

Cuban Futures 2015 Selected Transcripts

The below transcripts are not 100 percent full and accurate representations of the full speeches from the conference but are instead intended to give an impression of the content of the contributions made at the Cuban Futures Conference, 3 October 2015, organised by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and SERTUC.

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Opening Plenary: December 17th and beyond. How did we get here? How do Cubans see the new opportunities and threats?

1. Dr Carlos Alzugaray: The Five challenges for normalised US-Cuba relations

“Thank you very much for being active in supporting and defending the Cuban Revolution and the Cuban people in what has been relentless animosity from the United States – and that’s an understatement. The war that the US has waged against Cuba has reached levels that have not always been sufficiently understood.

“They have tried with the most incredible methods; the blockade. It is not an embargo, an embargo is a simple [process]. But this is a relentless war.

“One can never forget the original motive for economic sanctions against Cuba; to bring about hunger, desperation and the overthrowing of the Cuban government - they are the exact words used by State Department in 1960.

“Sometimes people say in Cuba that the blockade has been genocidal. Well, that was the intention. It didn’t have a genocidal affect as Cuba resisted. We must never forget this.

“Even though, things are changing, changing in ways that we didn’t expect. But it was long overdue. It’s a very paradoxical situation. Because on one hand, it has become acceptable in the world for the US to do things like that [the blockade]. But they are so illegal, so immoral. They are totally unacceptable. And they are still there.

“Something important to realise is that the blockade is still there. It is not as full a blockade as certain moments in the history of the blockade but it’s still there, and is the main impediment of Cuban economic policies.

“How did we reach the moment that we are in?

“Firstly, the resistance of the Cuban people and the intelligence of the Cuban leadership in these difficult times. Secondly, because of the worldwide solidarity movement. These two things helped us get to where we are.

“It is a new moment, full of opportunities but also full of dangers, so we have to be very careful about this as we must not let us to be demobilised as we have a US president who has, surprisingly, recognised that the blockade had failed.

“I believe, like Raul Castro, that Barack Obama is an honest man and I think that he has deep in his heart that he will change the policy towards Cuba. Once we analyse his history, he has said over the years that he has wanted to change the policy on Cuba and obviously that is what he is doing.

“The question that we need to ask ourselves is, is this really a change of policy, or a change only in tactics?

“I’m not going to make a final judgement, as I think the jury is still out. But I call it the Roberta Flack strategy; killing me softly with your song. But we have to be very careful not to let us go with the song.

“So this is important – I don’t think we can immediately judge that the United States is going to totally change its policy. That is for the Cuban people and the Cuban government to decide, who will be engaging with the US in the process.

“We would not be engaging with the US if we didn’t believe that that end can be reached. But it has not been reached yet.

“It will take a lot of effort. First, resistance. Second, solidarity. Third, intelligence. This is a war of intelligence, we have to be intelligent about what we do.

“There are, obviously, interesting things happening. I’ve been working on Cuba-US relations nearly all my life, when I started in the ministry of foreign affairs ... when I retired as ambassador I became a scholar. It is very funny, as I tried to change the direction of my work towards Europe. Impossible. The US-Cuba relationship is always there and people would always call me and say they needed a paper.

“In 1999 I wrote a paper on the possibilities of reconciliation after 100 years of conflict. But it’s still unpublished. Nobody wanted to publish it. My basic argument [was] that if we can get to a point where the US accepts certain basic rules with their relationship with Cuba, then we can start talking about normalisation.

“That doesn’t mean that conflicts are going to disappear. Or that the old conflict is not important. There is an old conflict in the history of US-Cuba relations; a conflict between US hegemonic ambitions and the Cuban will for independence and self determination. That is an irreconcilable contradiction, but we can handle it. We have showed that we can resist it. Through intelligent manoeuvring we can make the US accept realities and this is important.

“We wouldn’t be doing what we are doing if we didn’t have the conviction that right is on our side. Might may be on their side but right is on our side.

“What point are we at now?

“There are several big issues that require solutions before we can talk about normalisation:

1; the blockade

2; complications of different subversive policies that the US carries out against Cuba, totally illegal activities such as radio and TV Martí that broadcast propaganda into Cuba

3; the compensation for damages caused by the blockade

4; the return of the illegally occupied territory of Guantanamo Bay

5; the Cuban Adjustment Act that stimulates brain drain, steals brain from country

“The important thing about these five big issues is that they all depend on unilateral actions of the US. I emphasise this, because the western media says “Cuba has to do something”. No. We don’t have to do anything. We are not going to take any concessions. Those things are illegal.

“So, this is something that I think, US leaders; Obama, Kerry, they know. They know Cuba cannot have our arms won’t be twisted to do something we don’t want to do. That’s why this process will be very difficult, very long, unless something big happens.

“So it is important, in that context, not only that we believe in what we are doing, which is negotiating those issues in which there is obviously a common interest in some policies

“I know that this can be difficult to understand. I myself ask students, do you think that the United States has a legitimate interest in Cuba? Well yes, if the United States wants to promote trade, investment whilst acknowledging Cuban sovereignty, well that is a legitimate interest

“So yes, there are place where we have to talk, we have to reach deals. Protection of the environment. We have common threats; hurricanes. On all this issues there has been some cooperation and there will continue to be cooperation.

“The idea behind the Cuban strategy is how I see it, is let’s advance on anything we can do on the basis of mutual respect.

“We learned the art of respecting differences. So there are a number of issues where we can make agreements. I think another smart thing was which the Cuban government are pursuing with right now, with the Obama administration coming into its last two years; we have a window of opportunity to work with those forces in the US who want a normal relationship.

“There are forces in the US that want a normal relationship, like Congresswoman Barbara Lee, from California, Chair of the Black caucus. She has said over the years that they should have normal relations with Cuba, and that the United States can learn a lot from Cuba, in fact.

“So by increasing [dialogue] with the Obama administration until they are out, we must continue working on those issues where we can get deals.

“What are the areas in which American investment in Cuba can be productive for Cuba?

“Next week, the Secretary of Commerce is coming to Cuba. You will ask me, how can we accept the Secretary of Commerce from a country that embargoes Cuba? Well, firstly it demonstrates the contradictions of the American policy.

“Cuba has never said that it never wants trade. When Fidel Castro visited the US in April 1959, he said we want your investment, we want tourism, but we want a fair deal.

“We want all these things, but to happen on the basis of respect. And the purpose of the strategy is to create conditions so that if a bad change happens in the US in 2016 - and that

can happen - we already have in place a number of issues that would make it very difficult for someone like Jeb Bush or Marco Rubio to turn the clock back. For example, I don't think that any American president can put Cuba back on the terrorism list. That would be very difficult, I'm not saying it won't happen, but it will be very difficult.

"The idea is to work with the Obama administration, take advantage of this window of opportunity but without losing sight that they have to do a lot unilaterally, not with concessions from Cuba but from combined pressure, we can get some legitimate interests served by the US having a relationship with Cuba. But for the issues that there are no concessions from Cuba, they have to work. And frankly, we have achieved that.

"I think for most of you, like it was for the Cuban people, December 17 was a very happy occasion. We got Gerardo, Tony and Ramon to come back to Cuba and join Fernando and Rene. So, let's not fool ourselves. We have won a big victory but the war is not over. I feel safe in saying that the Cuban people count on your support, on your solidarity.

"Thank you to the British Cuba Solidarity Campaign for all of your work over the years. I spoke to the Ambassador Teresita Vicente at the airport before saying goodbye. You are very lucky to have someone like Teresita. So, thank you for all the work that you have been doing. Please, don't let down now. We are very close to victory, and victory should come to us from all the efforts that we have made. Thank you very much."

Opening Plenary: December 17th and beyond. How did we get here? How do Cubans see the new opportunities and threats?

2. Arleen Rodriguez: Obama negotiated with the historic leaders of the Cuban Revolution

“The question which I was asked to address here today was how did we arrive on the December 17 and how did we get here?”

“We arrived at December 17 alive. That is not what they wanted. In a dignified way. That they could never have imagined. Cautious, because we know them. We’ve been through 56 years of this – and I know this because I’m actually 56.

“But we’ve also arrived at this point with enthusiasm, because we’ve never hated them, we’ve always worked for good, neighbourly relations. In fact, books are now being published in Havana about the lack of relations and the efforts to construct them.

“Very little has been said over the last years of the personal efforts of Fidel Castro tendering the possibility of negotiations and all the actions against this effort on the part of the United States.

“So I want to give my own interpretations of what is going on in Cuba today. In the first essence, there is a sense of victory because they’ve had to recognise a government that they weren’t prepared to recognise for over 50 years.

“Obama didn’t negotiate with a new generation; he negotiated with the historic leaders of the Revolution. This sense of victory has provided us with another dimension to what happened on the December 17.

“For the freedom of our heroes, when they returned to Cuba, that was the real fiesta . Those who were in Cuba on that day will say that I’m not lying. Suddenly we weren’t thinking about normalisation, we were thinking about the return of the Five.

“The third sense of victory that we have, is the sense that throughout this long struggle, Cuba was accompanied with a Latin America that they tried to separate us from over many years.

“Latin American said, you either sit down and negotiate with Cuba or we won’t sit down and negotiate with you. And we’ve been accompanied by friends like yourselves that never got tired. Thank you.

“On the day that Obama and Raul Castro had their summit in Panama, the TeleSur asked me to interview several people so on that evening I interviewed one of the Five, Ramón Labino. And he summed it all up in the words, “be alert”. Take note when we say they have changed the methods but not the objectives.

“And at this moment all I can think about is all the people who couldn’t live through this moment; the victims of terrorism against Cuba, the victims of hate, and everyone who helped in Cuba who helped create a sovereign Cuba who could then negotiate within the context of that sovereignty

"I also interviewed a young man, a specialist in design. How much are our lives going to change because of this? No one was against the process, but no one was excessively enthusiastic .

"I work on the Cuba website, Cubadebate, and every time we debate normalisation we get a lot of people interested in that discussion and every time they read about the meetings, the process, they arrive at the same point. The main obstacle [the blockade] is still there, it hasn't been resolved .

"We had the first meeting of the bilateral commission on 11 September created by John Kerry and Bruno Rodríguez on 14 August

"For the medium term, three themes were identified; First, all the areas of bilateral cooperation like civil aviation and medical cooperation. Secondly to discuss the themes on which there isn't agreement to see if we can find any agreement where both sides have different opinions, for example, human rights. And thirdly the mutual demands of both sides.

"I asked a reporter from Telsur about ten days ago about what happens about the blockade, Guantanamo and the dirty war. But that is in fact going to be done on the third theme area, even though it transcends all areas.

"You have to note that while that discussion was taking place, Obama was assigning the law of Trade with the Enemy Act on Cuba. The speaker of Congress simply tried to present this as a technical issue that had to be signed at this stage.

"But people thought, and I mean myself here as well, if we thought about technicalities then the [Miami] Five wouldn't be free.

"And we thought that Havana had said in Havana 'no more enemies', that we are not rivals anymore. We're neighbours. It is true he never said friends, but he said no more enemies.

"Well in fact if they say we are not enemies, perhaps they should change the name of trading with the Enemy Act because it is very impolite to Cuba.

"The great paradox is that on 27 October, there is going to be a debate again by the UN General Assembly asking for the end of the blockade. Here there is only one question; How will the Obama administration vote in that vote?

"It is not just a case of how the Obama administration will vote, what is really important at this stage is that the blockade is actually lifted.

"The measures taken on 18 September have not really been able to be applied because of the problems of the blockade

"So what are we talking about here, is there media spin, so that solidarity with Cuba is disarmed. Does the world actually think that there is no blockade?

"I actually think that, [as] in the case of the [Miami] Five, the blockade will only be defeated by Cuban resistance and global solidarity. That will maintain us alive in a way that they never

wanted. Dignified in the way we continue to be, despite their attempts to bring us to our knees, before by aggression and now by seduction.

“In the event that they eat us up? The immigration official at London told me at the airport here that he wanted to go to Cuba before ‘the Yankees reduce it to rot’.

“The response is from our side? At this point we think of the verse of Silvio Rodríguez about happiness. So much swimming to die on the shore. The response to this is the country is making efforts to create an institutionalised society; that is really conscious of its sovereignty and its dignity. It’s our commitment to you, to ourselves and to our dead.

“When the programme [Mesa Redonda] started, of which I am a director, at the end we always say, “we continue in combat”. Thank you.”

Opening Plenary: December 17th and beyond. How did we get here? How do Cubans see the new opportunities and threats?

3. The Rt. Hon. Brian Wilson: Let nobody tell you the blockade is over

“Thanks to our Cuban friends. I’ll give a brief view on how things stand from my perspective as someone who has quite a long association with Cuba.

“I first went to Cuba in the late 1970s and maintained a good interest in it. In 1998, without any warning or expectation, I became the UK Trade Minister. And I set myself as a personal mission to use that position to normalise commercial trade relations between Cuba and the United Kingdom - that turned out to be a lot more challenging than it sounded.

“But I persisted with it. Over the next few years I went to Cuba repeatedly. I held five positions in government and every job I held in government, I went to Cuba. Every time I went to Cuba, the last UK government minister to visit was me.

“I’ve been in many different roles and have built many good relations and many warm friendships with the Cuban people. And hopefully I extended this friendship in a way to show that at that time not necessarily everyone in government or the British establishment were hostile to Cuba.

“Inevitably, everything I did and everything I saw reinforced my basic view that the campaign waged against Cuba by the US was one of the cruellest and vindictive of the 20th and 21st century history. It was also utterly counter productive in terms of its supposed political objectives.

“Relations between Cuba and the United Kingdom ebbed and flowed during that period. I think there was a little high spot during the late 1990s early 2000s when we I was a Minister and we had an excellent Ambassador who made enormous headway in establishing relations with Fidel Castro and the Cuba leadership. Then a darker period, when we had a terrible Ambassador, and also we were superioered by Aznar [Jose Maria Aznar, Prime Minister Spain, 1996-2004]which dictated EU foreign policy and the Common Position on Cuba. But anyway, throughout all that relationships were maintained and some progress was made.

“When I started [going to Cuba], just as a way of perspective, the excuse for there being no significant commercial relations with Cuba and the UK was an ancient piece of debt from the 1980s for 20 odd million pounds – buttons - but that had become the reason for withdrawing ECGD (Export Credits Guarantee Department) cover - export guarantee cover for Cuba

“So that had persisted for 15 years and nothing could happen commercially without that cover. But just by way of perspective and to reinforce some of what has been said, that nominally, ECGD British export finance cover is back - but it is still extremely difficult for anyone to use it in terms of Cuba. Whatever progress is made, ostensibly, there are always hidden hands trying to pull back on that progress and to make sure that nothing very much changes.

“We have a very, very good Ambassador and Embassy in Havana at the present time. There are plenty of people now who want to do business with Cuba, but it is still very, very difficult, as I’ll go into in terms of our own recent experience.

“In 2005 I came out of politics and thought that my relationship with Cuba was probably over, but I was asked in 2007 to chair a seminar in Havana on renewable energy. The Cubans realised that they had become dangerously over dependent on oil from Venezuela.

“And there was an ever-present danger that they could find themselves in the same position that they found themselves in when the Soviet Union withdrew overnight and Cuba had no oil which led to the start of very difficult period.

“They realised, which they still realise – it’s one of their highest priorities – that they need to diversify their energy supply, which they’ve been looking at options, particularly renewable energy. And the upshot of that seminar is that they saw the UK as a potential partner in that and instead of getting someone else to do it, I became chairman of a company called Havana Energy with eventually formed a joint venture with the Sugar Ministry in Cuba to develop biomass plants at five of the sugar mills

“And of course the potential exists for the same to happen at all of the sugar mills to make a very significant impact on Cuba’s energy needs. I’ll go into it in the sessions more later, but again just to reinforce what has been said, let nobody tell you that the blockade is over.

“Because for the past five or six years we’ve been working on this, and everywhere you turn there are obstructions to it. And the British government has been complicit in that and continues to be complicit. Not necessarily pro actively, but reactively, in refusing to do anything that cuts across American foreign policy and American objectives.

“So, for example, we are a tiny company, so we needed a partner to do this in terms of the equipment and capital for the first of these sugar mills. Of course, no British bank will go near it as they are in fear of American sanctions.

“And quite illegally, they refuse to provide banking facilities for anyone who wishes to do anything with Cuba. No British or international company which either has or perceives itself to even have the potential for contact with the United States will touch it.

“Eventually we did manage to get a French state company, Alstom, who were going to be partners in this. And that was preceding very well, and the equipment was going to be manufactured in Poland. We had export guaranteed from the Polish, everything hunky dory, and then completely from the leftfield Alstom were taken over by General Electric. And the shutter came down like that, and now we continue to work on other options, as some of my friends know here.

“Within the past year, one of my colleagues in Havana Energy who has been a client of the Bank of Scotland for 35 years had his account closed arbitrarily with minimal notice because Lloyds bank have a policy of not accepting anyone as clients anyone who has anything to do with Cuba.

“The idea that the blockade is over is a total and utter fiction. Let me assure you that the blockade is alive and indeed there is a paradox here. With a logic, if you can have a logical paradox.

“Because the closer the perception in America that the blockade is going to be lifted, then the greater the vested interests of American business is that nothing should happen, in case by the time they get there that others will have entered the field and will have closed down the options for them. So you have the paradox of the impression being that all this is changing, but actually there is logic in the fact that the blockade is, in many ways, just as tight as it ever was.

“There is a huge amount of need for investment in Cuba. There are huge commercial opportunities in Cuba for those who see it from that perspective because the consequences, the inevitable consequences of this wicked, 60 year war of attrition against the Cuban people is to reduce so much of the fabric of Cuba to such a low level of activity. It is inevitable, it would happen anywhere. If we had a 60 year blockade here, our agriculture, our industry would be in the same condition, our housing would be in the same condition. All of that is a consequence because of the United States vendetta against the Cuban people which is continuing down to the present day.

“The opportunities are there, the needs are there. And I’m absolutely certain that it must and will be on the terms of the Cubans and not on the terms of the United States and I think that there is this mentality that Cuba is waiting for the United States to arrive and somehow rescue it from this terrible plight.

“Nothing could be further from the truth. And so, if there are relations of mutual respect, then of course it is an enormous relief. And there is enormous potential for Cuba if there was a normalisation of relationships.

“But the Cuban infrastructure of today could not withstand it, even if it wanted to, the enormous influx of American investment. They are now queuing up to do business with Cuba, but presumably not understanding that it is going to be on Cuban terms rather than on their terms.

“This has to proceed on a pace that Cuba can take it, and brings benefit to the Cuban people. And of course it will proceed at the pace that prevents the exploitative relationship between the US and Cuba prior to 1959.

“So much is possible. There is a window of opportunity. I deeply hope for the sake of the Cuban people that this window of opportunity does not close before the progress can be made”

“The crucial point is that we are certainly not there yet. The other crucial point is that it should and should happen on terms that benefit the Cuban people and not the United States of America.”

Seminar: Economic Challenges in Cuba

4. The Rt. Hon. Brian Wilson: Everything is possible in Cuba

“[If you wanted to invest] in an emerging market, then Cuba would be the best place on earth. It is free of corruption, which is very, very unusual. It has a highly educated workforce so that everyone exceeds expectations on their academic or technical abilities.

“There is a very sympathetic foreign investment law particularly around the port of Mariel which has been designated as a growth area for foreign investment. And also, Cuba is very well placed geographically to be a hub for the whole Caribbean region and of course it’s sitting very close in proximity to a very large market on its doorstep for which it has been cut off from for some time.

“So objectively, Cuba has a huge amount of potential, economically, if the other elements could be removed from the equation, which clearly they won’t be for the immediate future, at least.

“But none of that should be a deterrent for trying to work with the Cuban government and businesses, state businesses in order to move things forward and that’s what we’ve been doing in recent years.

“If you deal with the Cubans, the basic starting point is respect. You have to respect the country, you have to respect their political system and you very quickly develop a high level of respect for the people that you are dealing with. Because they are all extremely competent, extremely fair and extremely reasonable and they are doing their best to work their way through a very difficult situation.

“It is not easy, why should it be easy? More than any other country on earth perhaps, the Cubans are aware that people coming in to do Cuba for economic reasons may not be doing it in the interest of the Cuban people. They may be working against the interest of Cuba, or they may be indifferent to the interest of Cuba. People who are working in government ministries, in the state businesses, it is their job to work to ensure that the legitimate interests of Cuba are safeguarded.

“So everything is negotiated to a very fine degree. It’s very open, it’s very honest. But it is very, very detailed. And again, if you respect the motivation for that, then it is not a problem, it is just something that has to be worked through.

“I’m sure that none of my Cuban friends would not disagree that there is a high level of bureaucracy that is sometimes challenging; there are many organisations, there are many ministries, there are many levels of government which any significant decision has to be cleared by. It all takes time. They go on holiday. It is not necessarily a smooth process, but it’s a process which you can always see your way through because you are essentially working with people who are working towards the same goal as you are and that has been our experience. Nobody should be deterred by it.

“Over the years I’ve seen scores of companies go in and nothing really much comes of it because they don’t start with that initial frame of mind. Very often I starts as a sort of trade tourism; ‘wouldn’t it be great to do something in Cuba?’ but they’re not sufficiently serious or sufficiently respectful in order to negotiate the goal posts which exists.

“In terms of opportunities, they are, almost literally limitless because of the state of the Cuban economy and infrastructure. As I said earlier, that is not the fault of Cuba. I’ve no doubt over the decades the victim status of Cuba has been used as a cover by some people as an excuse for things that should have been done better as well as a reason; that is inevitable.

“But the state of where we are now is that everything in Cuba needs investment and a great deal of that is going to have to be foreign investment. And it is of course, to some degree happening. Our experience is somewhat illustrative of that.

“When I went first and was talking about energy in Cuba, the guy who I was talking to there, who is now chief executive of Havana Energy, was already there. He had a background in emerging economies and he was talking to the Cubans about tourism development. And tourism development led to talking about energy and that is how the whole renewable energy thing started. So we then, remarkably, had the first joint venture with a foreign company in the energy sector ever with this tiny company - a lot of that based on personal relationships and so on.

“So we, Havana Energy, opened a joint venture with Azcuba, the sugar company. And of course the Cubans can’t put money into these joint ventures, so they put in land and the natural resource, the sugar mass. So then you’re talking about land, after two minutes of talking about land in Cuba you come to the subject of marabu.

“Some of you may know about marabu. Cuba has this plague, where the sugar industry and agricultural industry has receded. This thing, which was a decorative plant from Africa one hundred years ago, is now anything but decorative, now a million and a half hectares of Cuba is covered with marabu. As long as I’ve been going there it’s been spoken about as a plague.

“But we’ve taken it back here and get some tests done, and hey presto it is not necessarily a plague, it could be an asset as it is a very high quality biofuel and do we now are harvesting it. There is no shortage of it, and what was a plague is now potentially an asset

“So now you’re clearing land, and what do you start talking about? What are you going to start doing with the land that you’re clearing? And we, in order to deal with the marabu, we brought crop scientists from the Scottish agricultural institutes into the mix. Two of which were potato experts.

“Cuba used to export potatoes. Cubans love potatoes. They used to export them all over the region, but now there are shortages and they actually import them, irregularly – ridiculous. So now we’re moving on to potato production in Cuba. And these guys think that Cuba could be one of the best places in the world to grow potatoes. And you start growing potatoes, the why don’t you start growing this, that and the next thing.

“Everything is possible, everything is needed and if the right conditions exist then great things can be achieved in the coming years, and it is a very exciting prospect. [But] Nothing is without difficulty. I can’t say that anything I’m talking about can finally be delivered, as in every direction we are faced with the difficulties we’ve spoken about.

“If the government, if international institutions get behind Cuba and if the great barrier across the water [the blockade] could be removed. The living conditions the prospect and the incredible human potential of Cuba could be released – that is the challenge ahead.

Seminar: Economic Challenges in Cuba

5. Dr Steve Ludlam: Trade Unions in Cuba

Cuba's changing economy workforce and challenges to trade unions

The Cuban trade union federation, the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC) reported to its 2014 Congress that, 'The economic, political and social context that Cuba is living through imposes new challenges to the organisation, these are times of important changes, demands, commitments and convictions'

In this contribution I will note some fundamental facts about Cuban union; summarise the changes in the economic reforms that most impact on unions and workers; and suggest some of the key challenges therefore faced by the unions.

Unions in Cuba

The CTC was formed in 1939, creating for the first time a unified central federation. Cuba's unions are industrial or sectoral. They enjoy legal independence. The only legal constraint on unions is the requirement that their constitutions and rules are approved democratically by their members. Unions are funded from members' subscriptions, which are collected by union reps, not by employer check-off. Membership is voluntary, and more than 90% of eligible workers are members.

As Cuba's principal civil society organisations, unions exercise power and influence at many levels. They have a constitutional right to propose laws and are routinely engaged as partners in discussions with the government on policy legislative proposals affecting workers. When it comes to employment law, unions have a virtual veto over policy and legal change. The CTC also organises the mass consultations that Cuba carries out on major policy proposals, such as the Party Guidelines that form the economic reform programme, and the new national Labour Code that sets out basic worker and union rights. These consultations involve millions of Cubans in more than 80,000 public and workplace meetings that produce extensive amendments and additions. The CTC runs a national network of schools training union representative at all levels in labour law, negotiating, health and safety etc.

In workplaces, unions enjoy union recognition, the right to a seat on company boards, facility time and offices for representatives. Union agreement is required by law: to the pattern of the working day, any overtime or rest day working, to any lay-offs. Unions (and individual workers) can stop any work considered unsafe, by law. Unions negotiate the Collective Bargaining Agreement that is a legally required and binding agreement that must be approved by the workers assembly (by a simple majority on a 70% turnout). Unions sit on the legally established workplace grievance and disciplinary panels that are dominated numerically by elected workers.

Unions in Cuba acknowledge their dual role of advancing Cuba's socialist development in the interests of the working class in general, and of defending workers interests at work and in society under a Constitution that defines Cuba as 'socialist state of workers'. This of course can produce tensions. For example, the CTC reported to its 2014 Congress, about the the

workforce restructuring programme, 'that we supported and in which we ensured the processes and conditions so that these processes did not generate conflicts or incidents of a political character ... Nevertheless, the application of these decisions, without doubt, have come at a political cost to our organisation.'

Main features of 'updating the model' – the economic reforms - affecting workforces and unions

The principal aspects of the economic changes affecting unions and workers are the following:

Salary systems

In his first major speech as interim President, in 2007, Raúl Castro acknowledged that salaries in Cuba were not enough to live a decent life on. Cuban economists calculate that in 2008 salaries had only 28% of their purchasing power in 1989. The concept of the 'real salary', ie the inflation-adjusted purchasing power of the salary, has become a commonplace term in everyday political economy. Restoring decent salaries in a 'prosperous and sustainable socialism' is a central objective of the economic reforms but across the board increases on the national salary scale cannot yet be afforded. Some sectors may get general increases, and health workers had their salaries doubled, even tripled, recently. Otherwise, increases above the basic scales are to come either from individual payment-by-results or from profit-related company bonuses. This is also intended to restore the 'socialist principle of distribution' that incomes reflect the 'quantity and quality' of work. Payment-by-results schemes and company bonuses are now to be negotiated and set at the local level, not by ministries.

Workforce restructuring from 2010

In 2010 the government, with the CTC's support, announced a programme of mass restructuring of the labour force, to deal with the fact that hundreds of thousands of state jobs were very unproductive and mainly kept going to protect the constitutional right to work. The original objective was to redeploy half a million workers (10% of the workforce) during the first quarter of 2011, with an eventual aim of redeploying a million. Procedures were agreed with unions to require worker assembly approval of new payroll size, and for an elected worker-dominated committee to recommend which workers, based on objective criteria, should remain in the reduced workforces.

Redeployment was to be into a few understaffed state sectors (farming, police) but most was to be into hundreds of newly legalised categories of self-employment. This process was rushed and the procedures often ignored, and unions had to confront the government, which extended the process from 3 months to five years, and instructed the re-running of redeployment processes that had failed to follow agreed procedures. By 2015 half a million Cuban non-agricultural workers were self-employed. The government expects that this sector will account for 40% of Cuba's GDP in time.

New Guidelines on economic policy 2011

In 2011 the Party Congress adopted the (much amended) Guidelines that form the economic reform package. A central feature is the decentralisation of managerial authority to state enterprises. In a more market-orientated system, local enterprises are subject to stricter profitability criteria, with investment coming out of retained profits, and with the threat of bankruptcy for failing enterprises. Payment-by-results systems are negotiated locally, and annual bonuses available depending on profitability.

Non-agricultural cooperatives 2012

New legislation in 2012 enacted the possibility of forming non-agricultural cooperatives as the favoured, and socialist, form of non-state economic management. Co-ops could be formed, if agreed by the workers, either by groups of workers proposing a new co-op, or by the transformation of existing small-state enterprises in services or small manufacturing into co-ops. To date between 15,000 and 20,000 workers have become members of about 400 such co-ops. These co-ops enjoy tax and bank loan privileges.

New Foreign Investment Law 2014

In 2014 a new Foreign Investment Law was passed. This was a major policy shift to give more generous tax and profit-repatriation provisions to foreign investors in mixed private-state enterprises in strategic sectors. The policy shifts the emphasis from short-term income from foreign investment to long-term development in key sectors and in technological progress and expertise in the island, with an increase of Cuban workers in the sector, and even the use of migrant labour if needed (eg to complete building projects from which insufficient Cuban labour is available, given that half of Cuba's building workers are said to have gone into self-employment).

The result of this set of changes is to rapidly increase existing processes of decentralisation and diversification in the world of work in Cuba. These pose some significant new challenges to the unions.

Some challenges

Salaries

As noted above, the restoration of decent salaries in a 'prosperous and sustainable socialism' and the associated recovery of the 'socialist principle of distribution' are principal objectives of the economic reforms. This general challenge will be of the greatest importance for the future legitimacy of the Cuban state. Removing Cuba's dual currency system and its varied exchange rates will not make any difference in this respect. With little prospect of major increases in the basic national scales, the main instruments being used to raise earned incomes in the state sector are performance-related pay and profit-related enterprise bonuses. The design and negotiation of both performance-related pay systems and enterprise-level annual bonuses is decentralised by the reforms and associated legislation.

This diversification, together with the varied national minimum salaries in state/cooperative and mixed economy sectors (and the absence of a minimum income guarantee for the self-employed who are not 'contracted workers') is a potentially extensive challenge to the

constitutional principles of equal pay for equal work and to the 'socialist principle of distribution'. Many factors independent of the individual worker's contribution can be seen as potentially, indeed probably, determining income from performance-related pay and enterprise profit-related bonuses: the skill of local union negotiators responsible for the collective bargaining agreements that include performance-related pay systems; the competence of management; the profitability of enterprises that will reflect many factors unrelated to individual effort. As the CTC 2014 Congress Report noted, 'Inequality between some sectors and on occasions within the same sector can be observed'.

A further challenge arises from the rapid expansion for the private sector of self-employed and micro-enterprise workers. The reforms have an ideological aspect here, with a concerted effort by state and unions to defend such workers not, as often previously portrayed, as a petty bourgeois fifth column, but as workers providing valuable services and goods to Cuban society, some of whom may indeed be, or become, employers. The unions have accepted the challenge, as a former CTC General Secretary put it, to keep these workers 'in the side of the revolution'. The figures of union density among such workers have varied but the CTC recently reported an overall 46%, well down from claims of over 80% earlier in the period since the 2010 reforms. On the other hand, while there is no move to create a separate union in this sector and the self-employed are recruited into the appropriate industrial or sectoral union, there are over 1000 union branches within those unions with exclusively self-employed membership. This challenge is heightened by the explicit US intention, included in Obama's 17th December speech, to promote 'independent' trade unions in Cuba. The private sector is the obvious target for such US strategies to corrode the cohesion of Cuban civil society and create instruments of 'regime change'. This challenge was behind union responses to the Labour Code draft that resulted in a new condition on the previously unimpeded right to create a union. The 2014 Labour Code includes the condition that new unions arise 'in conformity with the founding unitary principles', which suggests a mechanism for the CTC or the state to oppose breakaway unions.

Whether as workers or employers, the self-employed are subject to the constitutional 'socialist principle of distribution' that incomes reflect the 'quantity and quality' of their work. Apart from the absence of any methods or mechanisms for measuring such dimensions of their work, a key challenge is the efficiency of tax collection. Raúl Castro has spoken of such taxation becoming the principal instrument of redistribution in Cuba. But the CTC recently reported that 69% of the self-employed were underestimating their tax liabilities. 'Tax evasion' is another term in popular political economy that has entered Cuba discourse in the reform period. No surprise there but if the diversification of work, payment, and taxation is not to undermine the constitution of Cuba's 'socialist state of workers', the unions, among others, have a lot of unfamiliar work to do.

Exploitation of man by man

The Cuban constitution prohibits the 'exploitation of man by man', in other words, in socialist terms, it prohibits the accumulation of capital through exploitation of waged labour. Such capitalist exploitation is a result, by definition for Marxists, of the private employment of labour. While such forms of work have existed before in revolutionary Cuba on a very small

scale, there has major expansion since the 2010 restructuring of the workforce introduced the 'contracted worker' category of self-employment. This category of self-employment is reported to be the second largest (after catering services) and reportedly involves some 150,000 workers.

Cuban unions and labour lawyers have provided a number of protections for such workers. Their minimum rights in terms of salary, hours, holiday entitlement and health and safety at work, for example, are enshrined in the new Labour Code. The CTC's consultation on the Labour Code draft produced an amendment requiring that such workers be given written contracts. As workers, the Code also gives them the right to collective bargaining agreements and worker participation. The pursuit of these rights is a challenge to the unions, which have identified private workforces with as many as 200 workers. So far, there are no private sector collective bargaining agreements, although the CTC is apparently getting some advice in this area from union allies abroad.

In the co-op sector, protection has been incorporated in the new legislation. Workers employed by profit-sharing co-ops are required to be offered membership of the co-op after three months work, or released (the National Assembly has since heard of an intention to extend this period to 12 months, and it is not difficult to imagine that such workers themselves may have expressed support for the longer period of job security). No more than 10% of the working time of a co-op can legally be performed by 'contracted workers'. Cuba's concept of the non-agricultural co-ops is that they are working co-ops, not co-ops employing others to produce their products and profits.

In the Foreign Investment sector, unions have successfully insisted, as in the past, that Cuban workers remain employees of Cuban employment agencies, not of foreign capitalists, and are protected like all other Cuban workers, by the Labour Code. The new foreign investment legislation also specifies, as noted, a higher minimum salary rate for workers in this sector and a policy of referring in salary negotiations to average salaries elsewhere in the region (presumably Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean). All the same private capitalists will be profiting from Cuban workers' labour in Cuba, so the issue of 'exploitation of man by man' is present here too.

The simple way to resolve this contradiction, as some have proposed, is to reform the constitution. But is the removal of the prohibition on capitalist exploitation of labour consistent with a 'socialist state of workers'?

Right to work

The Cuban constitution guarantees 'the right and duty to work'. That is why so many Cubans retained their jobs through the Special Period when there was often little or no work to do given the shortages of energy supplies and raw materials. However, the labour restructuring has changed the context of this guarantee, by ending decades in which the state itself provided jobs for all, or almost all. On current projections, it is expected that around a third of Cubans will be finding work outside of the state sector. And the employment benefit system has also been reformed, so that earnings-related unemployment benefit, previously regarded as virtually indefinite given the state's role in finding people work, is now limited to

a period of between 1 and 6 months. In other words, there is now a much greater responsibility on workers themselves to find work, in an economy in which enterprises are expected to review their staff payrolls on an ongoing basis, such that redundancy becomes a more common experience (albeit that the belt-and braces protective role of unions remains a legal component of the procedures).

Conclusion

Unions and workers remain major and active participants in the management of the Cuban economy at all levels, but they now do so in a world of labour that exhibits more of the challenges associated with market forces, notably job security, diversified and market-influenced salary systems, taxation systems for the self-employed, and a rapidly-expanding sector of private employment and self-employment. Cuba's unions are well aware of these challenges and have conducted nationwide training programmes on, for example, collective bargaining, have initiated new legal services to workers with grievances in the labour restructuring process, regular educational material in the unions' national paper *Trabajadores*, including a new monthly supplement dealing systematically with issues like performance-related pay, and written contract rights.

Arguably, the balance of the unions' dual role will shift, paradoxically, away from mobilising behind the government, to a more aggressive pursuit of workers particular interests, if they, unions and workers, are to play the key role now confronting them in sustaining the political legitimacy of the Revolution, as economic diversification and the shift in US 'regime change' strategy create new inequalities within the formal state and non-state economies.

Cuban unions need international solidarity as much as ever, and of course they need solidarity in particular to end the crippling US blockade with all of its dreadful impacts on their economy and their human rights.

Mesa Redonda / Round Table Session. Q: What is your personal feeling about the hopes and possibilities of the new Cuba-US relationship?

6. Rafael Hernandez: The U.S. have not changed their objectives, only the means

“I don’t know what normal relations look like with the United States. Have we ever had normal relations with the United States? What are normal relations?”

“What I think it important is that for the first time in history the United States is not looking down on Cuba as a subordinate or an enemy, but is treating Cuba as an equal. This is what they are doing – not what they are thinking. But what matters in politics is what people do

“Are we expecting the United States to renounce their own nature as an imperial power, because they are negotiating with an island, the island of Cuba? Is it serious to have those expectations?”

“Do you know the story between the scorpion and the frog?”

The scorpion asked the frog, ‘please take me to the other side of the river’.

The frog said, ‘no, it is too risky, you may kill me’.

The scorpion said, ‘but that is impossible, if I kill you, I will drown’.

In the middle of the river the scorpion stung the frog.

The frog said, ‘you’re crazy, what are doing?’

The scorpion replied, ‘it is in my nature’

“Do you think the scorpion will stop being a scorpion? No, that is not serious, in terms of political analysis.

So they have not changed their objectives, only the means. I think that the means is everything in politics. The way they are using the instruments to get their goals is the fundamental part of politics. Do we care if the means are bombs or dialogue? I think that we do care. Politics is about that.

“We have changed from a boxing match to a chess match. We are not hitting each other – we have different rules now. If we don’t understand that we are playing a different game then it may be risky for us .

“If we want to win in chess, or not to lose in chess, we should not use the boxing gloves to play chess. Boxing gloves don’t work when you are playing chess, You need to focus on playing chess well.

“When we are talking about politics and policy, this is what counts. Do we try to change the rules of baseball when we play against the United States baseball team? Or do we try and play as well as possible within the baseball rules?”

“So to me the question is, does this new situation open up new opportunities for Cuban politics and the Cuban national interest that was not on the table before? My answer is yes, totally yes.

“We have started to do many things with the United States that we were not doing before. This is not about the future – this is something that is happening today.

“We are negotiating in areas where we have never had a dialogue with the United States. There are many areas. What is interesting today is that we have passed from a government-to-government mono channel to a studio channel.

“Now we have relations; relations opening a variety of channels; artistic, academic, sports, business and church exchanges- they are areas who are talking to each other, and have been speaking to each other much more frequently than they have in the last 30 years.

“And the new government to government dialogue is aimed at producing cooperation. Can we achieve cooperation on areas of mutual interest? In many things like environmental protection on the Florida straits. Protection of migratory birds – they don’t have visa problems! They are coming and going every year. In all these areas we now have common interest.

“And those common interests can be highly developed, particularly if you do what we are doing, with an intelligent and well articulated policy with the United States. This is already a new situation. Many actors in American society are already cooperating already with Cuba. These are our allies. I don’t know if they are our friends, but they are our allies, as we have common interest.

“American Universities, science centres, healthcare professionals; many areas. And if we can cooperate in the area of healthcare assistance in other countries that will make both sides improve their relations more than anything.

Mesa Redonda / Round Table Session. Q: What is your personal feeling about the hopes and possibilities of the new Cuba-US relationship?

7. Carlos Alzugaray: The US has to come to terms with Cuban independence

“Thanks for Cuba Solidarity Campaign in Britain for being so active, so combative, so big scope. We are here in the Trades Union Congress (TUC HQ, Congress House) and that is because we have the support of the train unions, the support of the workers.

“How do I see things in the future?

“We can be very proud and very sure that the work that we have done is down to the work and the effort of Cuban people and those who have shown solidarity with Cuba, so this is significant.

“We are entering a new stage – this does not mean the end. The end will come; I am an optimist, a born optimist, and I think eventually we will get to the stage that the blockade is lifted; when Guantanamo is returned; when we get compensation for the damages [the blockade] has cost; when the Cuban Adjustment Act will be eliminated; when all the subversive policies of the United States against Cuba are also eliminated.

“The big contradiction will always be there - it’s in the nature of things as Rafael pointed out with the nature of the scorpion. It is the nature of imperialism.

“I have respect for President Obama, I think he has shown intelligence on this issue. Let’s not forget that Obama has become part of the ruling class but he has roots in another class, another race, and is in the middle of a very difficult situation. I have just read that there have been 45 mass murders already in the United States this year – it is an incredible – it is a very complicated society.

“We have to live with that elephant.

“I was reminded of a Swahili proverb of what the grass thinks about the elephant; It doesn’t matter if the elephant is making love or making war – he is going to trample all over the grass. So, we are going to be grass and we have to take that into account.

“But if we do things right, and continue to work, the elephant will learn where it can stand and where it can trample on us and that won’t be easy.

“We are confident that, in this battle we will reach what we want to reach. It’s going to be difficult; it’s not going to be easy, it will take some time. But let us focus on the immediate future – we are entering negotiation with the United States.

“And the important thing is that we reach negotiations on all those issues that we can. Because what the Cuban government is basically looking for, with the support of the Cuban people, is to create a situation where, whatever happens under Obama is going to be very difficult to reverse.

“So in this next stage the solidarity campaign must continue working. Be very, very on the alert about the manoeuvres that can be taken against Cuba.

“There are people in the United States that are not happy about what is happening. I can imagine that they are treating their wounds; they did not expect all this to happen.

“And they are going to continue to create provocations. I am sure that we are not going to fall into these provocations. They are going to argue that, “Cuba must do something”

“It is important that the solidarity campaign emphasises the illegal, immoral character of the blockade. It has failed. It is illegal, it is immoral, it has to be lifted, not only because of Cuba but because of the rest of the world

“The problem with the blockade is that they impose on others ... rules that they impose of their society. If they could, the enemies of the Cuban revolution, may try to derail it. There has been some progress made and they will try to reverse that.

“It is important that we are aware of this. First, they will try and derail it. The slander campaign against Cuba will continue. And secondly that they start saying, ‘Cuba must do something’.

“Well, to put it very simply; Cuba mustn’t do anything. We have, to speak in the slang of American movies, say, ‘you have to take it my friend’. We need the support of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign to get this done.

“In the long run, all the big issues are going to be on the table; the blockade; Guantanamo. All these big issues are going to be on the table.

“And we might end up with the American electorate deciding to elect Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, or Donald Trump – nobody knows what Donald Trump could do; his politics is difficult to predict.

“But we have to be aware, that these processes can be reversible. We haven’t reached the moment where these processes are irreversible yet. Hopefully we can, but we haven’t reached that moment yet.

“So, we are looking to the future, where we will continue to need your support, your solidarity, and at the same time, I promise you, we will continue to construct that prosperous, sustainable and fair society. It’s very important. We are not going to leave anyone behind in this struggle of the Cuban people.

“Because all of this came from Jose Marti. We don’t need American imperialism to demonstrate this. As Marti said, the only way to be good is to be prosperous and to be independent and to continue toiling for what we want and we are going to reach.”

Video footage from all the above sessions is available on the Cuba Solidarity Campaign YouTube Channel at: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRZs00LdaGOjxyiMhAtxHIjI-Xh9gEzIL