

Conference and Exchange: Havana, Cuba March 15-23, 2008

“From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”. This a fundamental constitutional principle in Cuba? Is this a good thing? Can it possibly work? Is it interesting to observe the effort? Yes.

The National Lawyers Guild, Labor and Employment Committee, invited CALL members to join them in a conference called “Defense of Workers’ Rights and Social Security” and to participate in a research exchange with Cuban and Latin American trade unionists, labour lawyers and scholars. I was the only delegate from Canada this year. I encourage others to attend what has been an annual conference for the last nine years. Next March will mark the 50th year of the revolution and it will a good year to be in Havana for the celebrations. What follows is a short summary of the conference. A full summary will be published by the Lawyers Guild and will be forwarded to CALL members.

The Labor and Employment Committee of the Guild has developed an impressive relationship with the national trade union of Cuba, the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (the CTC), the lawyers who serve the CTC and the Cuban government. We met all of the leaders of these groups and had an opportunity to listen to them and to ask questions about the trade union structure, the negotiation and enforcement of labour legislation and agreements, and the role of lawyers in Cuba.

The first two days were a convention with labour lawyers from Latin America and Cuba with guest speakers from the Cuban government. We had a half hour meeting with Dr. Ricardo Alarcon, who has served as president of the Cuban National Assembly since 1993, and considered a likely successor to the Castros.

This portion was interesting, but for those of us who did not speak Spanish a great deal was missed because of the difficulty of simultaneous translation. At the conclusion of the conference we were invited to a dinner at the offices of the lawyers’ association, the Cuban Jurists, in a lovely old Spanish style mansion, or the sort which grace Havana. There we met Roberto Gonzales, the brother and lawyer for one of the Cuban Five.

While I had only recently become aware of the Cuban Five, the group of Guild lawyers, many of whom were peripherally involved with the U.S. court case, considered this the high point of the week. Roberto spoke of the ten years of his brother’s imprisonment, the refusal by the US government to permit a visit from the wives and families of the convicted men, as well as the merits of the as yet unconsidered grounds for appeal. Briefly the five were convicted of the admitted act of infiltrating Cuban groups in Miami on behalf of the Cuban government to report on intended initiatives by these groups against Cuba. Cuban expatriates were leafleting Havana in small planes, encouraging a revolt against the government. At the time of the arrests of the five, two of these planes had been shot down by the Cuban air force. The court set aside the convictions on the ground that the Miami jury chosen to hear the case was biased. This decision was then quashed by the appeal court sitting “en banc”. The other four grounds remain outstanding. One arises from the refusal of the judge to hear full evidence, and to give proper

weight, to the defense of necessity arising from the failure of the American government to stop acts of terrorism against the Cuba people.

The next three days of the exchange were the most fascinating. We visited a school, a hospital, and a farm and had the opportunity to speak with production and trade union leaders in all these facilities. We heard about the terms of employment, the settlement of grievances, the allocation of scarce resources, and asked questions on a wide range of subjects. It was during these exchanges, and the long bus rides between Havana and the provinces, that one of the most valuable aspects of the trip occurred, the opportunity to get to know the other participants. The Guild lawyers are a fascinating group of social activists, and scholars. Very few of these lawyers were affiliated with trade unions, many see their role as helping the homeless, the unemployed, victims of discrimination, criminals and those who fall outside trade union protection. Others were professors active in leftist studies. They all asked interesting questions, and had different perspectives and conclusions about our observations.

We also enjoyed a guided tour of Havana, Sancti Spiritus, Santa Clara and Trinidad, by a very knowledgeable and sophisticated tour guide who was herself a lawyer, and several free evenings to enjoy the incredible jazz and beat of Cuba.

Our encounters with Cubans left me with renewed inspiration about the power of members of a collective to energize, educate and care for themselves. While the background to the successes of the Cuban revolution is an intense nationalism, and a rejection of any culture of protest, the Cuban experience confirms that working people can contribute fully and generously to economic and industrial growth when they are genuine participants in production and distribution decisions which directly effect them.