

Special RATB Brigade '07 Report Back issue

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'When the people rule'

Our 10th solidarity brigade to Cuba



From 21 April to 4 May this year the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG) and its campaign Rock around the Blockade sent its 10th solidarity brigade to Cuba since 1995. Fourteen activists spent a week in the rural municipality of Caimito and a second week in Havana City, meeting with people from all of Cuba's mass organisations and speaking with Cubans from all walks of life, to learn about the shape that socialism is taking in the country in the face of a merciless US blockade and hostility from the EU.

As on previous brigades our hosts were comrades from the Union of Young Communists (UJC), young people who have grown up with socialism, with their knowledge and high level

of political development as a testament to the Battle of Ideas and the other educational offensives of the revolution. The brigade went to 34 separate visits and meetings, including schools, health centres, workplaces and mass organisations; we took part in the historic First International Youth Conference to Free the Cuban Five, at which we were invited to speak; and we participated in the gigantic Mayday march in Havana.

While in Caimito we stayed in a teacher training school, one of many designed for highschool-age children to prepare for jobs in teaching. We had the privilege of getting to know the students and workers, who spoke openly about their roles in society and in the mass organisations, as well

as showing a wide knowledge of political struggles around the world. One of the most important of our visits in Caimito was to a Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), organisations which nearly all Cubans belong to. We met with workers at a citrus plantation, at a steelworks factory and other workplaces who were living examples that disproves the myths pedalled by the imperialist media and middle class 'socialists' in Britain about a so-called lack of freedom and democracy in Cuba.

Cuba is well known for the extremely high quality of free health care that it gives to all its citizens. We saw examples of this at work in both Caimito and Havana. We visited a polyclinic

and a maternity home, as well as an Operation Miracle hospital, where people from Latin America get free eye surgery. Cuba is now six years into the Battle of Ideas, a revolutionary programme aimed at 'an intense political battle, a battle of the masses, of popular participation, in which the highest priority is the educational, cultural and social development of every individual'. The achievements could be seen everywhere. In all the places we visited Cubans spoke with a broad knowledge of the problems they face in their struggle for a free society. As was clear from our meeting with Juan Carlos Marsan of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, the struggle continues, and the Cuban people are debating the way forward for socialism.

The pages of this newsletter contain just a few of the experiences and political lessons of our brigade. Others are given on our website (www.ratb.org.uk) and in the RCG's newspaper *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* The comrades have returned inspired with first hand experience of Cuba's socialist revolution and with more understanding of the need to build an anti-imperialist working class movement in Britain. Cuba shows that not only is another world possible, but it is already being fought for. It is an example for oppressed people everywhere.

**Long live Cuba!
Long live socialism
and revolution!**

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Working class power

'Work is our battlefield. It is the battlefield on which we confront imperialism every hour of our working day.' Che Guevara

The Cuban working class has a history of struggle dating back over 100 years from before the War of Independence at the turn of the 19th century to the armed underground resistance and strikes leading up to the Cuban Revolution in 1959, in which an estimated 20,000 workers were killed. Since then, the Cuban working class and its vanguard, the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), have been the leading force of socialist construction on the island. In the face of those petty-bourgeois critics of Cuba, our brigade defiantly confirmed the fundamental role of workers in the Revolution today.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba was plunged into severe economic crisis, at which point the US intensified its murderous blockade. The leadership of the Revolution was forced to implement the Special Period: the introduction of certain elements of private enterprise and the free market, and some foreign capital investment. Together with the introduction of tourism and the dollarisation of the economy, Cuban society was exposed to the iniquities of capitalism for the first time in decades. In a recent speech, Carlos Lage Davila, Executive Secretary of the Council of Ministers of Cuba, noted that:

'These circumstances substantially changed our people's lives: they bred bitter contradic-

tions, propitiated the spread of vices and privileges that had been overcome by the work of the Revolution itself; they caused social equality to suffer; and wages were no longer the just salaries with which the needs of daily life could be resolved. It was essential to make tactical concessions with consequences we have not yet overcome.'

In Caimito, Havana province the brigade visited a dairy production farm employing 2,500 workers, 2,000 of whom were engaged in production. We clearly heard the effects of the Special Period on the factory's capacity: annual milk production fell from 56 million litres to just 6 million litres following the crisis. However, the workers told us that throughout the Special Period capitalist methods were never introduced into their factory; that Cuba remained socialist throughout. We learnt how from a young age children in Cuba form work-teams to visit factories and farms so they are conscious of the fact that it is the workers who own the means of production.

The revolutionary consciousness of the workers in Cuba was clear throughout the brigade. At a metal-working factory in Caimito the First Secretary of the PCC there told us that the workers' salaries were less than they deserved. But he went on to explain that the workers were



Brigadistas at the citrus plant - Bodegas del Caribe in Caimito

conscious of the fact that since 1959 the government of Cuba has looked after the needs of the people; that one day salaries would be evened out and imperialism would not interfere; and that their work was part of defending social gains and keeping alive the flame of Revolution.

Workers at a citrus farm whom we met separating the best produce out for the tourist market told us that 'the tourist industry is vital to Cuba's economy. It needs the best looking produce and when we send it we are the ones who reap the benefits, because in Cuba the revenues from tourism are fed back into benefits for everyone, especially those who need it most.'

It is only through the conscious involvement of the working class in the running of society, through the ideological leadership of the most committed communists in the PCC, that Cuba was able to come through the Special Period and prevent the restoration of capitalism.

The building of a fundamentally new attitude to work has been a central issue of the Cuban Revolution from its inception; the understanding that only by creating a communist consciousness is the development of socialism assured.

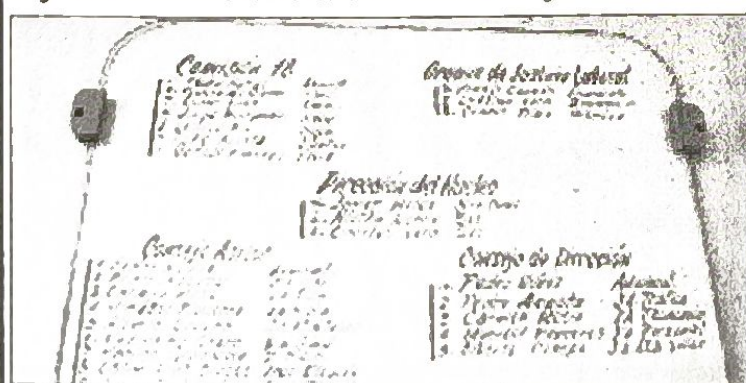
The Battle of Ideas has sought once more to place labour, pride in work and the worker at the centre of society, following the petty exploitation and individualism which has to a certain extent characterised the Special Period. One of the program's of the Battle of Ideas has been the creation of schools and universities combining work and study, theory and practice, drawing on the ideas of

Jose Marti. We saw students themselves renovating their own university building through voluntary labour. Workplace democracy and political consciousness were visible at every level. At a school bus depot which included 12 workers honoured with the title 'National Vanguard' we saw charts displaying members of various worker committees concerned with regulation of conditions, wages and any other concerns, committees for the general direction of the workplace, the names of elected union delegates and PCC members. Workplace assemblies took place at least once a month. On walls were slogans, quotations, photos and articles of Che, Fidel and Jose Marti.

However, a lack of raw materials, machinery and technology has been one of the major problems facing the Revolution since the Special Period, as Soviet machinery is increasingly aged, and the blockade means new technology is difficult to procure. Both in industry and agriculture, lack of technology is hindering the increase in productive output so needed for the further development of Cuban society. Therefore, as a leading UJC member explained to us, investment in new means of production is one the most vital requirements of the Revolution at this time. Cuba's recent economic growth, 12% last year, will primarily be invested back into new means of production to allow Cuba's socialist revolution to continue to go forward, with the working class at its head. Our brigade returned to Britain in no doubt that the workers of Cuba would be successful. **Joey**

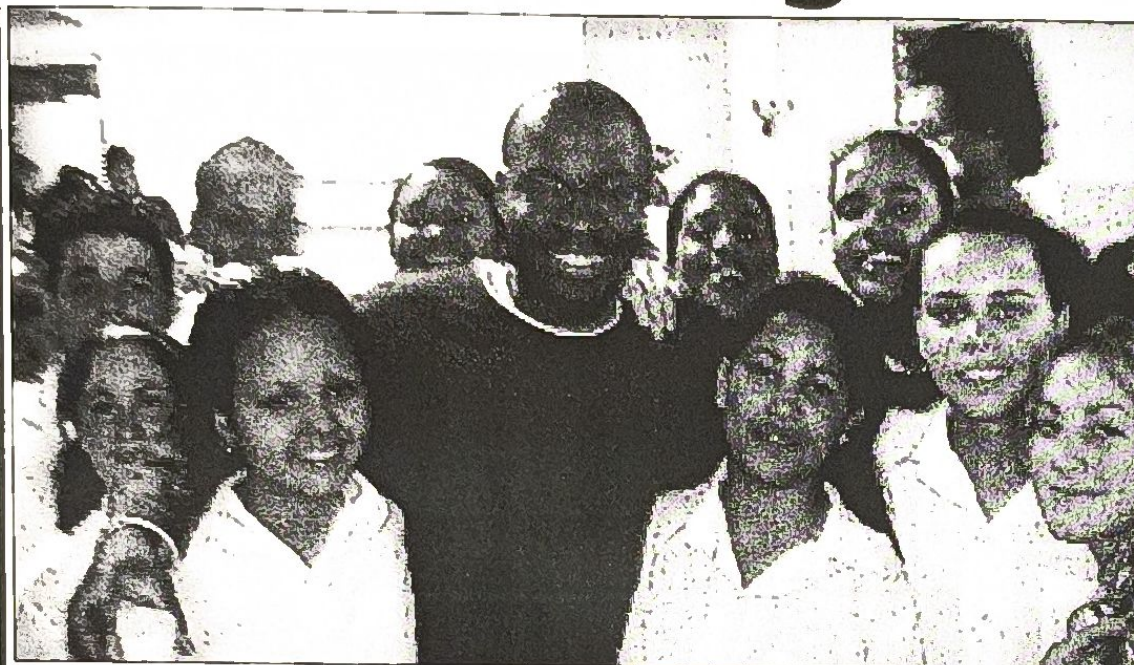


Brigadistas & workers at the Escuela de formacion emergente maestros



A notice board detailing the revolutionary roles of the workers at the school bus depot in Caimito

'Cuba is a big school'



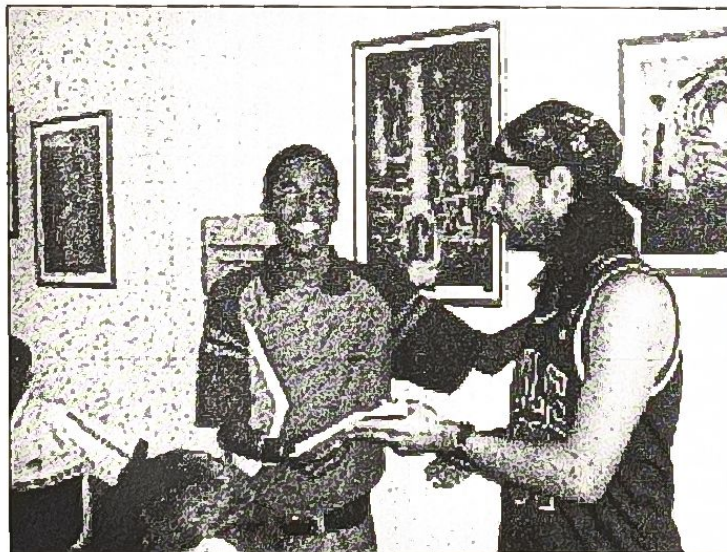
Brigadistas with students at the Escuela de formacion emergente maestros where we stayed, it is a specialist high school that prepares students for a career in teaching

Cuba's national hero, Jose Marti once said, 'To be cultured is the only way to be free' and it is clear that Cuba is far on the pathway towards freedom. Everywhere we went we met informed and cultured people. From cleaning staff, to fruit-packing workers, from young students to elderly members of a CDR, at every level of society we met people keen to engage in discussion with us about local and global issues. A good education system in Cuba does not simply mean that Cuban schools are good at teaching numeracy and literacy, though of course they are. In Cuba, education and culture are not limited to schools; they are at the heart of Cuba's socialist revolution, a part of everyday life.

In the citrus factory we visited in Caimito, each morning

starts with a short discussion of last night's news. If there are particularly important things to discuss then the discussion can be longer. All over the country workers and students alike start

the day in the same way. This explains why they can express their views on global issues with such confidence. In the same factory, five workers were studying part-time at the local micro-



brigadista with the 24 yr old Head Teacher at the Yuri Gagarin school

'I've been training teachers here since 2001 and I've also been the head of the union since the founding of the school. I've been working in the education sector for 38 years. My history in teaching started in 1961, which was when the literacy campaign (which eradicated illiteracy in Cuba within two years) started.'

I worked in rural zones in Mariel, and there were areas where there were a lot of counter-revolutionaries. Their role was to burn sugarcane, attack schools and farmers - they wanted to create terror in the area. But we decided to carry

on with alphabetisation, with the literacy campaign, until 22 December when it was declared that illiteracy had been eradicated in Cuba. I was 12 at that time. First of all the campaign was to eradicate illiteracy so people could write their names and signatures, then we carried on the training to bring them up to 6th grade and afterwards to 10th grade. I consider that I've spent my life defending the Revolution.'

Urbano Gonzalez Mirabal, teacher at the Vicente Perez Noa school, Communist Party member and local CDR co-ordinator



university. But in Cuba, education is not a matter of monetary gain, as it can often be in this country, where people feel obliged to go to training courses to find or keep a job. In Cuba, however, if people are made redundant for any reason then they have the opportunity to retrain if they want, and are paid to study. People are cared for.

On the brigade we saw example after example of how Cuban society nurtures and cares for its people and their talents. For example, at the Jo Smith Conas school for the Cuban national rowing team all students simultaneously study for a university degree in sports science, which will ensure they have a career when they can no longer compete as athletes. On top of this they study languages, politics and culture, and are therefore well prepared to face capitalism when they travel abroad to rowing competitions.

One of the programmes of the revolution has been 'universalisation'. Whereas students used to have to study in the major cities, now there are micro-universities in every municipality. Every doctor's clinic and hospital is now also a medical school. Every school is also a teacher-training college. For example, trainee teachers work in a school while studying at university. They are supported by a mentor in the school and by university tutors. From the start of their training, theory and practice are combined, leading to a more holistic preparation.

Education is also integral to Cuba's international solidarity. Cuban teachers have been involved in literacy programmes all over the world and Cuba welcomes students from around the world to study free of charge. On the brigade we met Palestinian medical students specialising in prosthetic limbs, as well as Ecuadorian and Mexican agro-economics students. And when Cuban doctors go abroad they do not simply provide medical assistance, instead they train local people to replace them when they have left. The revolutionary murals really do sum it up when they say: 'Cuba es una gran escuela'. Cuba is a big school.

Annie



The Cuban Energy Revolution

On our last brigade to Cuba in July 2005 we saw a new process beginning to unfold – a programme to make the generation of electricity more efficient and sustainable, with results for all society. This new drive of the Revolution was from the beginning linked to fighting corruption, bureaucracy and waste of resources. During our recent brigade we spoke to Cubans about how the project is advancing.

The background to the Energy Revolution was the run-down state of Cuban industry and decrease in productivity following the collapse of the socialist bloc. Cuba was left with power plants, factories and machinery that had to be remodelled to run on non-Soviet oil, leading to power cuts and blackouts. A revolution in energy generation was seen as being necessary to resolve these problems.

During the 2005 brigade we heard Fidel Castro speak during a mass rally on 26 July, giving a detailed talk about what the first steps were in this process. Thanks to new international relationships, particularly with Venezuela, the Cuban economy was growing, making it possible not just to bring the dollar out of circulation, but to build new houses, increase wages and pensions and give material benefits

to Cuban households. The plan was not only to supply appliances, but to find ways of making electricity more efficient, helping Cuba's economy and environment.

The most noticeable result so far is that blackouts are becoming a thing of the past. When we were in Guantanamo two years ago we experienced five in a week. This time in Caimito, a similar rural area, there were none. Cubans are feeling added benefits at home. 10 million inefficient light bulbs and appliances have been replaced by energy saving models. So far around a million electrical fans, 100,000 TVs, 110,000 air conditioners and 1,431,979 fridges, as well as other devices, have been changed. More than 223,000 efficient water pumps have been installed. An elderly couple invited the whole brigade into their home when we went to visit a Committee for the Defence of the Revolution, to show us their new fridge and rice cooker.

The supply of more than 10 million electrical cookers so far have made it possible for 80% of Cuban families to cook for the first time without having to use harmful traditional fuels like kerosene, used by poor people internationally. Work is also being done in the mass organisations to inform and educate the

Fighting capitala



International and Cuban students at the Universidad Agraria de La Habana – Fructuoso Rodriguez Perez, school of agriculture were quick to express their thoughts on the ethanol concerns ignited by Fidel. Their interpretation is formed from a socialist perspective. The title of the pictured book translates as "Lessons of political economics under capitalism."

population in energy saving techniques.

Progress is being made in wind, sea and biological forms of generation, and solar energy in particular. Although the Energy Revolution is still at an early stage Cuba is spreading its gains - facilities in countries such as Bolivia, Mali, South Africa, Honduras and Lesotho are receiving electricity from Cuban solar panels, as well as receiving Cuban doctors, teachers and trainers. In Venezuela, Cuban specialists are

currently setting up 143 solar panel systems in schools, medical offices, water purifying plants and rural neighbourhoods.

This is something that goes hand in hand with the material gains being made. If the Battle of Ideas is about pushing the Revolution forward with a culture of education then the Energy Revolution is about building mass participation in Cuba's economic advances and continuing to raise the political level of the people.

Louis

Capitalist greed

In a series of reflections published in the Cuban press Fidel Castro has described how the wealthy imperialist countries' increased use of ethanol as an alternative to fossil fuels threatens billions of people with hunger, poverty and environmental destruction.

In a meeting with US car manufacturers in March George Bush set a target of reducing petrol consumption by 20% by 2017, to be replaced by 35 billion gallons of ethanol produced from agricultural products, principally maize, sugar cane and soya bean. Castro immediately pointed out that this amount of ethanol, if it were produced entirely from maize, would require 320 million tons of maize. In 2005, the entire US corn crop was 280 million tonnes.

In March this year, the European Council decided on a target of biofuels accounting for 10% of EU fuel use by 2020. The Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that producing this amount of biofuel would require 72% of arable land in the EU. Clearly, these plans for increased ethanol consumption will cause a devastating increase in global crop prices, as ethanol manufacturers look abroad to meet demand.

Emissions from burning ethanol contain less carbon dioxide (CO_2) and other contaminants than petrol. Also, ethanol is CO_2 neutral because the CO_2

emitted when burning it is no more than the plants used to make it absorb during their lifetime. However, this point ignores the considerable CO_2 emission associated with planting, cultivating, harvesting, transporting and processing the crop to turn it into ethanol. Furthermore, in order to produce the huge amounts of ethanol demanded by the world market, millions of acres of rainforest in countries like Argentina and Brazil will have to be cleared to make way for crops. Rainforests are vital to the ecosystem because they absorb CO_2 and provide natural protection against flooding and soil erosion.

The main crops used to make ethanol require enormous amounts of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides, whose residues are washed into rivers, lakes and seas. The Gulf of Mexico now has a dead zone the size of New Jersey because fertiliser residue which drains from the US corn belt has created huge blooms of algae that suck oxygen from the water.

In March George Bush visited Brazil to agree plans for co-operation in the production and trade of ethanol. The two countries, who between them produce about 70% of the world's ethanol, have signed a deal making ethanol an internationally traded commodity and promoting its production in Central America and the Caribbean - a deal for which Castro

has heavily criticised Brazilian President Lula. Despite this the US will maintain its tariff on ethanol imports, to protect the US ethanol industry until at least 2009.

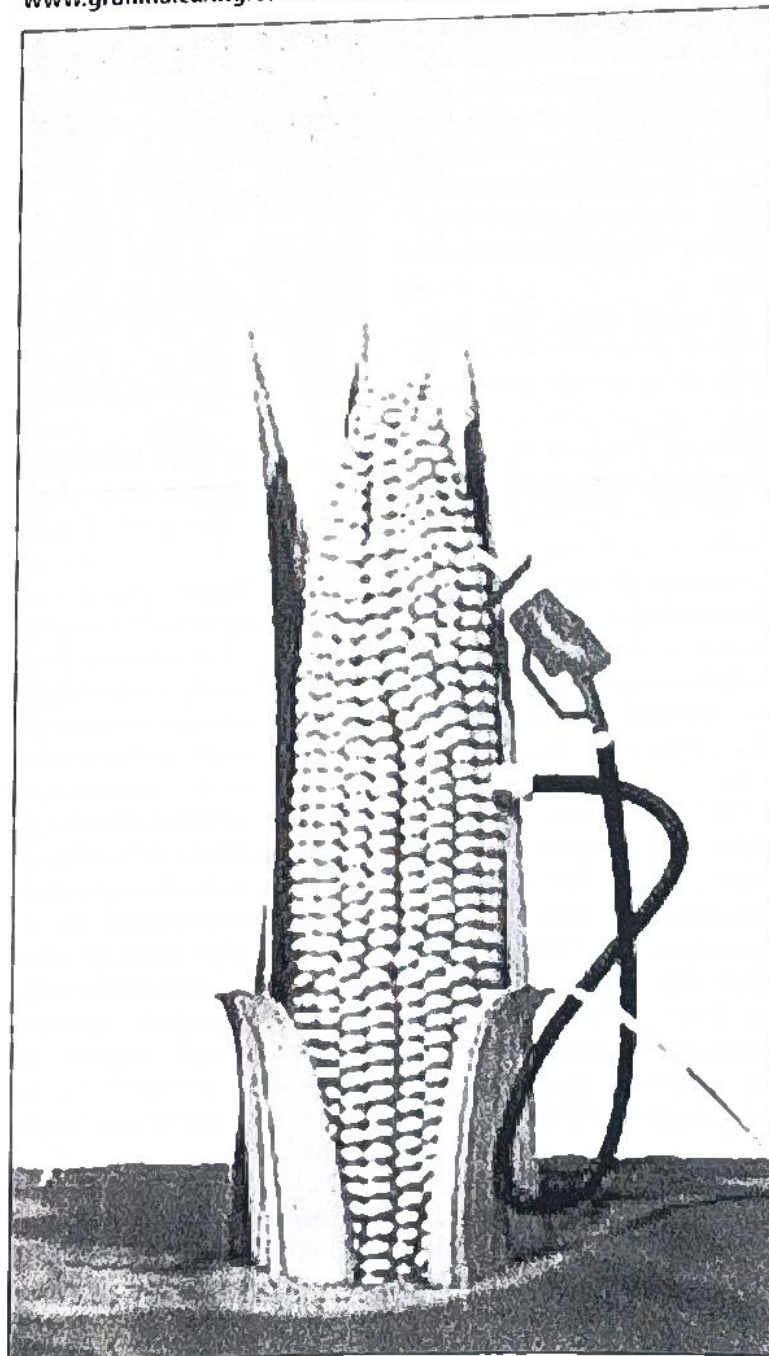
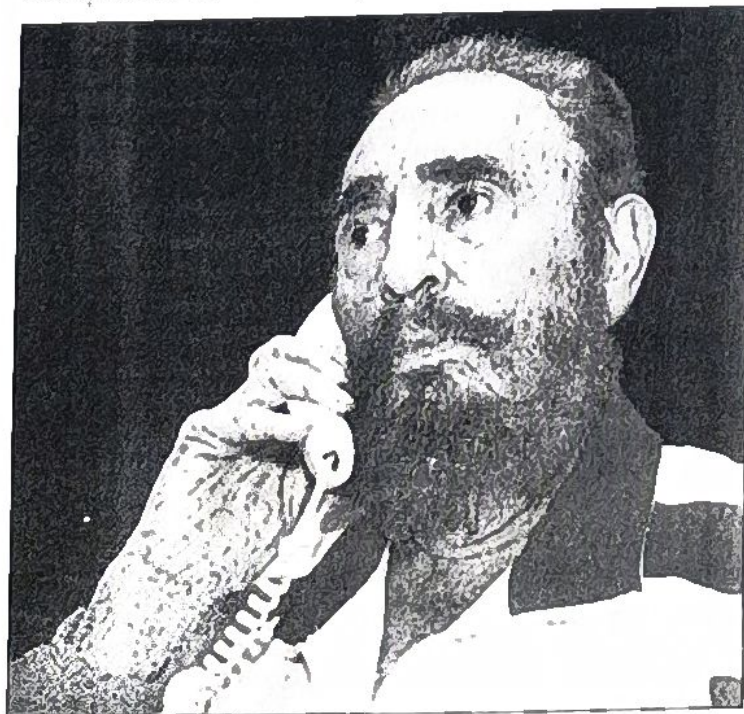
According to estimates given by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in May, world cereal production in 2007 will rise. Despite this, supplies will barely meet demand, which has risen as manufacture of ethanol expands. Price increases will raise the import bill of low-income food deficit countries by 25%. Poor people will starve at an even greater rate. Demand for ethanol is expected to increase overall demand for maize by 9% over 2007-8.

On 24 May, the Financial Times reported that global food

prices are headed for their biggest annual increase in as much as 30 years, an effect of the expanding biofuels industry, climate change and growing demand from India and China. In April Britain's consumer price index showed annual food price inflation of 6%, its highest in almost six years.

Fidel Castro has pointed out that, if the world followed the example of Cuba's Energy Revolution by investing in energy efficiency, the environmental devastation from burning fossil fuels would be halved. The idea of using foods for fuel as a response to oil shortages and climate change is indicative of capitalism, which cannot accept measures that put limits on its own expansion. Sam

www.granma.cu/ingles/Reflections-of-President-Fidel-Castro.html



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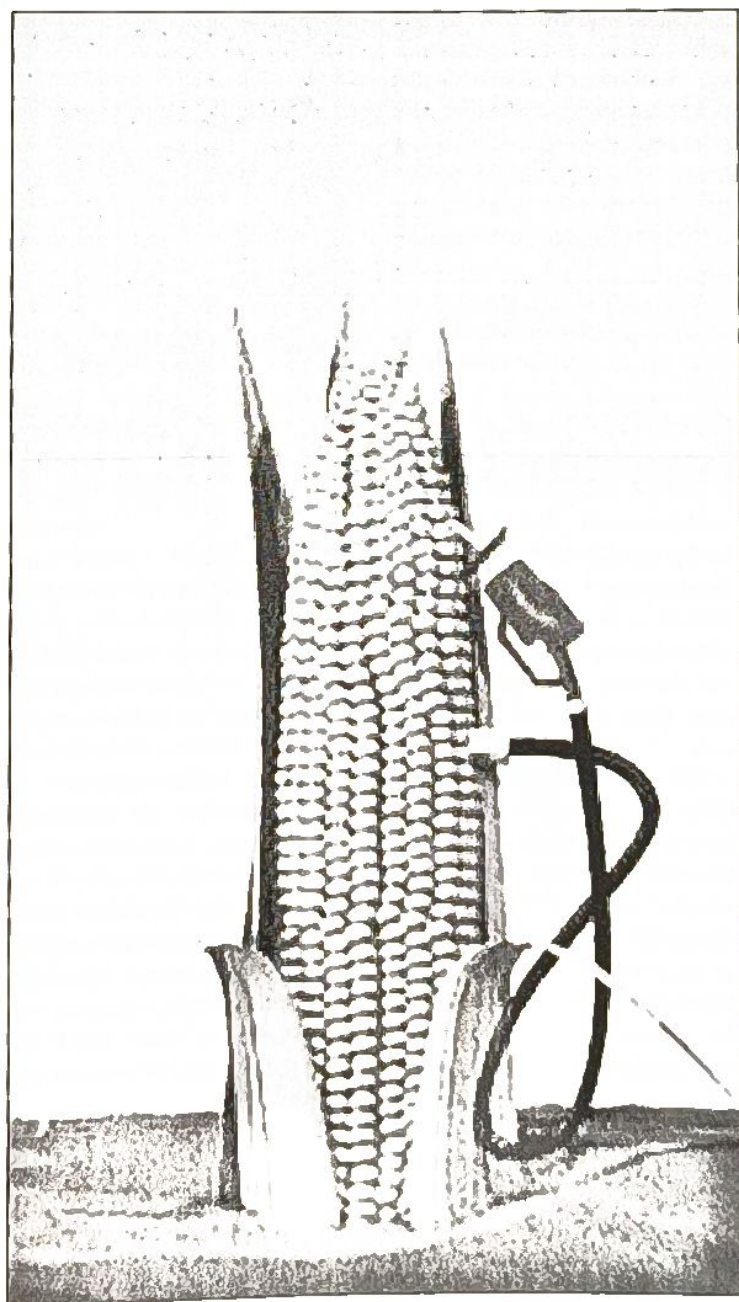
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www.granma.cu/ingles/Reflections-of-President-Fidel-Castro.html



Palestine-Cuba solidarity

At the UJC conference to free the five, brigadistas had a chance to talk to three Palestinian students studying in Cuba. We reprint some of their comments.

Cuba has offered scholarships for Palestinian students to study here, particularly in the field of health technology, and particularly limb engineering. Obviously the situation in Palestine, its war, therefore many Palestinians have lost their hands or legs and the Cuban Revolution with its solidarity with oppressed people, has offered us the chance to come and study here. ...We thank Fidel Castro and other revolutionary leaders for their solidarity with us. Actually the situation in Cuba is similar to other oppressed countries like Palestine... in terms of suffering from wars and oppression.

The US is the mother of the whole war and Israel is her son. Therefore they will vote with the States against Cuba. Its almost impossible in my eyes that Israel and the US will go against each other. For example the US says that the Palestinians are terrorists, not only in Palestine but internationally, and we all know that Israel bombs Palestinian villages and towns, kills Palestinian children and women, and at the end of the day the US comes and says that Israel has the right to do this, justifying the occupation.

We would like to thank all the liberated people. Particularly we would like to send our greetings to

Fidel, the symbolic leader, who is not only a leader for the Palestinians, but for the people all around the world. We can see at this particular moment at this conference, when there are so many different nationalities coming to lend their solidarity to the Cubans, even students from the US.

The Cuban people are an example of the liberated for people all over the world. The Cubans struggled and fought for their Revolution and now they are free. Even if they suffer from the blockade they are steadfast against it. We obviously support and give our solidarity to the Cuban Revolution, and it is our example, as it stands against the international hegemony led by the US and Israel. If someone wants to live in dignity and be free, they should learn from the Cubans and from Fidel Castro.



Free the Cuban Five!

On 29 and 30 April, brigadistas attended the International Conference to Free the Cuban Five in Havana organised by the UJC and attended by over 500 delegates from more than 70 countries.

Gerardo Hernández, René González, Antonio Guerrero, Fernando González and Ramón Labañino have been held in US prisons since 1998. Between them they have been sentenced to four life sentences and 75 years imprisonment on trumped up espionage and conspiracy charges. In reality they had been infiltrating counter-revolutionary groups in Miami that were plotting terrorist activity against Cuba.

Contributions at the conference included a detailed history

of the concerted terrorist campaign waged by the CIA against Cuba, a rousing speech by veteran revolutionary Armando Hart and a determined message that the struggle will go forward until the Five are free from Roberto Gonzalez, brother of Rene.

In addition to the Cuban comrades, in every session there were international speakers, representing the solidarity movement in their countries including the US, Mexico, Venezuela, Spain, Portugal, Belgium and the Ukraine. The RCG was proud to be invited onto the platform as a representative of solidarity in Britain with the Cuban Five.

A comrade from Western Sahara spoke about how the education he was being given free in

May Day in Havana

As if on a battlefield with the national flag held high, a multitude of young people sang the Internationale. From the rostrum the voices of a thousand people sang together, including representatives from 74 countries and 242 foreign organisations. Its the end of a great march. More than a million Cubans had just paraded through Havana's Revolution Square. They came to condemn US terrorism and demand justice: prison for the counter-revolutionary Luis Posada Carriles and freedom for the Cuban Five, who remain in US gaols paradoxically for having saved countless lives in both Cuba and the US itself.

The march in Havana lasted two hours. It was presided over by First Vice President Raul Castro. Salvador Mesa, general secretary of the Cuban Workers

Federation, gave a brief speech and summed up popular sentiment to mark the beginning of the march, headed by the famous Blas Roca Calderio construction brigade.

Slogans, placards, huge banners, effigies, photographs and diverse flags showed the creativeness of the people who came out for this show of national unity and fighting spirit in the face of the outrages of the US empire.

From abroad there were 1,600 young activists and revolutionaries, and modest workers who were able to travel to Havana thanks to their personal savings. Workers like Luis Delgado, Ana Viana and Ruben Ledesma from Uruguay who told *Granma* they had come 'because it was a dream to be here.'

Firat

The Combatants' Association

'Our army is the whole people of Cuba prepared to defend Cuba. We are internationalist. We fight for a just cause. We don't fight for money or riches of the country we go to' - member of the Combatants' Association in Caimito

The Combatants' Association in Cuba brings together veterans of the underground movement and the Rebel Army who fought the revolutionary struggle of the 1950s and of the Bay of Pigs in 1961, as well as those who fought in international missions in Angola, Ethiopia, Syria, Algeria, Yemen and more throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

These veterans are men and women who have defended the Cuban Revolution over the last 50 years and who have risked their lives to help those in oppressed nations fighting for liberation. Today those veterans are involved in the education and development of a new generations of Cubans, providing inspiration for the continuing struggle to build socialism against the threat of the US blockade and new internationalist missions.

The great respect and importance given to those in the Combatants' Association is a measure of how Cuba treats its people from cradle to grave. Hannah

Cuba represented true internationalism, while a representative from Barbados spoke movingly about the suffering caused in his own country by the 1976 downing of the Cuban passenger plane by Posada Carriles and his terrorist cronies.

The hypocrisy of the US keeping the Five in prison while releasing Posada was a recurrent theme and was stressed in the closing session by Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban National Assembly, who also affirmed the need for a campaign to increase international pressure in the build up to the next court hearing in Atlanta on 20 August.

Paul

Fighting racism

A UJC comrade in Havana

'When there was capitalism here black people like me couldn't study, and I study. Black people like me, when they were little, had to work. But for me the Revolution gave me the opportunity to study. Black people like me couldn't go to the doctor, but I can go whenever I want to. I don't have to pay one cent, that's the truth about Cuba. Yes, we've got problems, its a Revolution. it's a project that we have to carry on advancing till we reach perfection.'

Youth and organisation in Cuba

With young people in Cuba there isn't an anticipation of the worst. They don't wait for each other to make a mistake so that they can all laugh, and feel better about not taking the risk themselves. They are confident public speakers. It's not deemed as punishment to be cleaning the walls of their schools. They don't need to be immersed in consumerism in order to drown out the war chants of their generals and their leaders who are punishing Iraq. This is socialist Cuba, not imperialist Britain.

Their soldiers aren't occupying Iraq, Afghanistan or the North of Ireland. Cuban youngsters are taught about the role of imperialism in the Middle East at secondary school level. That Palestine is occupied by the state of Israel and that the oppressed people have the right to resist. Without question. They are taught why and how the USSR collapsed, from a socialist perspective.

They know that the free buses they take to school are 25 year-old, Soviet constructions. All well kept and in working condition. The uniforms they wear show their connection to the martyrs which their schools are named after, Che Guevara, Fabrizio Oheda, Vincente Perez Noa...

They are encouraged to explore their culture, their roots in Africa. The music which never stops, whether in a drumming performance, singing *guantanamera*, or in the huge rallies in their schools - on one occasion even waking our disciplined brigade at 6:30 in the morning.

The youth of Cuba have the opportunity to organise at every major level in their lives. The Young Pioneers, an organisation

of primary school children whose tasks include supervising national elections; FEEM, the middle school union; the university students' union, FEU; and the Union of Young Communists (UJC) with 609,000 committed members. The structures for young people to take part in their own development have tirelessly been refined since the beginning of the Revolution in Cuba and the fruits of this effort were clear to the RATB brigadistas from the outset. Membership of all these organisations is huge. Although the Cubans we met were keen to tell us that membership was not compulsory and that people were not isolated if they chose not to take part.

The Cubans are addressing the difficulties they face - at the beginnings of society, the youth. There aren't 'hoody bans' or dispersal orders, and authority doesn't embody oppression of youth activities. At the Yuri Gagarin, Secondary Experimental School, we were welcomed by a 24 year old black head teacher.

In Caimito, brigadistas met enthusiastic people who valued their unwavering rights to education, in contrast to the yearning for education of people from 'developing' countries. These students didn't have to walk four miles a day in the heat of the equator, to get to into classrooms of 30 pupils per teacher.

Probably the most striking aspect of the youth in Caimito, in schools and universities, is that they are fully aware that they are being prepared to shape their society. And it clearly empowers them. And there are no private schools where 'better off' children get 'better off' educations. This is socialism. **Ih-Tisham**

Committees for the Defence of the Revolution

In the first week of our Cuba brigade we visited a Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) in Caimito. These grassroots organisation are integral to democracy in Cuba and are the revolution's largest mass organisation. The CDRs were formed after the triumph of the revolution, to defend their local areas from counter-revolutionaries fighting against the fledgling revolutionary state. Today they remain at the heart of Cuban socialism.

A typical CDR consists of a branch based on a street, block or part of the countryside, in which the vast majority of Cubans over the age of 14 play a role. Each one gets together and democratically elects its leaders, who have a role to convey the worries and concerns of block members to their area's representatives in the Legislative Assembly of Peoples Power. They have a number of roles, some of which we saw during our visit. We spoke to the chairwoman and local people about their roles. As a collective of local people, the CDR is responsible for keeping the neighbourhood secure against crime and naturally occurring

problems. They work to organise people for mass rallies and countrywide efforts to achieve new goals, such as helping to distribute new light bulbs. After the fall of the Soviet Union, in the face of economic problems they helped to create collective gardens for the cultivation of food and medicinal plants. They regularly organise neighbourhood clean-up and repair operations, collecting recyclable materials and making sure the environment they live in is a healthy one. The CDRs are also actively involved in keeping their local members up to date with the provisions of the immunisation campaigns.

Another important responsibility of the CDR is culture. After our meeting the entire CDR came out to host a street party. Cubans of all ages danced and played music in the road - if that happened spontaneously in a working class area in Britain the gathering would be dispersed or ASBOed! The atmosphere of the night was amazing and helped us to see that the real fruits of socialism are not just in the economic and political liberation of the country's citizens, but also in community spirit and organisation. **Kyle**

Healthcare at grassroots level

Cuba's priority is improving society and the health and well being of all the people, as the brigade witnessed throughout our visits.

Maternity Home

In each of Cuba's 169 municipalities there is a Maternity House, a centre that ensures that every pregnant woman gets the best possible care and is dedicated to reducing maternal and infant mortality. All services provided by the Maternity House are free.

The family doctor (GP) and nurse work with the specialists to decide who needs the beds in the Maternity House. Women who live far from a hospital are admitted to the Maternity House in the last weeks of pregnancy to ensure safe transfer to hospital before the onset of labour. All women carrying twins spend the second half of their pregnancy at the Maternity House. If there are other children in the family, the father is given paid leave to care for them.

The doctor and nurse who showed us round their Maternity House in Caimito, commented: 'We are what we are because of the Revolution. The conditions for our grandparents were terrible. There was no chance to study. Now maternity care is all free. Before the Revolution that wasn't possible.'

Operation Miracle

The National Ophthalmological (eye surgery) hospital, Ramon Panda Ferrer, in Havana was the first centre for Operation Miracle, which since 2004, has restored sight to 500,000 people from 28 countries. This is the centre of a whole new expansion of ophthalmological services, not only internationally but also with the aim of training 1,000 ophthalmology specialists across Cuba every year. There are now ophthalmologists in every province in Cuba and the specialist development is taking place in forty selected centres.

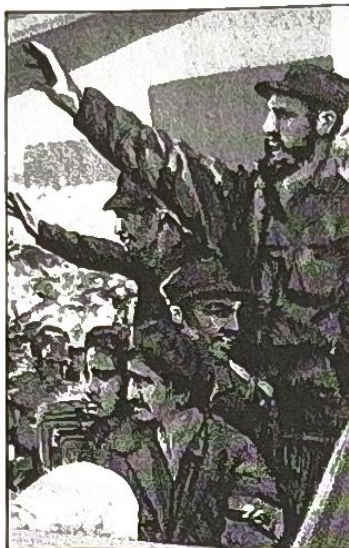


Proud brigadistas in Havana on May Day

Cuban revolutionaries are coming to Britain!

In February 2008 Rock around the Blockade will be touring Britain with two highly esteemed Cuban comrades, Rogelio Polanco, editor of the Union of Young Communists' (UJC) national newspaper Juventud Rebelde, and Orlando Borrego, a close collaborator of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. This is an opportunity not to be missed as the two are experienced communists with a wide knowledge about Cuban society and the process of building socialism. With extra fundraising there is also the possibility of bringing over a member of the Cuban Women's Federation, a revolutionary fighter in her own right, to enhance the speaking tour.

In Britain, a country which has grown rich off the backs of the oppressed people of the world, which is waging a brutal imperialist war on the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, which keeps masses of people in this country in poverty, and which uses racist legislation to attack refugees and asylum seekers, the voices of the future need to be heard. In Cuba a new society is being built. Socialism represents a challenge to capitalism and to warmongers like the British Labour government. People in Cuba live longer than people in poor communities in Manchester, Glasgow, Newcastle and Bir-



Che Guevara and Orlando Borrego

mingham. Education and health care are free and universal. In the last municipal elections in Cuba in 2005, 95.76% of people voted, compared with 36% in last year's local elections in Britain - Cubans have a stake in their system.

Orlando Borrego has written extensively about Che Guevara and his socialist theories. Che once said that the only way he and his comrade could be more alike would be if Borrego also had asthma! Rogelio Polanco is a key figure in the UJC and a regular contributor to the nightly round table political discussions on Cuban TV, as an expert on historical and current issues.

News in brief

Cuba vs EU imperialism

'We do not recognise any moral authority whatsoever on the part of the European Union to judge or advise Cuba.' This was Cuba's response to a document published by the EU on 18 June, which was billed as a step towards normalising relations with Cuba. It called for 'comprehensive and open political dialogue with the Cuban authorities on all topics of mutual interest'.

The EU still maintains the imperialist 'Common Position', which states that 'the objective of the European Union in its relations with Cuba is to encourage a process of transition to a pluralist democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as sustainable recovery and improvement in the living standards of the Cuban people.' European sanctions against Cuba remain 'suspended' but Cuba demands that they be dropped completely and the 'Common Position' be scrapped.

ALBA advances

It was announced recently that more than 650,000 people from Latin America and the Caribbean have had their eyesight restored thanks to Operation Miracle, an eye surgery programme developed by the governments of Cuba and Venezuela. As part of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), the operation is one of 32 programmes designed to further Latin American and Caribbean integration and provide important services to the poorest people of the region, who have long been denied of basic health care and education provision. ALBA, which now involves Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua, aims at extending to other countries the social gains made possible by Cuban and Venezuelan cooperation. Operation Miracle is one example, but the relationship has also involved the mass literacy campaign in Venezuela, and the brigades of Cuban doctors now also in Bolivia.

We will take the speaking tour to London, Nottingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Durham, Newcastle, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Portsmouth and anywhere we can. The work needs to be done now to ensure that we make the most of this momentous opportunity. Help us organise these meetings. Want to hold one in your community centre, college, university or workplace? Want to help us publicise a leg of the tour in your area? Then get in touch. Help us take the message to the streets: the Cubans are coming to Britain!

Yes! I would like to join Rock around the Blockade

- ☐ I would like to join RATB*
- ☐ I would like to be kept informed of RATB events by e-mail
- ☐ I would like to make a donation to support RATB's work
- ☐ I would like a copy of the pamphlet 'Revolutionary Cuba' (£2.95 + 80p p&p)

Name _____

Address _____

Tel _____ E-mail _____

Donation _____

*I enclose a cheque/PO payable to Rock around the Blockade for £10 waged/£4 low waged/£2 unwaged (please delete)
Please return to Rock around the Blockade, c/o FRFI, BCM Box 5909, London WC1N 3XX.



Vilma Espin, 1930-2007

Vilma Espin, the revolutionary leader of the Cuban Women's Federation (FMC) died on 18 June. Espin was a committed member of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee, and a member of the Council of State of Cuba. She played an active role in the 26th July Movement before the revolution, and was a founding member of the FMC, an organisation which has developed to include more than 3.5 million Cuban women. What she helped Cuba to achieve stands as an inspiration to socialists and oppressed people everywhere.

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