



CUBA Newsletter

Summer 2008

In this issue

Experiencing Cuba: The 25 th Southern Cross Brigade	1
National Assembly Elects Cuban Leadership	2
Cuba Signs International Human Rights Pact	2
Just A Man In Havana – Briefly	3
Secretary's Report	5
Vale Sergio Corrieri	6
Upcoming Events	6

Contact us

The ACFS meets on the 1st Thursday of the month at 6.30pm at **Level 1, CEPU Building, 741 George St, Sydney**

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

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Newsletter Contributions

We welcome contributions to the Cuba Newsletter. If you would like submit an article, please contact: newsletter@sydney-acfs.org

EXPERIENCING CUBA: THE 25TH SOUTHERN CROSS BRIGADE

The 25th Southern Cross Brigade comprised forty nine members in a fantastic group, staying just out of Havana. This year the brigade was in Cuba around election time, which was exciting and educative. The trip began with a New Years bang, also coinciding with the 49th Anniversary of the Revolution on 1st January. On New Years Eve we were treated to a Tropicana-style show in Havana, accompanied by plenty of Havana Club rum. Then, on the anniversary of the revolution, we went to a lovely ballet performance of Romeo and Juliet at the Gran Teatro.

We did six mornings of agricultural work, getting up at 6am to a recorded rooster's crow, and then going out to the fields to participate in activities such as picking beans, clearing grass with machetes and planting guavas.

We also had lectures and Q&A sessions with many people from all kinds of Cuban organisations. We met with the vice-minister of Foreign Affairs and economics officials, the Head of the Cuban Writers Association, as well as representatives of the Federation of Cuban Women, the Young Communist League, and student organisations.

We visited some urban organoponic farms, the latest area of innovation in Cuba, as well as the Caribbean School of Medicine, where international students study medicine to practice in their own countries. Also, it was especially moving to meet with members of the Combatants of the Cuban Revolution.

Lastly, we went to Santiago de Cuba, where we stayed with Cuban families for four nights. Despite a big language difficulty, we had a really nice time with our family. On the last night we had a big street party with all the local residents and a lot of Salsa, Conga and Reggaeton dancing!

The brigade was an amazing, uplifting and enriching experience proudly received by the whole group. Viva Cuba!

Chela Weitzel & Matthew Clark, brigadistas



Cuban billboard



Voluntary work



Organoponic Farm

ADVANCE NOTICE

**ACFS Sydney
Annual General
Meeting**

**Thursday 1 May 2008
6.30pm
Level 1, CEPU Building
741 George St, Sydney**

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTS CUBAN LEADERSHIP

excerpts from the Militant newspaper, March 10, 2008

BY MARTÍN KOPPEL & BEN O'SHAUGHNESSY

HAVANA, February 25—The 614 deputies newly elected to Cuba's parliament, the National Assembly of People's Power, elected a 31-member Council of State yesterday. The new National Assembly, elected every five years on the basis of territory, was chosen in Cuba's January 20 general elections.

Under the Cuban constitution, the Council of State, elected from among the members of the National Assembly, acts with the powers of the Assembly between sessions and executes its resolutions and decisions.

The National Assembly elected Raúl Castro, 76, to be president of the Council of State and Council of Ministers, the country's head of state and head of government. He has been the country's first vice president since 1976 and minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces since 1959. José Ramón Machado, another longtime leader of the revolution, was elected first vice president.

Six days earlier, in a step that surprised few people here, President Fidel Castro announced that for health reasons he would "neither aspire to nor accept the positions of President of the Council of State and Commander-in-Chief." He noted that he had shouldered those responsibilities since the adoption of Cuba's current constitution in 1976, and prior to that time had been prime minister for nearly 18 years.

The first act of the February 24 National Assembly session was the swearing in of the deputies to that body. There had been significant renewal of the membership of the assembly in the countrywide elections in January. Nearly two-thirds of the 614 legislators were

elected for the first time. Some 83 percent of the deputies were born after the 1959 victory of the Cuban Revolution or were younger than 10 years old at the time.

Thirty-six deputies are 30 years or younger, and the average age of the legislators is 49. The voting age in this country is 16. Cubans can be elected to local and provincial legislatures at the age of 16 and to the National Assembly at 18.

About 35 percent of the deputies are Black or mestizo, up from 33 percent in the assembly elected in 2003 and 28 percent in 1998. Some 43 percent are women, a 7 percent increase in relation to the outgoing assembly.

Members of Cuba's parliament, who are elected to a five-year term, receive no salary. They continue to work their existing jobs, which range from members of the armed forces to plant managers, university students, scientific researchers, workers, farmers, and leaders of unions and other mass organizations.

Ricardo Alarcón and Jaime Crombet were re-elected president and vice president of the Assembly, respectively, and Miriam Brito was elected secretary of that body.

The new first vice president of the Council of State and Council of Ministers, José Ramón Machado, was a combatant in the war against the U.S.-backed Batista dictatorship. A doctor by profession, he headed the medical department of the Rebel Army's Second Eastern Front, helping establish hospitals and clinics in that region. He later served as Cuba's health minister.

In his closing report to the Assembly, Raúl Castro reiterated arguments he had made in a public speech in Camagüey last July 26. "The massive support enjoyed by the revolution demands from us that we question everything in order to improve on it," Castro said. He added that "there is no reason to fear disagreements in a society like

ours" and that "debate and criticism within socialism" is necessary.

The new president pointed to some of the principal concerns that have been raised in the wide-ranging discussions that have taken place across the island since his July 26 speech. He said that in the coming weeks and months the government will start reviewing and eliminating some of the economic "prohibitions and regulations" instituted during the Special Period—designed to prevent the emergence of new inequalities under those conditions—that no longer serve the purpose for which they were instituted.

Castro dismissed the latest calls by U.S. officials for a "transition" in Cuba to "democracy"—that is, as always, moving toward "free enterprise," toward dog-eat-dog capitalism—as a precondition for lifting the five-decade-long U.S. trade embargo and for normalization of relations. "How little they know our people, so proud of their sovereignty and independence," he said.

Yes, how little the U.S. rulers can understand a genuine popular revolution, a socialist revolution—as they've not been able to do regarding the Cuban Revolution for more than half a century.

CUBA SIGNS INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS PACT

Excerpt from Prensa Latina

FOREIGN Minister Felipe Pérez Roque visited New York to proceed with the signing of the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The signing is a sovereign act that formalizes and reaffirms Cuba's commitment to the postulates of both documents, rights which are protected by Cuba's national judicial code and, especially, by the work and trajectory of the Cuban Revolution in the area of human rights.

JUST A MAN IN HAVANA - BRIEFLY

DAVID PHILLIPS
Independent Traveller
Nelson, New Zealand

I had wanted to do this for a long time, so long I cannot quite remember, but I do know I have been kicking myself for not going in '98 when I was back in Jamaica.

Of course, for some convoluted reason which, historically, seems like it may be part of the problem, it is not possible to fly to Cuba from the US.

It is possible from Jamaica but it turned out not to be possible for me in 1998. For a while, thought it was the centripetal family force of an important 40th Birthday reunion that was holding me back or the inconvenient truth that my Spanish speaking mate had other priorities, couldn't come with me and I would have to fend for myself. You know. Nothing to do with me not having the courage of my convictions, nothing to do with that. Then Ry Cooder released the Buena Vista Album and I thought, "Great", and then, "Shit. Now they'll all be going." But, just when I'd pretty much realized that actually, I should have, I could have, I didn't, a lost opportunity, never mind, how about Vietnam it's closer, I got another chance. Well now let me see...

So, late, very late, on Feb 12th the delayed flight from Kingston crossed Cuba from the south and descended into Havana. The lights are off, or at least, few and dim. Fantasies of leaving the plane, crossing a field to a distant tin shed with bored, unshaven, cigar smoking, military personal, leap unbidden to mind. In reality, the airport is one of the most attractive modern airports I have seen. Then I notice that the female officials are wearing skirts the same size as their heels. And everyone is smoking. From this moment on I find that the entire country smells of cigars.

I have checked with a second generation young Cuban-American

couple on the lane about the realistic price for a taxi to Havana. As I gird up my loins for the anticipated melee on leaving the airport, I am met by a very competent young woman (by which I mean about 35) who asks if I need a taxi. Well, yes, I do, but how much?...The price I have already been told. Bugger. What's wrong with these people, don't they know we're supposed to bargain in colourful, parodied, Monty Pythonesque, Third-World ways.

As my tri-lingual taxi driver takes me on a little tiki- tour of Havana, the first thing I notice is how little litter there is, the next, that the cars are not all from the cover of a Ry Cooder Album, and most important, that this city is very much awake. It's 12:30 am.

I am deposited at the end of a narrow, cobbled, atmospherically lit alley but I am already relaxing and take my guide's word that my hostel is down there somewhere. In fact, it's a miracle that it is - given my pronunciation of 'Hostal del Tajidillo'. But so it is, and just as I had hoped - a converted monastery with high ceilings, wooden shutters, balconies over the street and a central courtyard dripping palms and ferns.

Given my 3 weeks away from my wife, Carolyn, and dire warnings of Jinteras, a converted monastery looks especially welcoming.

I should explain. Jintera is the feminine form for those who 'ride' tourists and although it can mean hustler or just persistent street seller, it most often refers rather more literally to riding and being ridden, if you get my drift. Sex tourism, as it's euphemistically called, is one of the reasons male tourists visit Cuba and although the authorities have tried to disrupt the trade by banning 'entertaining' Cubans in your hotel room, the first thing I was told by the male, front desk staff-member was that he would be happy to turn a blind eye to any entertaining I might have in mind.

As I open the shutters in my room I realise I am looking out at the stone wall of the cathedral which itself forms one side of one of the oldest squares in Havana Veja. I can hear the town breathing, talking and singing and so I set out for the first of many walking adventures. Within minutes I find the Cathedral Square, filled with locals and tourists eating and drinking under the warm sky. Ruben Gonzales' uncle is at the piano and I realise that this is Monday so this must be Cuba. And it will be for another week.

By the time I get back to my room at 3am after the band stopped playing and the tourists went home and the 4 blokes drinking at the next table started singing and I somehow got involved in being bought and buying

rounds of increasingly good rum, I am feeling very relaxed.

The theme of relaxation is one I return to because it describes how easy it is to be a visitor to Cuba. Within a day I had stopped wearing a money belt, stopped worrying about my camera being grabbed, happily walked everywhere at anytime, stopped avoiding eye contact as a way to fend off unwelcome approaches and come to expect that the price was the price and the early morning taxi to the bus station would arrive on time.

Now, I am not saying it's easy to be a Cuban in Cuba. I simply don't know. After all I don't speak Spanish except to order a beer and I was only there for a week. However, I can say that I didn't see anyone malnourished or dressed in rags, and even the dogs look cared for. There were just as many, if not more Cubans than visitors anywhere I went, whether a restaurant in a hotel or the Museum of the Revolution. I didn't see beggars and I didn't see men in shiny Mercedes. I didn't see morbid obesity and I doubt if many people are diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. The family I stayed with on the South Coast had a fridge full of food, a TV and a laptop.

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They had no car and the 3 children shared a bedroom so I could have one to myself. Their eldest son's girlfriend had just received a scholarship to study Art in China. Between the two of them they spoke 5 languages.

Since telling various people of my experiences there I have found the response can easily be one of, "that's Communism for you". The interesting thing is that this same comment can be either positive or negative which I guess tells me that the place Cuba occupies in the collective mind of those of us that don't live there is pivotal in our wider preconceptions of how the ideology of government shapes our experience.

I have had a patient, originally Polish and recently a financial analyst working for the World Bank, saying, "that's Communism for you", in relation to my wondering how much more the Cubans might have been able to achieve if they hadn't had to spend so much money defending themselves. She commented that Communism needs an external enemy to justify controlling the population. Absolutely no connection in her mind to the "War on Terror" emanating from her base in Washington. I have had another patient, an American, respond to my saying how surprised I was at the lack of litter on the island, "that's Communism for you", which I initially thought was a remark about State control until she described being in Cambodia in the 70's where the trains ran on time, the people were welcoming and there was no theft. "It works", she said.

Of course, I can't subtract myself from this equation. The oft asked, "Why are you going to Cuba?" or, "What did you do there?" not only reflects the sub-text of the questioner but also requires some self-examination. Why did I, and what did I do?

The obvious answer is that I wanted to see for myself, albeit superficially. I wanted to see what a 50 year old Communist society looked like, to

get a feel, away from the words of the vested interests of those with strong opinions on either side of the debate. Having lived in neighbouring Jamaica which has a similar history of colonisation and slavery, the point of comparison was sharpened. And I wanted to hear where the music came from. Most visitors that I met seemed to feel similarly. By and large you meet a better class of tourist in Cuba!

I wanted to see what a 50 year old Communist society looked like, to get a feel, away from the words of the vested interests of those with strong opinions on either side of the debate.

So, what I did was "go walk about", setting off early in the morning and enjoying the rituals of a people waking up and starting their day. Everyday life is quite visible - people spill onto the streets as an extension of their homes and the homes themselves are built right on to the streets and open to both the street and the central courtyards within.

I followed groups of children being walked to school, I dodged keys being dropped from overhead balconies to the street, I smelt fresh coffee being ground and sat with people quietly reading in the shade of the squares. I tried not to have a list in my head and I tried simultaneously not to get too lost while following any sights or sounds that caught my interest. Invariably that would be music, which starts up in the bars by mid-morning.

I found galleries and museums and if the health of a culture is in any way a reflection of its art, I found a healthy culture. I found things I didn't fully comprehend - rituals involving elaborately dressed young girls processing through the streets, led and followed by attendant adults singing and playing drums, sprinkling water and sweets. I found people who I thought wanted to sell me things who didn't, and people who did but had enough dignity to accept, "No thank you", as an answer. I found an easy affection between people and most striking to me, between the men, who would

unaffectedly stay entwined after the initial hug and kiss of greeting.

I only found one jintera, well, actually she found me, and after I'd said my, "That's very nice of you but no thank you", bit I did think that since she spoke English it would have been interesting to accept the first part of her invitation, "to buy me a drink or something". When I mentioned this incident to a friend she said that it reminded her of going to Italy and not getting her bottom pinched.

By lunchtime it was definitely time for lunch and then an hour's walk back through the increasingly familiar streets to sit on my balcony and watch as everything wound down and the afternoon rains arrived. Siesta, and then do it all over again.

If anyone reading this is tempted to visit, then do stay in the old part of Havana. Apart from the stunning Spanish colonial architecture, it's all best explored on foot and because it is still a living, breathing, Cuban city and not a theme park for tourists, you will mix with and meet the people who live there in a relatively uncontrived way. But do learn some Spanish!

A Cuban friend I re-met in Miami had visited Cuba with other academics from her university and told me a story. When the others wandered away, a local man who they had been talking to took hold of her arm and said, "You're one of us, aren't you?" "Si", she replied. "Tell them it's hell", he said.

Now, this friend and indeed the whole group would be what most people would describe as left wing academics, and the point of her story was not, I think, to tell me that it is purely and simply, hell in Cuba, but to remind me that, like those other academics, it is possible that my experiences were skewed by my own orientation and the mask that Cubans might be wearing in a society that feels under scrutiny - from both the outside and the inside. It's possible, possibly probable and furthermore always interesting when

the two wings of political thought agree. My world banking, patient had already told me that had I visited Poland when she was growing up, I would have thought the country was functioning well and the people content.

What I felt I saw was a people who have within themselves some quality of self-belief which leads them to care about more than just themselves or their immediate family. Hence the lack of litter, the way the animals are cared for, the picking up of hitch-hikers, the grace when dealing with dumb tourists. I saw a society that values health and education, organics, recycling and energy conservation. There are no advertising billboards, no international conglomerates, (especially fast-food ones) and the remarkable experience of a society with no discernable US influence. Although, of course, the US has been enormously influential behind the scenes.

The contrast with Jamaica, another country I love, is palpable. I think I understand a little of how the experience of slavery leads to the passive aggressive or very actively aggressive -don't fuck with me - because I've learnt over 300 years that life is cheap and only the fittest and least moral survive. I may seem confident but that's because I'm not. Since life is likely to be short anyway then why should I care. What I can't quite get my head around is why it should be so seemingly different in neighbouring Cuba. Unless it's the last 50 years.

From what I can tell the Revolution was basically about 12 blokes who survived the first confrontation and holed up in the mountains. Incomprehensible that they could have superimposed their will on the entire country for the next 50 years, don't you think?

Whatever, the real story is, do I think you should visit... see for yourselves?

Yes. Especially if your country doesn't want you to.

I suppose for the sake of balance, as opposed to facts, if I really was a post-modernist, I'd go to Burma/Myanmar next. I just might....

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Suddenly the mainstream Australian media is taking an interest in Cuba, brought on by the official retirement of Fidel before the recent National Assembly elections. How gleefully the media broke the news and how enthusiastically their unctuous commentators held forth on the impending collapse of the Cuban social system. Hello!!! Didn't they realise that Raul Castro has been acting leader since Fidel's illness and the country hasn't fallen apart. In fact it's all been very orderly. After all, it's not as if the Cubans didn't have contingency plans ...what with all the US-backed assassination attempts made on Fidel, it would have been pretty silly not have a plan for his sudden demise. And unlike the Western media obsession with 'personalities', in Cuba people don't fall for that stuff. They know that there are many excellent candidates for leadership. Of course Fidel is loved and admired, but he is one person and the Cuban revolution has been and is being made by the Cuban people not by one man. Cuban people are politically sophisticated. They know it's not about one man. They recognise that Fidel won't be around forever. Typically the mainstream media seems unable to comprehend this. With a mixture of cynicism, naivete and good old ideological blinkers, they construct Cuba as 'ruled' by a 'dictator, with the people oppressed and suffering with heroic 'freedom fighters' bravely standing up for 'human rights'. In reality, this so called dictator has been elected to his position, as have the other members of the Cuban parliament. Voting is not compulsory in Cuba yet over 96% of the population voted in the recent elections. You don't have to be a millionaire either and you don't have to crawl for donations unlike some countries we could name. There are no death squads and no staged trials or torture in Cuba. People don't 'disappear'. How many other Latin

American countries have such a record? The so-called dissidents would like the right to take money from foreign governments to bring down the Cuban socialist system. Some are in jail for actually doing so. Some 'human rights!' The Cubans are on constant alert for attacks from US backed forces. All Cuban adults are trained to defend their country and have weapons available in case of attack. If it was true that Cuba was groaning under an oppressive dictator, how easy would it be for the people to grab some weapons and bring the system down? And yet they don't. Why? Because most of the population support the system that has brought employment, housing, universal free education and health care, workplace democracy, environmental care and freedom from oppression. Cuba may not be perfect but ask some of the millions of destitute Haitians and Jamaicans, Cuba's nearest neighbours, about their lives.

More and more people from this part of the world are now travelling to Cuba and seeing it for themselves. The recent ACFS brigade to Cuba had 50 participants who experienced many aspects of Cuban life including visits to cultural and historical sites, beaches, workplaces, schools, and hospitals, a lecture program, much dancing and music, voluntary work, family stays and the unique, warm welcome from ordinary Cuban people. The brigadistas were officially welcomed at the headquarters of ICAP (the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the People), the organisation that ACFS liaises with in Cuba. The ICAP Vice president Enrique Roman Hernandez spoke of the growth in solidarity which has taken place around the world with more than two thousand friendship societies in 150 countries. "We appreciate greatly your gesture of coming from such a great distance to show your solidarity with Cuba" he said. In its New Year message to our society, ICAP commented that "the plans to isolate Cuba from the international context have failed once again. Our

friends are visiting us, exchanging ideas, strengthening friendship ties".

VALE SERGIO CORRIERI

Periodico 26, local newspaper of Las Tunas, Cuba



It is with great sadness that we note the death of ICAP President Sergio Corrieri. A legend in Cuban cultural life for his work in theatre, film and television, and as a teacher, Sergio Corrieri was a committed revolutionary and member of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee.

Born in Havana on March 2, 1938 he worked in theatre from an early age and starred in the acclaimed film "Memories of Underdevelopment".

He spoke of his commitment to the Cuban revolution on many occasions. "The revolution had changed our lives - he said in an interview - and opened new perspectives for Cuban culture. We

understood that art had to be made with and for the revolution."

He founded the Escambray Theater Group in 1968, along with his mother, actor Gilda Hernandez. "We weren't interested in repertory because the plays were all very beautiful. We weren't trying to impose culture. We wanted to reach out to the people with points of view to help them understand their reality and be capable of transforming it."

He brought theatre performances to Angola and Nicaragua and as President of ICAP he continued this life work as a revolutionary and mentor. When asked if he missed acting he said. "At times I feel nostalgic, but at those moments other efforts make me feel useful and fulfilled. If I had another life I wouldn't hesitate to live this same one again trying to be even better."

Sergio Corrieri will be greatly missed but his legacy will live on.

UPCOMING EVENTS

ACFS has some exciting events coming up in the near future. Our A special guest at this event is **Rigoberto Zarza**, the new representative for the Asia Pacific region from ICAP. We will be welcoming Rigoberto at an ACFS members get together in Sydney on Saturday 22 March at Addison Rd Community Centre and he will be visiting branches around the country before heading off to Melbourne.

We will be launching of our new

humanitarian project at a **festival of Cuban films at Sidetrack Theatre**, 142 Addison Rd, Marrickville on Thursday evening, April 24. The project involves the upgrading of facilities in the dermatology ward at the Dr Ernesto Guevara Hospital in Las Tunas in Cuba. The project will be launched with a screening of the acclaimed film 'Salud' about the Cuban health system. This is a must see film that is particularly relevant in the context of what is happening in the health system in this country. Please come along and help support the 2008 ACFS project.

Our **AGM** is to be held on May Day, May 1, and will form part of our regular monthly meeting. The date is fast approaching and we look forward to meeting up with some of our members who are usually not able to attend regular meetings, and also with our regular attendees.

Cuban environmentalist Roberto Perez, featured in the excellent film *The Power of Community - How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*, will be speaking at Petersham Town Hall on Friday, March 28. This event is organised by the Cuba Australia Permaculture Exchange (CAPE) and is their inaugural project. It should be a great night.

Please see the flyers enclosed or contact ACFS at our email or postal address or ring the secretary on 0430 371 632 for details about these events.

In solidarity
Joan Silk, Secretary, Sydney ACFS

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