



Australia - Cuba Friendship Society (Sydney)

CUBA Newsletter

March 2009

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Contact us

The ACFS meets on the 1st Thursday of the month at 6.30pm at **NSW Teachers Federation Building, Lvl 1, 33 Mary St, Surry Hills.**

All friends of Cuba and those who would like to find out more are welcome to attend meetings.

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:
newsletter@sydney-acfs.org

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS

New meeting venue for the ACFS Sydney Branch

All ACFS monthly meetings will now be held at a new venue. Starting at our next meeting on 2 April 2009, will meet at 6.30pm at the **NSW Teachers Federation building, Level 1, 33 Mary St, Surry Hills.**

We would like to extend our utmost gratitude to the CEPU for the use of their meeting room for our meetings, their assistance and continued support over many years. Many thanks and best wishes to all. Contact Nick for more information on 0414 691 732

Notice of 2009 AGM

The Sydney branch of the Australia Cuba Friendship Society (ACFS) will hold its Annual General Meeting on May 7, 2009 at 6.30pm.. Please note that all ACFS meetings will be held at our new meeting venue at the NSW Teachers Federation building. For more information, please call Joan on 0430 371 632.

ICAP Representative to Visit Australia

Rigoberto Zarza, representing the Cuban Institute For Friendship With The People (ICAP), will be visiting Australia for the annual national consultation of the Australia and New Zealand Cuba friendship societies in Perth in April. He will be in Sydney in late march and early April. Sydney ACFS hopes to welcome Rigoberto at an event where he will speak as the guest of honour. Stay tuned for more information and check our website at www.sydney-acfs.org



Vale Peter Symon

With sadness we report the death in December 2008, of Peter Symon, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Australia. Peter was a fighter for a better world, a friend and comrade to those who struggle against oppression and an important political figure. He was a great friend and supporter of all that the Cuban revolution stands for and a great supporter of the Australia Cuba Friendship Society. We send our condolences to his family and comrades. He will be greatly missed.

15th ACFS National Consultation in Perth, Western Australia

The ACFS WA Branch I would like to invite you to the 15th National Consultation. This is a special meeting for the WA Branch, being the 15th consultation, the first in WA and also the 15th anniversary of the Perth Branch and of course in the year of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution.

The dates chosen for the consultation are Saturday 4th and Sunday 5th April 2009 with the aim to commence formal proceedings (Registration) 8:30am on Saturday the 4th.

If you would like further information, please email the ACFS Sydney.

SECRETARY'S REPORT

ACFS had a busy year last year and this year we're getting ready to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution. So it's probably a good time to ask why Cuba's revolution is important to us. Cuba is a little Third World island a long way away that gets some Hollywood attention from time to time and has nice music, sexy salsa, pretty beaches and some charismatic figures that started a revolution that might fall apart when they die...right? Wrong! A major task of the ACFS is raising awareness about the meaning of the Cuban revolution. It can be summed up in the phrase 'people before profits'.

Here in this outpost of the US empire we see, especially now, the effects of the capitalist mantra 'profits before people – as long as it's not too obvious'. Human lives are sacrificed in various ways to the demands of capital. Since we live in the affluent part of the empire, we have a welfare system of sorts. In this country people live on the streets but don't usually die there (although we have over 100,000 homeless people), and we have some sort of social security available which many of us will be dependent on even more in the present economic crisis. But workers are at the mercy of powerful interests and can be cast out, losing their homes and all they have worked for. We have health care and housing and education but increasingly, a two-tiered system is in place that reflects the social hierarchy of wealth and power.

In Latin American and Caribbean nations comparable to Cuba, the effects of their placement in the world capitalist system are devastating. Haiti is a prime example of this. Life expectancy is 54 years. Unemployment is nearly 70%. Half the population is illiterate. Most peasants are landless and living in abject poverty. 35% of rural children are malnourished. The tragedy of Haiti demonstrates what Cuba might be without the revolution that has transformed life

for its people and provided inspiration around the world.

We don't look at Cuba through rose tinted glasses. It's not a utopia. It's a process of revolution happening. But it is achieving an equitable social system where private profit does not dictate social priorities and whether people live or die. The Cuban revolution has had great leaders but the heroes of the revolution are the Cuban people who made the revolution and the leaders who arose from it. The media depiction of the revolution being made by a charismatic few simply reflects the capitalist -generated inability to conceptualise anything not based on glamorous individuals. Certainly not classes! In this society made by the people there are real workers' rights - industrial democracy where workers actually get to decide what happens in their workplace and the larger economy. It seems to be working too, even though its economy has been battered by the effects of three hurricanes, falling nickel prices and rising food and other commodity prices.

Institutional support for the demolition of racism and sexism is built into the Cuban socialist system and while these take a long time to break down, they are not receiving the surreptitious backing that we have seen especially in the so-called land of the free. The Family Code, related legislation, availability of women's healthcare, childcare, maternity leave provisions and other measures provides institutional support for the breaking down of gender related domestic labour and a new relationship between men and women based on equality in the home as well as the workplace. In a culture where work is respected, divisions between 'superior' intellectual or 'inferior' manual work are not rigidly defined as they are here and 'culture' is not reserved for the affluent. The opportunity for all to reach their potential is the basis of the free education and health systems.

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Instead of the bigoted jingoism that permeates much of Australian society, Cuban people are proud of their self determination and national independence and don't use it to put down minorities. Environmental action was encouraged by the need to survive the 'Special Period' of hardship resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and its effect on the Cuban economy, along with the

US ongoing blockade. Cuba is now an innovator in environmental sustainability with re-forestation, organic farming and energy conservation preserving its ecosystem and making it the only environmentally sustainable country in the world according to the World Wildlife Fund. Such lessons learnt from the Cuban revolution are valuable to all of us interested in a fairer and more humane society. Socialism varies according to the specificity of its location and a socialist Australia would not and could not be the same as Cuba. Nevertheless we look forward to learning more and contributing more to make a better world for all. Thank you to all our members and friends for their wonderful work, support and commitment. In all sorts of ways our members and supporters demonstrate their ongoing dedication. We welcome all who are interested in sharing this work. Some examples of our activities in the latter part of 2008 are below.

Some of the main activities for the ACFS late last year were based on opposing the ongoing US blockade of Cuba, supporting actions to free the Cuban 5 political prisoners, continuing contact with representatives of Cuban workers, assisting with reconstruction after the devastating hurricanes that hit Cuba late last year, NSW organising of the brigade to Cuba, and raising awareness about the Cuban social system.

In October we rallied outside the US consulate to draw attention to the cruel US blockade, an ongoing assault designed to destabilise the

Cuban economy, punish the Cuban people and bring about the destruction of Cuban self-determination and the installation of a US puppet regime. The blockade was also the major obstacle to the hurricane reconstruction efforts in Cuba. We called for an end to the blockade and increased Australian aid to the hurricane devastated island.

"Australian aid was miserly compared to that of Timor Leste whose donation was huge given the meagre resources under their control".

Australian aid to the hurricane devastated island. Australian aid was miserly compared to that of Timor Leste whose donation was huge given the meagre resources under their control. The October vote in the UN was again overwhelmingly in favour of lifting the blockade (185 in favour, 3 against and 2 abstainers).

In 2008 Cuba was hit by hurricanes Gustav, Ike and Paloma with estimated losses of nearly \$US10 billion. Along with all the ACFS branches in Australia we organised a hurricane appeal to help with the massive reconstruction tasks facing the Cuban people after these hurricanes. We managed to raise over \$2000. The funds were sent to Cuba through APHEDA, the ACTU overseas aid organisation. This enabled extra funding to be added to our donations as APHEDA fundraising is assisted financially by the Australian government. Our appeal also encouraged people to donate directly to APHEDA and funds were raised in this way as well as through ACFS. A special note of congratulations to ACFS members and friends in Newcastle who organised a very successful reconstruction fundraiser. Thanks to all for their hard work and generosity.

ACFS is a supporter the Free the Five Committee and has contributed towards the tour of Cuban 5's lawyer, Leonard Weinglass. We are represented on the Leonard Weinglass Tour Committee by ACFS President Peter Weitzel. We also supported the CPA-organised visit of Maria Eugenia Guerrero, sister of Antonio Guerrero, one of the Cuban 5. Maria Eugenia spoke

movingly at a number of events during her visit including a CPA film night and the panel discussion (and film night) organised by the Free the Five Committee. We continue to work to raise awareness about the Cuban 5 and support the work of the Free the Five committees.

We were pleased to welcome last

year the representative of the Federation of Cuban Trade Unions (CTC), Gilda Chacon Bravo, on a visit organised by the ETU (Qld) and assisted by CFMEU branches across Australia. Gilda made a number of workplace and other visits and spoke at a dinner organised by the ACFS at the Greek Club in Lakemba. Gilda is an important contact with working people in Cuba. She spoke about the lives of Cuban workers and the effects of the global financial, food and energy crises.

We also were very involved in promoting information about the Cuban health system and raising funds for our project in Cuba, the refurbishment of the Dermatology ward in the Dr Ernesto "Che" Guevara Hospital in Las Tunas in Cuba. We helped publicise Tim Anderson's film "Doctors of Tomorrow" about Cuban training of health workers and also showed the film "Salud!" about the health system in Cuba. A number of our members are very committed to raising awareness through Cuban films and we are grateful for their efforts and those of tireless speakers such as Tim who have really helped raise the issues of what a decent health system should be doing.

Events in Venezuela and its important links with Cuba have been the subject of attention recently and last year saw the launch of the Cuba Venezuela Solidarity Club at Sydney University. We have close contact with our friends in the Venezuela solidarity movements and look forward to continuing to work together in future.

The annual brigade to Cuba was organised by the SA and WA branches of the ACFS with NSW state coordinator Chela Weitzel doing a fantastic job in answering all sorts of travel related queries as well as all the work that is required to ensure that brigadistas have a great experience in Cuba. Thanks to the organisers and all who helped make this another successful brigade to Cuba. More than 40 people joined the brigade and we hope to hear more of the experiences of this group in future. Several groups from Australia including a trade union delegation will be heading to Cuba for May Day celebrations soon. Some will also be visiting Venezuela. This will be a great experience and we wish them all the best.

We were delighted to hear that the Cuban Embassy has now opened in Canberra and we look forward to meeting the Ambassador Mr Abelardo Curbelo Padron and his family. On 4 & 5 April 2009, Friendship Societies from around Australia and New Zealand will meet in Perth for the annual National Consultation. We look forward to this opportunity to welcome Cuban diplomatic representatives and ICAP representative Rigoberto Zarza as well as members and friends. (ICAP, the Institute for Friendship with the People) is the international solidarity organisation in Cuba) We encourage all our members and supporters to attend the National Consultation. Please see our website www.sydney-acfs.org for more information and/or contact us for more information and registration papers at secretary@sydney-acfs.org.

We hope to see you at our next meeting. Our meetings are open to friends of Cuba and anyone wanting more information. Don't forget it's on the first Thursday of the month (except in January) at 6.30pm.

Please note the change of venue to the NSW Teachers Federation building, level 1, 33 Mary St, Surry Hills.

In solidarity,
Joan Silk, Secretary ACFS Sydney

HAVANA BOOK FAIR: 'CULTURE IS A RIGHT, NOT A LUXURY'

By Linda Harris

Tens of thousands of Cubans poured daily into the former Spanish colonial fortress San Carlos de la Cabaña, where the 18th Havana International Book Fair took place February 12 - 22.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Minister of Culture Abel Prieto noted that since it began 25 years ago the annual book fair has become the country's major cultural event. The revolutionary government and Communist Party of Cuba, he said, were determined that the book fair be held despite the \$10 billion in damages caused by three major hurricanes in the second half of last year. Prieto recalled that even in the worst years of the 1990s, when Cuba experienced a deep economic and social crisis after the abrupt end of favorable trade relations and aid from the Soviet Union, the revolutionary leadership was determined that resources for promoting literature, music, and art be maintained. "Culture is a right, not a luxury," Prieto said, quoting Fernando Ortiz, one of Cuba's foremost 20th century writers on the country's culture and national identity.

The literary fair included poetry readings, a forum on the world economic crisis, book awards, and hundreds of book presentations. Art shows, concerts, and ballet performances are being staged in conjunction with the festival.

Dozens of publishers from Cuba and other countries had booths at the book fair.

I was part of the team of volunteers staffing the Pathfinder Press booth at the fair. Pathfinder presented several new titles including *El capitalismo y la transformación de África* with Victor Dreke, former Cuban ambassador to Equatorial Guinea and Teresa Efuá Asangono, the ambassador of Equatorial Guinea in Cuba. The book is about the changing economic and class relations in Equatorial Guinea today and about the Cuban revolution and Cuba's place in the Africa and the world.

U.S. ARTISTS FOR RENEWED CULTURAL LINKS WITH CUBA'

Havana, Mar 4 (Prensa Latina)

A national network of US artists called on the administration of President Barack Obama to renew cultural links with Cuba and lift restrictions preventing their Cuban peers from travelling to the United States.

In a letter addressed to the White House by the United States-Cuba Cultural Exchange (USCCE), they also urged President Obama to abolish the ban on US people to travel to Cuba and develop normal, respectful relations with the Island.

The letter has been signed by more than 1,100 US notables so far, including Carlos Santana, Herbie Hancock, Harry Belafonte, Bonnie Raitt, Eddie Palmieri, Danny Glover, Laura Bickford and members of

dozens of important US cultural institutions.

This call from US artists come as the administration examines its Cuban policy and Congress prepares to consider a bill that may eliminate restrictions on travel to the Island, the document says.

It adds that the campaign will continue until changes are implemented regarding the free exchange of ideas and art expressions between the two countries. USCCE was created in 2005 to facilitate a change in the US policy towards Cuba and allow for sharing free expression through arts and culture.

CUBAN-SOUTH PACIFIC TIES

Wellington, Mar 20 (Prensa Latina)

Tonga is the latest to join the growing list of South Pacific countries willing to develop bilateral cooperation with Cuba, Radio New Zealand highlighted. In recent weeks Cuba has opened diplomatic concurrences in Fiji, Samoa and now in Tonga as part of its policy to broaden relations with countries in the Pacific region.

According to Cuba's ambassador in New Zealand José Luis Robaina, the King of Tonga has agreed to further the Kingdom's relationship with Cuba, which may soon be offering the South Pacific island scholarships in a range of disciplines. He said Cuban cooperation may cover health, education and sports.

HAVE YOU RENEWED YOUR ACFS MEMBERSHIP LATELY?

Your membership fee and donations directly support our solidarity work and community projects in Cuba. Every cent towards our work counts!

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