

The Trade Unions in Cuba

INTRODUCTION

In common with so many other aspects of its policy making, Cuba's approach to trade unionism has been in direct opposition to that seen in other countries of Latin America (with the recent exceptions of Venezuela and Bolivia) over the past two decades.

Owing to the adoption of neo-liberal policies, with their emphasis on 'flexibility' and de-regulation, the trend since the eighties in Latin America, in common with countries in other continents, has been to override workers' rights. Union membership is discouraged or banned - violently in some countries, such as Colombia where 164 trade union activists were murdered between 2004 and 2006. (1) As a result, large sections of the work force, such as agricultural labourers and workers in the *maquilas* (export assembly factories), are non-unionised and habitually receive low pay for very long hours in poor and sometimes hazardous conditions with no job security or welfare rights.

At the same time unemployment, brought about by demands from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for 'structural adjustment', has swelled the ranks of the armies of workers in the informal sector which includes casual work, such as street selling and domestic work. In 2004 this sector accounted for 46.7% of urban employment in Latin America (2).

In Cuba, on the other hand, employment policy is not left to market forces or external dictates. Indeed the national Labour Code legislation of 1984, and supplementary laws, comprehensively guarantee both workers' individual rights and collective rights. Legislation also guarantees workers the right to belong to a trade union as well as conferring the state with the responsibility for finding work for everyone over the age of 17, including people with disabilities, who is able and willing to enter employment. Since the nineties the voice of the trade unions has become an increasingly important component of the economic and political life of the country. The Labour Code is now being reformed to take into account the new economic circumstances that have raised the unions' profile and the unions are at the heart of the consultation process in the redrafting of this fundamental legislation.

(1) Quoted in the Amnesty International campaign leaflet for Samuel Morales, 2006.

(2) International Labour Organisation 2004 Labour Overview. See also *Silent Revolution* by Duncan Green, pp156 -159 publ. 2003 by the Latin American Bureau/Monthly Review Press. The author mentions how, at the time of writing, 60% of the workforce in La Paz, Bolivia, was in the informal sector – one trader for every 3 families.

TRADES UNION MEMBERSHIP

Of the approximately 4 million people who are economically active in Cuba, 98% belong to a trade union. In addition there are 250,000 pensioners who are union members.

The position of women, who make up 43% of trade unionists in Cuba was one of the subjects discussed at the XIX Congress of the CTC (3) which took place in September 2006. Women account for 58.9% and 53.6% of officials at regional and local levels respectively and the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for women, as well as the need to increase the provision of nursery places (*Círculos Infantiles*) for the young children of working mothers were highlighted as priorities in this area of the discussion at Congress. The introduction of styles of employment which allow women (particularly those in management grades) to balance responsibilities at the work place with those required in the home was identified as another issue to be addressed.

Congress also discussed the importance of incorporating young people more actively in the trade union movement so that they could play a more active part in union activities at the work place and as officials (4). In addition to the opportunities for extra training and education currently offered to young people with low qualifications (5), it was agreed that more assistance would be provided to young people as a whole to find work appropriate to their training and educational levels (4).

Finally, it should be added that the unions run special programmes to enhance opportunities for the disabled and other disadvantaged workers, including ex-offenders. (5)

In the UK, by way of contrast, in 2006 approximately 21% - around 6.5m - of the active population of about 30,000,000 - belonged to a trade union (6). Each year the figure decreases: in the autumn of 2005 membership (of employed people) was approximately 6.68m, while in 2004 it was 6.78m(7) In 1979, on the other hand, there were 13.3m union members in the UK. (8).

(3) Information from CTC website.

(4) <http://www.trabajadores.cubaweb.cu/xix%20congreso%20de%20la%20ctc/DOSSIER...>

(5) see (4): section 'Jóvenes Trabajadores', resolutions 1, 4 and 6

(6) Trade union membership figures from TUC website: www.tuc.org.uk/index.cfm.

Figures of the economically active population in the UK – 30,351,000 for winter 2005/2006 provided by <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=7942> Theme 'Labour Market', Labour Force Survey Table 42

(7) Figures from the yearly reports, Trade Union Membership 2005 (<http://www.dti.gov.uk/files/file2573.pdf>) and Trade Union Membership 2004 (<http://www.dti.gov.uk/files/file11427.pdf>) The 2005 reports shows how, in common with Cuba, within the British trade union movement female membership is increasing, accounting for 51.2% of the total membership. However in the UK just one in twenty of employed 16-24 year olds belongs to a trade union, the average age of a union member being 43.

(8) Will Hutton: 'The State We're In', publ. Vintage 1996, p. 92

THE STRUCTURE OF THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN CUBA

La Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (The Cuban Workers' Confederation)

The function of the Cuban Workers' Confederation (CTC) is roughly the same as that of the Trades Union Congress: an umbrella organization that campaigns and acts as a mouthpiece for the trades unions affiliated to it.

The CTC was founded in January 1939. In the 1940s it operated in favour of US interests and in the 1950s it came under the control of the Batista dictatorship.

With the 1959 Revolution the CTC was reorganised and since that time the organisation has played a major role in the economic, political and social transformation of the country. In common with its 19 affiliates, it has complete autonomy, being independent of the government, state and Communist Party although it accepts the leading role of the Communist Party in Cuba.

The organisation of the CTC at provincial level mirrors that at national level: there is a CTC office in each of Cuba's 14 provinces to which are affiliated the provincial branches of each of the 19 trades unions.

A Congress takes place every five years at which the main management committees are elected. These are the National Council, the National Committee and the Secretariat, which includes the General Secretary. It is at Congress that agreements are made about issues relating to workers' rights and working conditions. However prior to the meeting of Congress, workers around the country meet to evaluate proposals on the issues to be discussed.

The CTC also runs one national and 14 provincial training schools for training union officials.

Following the economic crisis of the Special Period, decision making and the running of industry have been decentralised. As a result there are close links between the CTC, central government and the councils of state to whom the agreements reached at Congress are communicated. Every six months the national leadership of the CTC, together with union leaders, meet with government ministers to evaluate the implementation of agreements and to discuss the main economic and social issues of the day, together with suggested policies. The CTC also reports back on government initiatives.

Finally, the CTC maintains links with over 200 trade unions in 125 countries.

Union Structure

In order to form a labour organisation in Cuba no statutory authorization is required.

Each of the 19 trade unions is autonomous with its own statutes, conditions of membership, funds, methods of functioning and contacts with sister unions in other countries.

They all operate at national, regional and branch levels and they represent non-members in the workplace, as well as their members. Membership of a trade union is not obligatory. Workers who choose to join a union pay 1% of their earnings each month. Members' subscriptions are the only source of funding for the Cuban trade unions and the CTC.

Involvement in union matters by the membership is actively encouraged and on average there is one union official for every six workers. All union leaders and officials, including the General Secretary, are elected by members through secret ballot. They are expected periodically to report back to the membership on their activities and can be made to stand down if their performance is unsatisfactory. Regular meetings are held between members of the Executive and workers and officials at regional and local levels to ensure strong links and clear communication. In addition there are plenary sessions held in different municipalities between the General Secretary and local branches of the union in question in order to ascertain the views of members with respect to proposed agreements and policies.

The trades unions at the workplace

In each enterprise there is one trade union which represents all the workforce. The local union organization based in the enterprise is known as a *Bureau*. The Bureau represents workers in dealings with management relating to collective bargaining agreements, disciplinaries and other matters of general concern. Each Bureau is subdivided into smaller units called *Sections* which are usually organised in departments or shops. The number of workers in a Section tends to be small (around 5 - 10) to enable a closer contact between union officials and workers.

In their report following a visit to various workplaces in Cuba in 2002, the delegation from the National Lawyers Guild and the US Health Care Trade Union Committee commented that at company level there is some flexibility in union structure, which can vary according to location, the nature of the enterprise and the number of workers employed there. However, whatever the

procedures and structures adopted, they are the result of an agreement reached between the unions (after consultation with the workers) and management and are legally binding (9).

The American delegation also found very high levels of membership involvement on a daily basis (10). For example, in the CUPET Oil Refinery in Cienfuegos, for 1063 workers there is a Bureau Executive Committee of 11 people, 125 shop stewards and 1 full-time officer. The Bureau is divided into 24 Sections.

Officials undergo training in order to perform their duties effectively. At the CUPET Oil Refinery all officials attend a one-week course on full pay to familiarize themselves with labour legislation, the procedures for complaints and disciplinaries and for health and safety.

Workers at an enterprise elect their union officials every 2½ years by secret ballot. The officials at Bureau level are professionals in the pay of the union. Section officials, on the other hand, are nominated by their colleagues.

Union officials at this level have a close working relationship with the management and meetings are usually held daily in order to discuss issues that require attention. In addition, mass meetings of workers (*asambleas*) are called by the unions on a monthly basis, at which all company plans are submitted for discussion. *Asambleas* are also convened in order to approve collective bargaining agreements.

THE ROLE OF THE TRADES UNIONS IN CUBA

The trades unions at national level

The trades unions make a major contribution to decision making in respect to the economic policy adopted by the Cuban government to counteract the effects of the US Blockade, in force since 1961. Their role in this sphere increased substantially during the early 1990s, following the collapse of the USSR and its allies in Eastern Europe and the intensification of the US Blockade in 1992 (the Torricelli Law) and 1996 (the Helms-Burton Law).

During this decade (known as the Special Period) Cubans found themselves isolated both politically and economically. In the early years of the decade the population experienced a

(9) 'Workers' Rights in Cuba', page 14

(10) 'Workers' Rights in Cuba', page 15 footnote 18

sudden deterioration in living standards as the country's ties with their former economic partners were broken: the range of products available diminished dramatically, there were food shortages, prices rose, fuel shortages led to blackouts, transport was reduced and the country faced economic collapse. GDP fell by 35% and the value of the national currency depreciated to 150 pesos to the dollar (11).

It was during the Special Period that the trade union movement organised workers' parliaments in workplaces around the country. In preparation for the CTC Congress, held in 1996, over 2 million workers discussed measures to deal with the economic crisis and to evaluate government proposals to that end. These were presented for consideration, first to Congress and then to the National Assembly, the Cuban parliament. This period of consultation which extended across all trades and areas of the country took almost a year. More than 167,000 suggestions were made. (12) Among the measures proposed were laws on monetary policy, taxation, budgets and pricing policies.

The National Assembly took these suggestions seriously, and many of them were incorporated into the legislation introduced subsequently. For example (13) in 1995, after submissions from the trades unions, the National Assembly voted to withdraw an early draft of the Foreign Investment Law that would have permitted workers to be hired directly by foreign enterprises. Instead, the decision was taken to oblige such enterprises to hire workers only through state agencies in order to safeguard their pay and working conditions. In 1996 the majority of workers rejected the proposal to tax salaries during this period of severe privation, although they did not discount the idea for the future once the economic situation had changed. As a result the National Assembly postponed the proposal. Similarly, as a result of country-wide discussions, a proposal that workers should contribute to the social security system was not implemented.

Other measures to deal with the economic emergency (14) adopted after consultation with the workers' parliaments and which were included in legislation approved by the National Congress included:

(11) Silvia Martinez – *'Cuba: beyond our dreams'*, publ. 2004, Editorial José Martí ,p.94

(12) National Lawyers' Guild report – *'Workers' Rights in Cuba'*, p.6

(13) Examples quoted in *'Workers' Rights in Cuba'*, pages 6-7

(14) Quoted by Mike Hemmings in his article *'Democracy and Trade Unions in Cuba'*
<http://www.poptel.org.uk/cuba-solidarity/CubaSi-January/TradesUnionsToday.html>

- The acceptance of a higher rate of unemployment of approximately 7% on the condition that workers who were laid off should receive unemployment benefit amounting to 60% of the wages they had been receiving while working
- The working week should be increased from 40 to 44 hours.
- Wages across the whole economy should be lowered, rather than allow widespread unemployment.
- Small-scale private enterprises should be allowed.
- Collective farms should be broken down into smaller co-operatives.
- New sectors, such as Tourism, should be expanded to give access to hard currency.
- People should be allowed to hold dollars legally and dollar shops opened.

Between 1995 and 2001 more than 150 agreements relating to around 100 subjects were adopted after consultation with workers ⁽¹⁵⁾. In 2001 the extension of maternity leave from six months to one year was considered. During the CTC Congress, following discussions among workers, the proposal was made that the year's leave could be divided between the father and mother or be taken by the father, if the parents so wished. This proposal became law. In the same year it was agreed, after country-wide discussion, that outstanding workers should receive material incentives or rewards and that closer links should be established between the leadership and the rank and file to allow evaluation of proposed agreements by union members. ⁽¹⁶⁾

Since the late 1990s a continuous process of consultation, involving the unions, legal specialists and the relevant Ministries, has been redrafting the 1984 Labour Code to incorporate subsequent labour laws and to adapt workers' rights to the economic changes of the 1990s. At key stages of the redrafting, the proposals have gone out to workers' mass meetings and to every level of the union movement for consultation and the multiple comments and proposals have been incorporated into the redrafting process. By the time the new Code is finally adopted it will have been subject to an extraordinary consultation process involving millions of workers

(15) Silvia Martinez Puentes, '*Cuba: beyond our dreams*', p.98

(16) NLG report '*Workers' Rights in Cuba*', page 7

and thousands of union leaders. In reality, the new Code will contain nothing that the CTC has not approved. The process of consultation, therefore, has become central to economic policy making in Cuba. It is widely believed that it is largely on account of such practices that the country has succeeded in overcoming the severe economic crisis it found itself in. Indeed, since the mid-1990s Cuba has experienced sustained growth from which the population as a whole has benefited. The economic outlook is increasingly optimistic. As a result, the XIX CTC Congress held in 2006, voted to raise the rates of basic pay (in addition to increasing productivity) in order to reduce the increased disparities that had occurred on account of some of the measures taken during the Special Period (17).

One can only compare this approach to solving a country's economic crisis with those adopted in other third-world countries where the recipes imposed by the IMF and the World Bank of structural adjustment, deregulation, privatisations and liberalisation have led to increased poverty and deprivation for the majority of the respective populations who have suffered increased unemployment, a casualisation of the work force, the growth of the informal sector, a marked deterioration of workers' rights, wages and conditions of work and increasing victimisation and marginalisation of the trade unions (18).

The role of the trades unions at the workplace

The relationship between the unions and management

The relationship between unions and management at the workplace is essentially collaborative. The National Lawyers' Guild report points out (p.8) that as management in Cuba does not have the task of safeguarding shareholder profits, their goals do not clash with those of the unions. Consequently "management and the union and the workers were perceived as partners, all working together toward the same goals" which "were articulated as enhancing both production and the workers' lives." In addition, the disparity that exists in most countries

(17) <http://trabajadores.cubaweb.cu/xix%20congreso%20de%20la%20ctc/DOSSIER...> Resoluciones: La organización del trabajo y los salarios. El perfeccionamiento empresarial. El ahorro y la eficiencia económica.

(18) Duncan Green: 'Silent Revolution', Ch. 6, p.157. See also the article published by CAFOD: 'The struggle for fair working Conditions'. http://www.cafod.org.uk/where_we_work/latin_america/mexico/the_struggle_for_fair... There are also numerous declarations by Juan Somavia, Director-General of the International Labour Office, which can be found on the Internet

between management and workers' salaries, which can create resentment and tensions, is not found in Cuba where the earnings differentials are far less marked. (19)

Traditionally in Cuba the relations between the trades unions and management have been agreed within the framework of the Labour Code. Since the Decree-Law 229 of April 2002, however, greater importance has been attached to collective bargaining agreements (*convenios colectivos de trabajo*) between the unions and management in each enterprise, including those set up with investment from abroad. In these agreements the rights and obligations of both management and workers are negotiated (always within the parameters of the Labour Code) with the unions and approved by workers in mass meetings.

These collective agreements cover employment contracts, systems of bonus payments, grading on the national salary scales, promotion procedures, the working day (the average working day in Cuba is eight hours), shift and rest patterns, health and safety at work programmes, training, social facilities and facilities for unions as well as facility time for union representatives. They also include production and performance targets and the development of a business plan, work clothes, transportation, care of the environment, job transfers, layoffs and grievance procedures (20). Other issues, such as maternity, pension and other rights, are set out in the Labour Code and are not negotiable. Union representatives and workers also participate in decisions relating to hiring, layoffs and retraining (21).

The CTC has prioritised the training of union representatives in negotiating and monitoring the collective agreements. The national and provincial union colleges have spear-headed a massive training programme involving thousands of local union leaders to ensure that the union role in the agreements is effective and independent.

These collective agreements have a duration of between 1½ and 3 years and are legally binding. In her study of the unions in Cuba (22), Debra Evenson describes how some bargaining

(19) *'Workers' Rights in Cuba'* quotes salaries of 400 pesos per month (approximately US \$20) for plant managers at enterprises they visited while "low end workers" earned 300 pesos, about US \$15. In addition many workers receive incentive bonuses in addition to their basic salary. These salaries should, of course, be seen in the context of the cost of living in Cuba where, for example, most people do not pay rent and those who do pay on average about 10 pesos a month (approx. US \$2.40). A month's generous electricity supply for a family costs around 70 pesos (approx. US \$2.90). Transport is very cheap, bus travel from one end of Havana to another costing just 0.20 peso, a fraction of one cent (US currency).

(20) quoted by Evenson in *'Workers in Cuba: unions and labour relations'*, pp. 21-22, published by the Institute of Employment Rights, Comparative Notes series, no. 7; also in *Workers' Rights in Cuba*, p.12.

(21) *'Workers' Rights in Cuba'*, p13

(22) *'Workers' Rights in Cuba'*, page 22

relating to industry-wide issues is carried out by national or provincial union leaders with the relevant ministry. The result is an agreement on measures applicable to every enterprise in the sector and this supersedes local agreements. In cases of collective bargaining within individual enterprises, the provincial office of the trade union in question helps with the final drafting of the agreement.

The US National Lawyers' Guild report describes a session the delegation attended at a sheet metal manufacturing enterprise in Havana in which the respective negotiators and their lawyers calmly explained their viewpoints without the tension and defensiveness of comparable negotiations in the US and were listened to politely by the other party.

Union representatives in enterprises have long been guaranteed the right to participate in management meetings (called the Assemblies for Economic Efficiency). However their rôle in this respect, together with that of the workers, was enhanced following the CTC Congress of 2006 which called for greater participation by workers and unions in the management of enterprises (23). In addition to management meetings, there are monthly meetings between management and the workers in which managers render an account to the workforce of their performance and workers can raise issues and grievances.

The resolution of conflicts and grievances

In Cuba importance is attached to ensuring fair treatment at the workplace for all workers, who are protected legally by statutory procedures in relation to disciplinaries and layoffs (24). Every work place has a judicial procedure in place for the resolution of conflicts. Grievances against individual workers are heard by arbitration panels - the Grass Roots Labour Justice panels (*Organos de Justicia Laboral de Base* or *OJLBs*).

Each panel is made up of representatives from three groups: a worker from the company, a management representative and a union representative who has been elected by the rank and file. The Chair of the OJLB is elected by the workers in the enterprise. The hearing is

(23) <http://www.trabajadores.cubaweb.cu/xix%20congreso%20de%20la%20ctc/DOSSIER...> Resoluciones: *La organización del trabajo y los salarios. El perfeccionamiento empresarial. El ahorro y la eficiencia económica.*

(24) Information from 'Workers' Rights in Cuba', pages 5-6 and CTC website - Introductory article: *La CTC*

held at the workplace in the presence of any workers who wish to attend. Under this procedure, workers who have been disciplined can challenge the panel's previous decision by filing an appeal. In 2003 there were 18,865 complaints heard by such committees, 98% of which were resolved at the workplace (25). In respect to disciplinary measures, there is a sliding scale from warnings to sacking an employee. In cases that reach the courts, it is the unions who pay for lawyers to represent the workers accused of misdemeanours.

Finally it should be mentioned that in Cuba the role of the trades unions goes beyond representing workers at the workplace. They are also concerned with the social and cultural welfare of their members. Assistance is provided if members experience personal or economic problems and the unions provide educational and cultural activities. Since 2000 the unions across the country, and especially the CTC's Movement of Retired Workers, have been central to the building of Cuba's University of the Third Age (26). This institution has grown dramatically and by 2007 the number of graduates reached 75,000.

TACKLING UNEMPLOYMENT

Despite the obligation of the state to find jobs for all people of working age seeking employment, since the Special Period there has been some unemployment in Cuba. In 1995 this rose to 8.1% of the work force (27), but by 2003 the figure had fallen back to 2.3% (28). In the context of Latin America to become unemployed usually means a descent into destitution and marginalisation as individuals or families gravitate to the shanty towns around large cities with the hope of finding some kind of work, usually in the precarious informal sector. In Cuba the unemployed are given special support: in addition to receiving state benefits, they are provided with help in finding new employment and the opportunity to attend vocational courses with a view to re-training. Within the CTC there are three secretariats, one of which deals with employment issues for young people. Since 2003 there has been a particular focus on young

(25) Article: '*Expresión válida de la justicia laboral cubana*' by Caridad Lafita Navarro on CTC website.

(26) See the article '*Education from womb to tomb*' by Dr. Steve Ludlam published by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign in its magazine *CubaSí*, Autumn 2005.

(27) '*Cuba: beyond our dreams*': pp.135-6; Evenson – '*Workers in Cuba:...*' p.16

(28) '*Cuba: beyond our dreams*': p.139

people who are unemployed or who have low or no qualifications for whom special vocational colleges have been established. These young people receive a living allowance while they are studying. At any one time there are over 100,000 young people in foundation courses leading to advanced or intermediate-level vocational studies (29).

In her article (30) about the more than 200,000 sugar industry workers who became redundant when the industry was restructured in 2002 following the reduction of the price of sugar on the world market, Caridad Lafita Navarro describes how the policy of the Cuban government was to ensure that no redundant worker would be left unprotected.

Prior to the closing of the less productive mills, discussions took place between the government, the CTC and the trade union representing the sugar workers, following which there were country-wide discussions involving over 900,000 sugar workers to explain the rationale behind the cut-backs and to seek suggestions from the workforce on how to tackle the problems encountered by those workers who would be laid off.

The result was a programme called *La Tarea Alvaro Reinoso*.

A commission was formed in each enterprise belonging to the sector comprising a representative from the management, the branch secretary of the union and three workers with a good knowledge of the industry. Every worker who faced redundancy was interviewed as many times as was necessary in order to find a suitable career path for that worker. A total of 187,053 sugar workers were interviewed of whom around 170,000 were found other employment. Of these about 72,000 were found work in stockbreeding. Other areas of work included agriculture, forestry and food production. Whoever did not find work was given the option of starting a course of study while receiving the average wage in the sector. Around 33,300 unemployed workers joined courses on these terms. Of these, over 15,000 joined university or pre-university-level courses. In each province there was a job centre set up to place re-qualified workers in employment.

Finally, those nearing retirement age took early retirement with enhanced pensions.

(29) Silvia Martínez Puentes, p.139 ; article on www.greenleft.org.au/back/2006/676/676p18.htm -

'CUBA: Socialist government guarantees workers' rights'; article on CTC website: '*Algo más que una aspiración*'
(30) '*Ningún azucarero cubano quedó desamparado*' published on the CTC website: <http://www.cubasindical.cu>

NEW DEVELOPMENTS: THE XIX CONGRESS OF THE CTC, SEPTEMBER 2006

At the XIX CTC Congress new policies relating to the trades union movement in Cuba were agreed upon relating to the unions' involvement in the defence of Cuba:

The hostile actions taken against Cuba by successive US administrations (31) has intensified significantly under the Bush administration which has nominated a US national (Caleb McCarry (32)) to oversee the regime change planned by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba formed by Bush in 2001 (33). This unwelcome development, together with memories of numerous other invasions and interventions by the super-power in Latin America and the Caribbean (34) and the more recent invasions and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, has led to a situation where understandably, in the view of the writer of this article, national security has become an increasingly salient feature of policy making by the Cuban government and public institutions.

It is for this reason that at Congress resolutions were passed in respect to the need for the workplace to play a greater role in the defence of the country (35). For this purpose it was decided that the CTC and the unions would work in conjunction with the military authorities at both national and local levels.

Among the resolutions passed it was agreed that:

- each workplace should be equipped to enable the workers to take part in the defence of the country, should the need arise;

(31) For a detailed account of US state-engineered or funded attacks, including terrorist attacks, against Cuba in the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s, see the article by Tom Engelhardt 'Cuba in the Cross-Hairs: A Near Half-Century of Terror'

<http://www.globalpolicy.org/empire/history/2003/1024cubachomsky.htm>.

For further information about the Blockade, together with the Torricelli and Helms-Burton laws, see the articles 'Why is the US blockading Cuba?' And 'How has the US trade & economic blockade affected the Cuban economy?' on the CSC website in the section *Cuba Factfile*. In the early 2000s the Chiefs of the US Special Interests Section in Havana, James Cason, followed in 2005 by Michael Parmly, broke with diplomatic protocol by their provocative statements, by financing internal subversion in a sovereign state and by their improper use of the diplomatic bag.

See <http://www.politicalaffairs.net/article/articleview/2446/1/137/?PrintableVersion=enab...>

(32) For further information about Caleb McCarry see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caleb_McCarry

(33) For further information about Bush's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba see the article by the Cuba Study Group of Santa Cruz County, USA: 'Guide to understanding "Report from the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba.'

<http://www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk/news.asp?ItemID=330> and the article in CubaSi published by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, Summer 2006: 'Bush's 'secret' plan for Cuba' by Steve Wilkinson and Natasha Hickman

(34) For further information about US invasions and interventions in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guatemala, Haiti and Nicaragua in the 20th century, see the article on the Global Policy Forum Website 'US Interventions Abroad – By Regions': <http://globalpolicy.org/empire/history/regindex.htm>

(35) <http://www.trabajadores.cubaweb.cu/xix%20congreso%20de%20la%20ctc/DOSSIER...> Resoluciones: La defensa de la patria socialista.

- workers would receive training in the use of weapons and in the manoeuvres required if hostilities take place; each person's duties would be decided upon collectively at workplace meetings;
- workers, together with the rest of the population would have to ensure that defence preparations and shelters were in good, working order.
- if members of the workforce were required to partake in defence activities, they would be replaced in the production and service industries by pensioners with experience in these sectors especially assigned to perform these jobs.
- the training of trades union officials should include the subject of civil defence.

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

International Labour Organisation

Cuba has ratified 87 out of 184 ILO agreements (2001 figure) and has the second highest number of agreements ratified in the Latin American region. In contrast, the US has ratified just 14 agreements. (36)

The question of the 'free' trade unions

Within the ILO Cuba has been criticised for contravening the ILO Convention 87 on the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise. Similarly, since the 1990s, ignoring all the rights and gains obtained by Cuban workers both at the work place and in the framing of legislation, the US has alleged a lack of union freedom in Cuba as part of its increasingly aggressive policy to undermine the Cuban state. More specifically, The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions has criticised Cuba for preventing the free formation of trade union organisations by denying registration to a handful of groups.

However, as Debra Evenson (37) points out, "Cuban law permits workers freely to form

(36) *'Cuba: beyond our dreams'*, p.99

(37) *'Workers in Cuba: unions and labour relations'*, p.11-12

trade union organisations and does not require such organisations to register with any state agency in order to function or to have legal personality.....” Indeed, none of the national unions in Cuba are so registered. Debra Evenson describes how “Cuban representatives have pointed out repeatedly that the Decree-Law 67 of 1983, which required state administrative bodies to consult with the CTC on labour issues, was repealed in 1994 and the current legislation does not specify that the CTC or any other trade union organisation should be consulted on issues relating to labour policy.” Therefore “Cuba has eliminated the legal barriers for the formation of a national trade union organisation parallel to the CTC.” (pages 11-12) Moreover, workers cannot be sacked because of their political and union activity and/or views.

In the case of the complaint registered by the ICFTU, the Cuban government has responded (38) by saying the groups referred to could not be identified as trade unions, being composed only of between 2 and 5 members with no apparent base of support at any one work place. Notwithstanding there was nothing to stop such individuals from organising to form a trade union.

The interference of the US in this issue is described in an article by Dr. Steve Ludlam (39) in which he deals with the case of the 75 Cuban ‘dissidents’ who were also described by the western media as “independent trade union leaders.” In this group were Cuban infiltrators who testified subsequently that all the members had been in the pay of the James Cason, Chief of the US Interests Section in Havana (2002-2005) at the time. One of the stated aims of the US since the Helms-Burton Law of 1996 has been to sponsor groups of individuals who will act in order to create the conditions to overthrow the Cuban state and this evidently supersedes any obligation to conform to international rules of diplomatic propriety. Indeed, in 2005 the new Chief of the US Interests Section, Michael Parmly, stated publicly that his mission was to lay the foundations for a regime change in Cuba (40). One infiltrator, Pedro Serrano Urrea, described how the ‘independent union’ group in Pinar del Río had been made up of small groups of three to five people who were not workers and whose aims varied from hoping to emigrate to the US by obtaining visas, to receiving gifts, such as computers or radios, or large sums of money. For its

(38) *Workers in Cuba: unions and labour relations* page 13

(39) *Cuba Sí*, published in the magazine CubaSí on 6 February, 2006.

(40) Article in Political Affairs Magazine *‘Provocations by US Interests Section Denounced in Cuba’*
<http://www.politicalaffairs.net/article/articleview/2446/1/137/?PrintableVersion=enab...>

part, the aim of the US Interests Section had been to create alternative organisations of 'independent' libraries, doctors' surgeries, pharmacies and farms in addition to trade unions, which included a Centre for Trade Union Studies. However the members of these groups were often the same people, many of whom belonged to three or four organisations. Pedro Serrano described how, instead of discussing trade union issues at the Centre for Trade Union Studies, the four to ten people who attended meetings - and who were paid for doing so - were being trained for the "so-called 'civil society' and for the 'Transition Period' to a 'Free and Independent Cuba..... To destroy the system, that was the bottom line."⁽⁴¹⁾ Books and leaflets were supplied by the US Interests Section. This training included plans for the use of violence.

CONCLUSION

Cuba's achievements in enforcing just and humane working conditions and pay, together with the participation of the work-force in the work place, can best be measured when we make a comparison with conditions that exist currently in other third-world countries.

An International Labour Office statement by its Director-General, Juan Somavia ⁽⁴²⁾, indicates that one half of all workers in the world - 1.4 billion people - earn less than US\$2 a day. He goes on to say that these people work in the informal sector with no benefits, social security or health care ⁽⁴³⁾ and that global unemployment "is at its highest point ever and continues to rise. In the last ten years official unemployment has grown by more than 25% and now stands at nearly 192 million worldwide, or about 6% of the global workforce." Of this number "the ILO estimates that 86 million... are young people aged 15-24. ⁽⁴⁴⁾"

(41) Quote from article 'Cuba Si'

(42) 'Dealing with the Global Jobs Crisis,' opinion piece by Juan Somavia, Director-General of the ILO, publ. 25 January 2006

(43) The same process is becoming more prevalent in the industrialised countries. A TUC report 'The hidden 1 in 5 - winning a fairer deal for Britain's vulnerable workers' (published 10 Sept. 2006) describes how over 5 million "vulnerable" non-unionised workers in the UK are earning below one third of the average wage, denied legal rights and having to work in insecure and unsafe conditions. These workers include temporary employees, migrant workers, home workers and those who work for cash in hand.

(44) Quotations from 'Dealing with the Global Jobs Crisis'.

In response, the International Labour Office, supported by the UN Economic and Social Council, has mounted a campaign to make 'decent work a global goal.' The campaign is defined as follows: (45):

Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

In this context it is apparent that Cuba's achievements in respect to the working conditions and rights of its working population stand out as being remarkable. If one adds the effects of the Blockade which has impeded so much essential economic activity and development for over four and a half decades, they appear to be little short of miraculous. In 2003 the United Nations' Human Development Index, which focuses on three measurable dimensions of human development – living a long and healthy life, being educated and having a decent standard of living - ranked Cuba at number 52 out of 177 countries and in the category of 'High Human Development' (the top 57 countries in the world) (46). In 2005 Cuba was the only country in the Caribbean whose HDI score had risen (47), bucking the reverse trend in economic and social development found elsewhere in the region (48). These figures are a testament to Cuba's stance against neo-liberalism and the seemingly uncontrollable power of the multinationals .

Yet Cuba receives virtually no recognition for its achievements by governments and the world's media who persist in their policy of defamation and silence, fearful no doubt of the consequences of public awareness of an ideology that guarantees the rights of workers in a full and practical sense. Nonetheless Cuba's example is not being lost to the millions of workers around the world who are suffering the insecurity and poor conditions as a result of neo-liberal

(45) 'Decent Work FAQ: Making decent work a global goal': http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/features/06/decent_qa.htm

(46) HDR 2005 Country Fact Sheets – Cuba p.1: http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_CUB.html

(47) *The Voice* newspaper, 13 October 2005.

(48) As well as in the Caribbean, this trend was particularly noticeable in Eastern European states and in Sub-Saharan Africa.

policies. In Latin America the popular movements that have emerged in Venezuela and Bolivia and that are expanding in other countries of the region testify to the hope and inspiration generated by Cuba to people living thousands of miles beyond its shores who have been abandoned to their fate. It is these people whose cheap labour fuels the engine of our neo-liberal global economy and who ultimately will determine our economic future; it is their experiences as workers that will influence their views and their actions as they look for alternative economic structures in their endeavours to secure a decent standard of living for themselves and their families.

Ultimately - whatever the designs of our politicians and the media - we will all be touched in one way or another by Cuba, that small Caribbean island's insistence on developing alternatives to the injustices of the powerful multinationals and the global neo-liberal economic system they hope to inflict on the world's populations.