



CUBA Newsletter

Autumn 2005

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Contact us

The ACFS meets on the 1st Thursday of the month
Level 1, CEPU Building
741 George St, Sydney

Mail: PO Box K364,
Haymarket NSW 1240

Web: www.sydney-acfs.org

Email:
secretary@sydney-acfs.org

Newsletter Contributions

We welcome contributions to the Cuba Newsletter.

If you would like submit an article, please contact: the Newsletter Coordinator, Gonzalo Parra by email at:

newsletter@sydney-acfs.org

SYDNEY ACFS UPDATE

Dear friends and comrades,

The ACFS National Consultation will be held in Sydney in April (see further information enclosed with this newsletter). It's been many years since we hosted a National Consultation. The three Sydney solidarity organisations, ACFS, Committee in Solidarity with Cuba, Western Suburbs, and Amigos de Cuba, will be working together on this and we hope you will attend this important event. It's a fantastic opportunity to get together with members from around the country and to come up with ideas and actions in support of solidarity with Cuba. There's been a lot of gasbagging in the mainstream media about Cuba lately – you could power a small city on some of the more fanciful emissions - so it will be great to hear guest of honour Juan Pozo, the Cuban representative of ICAP, the Cuban international solidarity organization, give us some accurate information.

While of course Cuba's not a paradise – what country is – it's surely the only country in the area where no-one is homeless, people's physical and cultural needs are met, social indicators show a high standards for all the population in crucial areas such as education, health and employment, and people don't go in fear of 'disappearances' and torture. What great big rich North American neighbour can say the same?

Earlier this year we farewelled the Cuban Consuls, Sicilia and Julio and welcomed the new Consuls Nelinda and Ifrahim. We look forward to continuing work with the Consuls to promote exchange, awareness and communication between people in our countries.

The brigadistas from the recent Work/Study Brigade to Cuba returned in January and we had the opportunity to hear about their trip at our last meeting. As usual, the home stay was one of the highlights of their visit. We look forward to hearing more about the brigade experience at future meetings.

This year we completed fund-raising for our humanitarian project in Cuba, the Rainbow Centre, and we will be selecting another project to support in the near future. We will also be actively raising awareness about ongoing US aggression against Cuba and will focus attention on the continuing incarceration of the Cuban Five in US jails.

Don't forget that we have our meetings on the first Thursday of the month and anyone interested in our work is welcome to attend. Hoping to catch up with everyone at the Consultation and/or the public event on the Saturday night.

Yours in solidarity (and against boring right-wing windbags!!)
Joan Silk
Secretary, ACFS (Sydney)

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Notice is hereby given that the ACFS (Sydney Branch) will be holding its Annual General meeting on:

**Thursday 5 May 2005
6.30pm
Level 1, CEPU Building
741 George St, Sydney**

(The building is about a block down from Railway Square and the entrance is in the lane beside the building)

ACFS NATIONAL CONSULTATION

The 2005 National Consultation will be held in Sydney at the CFMEU Building 12 Railway Parade, Lidcombe on Saturday 16 & Sunday 17 April.

More details on the consultation have been included in this mailout.

If you would like further information, please contact Nick Rawson on 0414 691 732 or email us on: natcon@sydney-acfs.org

SYDNEY ACFS UPDATE

New Cuban Consuls Arrive In Sydney

On Friday February 4 2005, the ACFS held a special event to farewell the current Consuls and welcome the new Consuls to Australia. Below is a copy of the speech given by Sydney ACFS President, Peter Weitzel.

It is four years since Sicilia and Julio arrived in post Olympics Sydney and began their important work in Australia – four long years even though they have passed in an instant.

The first big event where we began to get to know them was at the 40th

anniversary of Playa Giron, or the Bay of Pigs, held at the Edge Theatre in Newtown where, just months earlier, more than a hundred people were treated to a talk by the Cuban Olympic head, Jose Ramon Fernandez.

That same year, Hurricane Michelle struck Cuba and, in the USA, the tragedy of September 11 struck. At our end of year

event, we raised money for the hurricane relief effort and examined Cuba's thoughtful response to the terrorist attacks in the USA, which by then had already resulted in the brutal attack by Washington on the Afghani people.

Since that memorable evening, many events have passed by. Some of them are regulars in the Cuban calendar such as the birth of Jose Marti and the celebration of July 26. Others have concentrated on the injustices suffered by the Cuban people at the hands of Washington, such as the ever tightening, criminal blockade of Cuba and the unjust plight of the five Cuban patriots imprisoned across the USA. We have hosted or co-hosted visitors from Cuba such as Otto Rivero, Pedro Ross, Gilda Chacon and Ileana Hernandez. We have welcomed guests from ICAP such as Eva Seone, Alicia Corredera, Fernando Duque and Juan Pozo. There have been the projects to support and, of course, the annual Southern Cross Brigade to Cuba to promote.

A highlight in this period was the visit by Aleida Guevara who was in

Australia talking on "Che Guevara, War and the Fight for Global Justice".

All these activities were only possible due to the huge commitment of a core of volunteer members of the Sydney ACFS. In many, if not most cases, the involvement of the Committee in Solidarity with Cuba, Western Suburbs and the Amigos de Cuba has been an essential ingredient.

As well, for the solidarity that they have shown us in our support for Cuba, I would like to acknowledge CISLAC and the left media, especially Green Left, the Militant/Pathfinder and the Guardian. I would also like to express my thanks to the many unions who support Cuba. In particular, the CFMEU, the CEPU, the FBEU, the MUA and the AMWU. Their contribution of facilities, financial support and moral support is invaluable.

In all these and many more events, Sicilia and Julio have done their utmost to facilitate our work of fostering an understanding of and a friendship with Cuba and Cubans.

I know that they are keen to return to Cuba after such a long time, so far away. We will miss you.

However, at the same time that we are losing two Cuban friends, we are fortunate to be meeting two new friends. On behalf of the ACFS, Sydney, it is my great pleasure to welcome to Australia the new Consul General and Consul for Cuba, Mrs. Nelinda Hernandez and Mr. Ifrahim Miranda. We are looking forward to getting to know you and to help promote a sense of friendship between the people of Cuba and Australia. We hope that your stay in Australia is productive and enjoyable. Welcome.

RESPONSE TO SMH GOOD WEEKEND ARTICLE 'CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION'

By Peter Weitzel

As a supporter of Cuba, I was delighted to see the February 19

cover of the Goodweekend which showed healthy, happy Cuban children playing under the banner headline of "Children of the Revolution" and indicating that the nation was holding its breath over the ultimate fate of an aging Fidel Castro who is, after all, recovering from a serious fall last year. These children benefit from a government that has recently reduced class sizes to 20 across all years of their free and universal schooling. As well, a highly successful biotechnology industry ensures that the majority of the dozen or so vaccines that these children receive, as a right, are produced on the island itself. Many other examples of their inheritance from the Cuban revolution crossed my mind.

The article itself was entitled "Castro's Last Stand". It seemed an obvious reference to Custer's Last Stand, a famous battle during which the US government forces were defeated by Indigenous Americans. The parallel between the attempted genocide of the Native American people and the attempted destruction of Cuban society seemed compelling.



INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM 1:
REPORTING ON CUBA

Upon reading the article, many of these positive thoughts melted away. I was confronted with an article that mentioned Cuba's accomplishments only briefly, if at all. I also found many of the clichés that ill informed critics of Cuba are likely to trot out in order to present Cuba as an out of date, decaying culture. In the style of "good" balanced journalism, both sides of the argument were mentioned but more typeface and more spin were given to a certain point of view even if the content presented did not warrant such a weighting. Words such as desperate, grim and abject pepper the article. Alas, such is the style of much that passes for journalism in Australia today.

Response To SMH Good Weekend article 'Children of The Revolution' (continued)

For example, the brutal assault on Cuba by Washington was referred to simply as an economic embargo. Nothing was said of its inordinate detail and its extraterritorial nature.

Nothing was said of its annual condemnation in the United Nations by all but 3 or 4 countries in the world (the US, Israel and 1 or 2 Pacific States). The Australian government votes with Cuba on this issue. Moreover, nothing was said of the other aspects of the US war against Cuba such as the US support for armed attacks against Cuba, the condoning by Washington of terrorist attacks against Cuba or the use of biological warfare against Cuban agriculture. These events are well documented. Washington has refused to sign an accord with Havana concerning terrorism. All this activity was summed up in the article under the banner of "bullying" by Washington!

The extremist fringe of the Cuban Americans who are based in Miami have a close relationship with the current US administration in as much as their agenda complements that of Washington. Bush Jr. has promised to restore them to their former positions as owners and rulers of the any new Washington version of Cuba. So, it is little wonder that the Cuban government comes down heavy on people who are being paid the equivalent of a professional salary to promote these ideas and destabilise the country. It is made clear in the article that the US has bank rolled these activities to the tune of millions of dollars a year for decades. If Australians were being paid professional level salaries to propagandise and organise for an organisation or government that was battling to bring to an end to the Australian political system, system of business ownership and mode of land tenure, I am sure that the response would be similar.

The article states that the number of alleged dissidents is small, that no one was much interested in talking about them and that they possess no known base amongst the Cuban public but then goes on to infer that

they represent the silent majority. So much for evidence based reporting. The creation of dissidents is a long-standing tradition. There was a celebrated case of an incarcerated disabled poet, Armando Valladares, a darling of the US Human Rights brigade until it was comprehensively proven that not only was he not much of a poet but neither was he disabled!

There is this thesis in the article that an invisible climate of fear pervades Cuba and that an equally invisible hand controls the population. It is pointed out that there is no obvious heavy-handed government. Then, in the face of this lack of evidence, a case is made for the very fear that cannot be perceived. As for the F word, I have heard it uttered many times in Cuba. It is, of course –Fidel– for Cubans rarely refer to him as Castro. Oliver Stone, the US film director, interviewed Fidel for over 130 hours for the documentary "Commandante". He said that if the spontaneous thrill and excitement that Cubans show when they encounter Fidel in the streets was feigned, then, they all deserve an Academy Award! What a tyrant!

If the events surrounding the arrest of the alleged dissidents had been followed, it would be obvious that Castro did not "go mad" when these people were apprehended. There had been a series of high-jackings of air and sea craft to the US leading up to the arrests. Washington was showing no desire to curb these events despite their alleged war on terrorism. This was seen as an attempt to destabilise Cuba, perhaps as a pretext for a possible invasion. As inferred in the article, there were extraordinary circumstances that lead to the arrests. As Cuban intelligence had infiltrated these groups, the authorities were sure of their facts.

As for the 3 men executed, they were 3 of a number of people who high-jacked, at gun-point, a harbour ferry with all passengers and crew aboard and took it out onto the open seas putting all lives at risk. This sort of activity is not the sort of "innocent" activity alluded to in the article.

The long article goes on with so many sweeping generalisations and theories that I am tempted to go on and on. However, I will finish with

pointing out the obvious. Cuba is a poor country that, despite its poverty, has made great advances for its people.

It has an enviable public health and public education system. For example, infant mortality continues to drop and is lower than the US and half that of African Americans.

All people are housed, and fed and unemployment is at about 2%. No one lives on the streets.

The Cuban culture is world famous and is enjoyed by all Cubans. Within Cuban culture there is room for dissent that is genuinely aimed at improving the lot of the ordinary people rather than sacrificing the population to the interests of international capital. The Cubans engage the world and trade widely despite the interference by Washington.

Cuba makes no claim to be utopia and as the musician in the article stated "its hard for everyone." The majority of people in the world struggle and the Cubans are mature enough to accept this and to work for something better. Many in the world would hanker after the life that Cubans have. As well, they have their dignity.

Finally, it has to be admitted that there are hundreds of people detained indefinitely without trial in Cuba. Of course, they are the US prisoners of Guantanamo Bay held on land that the US took from Cuba long before the world had heard of Fidel Castro.



INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM 2:
REPORTING ON THE USA

REPORT ON THE HAVANA BOOKFAIR

By Joanne Kuniansky

The 14th Havana International Book Fair was held February 3-13 at the historic San Carlos de la Cabaña fortress. The imposing 18th century Spanish fort, which overlooks Havana Bay, served as Che Guevara's Rebel Army command post after the January 1959 victory of the Cuban revolution. At La Cabaña, Guevara promoted cultural events among the soldiers stationed there, including ballet performances, plays, poetry readings, and concerts, as part of pointing the way forward for working people to broaden their cultural horizons as they fight to build a new society.

The book fair is held under the banner "leer es crecer" -- "to read is to grow." Over 600,000 visited this year's fair. Every day tens of thousands crowded the book stalls and formed snaking lines across the sunny courtyards to purchase titles on a wide range of topics. Many attended the hundreds of book launchings, literary prize ceremonies, and other events. Each night, concerts were held at the fair with prominent Cuban artists.

The popularity and mass character of the book fair is a product of the Cuban Revolution. In 1961, 100,000 young people mobilized by their revolutionary leadership spread out across the country and wiped out illiteracy in a one-year campaign. For the past four decades, expanding access to education and culture has been a cornerstone of building a society where workers and farmers hold power.

The book fair, held since 1984, took place every two years until 2000. Since then it has become an annual event, as publishing in Cuba has steadily recovered from the depths of the economic crisis that followed the collapse of the regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and devastation of Cuba's foreign trade. For the past couple of years, in the three weeks following the Havana event, the

book fair has gone on the road to some 36 cities in provinces throughout Cuba, making books more accessible to hundreds of thousands of Cubans beyond Havana.

One of the most popular features at the fair is the Libreria where books are sold in Cuban pesos, making them affordable. Over each doorway of the five rooms of the Libreria are quotes like one from Fidel Castro, which says, "We don't tell people *believe*, we say *read*." More than 5 million books were put on sale --almost one book for every two Cubans. The wide range included children's books, world literature, political science, history, computer sciences, language texts, and scientific books.

The expansion of the book fair is part of the Battle Of Ideas - the popular term in Cuba for the political offensive waged to defend the socialist revolution in the face of both the imperialist ideological drive portraying capitalism as the only future for humanity, and of the contradictions and inequalities that have grown up with the penetration of the capitalist world market over the last decade.

Central to this Battle of Ideas is deepening the participation of working people in the revolution and reinforcing proletarian internationalism. Cuban volunteers in Venezuela were a regular topic of discussion at the fair. As well, I met many young Venezuelans who are studying social work in Cuba. I attended the fair as a volunteer to report on the event and help at the Pathfinder books booth which was a hive of activity each day. Many who visit to look at Pathfinder's range of titles also took the opportunity to discuss politics with the volunteers staffing the stand, who included communist workers and youth from the United States, Australia, Canada, Iceland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

I met Cubans who are engaged in the Battle of Ideas. This included Frank Garcia, a third year sociology student at the University of Havana, who teaches a class on political culture to pre-nursing

course students at a neighbourhood polyclinic. The students are part of a pilot program in Havana to encourage young people who haven't completed sufficient schooling to go on to university to become nurses. I was able to participate with another Pathfinder volunteer in Garcia's class where Lourdes, one of the polyclinic nurses, explained, "They get a chance to further their education and, at the same time, help to remedy a nursing shortage."

Two chemists who visited the Pathfinder booth explained that they were among many professionals who are making it possible, by teaching courses, to offer university degrees through new municipal universities held at night in the facilities used during the day by secondary students. This greatly expands the number of university spots available to all Cubans. In addition, a television channel called *University for All* offers courses that workers can take at home.

These are some of over 150 projects currently underway in Cuba to raise the educational and cultural level of working people. As the result of the Battle of Ideas, some 60-70% of the entire population is today involved in some kind of formal education.

Before the book fair I attended part of the First World Literacy Congress, held in conjunction with an annual international conference of educators, called Pedagogy 2005. The combined gathering drew 5,000 participants from 51 countries, the majority from Latin America, including 1,300 from Venezuela. Explanations of different ways of facing and confronting the abyss between economic and social conditions in the imperialist countries and those in the semi colonial world were at the centre of the conference.

Cuban education minister Luis Ignacio Gómez opened the event with a presentation on "Cuba: A Revolution in Education." He began by describing the situation in the world today, in which 860 million people are illiterate— including 40 million in Latin

America—and social and economic conditions are worsening for hundreds of millions. Citing Cuban national hero José Martí, Gómez insisted, "No social equality is possible without equality of access to culture."

The large participation of teachers and literacy campaign organizers from Venezuela marked the conference. The Cuban government has sent advisors and many Cuban youth as well as television sets, videotaped educational programs, and other materials to assist.

Venezuelan delegates at the conference said government reports estimate that 1.37 million people in that country learned to read and write during the past two years. I met Hilda Rivero Gómez who said that until two years ago she was illiterate. She had been a housewife who got involved in literacy classes in 2003 and graduated. She has since become one of the Mission Robinson facilitators and is seeking to complete her high school education through Mission Ribas. Her goal is to study at the university. "I have changed completely," she said. "When you know how to read and write you can better defend your rights and you have a broader perspective of yourself and the world."

What has allowed the literacy campaign to make real progress in Venezuela has been the widespread mobilization of youth and working people, who themselves are being transformed through their own efforts.

At the closing session of the conference Enrique Ramos, president of the National Youth Institute in Venezuela, described the impact of the literacy campaign in Venezuela. Ramos reported on preparations for the upcoming 16th World Festival of Youth and Students, which will take place in Caracas in early August. He urged those present to attend and help build the festival, which he described as a broad affair to which they hoped to attract 15,000-20,000 young people from around the world.

WOMEN

International Women's Day Update - More women nominated as People's Power neighbourhood delegates

Havana, Mar 10, (Granma)
As of February 28, women made up 29% of candidates proposed as neighbourhood delegates during the nomination assemblies taking place as part of the Cuban electoral process now underway.

Such a high percentage so early on in the process – if maintained at that pace in coming days – could indicate a change in female representation in the nation's parliament.

According to the most recent data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union regarding female representation in national parliaments, in November 2004 Cuba shared 7th place with Spain (36%).

The electoral process is a priority right now, according to the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) and the main goal is to promote the inclusion of women in government responsibilities, where since 2002 their representation has been 23.37%.

Sonia Beretervides, a member of the FMC's national secretariat, explained that a broad promotion plan is being carried out in every region of the country so that a larger number of women will be nominated as neighbourhood delegates, administrative council members and members of municipal assemblies.

"We know that this is a challenge for our comrades who are also mothers and wives; that is why we also aim to promote greater gender awareness," Beretervides explained.

"In 2004, the FMC had the largest membership in history – 4,061,728 – and as we observe March 8 this year, the FMC is also increasingly participating in the country's social and political life," the leader remarked. The most prominent aspect of the FMC's involvement is the work carried out by its mass of

volunteer workers, who focus on developing and delivering projects in local communities. There are currently 76,168 public health brigadistas and 76,215 volunteer social workers working in projects around the country.

"With such a large membership and so many activities, which go beyond women and include families, children, teenagers and other social issues, if we didn't have grassroots commitment, it would be impossible to achieve these results," pointed out Beterevides.

Cuban women occupy a broad range of jobs, and their participation in different occupational categories is continuing to grow. According to official data from the National Statistics Office (ONE) women's presence is particularly great in the administrative sector, where they hold 84.8% of those jobs. Even more significant is the fact that they form the absolute majority among highly skilled people in the country, making up 66.4% of technicians and professionals.

In 2004, more than 57,000 women obtained new jobs, which represent 51.5% of new jobs during that period, while 69,908 young women enrolled in the General Education Courses for Young People.

According to Beretervides, the institutional support offered to women by the Revolution over the last 45 years has been very important. "The process has benefited and accompanied the entire period of women's social achievements in Cuba," she commented.

This year the FMC is celebrating the 45th anniversary of its founding by President Fidel Castro Ruz.



FMC President Vilma Espín and Fidel Castro

ENVIRONMENT

The worst drought in over 100 years

Havana, Feb 25, (Raisa Pages) Registered rainfall levels for 2004 were the lowest since 1901. However, the ongoing drought did not begin last year; rather, it began in the spring of 2003 in the country's eastern region.

Jorge Luis Aspiolea, president of the National Institute of Hydraulic Resources (INRH), told Granma daily that more than \$20 million has been invested in recent months in projects to alleviate the drought's effects. Those expenditures are part of a plan of action laid out by a Central Commission designated by the government, which is working together with another 20 agencies that belong to the Central Administration of the State to tackle this issue.

Higher temperatures and Cuba's ongoing drought are two consequences of worldwide climactic changes that stem from increased global warming, according to experts at the Meteorological Institute.

The growth of global warming on a planetary scale is due to an excessive concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane and nitrous acid in the atmosphere, producing greater retention of solar energy. The trend towards reduced precipitation is something that began in the last century, and endangers not only Cuba but also the entire Central American and Caribbean region.

In 2004, registered rainfall stood at just 69% of Cuba's historical average (1,375 mm). The first part of 2005 has not brought better news. In January, the 44 mm of reported rainfall represented only 50% of that month's historical average.

At the end of January, the reservoirs were at 35% capacity, holding only 3,071 million cubic meters.

Dams in the provinces of

Camagüey and Las Tunas are holding as little as 14% of their capacity.

Of Cuba's 235 reservoirs in operation, 114 do not reach 25% of their capacity, while 41 are virtually dried up and can not be used.

In face of this scarcity, water is being distributed via tanker trucks to 1,834,232 people throughout the country. The trucks consume 50,725 litres of fuel daily.

Juan Contino Aslam, president of People's Power in the city of Havana, urged the capital's residents to conserve water based on low levels provoked by the drought.

Contino explained that the potential exists for reducing water usage, because nearly twice the necessary water is pumped in the capital, and more than half is lost through leaks. He also mentioned wastage by commercial and state enterprises that consume large quantities and regularly use two to six times the established amounts.

He emphasized that it is better to conserve water than to invest resources in an attempt to produce more, which is a very expensive procedure. He reiterated his call – above all to the public sector – to eliminate leaks, which would result in more available water for residential areas, where a large amount of internal leaks also exist due to a lack of plumbing fittings, according to a report in Tribuna de La Habana.

New investments in large pipelines and the elimination of leaks are part of the province's plan of action, which also includes continuing rehabilitation of the water system, begun in 2000.

Water will continue to be transferred from one source to another, while construction will be stepped up on wells and tanks for the water tanker trucks.

With local governments' consent, a water supply schedule has been established in order to provide a small increase in the amount of water for areas that are in critically short supply, such as La Habana del Este and Cotorro, while the supply cycle for municipalities such as La Habana Vieja has been shortened.

ECONOMY

Two million visitors to Cuba

Havana, Dec 27 (Granma). For the first time Cuba has exceeded the total of two million foreign visitors in one year, according to Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz, speaking at a special event in the Playa Pesquera Hotel in this province's tourist complex.

He added that this year the performance of the sector has been favourable, with an 8% growth in the arrival of visitors in 2003, a figure one percent above the forecast of the World Tourism Organization for the Caribbean region.

Marrero Cruz noted that current options in the sector are more varied and that, in addition to the traditional beach tourism, interest is growing in cultural, historical, nature, health, and nautical modes, which make Cuba in itself a destination satisfying many tastes.

He stated that the average stay of tourists, mostly from 44 countries with Canada in the lead, had also increased significantly this year.

HAVE YOU RENEWED YOUR ACFS MEMBERSHIP LATELY?

Enclosed is a \$20/\$10 (concession) for 1 year membership.

Enclosed is a donation of _____ towards the work of the Society.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ **Email:** _____

Please return to ACFS, PO Box K364, HAYMARKET NSW 1240