

**"Colombia Peace Talks Advancing in Cuba:
Historic Opportunity to Negotiate a Lasting Peace"
Cuba and the U.S. Move Toward Normalized Relations**

**A report from the fact-finding and advocacy delegation organized by
the Alliance for Global Justice (AfGJ).
<http://AFGJ.org>**



The entrance to the Bay of Havana from Colonial Fortress el Moro.

April 11-18, 2015

The Alliance for Global Justice (AfGJ) was invited by the Colombian Permanent Committee on Human Rights to organize a delegation to Havana, Cuba April 11-18 in support of the Colombia peace negotiations which are taking place on the island. While the delegation was being organized, Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro announced steps toward normalizing relations for the first time since 1961. The delegation took advantage of this political opening to meet with a number of Cubans to talk about the economic and political implications of improved relations.

Who were the delegates?

Thirty-two persons with backgrounds in social and economic justice work participated in the delegation. The participants were from several U.S. states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania Oregon and Texas) as well as the countries of Colombia, Costa Rica and the US colony of Puerto Rico. In addition to AfGJ, delegates represented, among other entities, the National Lawyers Guild (NLG), the International Action Center (IAC), the Task Force on the Americas, and Agricultural Missions, Inc (AMI).

Background to the Colombian Peace Talks

The current Colombian peace negotiations formally began in October of 2012, after representatives of the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP) agreed on a framework to end the conflict and achieve a lasting peace. There are six agenda items: 1) comprehensive rural development, 2) political participation, 3) end of the conflict, 4) solution to the problem of illicit drugs, and 5) victims, and 6) implementation of the agreement. The negotiators have reached partial agreements on items 1, 2, and 4. The current round of negotiations is addressing items 3 and 5.

Who did the delegation meet with?



Rodolfo Benitez, Ambassador for Cuba as Guarantor country of Peace Talks.

The delegation met separately with negotiators from the FARC-EP and their lawyers, an official negotiator of the Colombian government, as well as the sub-commissions on gender and on victims. The delegation also met with ambassadors of the two guarantor countries – Norway and Cuba. As a result, the delegates are now informed about the process of the negotiations.



One of the two principle Colombian government negotiators: High Commissioner of Peace Sergio Jaramillo.



Members of the Gender Sub-Commission, including two members of the FARC-EP negotiating Team, Erika Montero and Victoria Sandino Palmero (2nd and 3rd from left).

Overall impression of the peace talks.

From our meetings with one of the two principal Colombian government negotiators, Sergio Jaramillo, the FARC-EP negotiators, the lawyers advising the FARC-EP, members of the Gender Sub-commission, and the guarantors from the Norwegian and Cuban governments, we were impressed by the duration and complexity of the issues being negotiated, as well as the hard-nosed persistence with which the talks are being pursued.

We came to understand that the Cuban and Norwegian governments have made a long term and expensive commitment to create favorable conditions for these talks, that the host country Cuba has taken on a very long-term commitment to do so, no matter the financial resources required, and that the support countries of Chile and especially Venezuela, that are named as accompanying countries to the peace process, have also contributed substantially to the process.

Venezuela's role was characterized as "key" by the guarantor countries. We observed that the comprehensive themes being discussed, and the detail with which they were being studied and negotiated, had the potential for transforming the root causes of the conflict, such as land concentration and land tenancy, and the mass use of violence as a political and economic tool in Colombian history. The negotiations were not shying away from the different world views behind both the Colombian government's actions, the role of the Colombian military and paramilitary forces, and the responses of the FARC-EP and of Colombian civil society in general.

We conclude that, despite the difficulties and remaining differences, these negotiations enjoy significant support from the executive branch of the Colombian government and from Colombian social movements and the FARC-EP. In addition, the Cuban government's commitment to hosting these talks as a neutral party is solid.



Mark Burton, AfGJ delegation leader speaking; Enrique Santiago, legal advisor for the peace process at left; FARC-EP Negotiators Jesus Santrich and Pablo Atrato; and Stephen Bartlett (AMI Staff person, acting as interpreter).

Historical Conflict and Victims Commission: Elaborating the Context of the Conflict.

A historical truth and victims commission constituted as part of these peace talks issued a report in February 2015 that goes into the antecedents, root causes and precipitating events preceding the more than 50 year-old conflict between the FARC-EP and the Colombian state. One of the FARC-EP lawyers reiterated many of these findings during the meetings held with our delegation.

Today, both traditional parties have united to a large degree in order to fend off the strong movement of dispossessed peasant organizations as well as the diverse social movements organizing for the transformation of Colombian society, in opposition to the long standing power of the Colombian oligarchy. During 1947, the social movements united and campaigned for the presidency of the Liberal party candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. This effort ended in a catastrophe for the country with the assassination of Gaitán in 1948, that began a wave of repression and murder known simply as "The Violence." A civil war ensued where nationalist elements of the

Liberal Party fought the oligarchy until the internal conflict died down in 1958. In the 1960s, U.S.-supported military attacks on the peasant movements, as well as the revolutionary movements and campaigns occurring around the world, particularly the example of the Cuban revolution, provoked sectors of the displaced peasantry to take up arms. In Colombia, some of these guerrilla forces would go on to organize as the FARC-EP.

The FARC-EP was founded in May, 1964 in response to a large scale military attack as part of the United States' plan LASO on 3 communities in the Department of Tolima. 48 farm workers retreated to the mountains of Tolima from the autonomous region of Marquetalia, and led by Manuel Marulanda Velez, formed the FARC-EP to defend the local peasantry against the attack of the 17,000 Colombian troops on their communities. These military operations were orchestrated against independent and autonomous peasant republics that had formed in response to ongoing repression. These military attacks as well as the formation of paramilitary organizations, had been encouraged by a 1962 US government commission headed by General William Yarborough that called for the creation of a "civil and military structure [to]...perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States..." Since that time the armed conflict has raged for over five decades in a contest in which neither side can achieve a clear and enduring military victory.

In the 1980s, another effort in the electoral sphere united under the Unión Patriótica. The FARC entered into a peace agreement with the President Belesario Betancur in 1984 which called for a cease fire and political participation by the FARC. The FARC, and other political sectors formed the Unión Patriótica (UP) which was a broad front encompassing the FARC, and many other sectors of Colombian Society. The UP did surprisingly well in the elections of 1986 and 1988 and a wave of assassinations began against the UP's Presidential candidates, elected officials, and members. It is estimated that some 5,000 members of the UP were assassinated, with thousands more forced into exile. At the same time a counter-insurgency strategy taught by U.S. advisors involved in the Vietnam conflict was employed, once again through the creation of paramilitary forces using brutal "scorched earth" tactics, which were tied to the Colombian military. Deepening conditions of social inequality, particularly the mass displacement of *campesinos* and *campesinas* from rural areas, led to a rapid expansion of the FARC, which eventually came to have strong influence and even control of an estimated 40% of Colombian territory. The rise of cocaine production and trafficking destined to the markets of the U.S. in particular complicated and financed the rise of the paramilitaries. The FARC-EP has a long history in support of crop substitution. Recognizing that coca growing is the only viable alternative for many peasant farmers it also taxes drug traffickers.

In the late 1990s, the U.S. Clinton administration and the Colombia Pastrana administration expanded the counter-insurgency capacity of the Colombian military with "Plan Colombia", under the pretext of the "War on Drugs." Since that time, under successive U.S. administrations, more than \$9 billion in U.S. aid has fueled the conflict, as Colombian presidents in succession have attempted unsuccessfully to defeat the FARC-EP militarily. Besides military incursions into FARC-EP territories and aerial bombardments, massive aerial fumigation efforts using glyphosate (particularly via the use of Monsanto's RoundUp Ultra) have been a principle tactic of destroying not only coca crops, but also the food crops that rural Colombians depend upon for survival, an ominous parallel with the "scorched earth" tactics of the Vietnam War.

The Brutal Facts: Victims of the Colombian Conflict:

Estimates of the victims of the conflict range from 1.5 million to over six million. More than 90,000 people have disappeared (18,000 under the past presidency of Alvaro Uribe during the implementation of "Plan Colombia", over 220,000 have been killed (80% of them civilians), and 6 million people have been internally displaced – the majority women and children. The U.N. has estimated that paramilitaries with ties to the government and transnational corporations, together with the military, are responsible for over 80% of the casualties.

One third of the land of Colombia is in the hands of cattle barons. In a population of 48.32 million, around 40% of the population lives in poverty with 65% poverty levels in rural areas, and 12 to 14% living in abject poverty. Many of these are land-poor and displaced rural peoples 6 million of whom have become refugees in their own country as internally displaced persons.



Isabel Sanroque, FARC-EP member of the Gender Sub-Commission that brought 60 Representative victims from Colombia to testify in Cuba.

The Dire Need for Rural Development and Transformation in Colombia:

One high priority of peasant populations has centered squarely on the question of rural development and the struggle to reverse land concentration into few hands by means of displacement, *latifundismo* and corporate land grabs, a position the FARC-EP has championed in negotiations. It is no accident then that the first partial agreement hammered out with the Colombian government at the beginning of these peace talks was the agreement on Comprehensive Rural Development. We were told that the FARC-EP insisted on this as the first agenda item to be discussed at the talks. On our delegation we quickly realized that the vast majority of members of the FARC-EP are from rural communities impacted by the violence and displacement.

What has been agreed to thus far, and what are significant issues that have been set aside “in the freezer” while talks continue?

Partial Agreements and “The Freezer” (a nickname, according to a FARC-EP lawyer and one of the FARC-EP negotiators, for agenda items where no agreement could be made in initial talks are put aside temporarily) (as of April 2015):

Since 2012, there have been three partial agreements completed, with the caveat that none of the partial agreements would go into effect until the entire package of agreements were passed at successful completion

of the talks. As mentioned above, partial agreements have been completed for 1) integrated rural development, 2) political participation and 4) the issue of illicit drugs. At present the themes of 3) end to the conflict and 5) victims (including a Historical Truth and Reconciliation process) were being negotiated. The theme of ending the conflict includes the notion of non-repetition, which addresses the root causes of the conflict in need of transformation to ensure that the conflict will not re-emerge at a later time. It also includes the pilot project in three locations in Colombia whereby the Colombian military and the FARC-EP are actively collaborating to remove land mines placed by either side as well as unexploded ordnance (much of the latter from bombs that the Colombian air force has dropped across the territories of Colombia). This program has recently been getting media coverage and is held up as a very hopeful development. The FARC-EP characterized these efforts as also important as a means of building trust between the Colombian military and the guerrilla.

The first partial agreement on integrated rural development is a 21-page document that deals in substantial detail with land tenancy and distribution, the secure return of the original owners to land, prioritizing land distribution to the most vulnerable rural populations, including the poor, women and children, and criteria for redistribution of state-owned lands and forest border areas, idle lands and lands “not fulfilling their social function.” In addition, there is an extensive discussion about basic social services that the Colombian government should provide in the rural sector, including health facilities, schools, roads and other necessary infrastructure. When questioned by our delegation, the Colombian negotiator Sergio Jaramillo confirmed that the Colombian State was committed to providing the resources to fulfill this agreement, even if the Colombian government had to raise the funds in order to do so. Unfortunately, the government has made, and not honored, such agreements in the past, so due diligence will be necessary in any agreement to assure enforcement of such provisions.

Our delegation did not learn specifics about the partial agreement on political participation, nor of how the question of illicit drugs would be dealt with but are available in Spanish at <https://www.mesadeconversaciones.com.co>.

- 1) **The issues set aside “in the freezer” are substantial** and will require, at a minimum, significant further negotiations. The following are issues we learned, that came up in the course of the talks, but had not yet been resolved:
- 2) The question of who, if anyone, should be punished for the massive victimization that this armed conflict has caused. Related to this is how “political crime”, i.e. “the right to rebel” can be differentiated from genuine “war crimes.”
- 3) The question of who should judge the crimes committed by the Colombian government and, by extension, the paramilitaries. So far, the Colombian government has held to a position that the military itself should be the judge of the crimes committed by the Colombian military, and not a higher civilian judicial body. The crimes of the paramilitaries, on the other hand, the Colombian government has allowed for their prosecution in civil courts.
- 4) The composition and purpose of the Truth and Justice Commission that has been proposed for clarifying the truth in terms of the victims of this conflict. In addition to the differences of position on judgment and punishment, it is not yet clear how this commission will be composed and what judicial and enforcement mechanism will be in place to follow up on evidence presented.
- 5) The cease fire question and on-going violence while the talks are taking place. The FARC-EP has declared a unilateral ceasefire that held solid until guerrillas of the FARC-EP killed 10 Colombian soldiers on April 14, they said, in response to aggressive maneuvers against them by the Colombian army. During a period of several months of the FARC-EP ceasefire, the Colombian government continued military operations against the FARC-EP, including bombardments of their camps, etc. Recently the Colombian government declared a one-month cessation of those aerial bombardments, but did not declare a full-fledged cease fire. There have been FARC-EP casualties all throughout this period. Our delegation found the argument compelling that the Colombian government should join the FARC-EP ceasefire to increase trust in the peace process and avoid bloodshed that could potentially arouse

dissatisfaction with the pursuit of a diplomatic solution. The Colombian government representative skirted this question, insisting that a Colombian ceasefire announcement was premature.

- 6) The question of the legality of a broad amnesty as proposed by the FARC-EP, for the guerrillas. The Colombian government has claimed that due to the existence of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Colombian government could not guarantee a blanket amnesty for members of the guerrilla. In addition, the Colombian government has insisted that FARC-EP members would necessarily need to be judged and punished, even if the punishments were "alternative" such as house arrest, etc. The FARC-EP, on the other hand, have insisted that the pursuit of justice cannot be narrowly focused on the guerrilla alone, since, they say, the Colombian government, together with paramilitary forces, have been documented by the United Nations to have committed more than 80% of the murders and human rights violations of the conflict.

The definition of "political prisoners." Many of the 9,500 Colombian political prisoners are people accused of being members of the FARC-EP who are community organizers, union representatives, civil society leaders, etc. and who were imprisoned on the pretext of their being collaborators with the armed actors of the FARC-EP and the ELN. However, we were told by FARC-EP delegates that the FARC-EP only recognizes 1,000 political prisoners as actual FARC-EP members, and the ELN says none of the political prisoners are from among their ranks. Popular movements in Colombia, as well as the FARC-EP, recognize three categories of political prisoners: prisoners of conscience; those imprisoned for political activities and arrested due to set-ups, false information and paid informants; and prisoners of war. The vast majority of Colombia's political prisoners are civilians from rural areas. Also in "the freezer: is question of the "false positives", dealing with the thousands of cases of killings of poor young men by the Colombian army which then cynically presented these victims to the public as guerrillas killed in combat.

An obstacle to the talks "Made in the USA."

The release of Simon Trinidad. Simon Trinidad is a FARC-EP leader who was captured in Ecuador on January 2, 2004 on his way to meet with James Lemoyne the UN Special Envoy to Colombia on a peacemaking mission. He was then extradited to Colombia where the Colombian government asked the United States to extradite him. The US refused as there were no outstanding charges. The Colombian government then trumped up charges of drug trafficking and hostage taking and sent him to the United States. The hostage taking charges were accusations based on association with the FARC-EP of holding prisoner U.S. citizens who were CIA contractors spying on FARC positions when their plane was shot down in an area where FARC-EP had tremendous influence. Simón Trinidad never met the 3 contractors, never spoke with them, and had no power over these mercenaries. After two trials Simón Trinidad was never convicted of drug trafficking. This intellectual leader of the FARC was convicted on the hostage taking charges by a shaky jury convicted him of one of 5 charges in the indictment, after two trials.

The charge of Conspiracy to Commit Hostage Taking was used and he was sentenced to 60 years in prison. The evidence was very weak but conspiracy charges are notoriously broad under US law. Today Simon Trinidad remains behind bars in Florence ADX SuperMax facility in Florence, Colorado, USA, where he suffers extreme isolation and is held virtually *incomunicado*. The FARC-EP have stated that the release of Simon Trinidad is a prerequisite for the successful completion of the peace negotiations. Simon Trinidad is an experienced negotiator with experience in the previous peace talks at San Vicente del Caguan under the administration of Colombian president Andres Pastrana. When questioned on this issue by our delegation, the Colombian negotiator Sergio Jaramillo said that the Colombian government is in agreement with the FARC-EP that Simon Trinidad should be released. He acknowledged that the sticking point on this question was "in Washington D.C." He was interested to learn that our delegation leader Mark Burton, was in fact Simon Trinidad's lawyer, and met with him following our meeting. This agreement by both parties in the talks opens the door to a potential resolution of this obstacle, so that Simon Trinidad could ultimately be released and join the negotiating

team of the FARC-EP in Cuba.

The Gender and Victims Sub-Commission:



Members of the Gender Commission

Our delegation met with 7 members of the gender and victims sub-commission, two of whom are also members of the FARC-EP negotiating team. It should be noted that the existence and work of such a group in peace talks may be historic. This sub-commission has been instrumental in linking the Colombian peace talks in Cuba with civil society organizations in Colombia concerned about the root causes of the conflict. They have helped bring 60 representative victims of the conflict to Cuba to provide testimony. In Colombia in parallel to this process in Havana, there have been numerous meetings and forums in many different regions of Colombia where victims have given their horrific testimonies. All accounts both by the FARC-EP and the government negotiator we met with are that these testimonies were “powerful” and injected a great deal of seriousness and gravity to the talks as a whole. The government negotiator claimed that this was a first opportunity for the FARC-EP to see the victims of their actions face to face, but did not mention the opposite phenomenon, of the government hearing the testimonies of victims of state violence and state-tolerated or coordinated violence by the paramilitaries.



AfGJ Delegation members Martha Grevatt and Berta Joubert-Ceci (from Puerto Rico) pose with Victoria Sandino

The job of the gender sub-commission is to “review” the 3 partial agreements and future agreements from a gender equity perspective, and also to make proposals through the FARC-EP delegation to the talks on any of these agreements. The inclusion of the human rights issues surrounding women victims of the conflict, as well as people of diverse sexual orientation (the LGBTI community) has been dynamic and forward-thinking. It was stressed by the women we met with that there needed to be a redefining of the “security policies” of the Colombian government. The women asserted, and this was repeated in the meeting with the full FARC-EP negotiating team, that the Colombian government has a doctrine of the “enemy within.” This doctrine, they explained, justifies the identification of “internal enemies” of Colombia, a doctrine that historically was “anti-communist” and today has been renamed as “anti-terrorist.” To transform this doctrine, the FARC-EP has proposed a Constitutional Assembly to be convened to revise and rewrite the Colombian Constitution, recognizing that there are many good things written “in ink” in the current constitution that have never been enforced or respected.

Conclusion on the Colombia Peace Talks:

The delegation was unanimous in supporting the on-going peace talks taking place in Cuba. We applaud the efforts of the Norwegian and Cuban governments to provide a safe and neutral venue for such talks, as well as the support of the Venezuelan and Chilean governments. We are encouraged that the Obama administration has appointed a special envoy, veteran diplomat Bernard Aronson, to report back on the negotiations. Along with the world and with the majority of Colombians who have been polled, we support the continuation of these peace negotiations for as long as it is necessary to overcome the obstacles and differences between the parties in conflict. We were grateful that both the government negotiator and the FARC-EP delegation were willing to take the time to provide their perspectives on the talks, as well as the Gender and Victims sub-commission.

We are committed to educating people in our own communities and nations of the importance of these talks for the future of Colombia and indeed, of Latin America as a whole. We are encouraged that themes directly impacting upon the civil, economic and human rights of Colombians are being discussed at such length and that partial agreements are emerging from those talks. We agree that dealing with the root causes of the conflict is absolutely necessary in order to avoid the repetition of the conflict. We further agree that the U.S. government should not replicate its past role of putting up obstacles and indeed undermining peace in Colombia. Given its role in prolonging the oldest civil war in the world, the U.S. government should provide funds needed to demobilize combatants on both sides and enable their reintegration into civilian life through provision of land, homes, and jobs. The U.S. should also provide financial support for profound land reform measures and environmental recovery from U.S.-mandated defoliant spraying of peasant coca fields.

Cuba Meetings

Background:

On December 17, 2014, after we had already announced our delegation, Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro announced they were beginning discussions aimed at normalizing diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba – a condition that has not existed since 1961. They also announced the exchange of the three remaining Cuban Five political prisoners in the U.S. for USAID contractor Alan Gross and a previously undisclosed U.S. spy jailed in Cuba.

In January 2015 an executive order was published easing the travel ban that has been an important aspect of the U.S. economic blockade. Group travel to Cuba under a “general license”, instead of a “special license”, means that groups no longer need prior permission from the Treasury Department, though their activities must still fall

into this broader list which includes: education, cultural exchange, and people-to-people, among others. The ban on individual travel to Cuba remains in effect.

Notwithstanding, Americans are not all waiting for individual tourism travel to become legal; the island has been inundated with tourists. Our group's food, hotel, transportation and Cuba-related itinerary were handled by the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP).

Program:

We were met on our first day by Ramon Labañino, one of the released Cuban Five political prisoners. Delegation members Walter and Kay Tillow had taken care of Ramon's family while he was incarcerated in Kentucky and Georgia as well as Fernando González' family during the time he was incarcerated in Indiana. AfGJ's Chuck Kaufman also had the honor to help take care of Fernando's mother and sisters when they were granted visas to visit him several times while he was incarcerated in Safford, AZ.



Cuban Five hero Fernando Gonzalez, Mark Burton, Chuck Kaufman, and Kay Tillow.

Fernando González, who is vice-director of ICAP and other members of ICAP's leadership, provided us with an overview of Cuban reality and recent political developments. Of his incarceration in the US, Fernando denounced the months that the Five were held in solitary confinement, calling it a violation of human rights. He also said he was shocked by the level of poverty he observed while being transported from detention at Safford to Phoenix, AZ for his flight home in February 2014.

In response to a question about the effects of normalizing relations, Fernando said it is clear to the Cubans that the goal of the U.S. is to change the political system in Cuba and that this policy change is occurring due to the failure of the policy of isolation and embargo. He emphasized that the changes will not lead to a McDonald's on every corner and the elimination of their own culture. He summed up by saying, "We will listen to more rock and roll, but we will continue to dance salsa!"

We received an overview of economic challenges with a representative from Hugo Pons Duarte, an economist with the National Association of Cuban Economists (ANEC) and also were able to go into more depth on the forthcoming economic changes during a meeting with an economics law professor at the National Association of Cuban Jurists (attorneys). They both discounted the McDonald's/Starbucks phenomenon by explaining that the foreign investment law is for 246 specific projects within the Special Development Zone to be built at the port of Mariel outside of Havana. This project aims for \$8.7 billion in foreign investment and the port itself will be able to receive the new larger Panamax ships.

The projects open for foreign investment focus on diversification of markets and exports of all types, including natural resources and petroleum products. We were told that Cuba presently imports approximately \$2 billion a year for food. There is also a priority for foreign investment in agricultural production and added values technologies to achieve food sovereignty. The Cuban government is aware that it is essential to raise salaries and people's purchasing power, at the same time to increase efficiency and to prioritize increasing production for their main industries. Their goal is full employment with decent work conditions, but they are also very concerned about the very low population growth that will result in more retired workers than new youth entering the work force by 2021.

We were told that delisting Cuba from the U.S. terrorist list – which happened while we were in Cuba – will open the doors for more foreign investment in Cuba. Congress has 45 days (from date of publication) to object to lifting the classification. The U.S. right has expressed strong opposition but recognizes that it doesn't have the votes so even anti-Castro Florida Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen has dropped her opposition to Obama's action.

The economic embargo remains intact, and it was clear that Cubans want those of us in the U.S. who support peaceful relations to launch a strong campaign (similar to the campaign to Free the Five) to terminate the unjust and universally condemned blockade/embargo. This requires an act of Congress, so we have our work cut out for us. However, significant pressure on the Obama administration to normalize US-Cuba relations comes from U.S. economic interests, who are not direct parties to the lucrative Cuban trade agreements granted to European, Asian and Latin American actors. U.S. corporations are chomping at the bit to make profits in Cuba. So, as progressive advocates who support Cuban socialism, we are going to have some strange bedfellows in this struggle.

Delegation members expressed concerns that labor rights might erode as foreign investment increases. Certainly this has happened in other regions where sweatshops, labor abuses, and environmental destruction go hand in hand with foreign investment.

We learned at the Cuban Workers Central (CTC), the national union federation, that there are unions organized in 17 sectors dispelling some of the disinformation propagated in the U.S. about Cuba. Some of us had been falsely told that in Cuba there are no unions and that workers don't have the right to strike. In fact, the CTC has 3.5 million members, including 5,500 union staffers, who pay dues that support the CTC without government funding. All leadership, from top to bottom, is elected by the workers. The CTC itself is 20 years older than the 1959 Revolution.

We were told that there is no Cuban law against strikes, however, none have occurred since 1959 because there are effective alternative mechanisms for resolving labor-management conflicts. Depending on the sector, worker assemblies are held every one to three months. Management must be present and report to the workers on the state of the enterprise, as well as listen to complaints and report back on how concerns from prior assembly were acted upon.

The CTC takes the complaints that remain unresolved to the appropriate ministerial agencies, for example,

to the Health Ministry if the complaint is health related. An example was given of a manager who refused to resolve a problem and was fired by the Labor Ministry as a result. It may be hard to believe, but socialism really is different than capitalism!

The CTC told us that private employers must pay at least 200% of the minimum wage and give workers at least one day off per week. Also, companies investing in the Mariel Special Development Zone will not be able to bring in foreign workers except for some technical experts. Since Cuba has an educated workforce, the foreign technical experts will be few and temporary.



The incorrect premise that the Cuban government is a dictatorship and that there are no elections is absolutely false. Cuba seems to hold more elections for diverse positions in all sectors than we do in the U.S. or any other “democratic” country. The ancillary lie is that, okay, they have elections but they don’t mean anything because only members of the Communist Party are allowed to run. False again.

Although many candidates are members of the Communist Party, it is not a requirement but a result of the fact that the most respected members of the community, those who volunteer the most in the community, are the most likely to be nominated for Party membership. Our guide told us that he was nominated for the Party, but opted not to join because 1) he hates meetings, and 2) Party members are expected to put in lots of volunteer hours.

Cuba held elections for the national legislature and municipal offices on April 19th, the day after the delegation ended in Cuba. Chuck Kaufman reported that he read in a brief article published by the Tucson Daily Star the next day that two opposition candidates in one of the municipalities had lost their bid for election. It is very unusual for a little bit of truth like that to slip into the U.S. corporate media.

We asked for a meeting with the U.S. Interests Section. Since we don’t have diplomatic relations, neither country has an embassy in the other, but rather an *Interests Section* nominally under the legal aegis of the Swiss government that acts as intermediary and owns the property where the US Interest section is located in Havana. The U.S. Interests Section limited our group to only twelve participants “due to their great demand for

meetings”. Those who participated were disappointed in the content of the discussion, as the group was met by the US Consul General, Timothy Roche, rather than a political or economic delegate and was combined with another US delegation sponsored by Fullbright and Global Exchange.

We were told that they were hopeful and prepared for the transition to a US Embassy, with letterhead and signs and all materials necessary. At present, the \$20 million allotment for Democracy Promotion in Cuba is being spent in South Florida for Radio Marti, etc. rather than Cuba “benefitting” from USAID. Roche also said that return to Cuba the US base and prison at Guantanamo was “not on the table.” On a personal note, he told us he was sorry to end his 3 year term in July, that his family, wife (also employed at Interest Section) and 2 children, had an excellent quality of life in an atmosphere without crime or pollution and his children were well integrated into local population, with Cuban friends and involved in the soccer team, etc., while in other posts the requisite high security for US diplomats limited their movements and daily lives.

We had several other substantive meetings, one with the director of ELAM, the Latin America Medical School where Cuba trains international medical students as part of their international solidarity, mostly from Latin America and Africa, but also trains US students, predominantly African-American and Latin American students free of cost. Each year there are 1200 – 1300 new students. As of 2015 students from 93 countries have attended – all expenses paid, including small stipend in Cuban pesos. The US medical students are supported by the non-governmental organization Pastors for Peace. Today in Africa there are 2,000 Cuban doctors and 1,000 ELAM African graduates providing preventative public health services to poor communities.

We had a meeting with Cuban athletic trainers at Cerro Pelado, an important Cuban sports training center for the training of national athletes for international competitions. And on our last day we traveled to the outskirts of Havana to meet with an agricultural cooperative.

While in Cuba we also were tourists, visiting the oldest Spanish fort in the Americas, taking a walking tour of Old Havana and other sightseeing and cultural events.



