

NOTTINGHAM ORGANIC GARDENERS Meetings every second Tuesday of the month at 7.30 pm at the Gladstone Pub, Carrington. Ring Fran Rhoden 0115 9625198

SALSA LESSONS Beginners, Improvers and Advanced. Every Monday night 6.15pm. Top Floor 4 Castle Boulevard, Nottingham NG7 1FB
Absolute beginners welcome. Contact Felix/Olga on 07985780081

SALES Fairtrade coffee direct from Cuba £3.40 250g, Cuban Film posters (A2) £18.50. DVDs, CDs and much more. Ring Dave Hewitt on 0115 9535631

CUBA SOLIDARITY is a voluntary self supporting organisation devoted to gaining respect for Cuba's sovereignty and independence and an end both to the economic blockade and to interference in Cuba's affairs by foreign governments. The Nottingham branch consists of two elements. First a small group of enthusiasts who organise and promote events to encourage an interest in Cuba and Cuba Solidarity and to raise funds mainly to provide educational and medical materials denied to Cuba by the US blockade. (Anyone wishing to join this group should contact Barrie Ward). Secondly, a much larger group who receive this newsletter with details of forthcoming events which we hope you will continue to support and enjoy. To receive a copy regularly, please contact Barrie Ward.

CONTACTS

National Cuba Solidarity. For individual membership and to receive copies of 'Cuba Si' – CSC, c/o UNITE Woodberry, 218 Green Lanes, N4 2HB Tel: 02088000155

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For contributions, letters, criticisms concerning this newsletter – George Drury 157 Heage Road, Ripley DE5 3GG Tel 01773 748264 gdrury@mailcity.com

*Coming to the Garden Party? Why not come by bus?
Park and Ride Tram to City Centre. Bus no. 45 from Queen Street to Woodborough Road, Dagmar Grove stop. Cross the road and the next road on the left, a few steps down the hill, is Denmark Grove.*

NOTTINGHAM CSC NEWSLETTER

Summer 2009

50th Anniversary Celebration Tour



Cubans celebrating in Havana
(not the Nottingham contingent)

I have known a relieved round of applause from the pilot on touchdown after a troublesome flight, but never quite what happened when our plane arrived at the Jose Marti Airport in Havana just after Christmas last year. Among shouts of "Viva Cuba" and "Viva Fidel" the passengers greeted our arrival with spontaneous applause. In a few days time the Revolution would celebrate its 50th

anniversary and we were there to share in this extraordinary achievement. There were five of us from Nottingham in a party of some thirty people from all over Britain in a tour arranged by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign in London.

Well, the celebration was not quite what we, or it seems the organisers, had expected. Yes, there was a large political rally in Santiago addressed by Raul (continued on page 2)

Inside This Issue

Guantanamo: A History

Current Affairs: Revolution and Evolution

How Cubans Cope With Hurricanes

50th Anniversary Celebration Tour (continued)

but Santiago was miles away and the nearest we could get to see it was in our hotel lobby where it was on the TV. The mass celebration in the Plaza de la Revolution never materialised. There were a number of theories to explain its absence including that it would be inappropriate in a time of global financial crisis and austerity, or that it reflected a different approach by Raul's administration to mass demonstrations or even that it was linked to Fidel's failing health.

Still, it was clear that Havana was en fête with many streets festooned with flags and with many barrios hosting street parties and that must have been the picture throughout the island.

It was only late in the evening of the 1st January that we were caught up in events possibly more significant than a political rally. On a warm evening a huge throng of mostly young people was making its way along the famous Malecon to join an even greater multitude before the ranks of Cuban flags which confront the US Interests Section. Multiplying by the minute, they had come to hear some of the best known bands in Cuba in a free concert under the stars. Over the stage was the slogan "Todos Por La Revolucion". This was a relaxed friendly throng wanting to dance and have a good time. Not a bad way to celebrate what their grandparents had fought for and their parents had sustained against all the odds.

Otherwise this celebratory tour provided a kaleidoscopic experience of street parties hosted by CDRs in Havana and Trinidad, visits to a polyclinic in Old Havana, a cooperative farm, an international camp for Brigadistas and, most memorably, a Veterans Association in Santa Clara. These were men who had fought with Fidel in the Sierra and with Che in the decisive battle for Santa Clara itself. One vigorous eighty year old described his experiences in the Revolutionary War in Cuba and, after the successful outcome, his soldiering in Angola and on to Ethiopia. He completed his international duties by working in forestry in Siberia – where he claimed that he worked too hard ever to get cold.

A fleeting look at Cuba suggests that things are much easier than they were in the worst days of the 'Special Period'. The good old 'camel' buses have disappeared from the Havana streets, to be replaced by shining new buses from China. There was little or no sign of street begging nor for that matter the street prostitution which disfigured a visitor's experience in the 90s. There seemed plenty of fresh produce in the markets and, wherever we went, the

organicopos were thriving. Also, and this was, of course, only an impression, the people we met seemed to be heartened by the obvious improvements around them.

It wouldn't be the Cuban Revolution in progress if there weren't problems to be resolved – and there are many of them. In Santiago Raul was speaking about the need for greater labour discipline: Cuba must reduce its food imports and produce more: the price of nickel has dropped dramatically on the world markets: last but not least, the existence of two currencies is socially divisive.

Some things don't change: the warmth of the welcome everywhere, the wonderful scenery, buoyant Cuba and the warm Caribbean. Try it as soon as you can.

Guantanamo



Anyone, before 9/11, with a passing interest in Cuba who probably only knew about the 1963 Missile Crisis and the subsequent hostile relationship with the US, would probably have been amazed to learn that the Americans actually had a base there. Even the more knowledgeable of us may not be fully aware

of how this weird accommodation came about and (to use the word in its other sense) how the accommodation has functioned throughout the hundred years of its existence. A recent study, as reviewed in the London Review of Books, provides the answers and we thought it worthwhile to give a summary here. Some basic facts about Cuban history have been added to help clarify the circumstances.

The Spanish officially arrived for the first time in 1511 to claim the island which they subsequently used as a staging point and a base to combat piracy in the Caribbean. By the end of the 18th century, they had realised the full potential for sugar cultivation, had exterminated all but a very few of the indigenous population and replaced them with their own settlers and a large contingent of mainly African slaves. However, in the 19th century the whole colonial empire began to break up in earnest and in Cuba, as elsewhere, the Spanish faced a series of sporadic but increasingly effective insurrections. Demands in other colonies had reduced their military presence from 200,000 to 80,000 troops by 1898, a time when Cuban rebels, inspired in particular by Jose Marti and his death in battle in 1895, constituted their greatest ever threat. It was at this point that the United States decided to intervene. Some historians argue that the state of the Spanish finances and all their other commitments would have made it impossible for them to hold out for more than another year or so, but notwithstanding, the Cubans welcomed the US assistance. War was declared in April 1898, US forces arrived in June and the Spanish surrendered in July.

Congress explained the motives for the intervention in the Teller Amendment: "The United States disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction or control over said island except for pacification thereof, and asserts its determination, when it is accomplished, to leave the government and control of the island to its people".

Once the Spanish had left, the US took over control and their soldiers remained for the next four years, as President McKinley put it, "until there is complete tranquillity in the island and a stable government inaugurated". This was not unreasonable; the departing Spanish had practised a scorched earth policy in some areas and, especially in the countryside, banditry was rife. It is fair to say that the behaviour of the US government at this point suggests that they were more inclined to get out of any deep and expensive commitment in Cuba as quickly as possible, rather than to use this opportunity to acquire a fully dependant colony. However they realised that they had the unchallenged opportunity to create a cast iron insurance against any future threat from this close offshore island, once their troops left. The Platt Amendment in 1901 made it obligatory for those Cubans writing a new

constitution to include the unlimited rights of the US to send troops to Cuba at its discretion and to establish bases on the island. This surreal interpretation of the 'pacification' clause in the Teller Amendment, of course, completely violated the rest of it.

When the troops did leave in 1903 the Lease Agreement with Cuba granted the US complete jurisdiction over an area of 45 square miles, including the mouth of Guantanamo Bay, while they recognised that its 'ultimate sovereignty' remained Cuban.

During the next few years disturbances occurred, mainly stemming from inter-racial hostilities. There was an influx of US and Spanish settlers (including one Angel Castro, father of a well known Cuban) and, as in so many post colonial countries, joined the surviving white colonial families who retained and enlarged their holdings of land and control of commerce. The American military were called in, ostensibly to restore order, in 1906, 1909 and 1912 though they do not seem to have become involved in much, if any, actual combat. They, however, used the 1912 opportunity to reactivate the Guantanamo base with a fresh treaty that reaffirmed their rights there in return for an annual rent of \$2,000 (this is still paid but the Cubans have metaphorically, or perhaps literally, torn up the cheques and they have not been cashed).

The following 20 years created few concerns for the US as Cuban governments generally ensured the security of their investments. A detachment was reluctantly dispatched in 1917 when the Cuban government hoped they would intervene in disputes and although it remained for six years, it was clearly only stationed where it could protect sugar plantations. In 1924 Machado was elected and followed what was to become a familiar European practice of by-passing elections and extending his period of office, turning into a dictator, 'the Tropical Mussolini'. This created no particular concern in the US, especially when they were preoccupied with their own massive economic problems at the end of the decade. The depression, with its catastrophic effect on the value of sugar, together with the political resentment of the style of government, created turbulence in Cuba. When it was clear that Machado had lost popular support, Franklin Roosevelt made no attempt to bail him out. Roosevelt hoped to retain something of the status quo by diplomatic means with the new group which seized control in 1933 but had little hope when proposals were made for the nationalisation of American owned sugar mills and the electricity company. Ramon Grau the new leader announced the abrogation of the Platt Amendment. Roosevelt did not send in the troops but (shades of things to come) blockaded the island.

Enter Batista who managed to secure the support of the army and realised that a conciliatory approach to the US would be far more advantageous than outright confrontation. Encouraged by the US, Batista ousted Grau and in effect dominated the country for the next 25 years, not always as titular leader. A cosy relationship with the US extended throughout this period. As a gesture of good will, Roosevelt renounced the Platt Amendment but a new treaty reaffirmed the Guantanamo lease and extended it indefinitely.

The economic effects on the area around the base were perhaps predictable. Large numbers of menial workers could be employed cheaply but for wages well in excess of those paid elsewhere in Cuba. Hotels, restaurants, and all other types of pleasurable places grew up as they would around any exotic garrison and port where sailors and marines could enjoy shore leave. As in the rest of Cuba, profits for a few were considerable and for the Mafia above all. As for the locals, provided they were prepared to suffer the side effects of 'enjoying shore leave' and the presence of brothels and prostitutes on a large scale, they might have thought that they were better off there than in many other places in Cuba.

All this changed with the Revolution. Servicemen no longer ventured outside the base on shore leave but Cubans still worked there. According to documents recently available in Russia, it would appear that Khrushchev's installation of missiles was intended to deter any proposed US invasion of the island and for no other purpose – hard as this is to believe.

Strange features of this Crisis were that Cubans were still permitted to work at the base, even though a few left in protest, while some Cuban cleaners and maids who could speak English, carried out clerical work abandoned by those military wives (amounting, together with children, to 2432) who were evacuated to the US. They reverted to their old jobs when the wives returned.

After an episode in 1964 when Florida jailed 38 Cuban fishermen and impounded their boats and Fidel cut off the Guantanamo water supply in retaliation, the Cuban workers were given an ultimatum. Either they could choose to stay with the base and cut off all ties with their families and Cuba, or they could choose Cuba and lose both their jobs and pensions. Out of the 2,000 workforce, 448 chose the base. 750 were reemployed but without retirement rights. This was slightly revised by President Carter in 1979 when those retiring after that year could be paid pensions. In the meantime, no more Cubans were hired after 1964 and contract workers from Jamaica, the

Philippines and similar countries have replaced them. Three Cubans still commuted to work in the base in 2007.

The place ceased to have any meaningful strategic value but suddenly, as we know too well, provided somewhere to put detainees from Afghanistan. These were defined neither as prisoners of war nor civilian criminals, imprisoned in a place which is legally Cuban territory and thus not subject to any US Federal laws yet legally without any Cuban control or jurisdiction. It is the ultimate example of a situation, in the current phrase, "all within the rules".

'Guantanamo: A Working-class History Between Empire And Revolution' by Jana Lipman is published by the Californian Press at £17.95.

The invaluable 'Cuba. A New History' by Richard Gott is published by Yale University Press and copies are available at a discount price of £7.50 from Dave Hewitt (0115 9535631).

Current Affairs: Evolution and Revolution

How to account for the removal from post of three prominent figures in the Cuban government? Professor Tony Kapcia from the School of Latin American Studies at Nottingham University, speaking to Café Scientifique the other night, was not sure. All three were rising stars and one of them he had thought of as a future head of state in succession to Raul whose term in office is likely to be transitional and short term. Even more puzzling, another was seen to be closely identified with the economic reforms favoured by Raul.

Tony Kapcia considered the different approaches between Fidel and Raul. In answering the question 'how do the Cubans keep support for the Revolution going?' he pointed out that one of the features in Cuba, which sets it apart from the former Eastern Bloc countries, is participation. In Fidel's favoured model, participation was largely seen in mass demonstrations; never better exemplified than by the great mobilisation over the case of Elian Gonzalez that helped to secure his release from Florida. It was 'wall to wall campaigning', as Kapcia put it. Raul, on the other hand, seems to be switching to an alternative system involving participation through structures – "you lose the excitement but the aim is the same".

Raul has picked up on the emphasis on morality which was a characteristic of the early days of the Revolution. To the extent that there is corruption in the system (and it's nothing like pre-Revolutionary Cuba, of course) Raul is

clamping down firmly, trying, for example, to eradicate low-level pilfering from state enterprises.

One thing the Revolution did achieve, Tony Kapcia explained, was the re-distribution of land ownership. The Cubans have observed the collapse in Eastern Europe and the subsequent privatisations. The last thing they want is to see the exiles come back and claim land previously re-distributed by the state. "But a lot of privatisation is likely at the retail level and also with small farms. If all goes well, Raul will go with it".

Latin American countries look to Cuba as an example, not as a model, Kapcia said. The Cubans went down the road following a model (the Soviet Union) and they don't urge other countries to follow suit.

As regards the trade embargo, Kapcia believes that if the US wishes to de-stabilize Cuba, it would get rid of the blockade, but the resulting chaos would not serve US interests. In any case, revocation is academic, since the large majority vote necessary in the Senate is out of the question in the foreseeable future. So, "don't hold your breath".

Professor Kapcia expects Obama to promote small reforms, reversing some of the more draconian measures of the previous administration. He will do what he can by presidential decree. Moderate progress perhaps, but far better from the White House than we could possibly have envisaged four years ago.

How Cubans Cope With Hurricanes – And Other Things As Well

"I got into this bus from Havana to Santiago," said Jim, "and took out my book to read".

"As you do", I said.

"First, I got a nudge from the man next to me and then a woman across the bus announced, 'We are a collective'. No way was I going to be allowed to hide inside a book. You have to understand that about Cuba. They have it instilled into them from childhood".

For the purposes of this newsletter, I had decided that it would be fascinating to find out exactly how the Cubans manage safely to evacuate tens of thousands away from the path of the dangerous hurricanes which crash into the island every autumn. Last year's were exceptionally heavy, even by Cuban standards. Fatalities are non-existent or confined literally to one or two.

My idea was to seek out Cubans in Nottingham who would describe the experience of moving out of their homes and back again, but I wasn't having much success in finding them. "Try Jim", someone said. So here we were, chatting over a drink.

It seems that twelve years ago, as a result of a casual conversation and more or less on a whim, he decided to visit Cuba. The friend also suggested that a visit to the office of a Barrie Ward might help and Jim came away with a couple of Havana telephone numbers. These produced a warm welcome and lodgings. Several days later he was invited to party where he met his future wife. The couple have retained her family apartment and they divide up their time more or less equally between Havana and Nottingham. Unfortunately at the time his wife was in Cuba and I couldn't talk to her.

"All I can tell you from my experience about the evacuation process, is that I was dealing with a factory in Havana when part of it was prepared for emergency accommodation but in the end it wasn't required". Jim then went on to describe the bus journey as quoted at the start of this piece. At the time I didn't really grasp the significance of what he was telling me but it all became clearer later on when I was at last able to contact a true Cuban, Tania, who gave me a precise account of the island's hurricane strategy.

It quickly emerged that I would be very unlikely to find anyone in Nottingham who had actually been evacuated. I had somehow imagined that everyone in a hurricane corridor would be required to leave. Not so, only those who were housed in buildings that could not be relied on one hundred percent to withstand the force of the wind, moved out. But how was this assessment made? Here is where the 'collective' and the CDRs come in.

The Comites de la Defensa de la Revolucion were established within a year of the Revolution. Each residential area has a CDR with an elected chairperson and these areas are small units. In urban districts Jim reckons they only cover 20 or so households. As far as hurricane preparations are concerned, the CDR is responsible for assessing every house and preparing a plan which must be written and published. All doubtful premises must have a precise programme detailing, on the issue of an alert, where residents have to await transport (or state what their own transport arrangements are), where they are taken for temporary accommodation and even where they would go for more permanent occupation, should their homes be wrecked. On the approach of a hurricane, the radio and TV give frequent advance warnings. Even if not required to evacuate, no one should leave their house unless it is absolutely necessary. In this way, Tania says, not only are fatalities and injuries kept to a

minimum but, just as important, confidence in the system is such that no one fears the onset of hurricanes. She went on to make it clear that, whatever reservations one might have over the Cubans capacity for organisation, this one really does work efficiently: "It is one of the things about my country for which I do feel proud". However, she added that the damage to crops was a constant problem.

That was the answer to my hurricane enquiry, but it opened up another one. What are these CDRs and how do they function?

As was reported in the earlier piece about the 50th Anniversary Tour, our group attended two street parties organised by CDRs. Given the name, this was a fairly obvious thing for them to do but what about the less obvious?

So, back to Jim. I didn't want him to give me some sort of official job description (even if he could) but rather to tell me about any part they have played in his day to day life in Cuba.

"Well, for example, my wife went to this meeting to organise some representation at a demonstration condemning Posada Cariller " (the Miami Cuban said to be responsible for acts of terrorism and who has enjoyed the approval and protection of the Bush clan in Florida). Someone made a pointed remark about those who spend half the time in Europe ". Jim's wife is clearly a feisty woman and expressed an opinion on that point but did think that this was an opportunity to give active support. Jim duly turned up and joined the massive crowds, under the appropriate banner, on the way to the city centre, getting to know a neuro-surgeon he found marching beside him (someone he has kept in contact with ever since).

Such participation is obviously an accepted piece of social behaviour more or less taken for granted. However, Jim says that two middle aged women in the street who clearly wish to keep themselves to themselves, have no pressure put on them. His account reminded me of the respect for certain social obligations (and such sanctions as existed) in England in the 19th century over church going.

An American friend Jim knows cancelled all engagements for a week while he and his wife carried out a sort of neighbourhood watch duty. The father in another family was French and a surgeon who practised for long periods in France. He sent back remittances that were modest by his standards but turned out to be sufficient to allow his adult nephew not to need any employment. A representative of the CDR visited and suggested to the young man that such non-productive and essentially parasitic behaviour was

contrary to the spirit of the Revolution and he would be expected to remedy it. There were other examples where such interventions occurred where problems existed and the CDR provided in effect unpaid social worker assistance. One imagines that the recipients' attitude towards all this depends on the nature of the problem and the skill of the provider, although I suspect that many of us would find such a role taken by our close neighbours quite hard to accept comfortably. On the other hand, these are not impersonal communities where desperate and tragic problems are hidden behind closed doors and neighbours 'mind their own business'.

As with so much about the social and political system in Cuba, this makes you wonder what is the acceptable face of socialism and what is not. We can tend to be cynical and question motives. If words like freedom, conformity and repression come into the frame, the challenge must be to examine the subtle form they take in our own society before we criticise another. Perhaps some misgivings might be put in perspective by two other contributions from Jim.

He was in a cinema showing a film which was essentially a comedy about the conflict between generations in a family. Grandfather adhered strictly to old established codes, resolutely trying to obstruct the rather dubious circumventions of the younger members of the family. Without saying so explicitly, it clearly indicated the existence and temptations of the black market. The audience roared with laughter.

Recently a smoking ban has been introduced, much like ours. Jim was somewhat surprised when he walked into a bakery to find a substantial amount of smoking going on. Shopping further down the street, he found the pharmacy full of cigarette smoke. Later he discussed this with a friend. "Ah Jim" said the Cuban, "you must remember we are a Latin people".

Postscript

Out of the proceeds from last year's Garden Party as a result of your generous support, we contributed £700 to the Hurricane Relief Fund.

Stop Press

To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Revolution we are in the process of arranging an evening at the Polish Club early in November when Omar Puente and Los Raices Cubanos and/or Cubania will perform. Full details will be available at the Garden Party when tickets may be bought.