

May Day in Cuba



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By Charles McKelvey

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“The tens of thousands of scientists and doctors that our country has were educated to save lives. This is the pride of our doctors, and our research centers. Tens of thousands of Cuban doctors have provided international service in the most remote and inhospitable places.”—Fidel Castro

These words of Fidel Castro were transmitted at the beginning of the South African Broadcasting Company coverage of the arrival of the Cuban medical mission to South Africa this past April 27. The 217 Cuban health care workers were received by the Cuban ambassador to South Africa as well as Ministers of the South African Government (including the Minister of Defense, the Minister of International Relations, the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs), and also the General Secretary of the South African Communist Party. They stressed Cuba’s continuing solidarity with Africa, from support for the struggle against apartheid, the battle against Ebola in West Africa, and now the struggle against Covid-19. Africa can count on the solidarity of Cuba.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic prevents the customary First of May mass marches in commemoration of International Workers’ Day, Cuba is celebrating international solidarity in practice, with medical brigades in fifty-nine countries, where 28,400 collaborators (53% of whom are women) join the battle

against Covid-19, together with professionals of those countries. These countries include no less than thirty in Africa, plus ten in Asia and Oceania, four in the Middle East, six in Central and South America, and nine in the Caribbean.

On the island, Cubans are celebrating May Day 2020 with unity, discipline, and optimism, confident that its plan is winning the battle against Covid-19, but not mistakenly believing with overconfidence that the battle is won and that discipline and social distancing can be relaxed. Cuban President Miguel Díaz Canel, tweeted exhortations for “solidarity, commitment, courage, and discipline,” saying that “we are saving lives and overcoming fear.”

At the daily teleconference of the Cuban Council of Ministers on April 30, the Cuban president reflected on the progress that is being made in the struggle against Covid-19. He noted that in the last five days the number of persons discharged from the hospital has been surpassing the number of new confirmed cases each day, which is consistent with the most favorable projections in mathematical models that Cuba has developed; but he cautioned against overconfidence. Compliance with the measures must continue, he declared, in order to avoid an escalation of confirmed cases. We have to maintain physical distancing, and we have to continue to work diligently to identify sick persons early.

The Cuban President called upon the people to celebrate International Workers' Day in their homes, recognizing and giving thanks that we have given our all to defeat the epidemic; that we have with discipline overcome fear.

International Workers' Day is a living memorial to the Chicago workers murdered on May 1, 1886. In many countries of the world, there are annual mass demonstrations in which the demands of the workers' movements in their particular countries are lifted up. Last year, for example, in hundreds of cities of the world, workers protested the social insecurities provoked by neoliberal economic policies, unemployment, wage inequality, and increasingly concentrated wealth. In Latin America, International Workers Day of 2019 saw mass demonstrations of workers protesting the interference of the International Monetary Fund, the conditions of life of the people, the privatization of state companies, labor reforms that legalize superexploitation and low salaries, the annulment of the right to organize, and the growth of the external debt with the packages of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

In Cuba, International Workers' Day has had a different tone. As a consequence of the political empowerment of the workers, May Day in Cuba has been the occasion for mass festive celebration of the socialist revolution and its achievements in defense of the workers and other popular sectors. Rather than protests against the government, the mass acts are declarations of support for the government and the socialist project of the nation, in opposition to the imperialist policies of the global powers, especially Cuba's powerful neighbor to the north.

The political empowerment of Cuban workers was attained through a historic struggle that had its gains and setbacks. In the 1920s and early 1930s, workers organizations were in the vanguard of the struggle against the Machado dictatorship, with the first Communist Party of Cuba as the leading force, educating and organizing the workers. But during the 1940s and 1950s, the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC) had become an instrument for forcing the workers to submit to capital. During the dictatorship of 1952 to 1958, a corrupt union oligarchy benefitted from obligatory membership dues, and it collaborated with Batista in the repression of workers. However, in the early 1960s, with the support of the Revolutionary Government, CTC took definitive form as a revolutionary organization, casting aside the corrupt union oligarchy. Along with other mass organizations of peasants, agricultural cooperativists, students, and women, CTC played a central role in the mass assemblies of the 1960s.

Since the Constitution of 1976, the political empowerment of workers is integral to Cuban structures of popular democracy. CTC representatives, along with those of the other mass organizations, form candidacy commissions, which present to the delegates of the 169 municipal assemblies the names of candidates to the National Assembly of People's Power. (The municipal assemblies are elected by the

people in 12,515 voting districts in secret elections in which voters choose from two or more candidates nominated by the people in a series of neighborhood nomination assemblies). The National Assembly of People's Power, elected by the municipal assemblies on the basis of the recommendations of the candidacy commissions, is the highest authority in nation; it elects the highest members of the executive and judicial branches of the state, and it enacts legislation. In addition, by constitutional requirement, representatives of CTC and other mass organizations are included in the legislative committees of the National Assembly. Such are the structures of people's power, in which political power is in the hands of the delegates and deputies of the people.

Since the triumph of the Revolution, Cuba has developed an expansive definition of worker to include workers of all categories: industrial workers, agricultural workers, service workers, professionals, educators, doctors, nurses, and self-employed workers. Cuban workers, in the broad sense, are organized by place of work, united regardless of occupation, such that the researchers, secretarial staff, and janitorial staff of a research center are in the same local union, whose officers are elected without reference to their function in the center. More than 90% of Cuban workers are members of the Cuban Confederation of Workers.

In addition, May 1 is the fifty-ninth anniversary of Radio Havana Cuba. Its establishment was stimulated by the avalanche of disinformation about Cuba disseminated by AP, UPS, and other news agencies, which in reality were ideological agencies of imperialism, rather than genuine news agencies. The conservative press of Latin America of the era also participated in the dissemination of false information about the Cuban Revolution. On the eve of the U.S.-sponsored invasion by Cuban counterrevolutionary émigrés at the Bay of Pigs, Fidel announced that Cuba already has a radio plant that is transmitting to Latin America and the world. The radio transmissions were open to the world on April 16, 1961, as "a voice of friendship that travels the world." Radio Habana Cuba was established officially on May 1, 1961.

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