is seeking to deepen the region’s dependence on the US oil monopolies. However, the ease with which the US revoked the license for the Dragon and Cocuina gas fields should be a cautionary lesson. First it shows that once we adhere to the extraterritorial laws of the US, we will always be vulnerable to unpredictable changes from the White House. Why should Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela need permission from the USA to jointly develop gas fields that sit between their countries?

The 38% tariff charge on Guyana is also instructive. Today the current People’s Progressive Party (PPP) government in that country has made itself the willing servant of ExxonMobil and is allowing the US to use it to ratchet up tensions with Venezuela but that subservience did not save it from the 38% tariff hit. Rather interestingly, the US has exempted from tariffs, Guyana’s exports to the US of crude oil, aluminum ore, and gold. This demonstrates once again that the US government looks after the interests of its monopolies and making yourself their willing servant brings you no advantages. In response to all of these attacks, the region’s only response has been to beg, plead and lobby the US to change its mind.

It is a testament to the failure of our 60 years of independence that today the Caribbean is in such a vulnerable position, notwithstanding the writings of pioneers like Arthur Lewis who put forward ideas of how the region could develop economically. It demonstrates our inability to defend our core economic interests and highlights the fact that all we are left with is begging and pleading for our interests to be taken into account. In reality, although the fines exemption is being touted as a success, tomorrow the US can revoke this in the same way that it revoked the licenses it granted Trinidad and Tobago.

The current situation requires a fundamental shift in policy. Not surprisingly, there have been calls for the region to diversify its economic relations and move away from dependence on one or two markets. This can begin with greater Caribbean wide economic integration. But to achieve this, we must break the US blockade of Cuba. The Caribbean must elevate its economic relations with Cuba, break the various US laws intended to implement it and provide legal protection for those individuals and businesses which want to do business with Cuba. Doing this as part of a wider regional economic integration aimed at fostering a more self-reliant and less dependent Caribbean is a good first step in countering the current onslaught from Trump and his government.

Break the blockade on Cuba!

Defeat the onslaught from Trump!

Caribbean Network for Solidarity with Cuba (CNSC)
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