

Report from the Cuban Delegation

24th November to the 4th December 2018.

As part of the 2018 UNISON Delegation to Cuba regions were invited to join the delegation which was supported by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign. I was extremely privileged to represent Scotland and together with Sam McCartney we joined the delegation which took place on 24th November to the 4th December 2018.



Background

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean. It has a population of over 11 million people, 2.1 million of whom live in the capital city of Havana. It is not rich in natural resources and its main income comes from exporting nickel, coffee, tobacco, pharmaceuticals and from tourism.

Frustration with the political system and brutal dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista gave rise to Fidel Castro's 26th July movement, three years of guerrilla warfare and the eventual triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

Delegation Visits

1. The delegation visited Havana and Pinar Del Rio with our first meeting with the Public Administration Union (SNTAP) and the Health Workers' Union (SNTS) in the headquarters of the Cuban TUC (CTC). We received an overview of the trade union movement within Cuba, colleagues explained to us the union density and leadership structures.



2. We visited the Latin American School of Medicine and had a lengthy discussion on the International Doctors' Project, with many examples of the work Cuban doctors have undertaken. In 1998 Cuba responded to a crisis in Caribbean assisting 30,000 victims (Fidel said that following the hurricane the people were subject to the crisis of poverty and Cuba had a humanitarian duty to help). The project is recognised as a huge success, In February 1999 first students arrived from outside Cuba with other Latin American countries asked to join the Programme. In November 1999 – over 1,999 students from 19 countries. In 2012 project now covers all islands in the Caribbean and Africa and this year students from 83 nations are participating in the project which is offered is free of charge.

Now with over 29,000 students back in their own countries, with some of the doctors coming back to undertake advance practice in specialist medicine.

3. Cuba Health Union has 500,000 members, we discussed the support Cuba had offered to Brazil by sending doctors (200) to work in support of local communities. 700 Brazilian communities saw a doctor for the first time – these were Cuban doctors. However, the integrity of the doctors were brought into question leaving no other option but for the Cuban Government to bring them home.
4. In Pinar Del Rio we saw first-hand the health service in action as we visited a Polyclinic and doctor and nurses home situated in the local community. The focus over the past 60 years has been on preventative medicine. In terms of having healthy people, the Cuban health service outperforms other low and medium income countries and in some cases, outperforms much richer ones too. So how do they do it? and could other countries, rich and poor, learn from the Cuban example?
5. I believe in Scotland we have a lot to learn from the examples in the public health agenda with a focus on prevention. With limited resources they have shown outstanding results with Fidel focussed on health prevention Cuba has the highest ration of doctors to patients in the world at 6.7 per 1,000 people, Life expectancy 80.45 years for women and 76.50 years for men and the 2018 3.8 infant mortality of 1,000 live births - one of the best in the world.



6. Healthcare in Cuba is free and universal, enshrined in the Cuban constitution as a fundamental human right, guaranteed by the state. And the foundation of their preventative health care model is at primary care level, the family doctors and nurses who oversee the health of those who live around the clinic.
7. One of the activity we undertook was to visit to the junior high school, meeting and learning for the young students was truly inspiring. Most students when asked wanted to become a doctor, teacher or lawyer, this is leading to a real shortage in trades skills within the country. The government is now trying to address this by opening a number of trade schools encouraging students to focus on vocational qualifications.



8. On the same day we visited the Museum of Illiteracy where we heard of the success of the 1961 Year of Literacy, there was a call from Fidel for students from the towns to join the Literacy Brigade. There were over 100,000 volunteers with the youngest being only 8 years old who left their homes and moved to rural communities to educate the farming communities.



9. One of the testimonies from the volunteers said “The literacy campaign taught us how to share, how to give without expecting anything in return. On the literacy campaign, nobody went to be paid: nobody was given anything. We went to share what we know, to give our good intentions, to work for the people learning to read and write. It gave us the value with which we’ve lived our life’s ever since. **And for those of us that were women, it liberated us**, our generation of women gained a completely different perspective of life. The literacy campaign changed the meaning of life for Cuban women”.
10. Our delegation had a focus on equality and learning how since the Revolution the equality agenda had been advanced, we met with Federation of Cuban Women and the National Centre for Sex Education (CENESEX), the main organisation promoting LGBT rights in Cuba.
11. Women’s equality was seen as an integral part of the Revolution and the principles of the new Cuban society. The fight for women’s rights was heralded as a “revolution within the Revolution” and the Cuban Constitution explicitly guarantees women economic, political, social, cultural and family rights and opportunities equal to those of men.
12. Since the Revolution women have made huge advances in all fields of life from health and education to politics and economic empowerment. Examples of the success for the revolution towards women’s empowerment with women making

up the majority of judges, attorneys, lawyers, scientists, technical workers, public health workers and professionals.

13. There is a major current discussion in Cuba concerning the new Cuban Constitution. The country is consulting on renewing the constitution by so far going through 169,000 meetings all over the country to engage and discuss. All suggestions – amendments from the population have been considered. This will lead to the National Assembly meeting again and there will be a referendum in 2019 at 60 anniversary of the revolution. There is a recognition that the world has changes the new constitution will go beyond citizens' rights, looking at human rights and equality for all. We also heard of the provision to include a body of rights around non-state providers – non state sector, private companies to be included in the constitution. This is not about changing the political system but to enable a more structural change to improve efficiency and productivity leading to economic sustainability.
14. 2019 marks the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution which ousted the brutal US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista and put an end to the death squads, mafia rule, rampant inequality and racial segregation which characterised his regime. Nationalisation and redistribution of previously owned US land, homes and businesses returned much of the wealth and property in the country to the Cuban people and state.



It was clear from all of our delegation visit that the focus on humanitarian work will go on in Cuba and as they celebrate 60 years of the Revolution. The country has shown its focus to remain resilient, compassionate and true to the memory of Fidel.

As a health worker I recognise since the Revolution Cuba has developed a world class health system that achieves developed country demographic indicators, on a fraction of the budget and despite suffering more than 50 years of blockade.



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