



# Valuing Education



**REPORT OF THE 2016 NUT DELEGATION TO CUBA**



# National Union of Teachers Cuba delegation Schedule Saturday 22 October – Sunday 29 October 2016

The delegation took place over  
October half-term

## 22 OCTOBER: TRAVEL FROM UK TO HAVANA, CUBA

### SUNDAY 23 OCTOBER

- Delegation Briefing
- Orientation: historical Walking tour of Havana
- Orientation: Museum of the Revolution
- Orientation: Plaza de la Revolution

### MONDAY 24 OCTOBER

- Visit: Cesareo Fernandez Primary School
- Visit: Manuel Bisbe Secondary School
- Visit: Manuel Saumell Specialist Music School
- Meeting: CDR neighbourhood organisation

### TUESDAY 25 OCTOBER

- Visit: Abel Santa Maria Special School
- Visit Literacy Museum
- Meeting: SNTECD teachers' union national leadership
- Meeting: NUT-supported English teaching exchange



### WEDNESDAY 26 OCTOBER

- Transfer to Pinar del Rio province
- Visit: Pinar del Rio University
- Meeting: SNTECD local organisation
- Meeting: CDR neighbourhood organisation

### THURSDAY 27 OCTOBER

- Visit: Pinar del Rio Specialist Art School
- Transfer to Havana
- Executive meeting with SNTECD

### FRIDAY 28 OCTOBER

- Meeting: Federation of Students (FEU)
- Meeting: Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP)
- Meeting: Cuban Federation of Women (FMC)
- Depart Havana

### SATURDAY 29 OCTOBER: ARRIVE UK



## Delegates

**Kiri Tunks** (Vice-President/East London)  
**Dave Harvey** (Chair, International  
Solidarity Committee)  
**Mari Burton** (West Sussex)  
**Shana Carquez** (Sutton)  
**Tom Collins** (Northamptonshire)

**Ricardo Ferreira** (NE Hampshire)  
**Sandra Hall** (Hackney)  
**Dr Dorothy Higgin** (Norfolk)  
**Alixandra Lewis** (Norfolk)  
**Gawain Little** (Oxfordshire)  
**Thomas Millard** (Thanet)  
**Maggie Morgan** (West Sussex )  
**Niparun Nessa** (Rochdale)

**Karen Parkin** (Wigan)  
**Susan Piper** (Tameside)  
**Carole Regan** (East London)  
**Ann Seuret** (West Sussex)  
**Chris Smith** (Norfolk)  
**Kyra Williams** (Southwark)  
**Bernard Regan** (Cuba Solidarity  
Campaign)



# Our aims and findings

**IT WAS AN ABSOLUTE PRIVILEGE to lead the delegation of 20 classroom teachers and NUT members on an official delegation to Cuba as part of the Union's broader international focus.**

The initial aim of the delegation was to explore how Cuba had achieved the Millennium Development Goals, many of them before they were set, especially Goal 2 on universal primary education. This has been achieved in spite of a US blockade still in place after 60 years and, according to the World Bank, is in stark contrast to most other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

It was immediately clear that education is the highest priority in Cuba with a 13% share of the country's GDP, as compared to 6% in the UK. Every school, college and workplace that we visited we found an absolute commitment to the educational achievement of everyone, whatever their circumstance or ability. This was reflected in the integrated way that health and social care systems worked with schools to remove obstacles to progress, and the entitlement of parents to paid time off work to have regular meetings with teachers.

The breadth and depth of the curriculum was apparent with students enjoying a wide range of subjects and experiences with the arts and music held in obvious esteem and a clear commitment to citizenship and PSHE. Delegates were very impressed with the educational attainment of the students we met, with some classes working 1-2 years ahead of our own.

Perhaps the most striking difference was the status given to the professionals working in the education system where high quality training is a key factor in maintaining a skilled and knowledgeable workforce. Teachers are seen as the experts in their field and they are fully consulted about any changes to the curriculum or education policy. In fact, any such changes generally come from 'below' through school and union fora. Teachers and students are represented at every level of decision-



making from school councils up to parliament itself.

This is in direct contradiction of how education is going in the UK, and globally, where the Global Education Reform Movement steams steadily ahead turning education into a business reliant on high stakes testing, privatisation and casualization. It is nothing short of amazing that a country under such economic restrictions is able to provide an example for the rest of the world.

We didn't expect to visit Cuba and feel somewhat embarrassed. But that is what happened.

We quickly realised that we had so much more to learn from them than they from us. But we are quick learners. We have returned, renewed and energised to fight for an education system that puts children at its heart and that respects and empowers its staff.

As one of our delegation remarked, "If they can do it in Cuba, what's stopping us from doing it here?"

**Kiri Tunks**, Vice President NUT



## DELEGATION FINDINGS

**The following factors contribute significantly to the high standards and achievements of the Cuban education system:**

1. Education is given top priority in terms of resource allocation and public policy.
2. Students follow a broad and balanced national curriculum with arts, physical exercise and humanities allocated significant time.
3. Teachers are highly qualified and have significant input into the design of the system at local and national levels.
4. The system is student-centred, involving students in making decisions about their learning from an early age.
5. Equality and diversity are central in terms of attitudes toward staff and students.

We believe that these five factors pose significant challenge to the direction of travel of education policy in England and Wales, and in many countries internationally.

It is imperative that policy-makers and teachers themselves engage with the lessons from Cuba's successful education system.



A Cuban billboard reads 70% of Cubans have been born under the blockade



## National Context

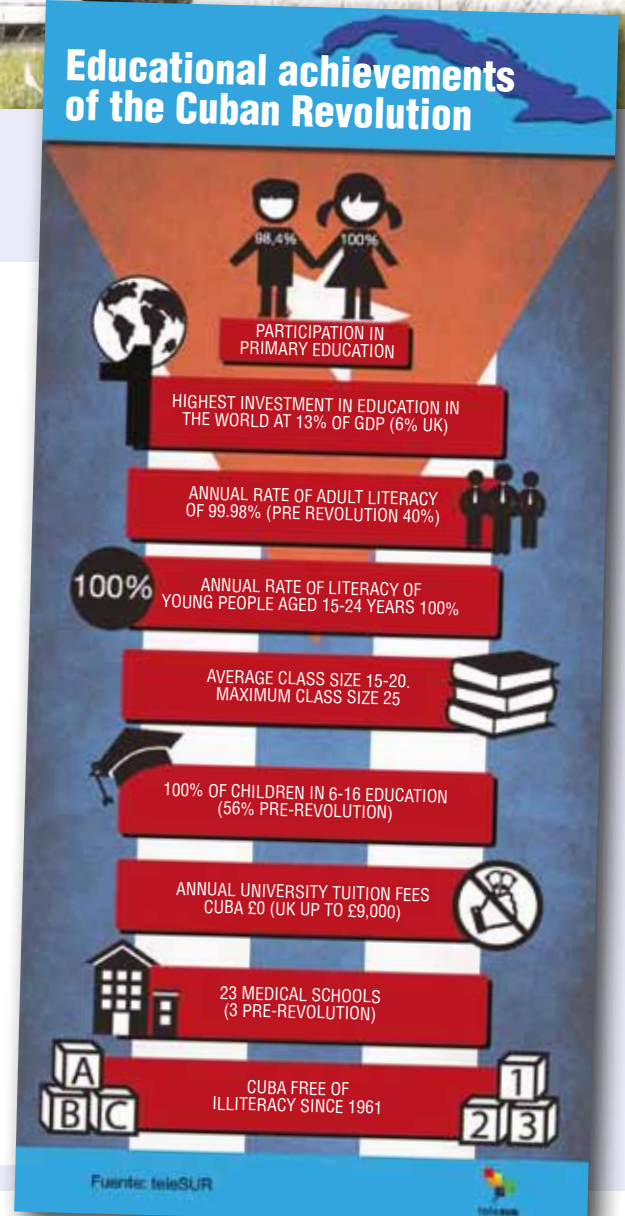
**ALL SCHOOLS IN CUBA are state-funded and run by municipal government as part of a national education system.**

Cuba has a three-tier system of government. The National Assembly, which has responsibility for approving legislation (including education policy) proposed by the Council of Ministers, is elected on a five-year cycle. This is the same for the 16 Provincial Assemblies. Municipal Assemblies are elected every two and a half years. Nominations are made at community meetings in each neighbourhood and, for the Provincial and National Assemblies 50% of seats are also nominated from the mass organisations.

Elected representatives are released from their job for the duration of their term of office and continue to receive their working wage. There are no separate parliamentary or ministerial salaries in Cuba. Representatives must hold 'accountability' meetings for their constituents at least once every six months and are subject to recall at any point by a majority vote at one of these meetings.

In addition to the local, provincial and national assemblies, Cuba's mass social and grassroots organisations have a role in policy-making and implementation. These organisations include the Cuban Workers Federation (CTC), the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), the University Students' Federation (FEU), the Secondary School Students' Federation (FEEM), the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) and the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, community organisations (CDRs). As part of our delegation, we were welcomed to two of these CDRs, which bring together residents in every neighbourhood in Cuba and involve them directly in the policy-making process.

### Educational achievements of the Cuban Revolution





# The Cuban Education System

**THE CUBAN EDUCATION system evolved rapidly following the 1959 revolution.**

Prior to that, over 40% of the population was illiterate and only a minority of children attended school. Illiteracy was all but eradicated in 1961 and this was followed up with a campaign for every citizen to achieve 6<sup>th</sup> grade (the equivalent of primary) education.

The current system is divided into four main phases:

- pre-school – children can attend pre-school from the age of 6 months. The pre-schools are jointly governed by education/childcare professionals and parent committees.
- primary school – children aged 6-11 cover a common curriculum including Spanish, maths, history, art, music, dance, physical education, gardening and health & hygiene.
- secondary school / pre-university – children aged 12-16 cover a common curriculum for the first three years then continue either into pre-university education or technical/professional training for the last years of secondary school.
- university / technical college / adult education – Cuba offers a wide range of post-compulsory education, including undergraduate and postgraduate courses at one of the island's universities or distance-learning institutions. It is not uncommon for Cubans to combine work with study and every worker has the right to paid time off to further their education.



Education is fully government-funded at all levels and provided free of charge from pre-school to university and adult education. The Cuban government allocates 13% of its annual budget to education, the highest level of funding of any country in the world. The target class size in primary schools is a maximum of 20 – achieved in 93% of schools. Where classes exceed 20 there are two teachers.

Every class is taught by a qualified teacher. Teaching is a graduate profession but many teachers have masters-level degrees (42%) or doctorates in education. Professional development, including at masters and doctorate level, is free of charge and teachers are given release time in order to study.



# Valuing Teachers



## Teachers Evaluation

Teacher evaluation in Cuba is carried out through peer observation. Student assessment data is not used to judge teachers. Teachers are observed at two points during the year, in the spring and summer terms, and given one of four grades overall. The observation is carried out by colleagues working under the guidance of a local team of teachers.

Any dispute over the grading is taken to an appeal panel with equal numbers of union and teacher representatives. If a teacher receives an unsatisfactory grade, their teaching load is reduced and they are given additional planning and preparation time with a mentor until their performance improves.

The system relies on professional pride (and a small financial incentive for teachers who achieve the top grade), rather than punishing failure, in order to improve teaching. This is reinforced by a series of local, provincial and national awards for teachers who show outstanding practice, and the opportunity to act as mentors to other teachers across the system.

**TEACHING IS A HIGH-STATUS occupation in Cuba. The government gives a high priority to education and this comes across clearly in the attitude towards teachers in society in general and in schools in particular.**

Teachers are highly-qualified and have a high level of professional autonomy, exercising professional judgement over curriculum, assessment and planning the school's schemes of work together.

There is one united teachers' union in Cuba, the National Union of Education, Science and Sports Workers (SNTECD), which grew out of the pre-revolutionary teachers union and was formally established in 1962. Membership of the union is on a voluntary basis and its work is funded solely by member subscriptions. The union is organised on the basis of workplace branches and holds an annual policy-making conference. Between conferences, the union is led by an elected Executive, Officers and General Secretary.

Elected officials up to and including the General Secretary are released from their teaching posts to take up their elected role and continue to receive their teachers' salary. There

are no additional payments or salary for union work.

The teachers' union is involved in the policy-making process at local, municipal and national level. A great example of this is the process of curriculum reform which was taking place in Cuba during our delegation.

The reform process begins with the teachers' union initiating a discussion in the workplace branches to generate proposals which are discussed by the Council of Ministers and form the basis of legislation. This legislation is then put back to the union, as well as the other mass organisations, including the School Students' Union, University Students' Union, and Federation of Women, for further discussion. Meetings are held in every workplace and amendments submitted through union

structures. Crucially, when the final draft is produced, it cannot come into operation until it has been agreed not just by the National Assembly but also by the teachers' union.

As the General Secretary of the union said to us when explaining the system, "How can a teacher be expected to implement a curriculum if they have not been involved in developing it?"





# Valuing Learners



## ONE OF THE MOST NOTICEABLE things on entering a Cuban school are the high levels of motivation amongst the students.

There are a number of reasons for this, including the high value Cuban society places on education, the status accorded to teachers and the positive role model that line the walls of Cuban classrooms, from Che Guevara to Albert Einstein.

However, one key factor is the love and respect given to Cuban students by their teachers and by the system as a whole. There is no system of high-stakes testing in Cuban schools and students are relaxed about the exams they sit. When we asked a group of secondary students whether they were worried about upcoming exams, their answer was refreshing: "I don't worry. As long as I study hard and do the best I can, I will be pleased."

Teachers have a close relationship with their students, covering both academic and pastoral roles, and the Head teacher of one school we visited described their role as that of a second set of parents to the students: "When they are here, they are our children and that is how we treat them, with love." Parents are given paid release time from work to attend regular meetings with their children's teachers.

From the moment they start primary school, Cuban students have a lot of input and influence in the running of their schools. Every class elects a class president, vice-president, and health and hygiene officer. These students take on a number of responsibilities within the classroom, including motivation and behaviour of fellow students, and submission of homework. The students also elect a school president and vice-president who, together with the class presidents and vice-presidents, form the student council. This council has input into the curriculum and administration of the school and the school student president sits on the 'direction committee' of the school, alongside the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher, Heads of Year and an elected parent.

## Time to Dream

One of the schools we visited, Cesareo Fernandez Primary School, had just held the second of two student-led days, planned and organised by the student council. The first, in the summer term, was entitled *Time to Dream* and each class spent the day on activities exploring their dreams, hopes and wishes for the future. They talked about what they would do within the school if money and time were no object. The second, in the autumn term, was entitled *With Our Feet on the Ground* and the students looked at the ideas from the earlier day and talked about which of these could be put into practice and what they would have to do as a school community to achieve them.



# Delegates

“Any Cuban will tell you that there is much more to do before they can say their system has succeeded but they firmly believe that the route out of poverty for everyone is education.

Because of the USA’s blockade the Cubans are forced to spend carefully and wisely and education must come first. Public healthcare, again, always free to all Cubans, comes as a close second.

It’s amazing what the Cubans HAVE achieved, having had access to so little, for so long and their many successes are tribute to the sheer resilience and determination of the people to rebuild their country. ”

**KAREN PARKIN,**  
Primary School Teacher



“...during one school visit after another over the course of the NUT Cuba delegation programme, the word amor (love) cropped up in the head teachers’ speeches as an important underlying principle guiding Cuban pedagogy.

Just take a moment to think about that concept: love as the bedrock of state policy.

...The only conclusion one can arrive at is that Cuba has taken a deeply-held popular faith in the child as a symbol of hope for the future and combined it with the socialist principle of free education for all, resulting in an extraordinary state commitment to investing in the human being as a communal asset. ”

**MAGGIE MORGAN,**  
Secondary SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator)

“I was so impressed by the community spirit and positive atmosphere flowing everywhere.

Having free universities was a way of opening the doors for all young people to educate them into the professions the country needs. The only debt the students said they had when they leave is a ‘debt to the people’. ”

**NIPARUN NESSA,**  
Secondary Maths Teacher





# Equality & Diversity



## **THE CUBAN EDUCATION SYSTEM is founded on the principles of inclusion, equality and respect for diversity.**

This is evident from entering any Cuban classroom, where you will find a range of role-models on the walls, representing the breadth and diversity of Cuban society, as well as specific posters about equalities. The large numbers of Black Cubans in leadership positions within education and society more broadly is particularly noticeable, coming from a country like Britain where institutional racism is a daily reality.

The majority of head teachers and school leaders are women and this is reflective of other professions where 60% of doctors, 58% of scientists and 66% of professionals are women. 48% of members in the National Assembly are women, the third highest proportion in the world. One of the most influential mass organisations in Cuba is the Federation of Cuban Women, which has over three million members, representing 80% of the female population. They have been instrumental in bringing forward legislation to promote women's rights, in particular the 1975 Family Code which states that women and men must share household responsibilities equally.

As part of our delegation, we visited a the Abel Santamaria special school for visually-impaired students. During our visit, teachers emphasised that the students have the same curriculum as in mainstream schools with the main

difference being the way in which materials are adapted, additional resources (such as braille machines) are provided and additional support is given by medical professionals. The school has a full-time optometrist who works with students one-to-one and in small groups, and class sizes are significantly smaller than in mainstream schools. Throughout, there was an ethos of respect and equality which was perfectly captured by this sign in one of the classrooms.

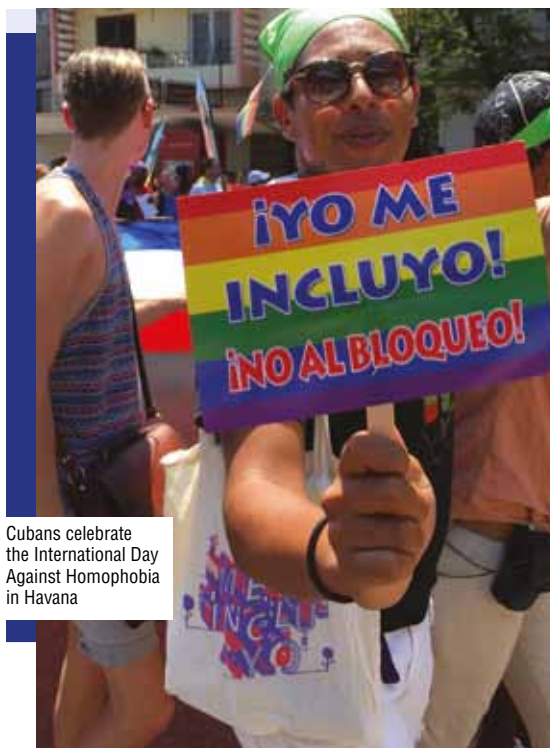


A sign in the Abel Santamaria school reads: 'Requirements of a student with a visual impairment. Give me freedom, challenges, independence, equality, demands, love. Do not give me overprotection, sympathy, pity.'

## **LGBT+ Rights**

Like many other Caribbean and Latin American countries, Cuba's LGBT+ community have faced discrimination and homophobia in the past. Hundreds of years of Spanish colonialism, the Catholic Church, and a culture of machismo helped entrench homophobic attitudes deep in society. However there have been significant steps in recent years to rectify mistakes of the past, and to challenge homophobia and transphobia in Cuban society.

Following the decriminalisation of same sex relationships, and equalisation of the age of consent at 16, in 1979, a number of education initiatives and changes in the law marked the beginning of changes in government and societal attitudes to LGBT+ rights. A law passed in 2008 allowed for sex reassignment surgery to be made free and in the same year assisted reproductive technology for lesbian couples became available. Since 2008, Cuba has celebrated the annual International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO) on 17 May with a march and a fortnight of events including conferences, panel discussions, debates, films and cultural events. In 2012, Adela Hernandez became the first known transgender person to hold elected public office in Cuba.



Cubans celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia in Havana

A school mural promoting the arts



# The Arts in Cuba

“The arts aren’t part of life in Cuba.  
The arts ARE life in Cuba.”

**KAREN PARKIN**

**THE PRESENCE OF THE ARTS in Cuban schools was noticeable throughout our visit.**

At almost every school we visited, students performed or sang or danced for us. The arts are not only fully integrated into the curriculum, with time given to drawing, painting, sculpture, music and dance, the children are also surrounded by artwork and music in their classrooms and playgrounds. A number of the schools we visited had their outdoor walls decorated with huge murals. Many of these are painted by famous Cuban artists as their civic contribution to the education system.

We also visited two specialist schools, one a music school, the other an art school. Teachers from these schools visit primary schools to encourage students to apply if they have an interest and/or aptitude for music or art. The students have an extended school day which is split in two. For half the day, they cover the normal curriculum at the same pace their peers. For the other half, they have specialist music or art lessons in small groups or one-to-one. Students then have the option to go on to university or technical training, or to pursue a career in the arts.

In spite of the provision of specialist schools, the standard of art and music in mainstream schools was incredibly high and the time given in the curriculum for studying these subjects was substantial.



## The Impact of the blockade

One of the things that was noticeable throughout our time in Cuba was the impact of the US blockade. In the education system, this manifested in the difficulty of obtaining simple resources such as stationary, computers and science equipment. Whilst teachers and government make every effort to ensure that students have what they need to learn, it is impossible not to notice the absence of basic resources that we would take for granted in our schools.

The continuing effects of the blockade mean that Cuban teachers need two distinct forms of solidarity: practical solidarity to overcome some of the immediate impacts of the blockade (eg donations of musical instruments, Braille machines, etc.); and political solidarity to increase the pressure on the US government to end the blockade of the island.

### The US Blockade

The US blockade of Cuba is a collection of US laws and legislation which restricts Cuba’s ability to conduct trade, not only with United States, but many other countries too. It impacts on all areas of the Cuban economy, from access to health and education supplies to food and basic provisions, as well as sports and culture. It has cost the Cuban economy over \$753 billion since 1962 and remains a key part of US Cuba policy despite 25 successive votes to condemn it by the United Nations General Assembly.



# The blockade is still in place, but together we can work to end it once and for all

## Affiliate to the Cuba Solidarity Campaign today

### Special offer for NUT associations and divisions

**FREE BOOK:** *In the Spirit of Wandering Teachers: The Cuban Literacy Campaign 1961.*

Plus *CubaSi* magazine four times a year, AGM voting rights, regular speakers and invites to events and conferences.



NUT Branch:
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We enclose a cheque for £40 (annual branch affiliation fee)

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Please make cheques payable to the address below.

The Cuba Solidarity Campaign campaigns for an end to the US blockade of Cuba and for the return of the illegally occupied territory of Guantánamo Bay.

Find out more at [www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk](http://www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk)  
Cuba Solidarity Campaign, c/o Unite, 33-37 Moreland Street, London EC1V 8BB

## JOIN THE 2017 DELEGATION TO CUBA

**21 – 28 October 2017**

Two centre study tour travelling to Havana and Pinar del Río and Viñales to examine current educational provision in rural and urban environments.

Visits to primary, secondary, special educational needs and arts schools; professional meetings with teachers and trade unions, the Federation of Cuban Women and student organisations; plus historical, cultural and community visits.

Package includes flights, accommodation, transfers, visas, English speaking guide and translator, and some meals.

Exclusive to NUT members who need to be nominated by their association or division.

Contact [international@nut.org.uk](mailto:international@nut.org.uk) for details.



## Braille machines for Cuba Appeal

**2 hours of blockade = all the Braille machines for blind and partially sighted people in Cuba**

The NUT, in association with the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and UK charity, the Music Fund for Cuba, has launched an appeal to send refurbished Braille machines to special needs schools in Cuba. The appeal hopes to provide machines for all the schools in each of Cuba's 15 provinces.

Find out more and support the appeal at [www.musicfundforcuba.org.uk](http://www.musicfundforcuba.org.uk)



“I can’t forget what we saw there – and it’s something that the current Department for Education, overworked head teachers and you need to take notice of: there is another way to ‘do’ school. There is another effective, less pressurised version of education that produces young people who enjoy their time learning and leave eager to serve their community.

There is another way we can teach, inspire and work with our young people to ensure that everyone gets the most out of their education - it’s just a shame I had to go half way round the world to see it.

Surely, if they can do it in Cuba, what’s stopping us from doing it here? ”

**MARI BURTON**,  
secondary school  
history teacher



## Further information and contacts

For more reports, personal accounts, feature articles, photos and films from the delegation go to: [bit.ly/NUTCubaReport](http://bit.ly/NUTCubaReport)

For further information about the 2017 delegation contact: [international@nut.org.uk](mailto:international@nut.org.uk) for details.

Thanks to the Cuba Solidarity Campaign for organising the delegation.



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## Get involved

Join the Cuba Solidarity Campaign today and help end the US blockade; US interference in Cuba’s independence and sovereignty; and the illegal occupation of Guantánamo Bay.

[www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk](http://www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk)