

Raúl Castro urges union to combat corruption

Raúl Castro pressed Cuba's communist labor union at its 19th congress to lead the fight against corruption.

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HAVANA - Raúl Castro urged Cuba's communist labor union to lead the country's battle against corruption Wednesday, saying workers are "the essential force" in fighting a wide range of vices.

His speech, which closed the union's 19th congress in Havana, earned him a standing ovation from the crowd of about 1,400 people, which chanted ``Vive Raúl!"

Castro, 75, is acting president while his brother Fidel recovers from intestinal surgery.

It was the first time Fidel Castro, who is 80, had missed one of the union's congresses, his brother said, adding that Fidel's "ideas, and also his teachings, were nonetheless present" at the three-day event.

The younger Castro, who appeared relaxed and confident in his new leadership role, complimented the union for its dedication to the island's socialist ideals, at the same time chiding the leaders for failing to control rampant stealing from the state, and worker apathy.

"One of the most difficult challenges in this ideological work is succeeding in making the worker feel like a collective owner of the society's riches -- and acting accordingly," Castro said in remarks lasting under an hour.

"I'm not saying that this is the only cause of the acts of corruption, and robbery, and illegalities, and lack of labor discipline," he said.

``But given the conditions of socialism, it is very difficult to confront these dangerous vices without the assistance of the workers, who are the essential force."

He said severe shortages created when Cuba lost economic support after the fall of the Soviet Union have prompted some of the stealing.

"But it's also been due to our old and new errors," he said. ``Some union leaders have not made the best decisions, nor employed the best work form."

He called on those present to "meditate profoundly" on how they can improve their roles.

Before falling ill, Fidel Castro had been leading his own campaign against corruption, portraying the widespread stealing from the state and other examples of "moral decay" as the greatest threat yet to Cuba's socialist system.

The younger Castro repeatedly cited former remarks by his brother, but said nothing specific about the health of the leader, who ceded power July 31.