

SCOTTISH SOCIALIST PARTY
DELEGATION TO CUBA
interim report
1-15TH FEBRUARY 2009



BACKGROUND

On Friday 23rd May 2008, Teresita Trujillo, an Official of the Foreign Relations Department of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, met with members of the SSP executive and international committee, with a view to strengthening relations between the SSP and the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. With that in mind the SSP was asked to send a delegation to visit Cuba to meet with the government and local community groups to experience Cuban society first hand

On the 1st of February 2009, 9 members of the Scottish Socialist Party travelled to Havana to take part in a 15 day programme of meetings, visits and cultural events organised by the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. The Delegation consisted of 3 members of the Executive Committee , two of which were also on the international committee. members were from branches in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Rutherglen and Fife.

PRE-TRIP

The delegation met 3 times before going to Cuba to arrange the practical arrangements and to plan a strategy for when the group was in Cuba. a list of areas we would like to discuss with the Cuban government was drawn up and sent to the Cuban embassy in London, Luis Marron, the Political counsellor, at the embassy, co-ordinated communications between the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the Central Committee (CC) of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). A programme of events were emailed to the delegation a few days before leaving. (see appendix 1).

PROGRAMME

The programme arranged by the CC of the PCC was 15 days of events with between 3 and 4 meetings per day in 3 different areas of Cuba. The first few days were spent in Havana , travel to Santa Clara for 3 days and up to the far north-west province of Pinar del Rio before returning to Havana for the last few days.

The meetings covered many aspects of Cuban society, but included meetings with the CC , social workers, and the women's federation in Havana, The Che memorial, the INPUD factory and a health centre in Santa Clara and a fish processing plant , a university and a CDR (committee for the defence of the revolution) in Pinar del Rio.

Later on we will give a bit of detail of a selection of meetings but there were too many to list in their entirety in this paper. members of the delegation would be happy to discuss individual meetings with branches or individuals with an interest in a relevant event.

THE CUBAN TEAM

it is important to put on record the delegations gratitude to all those, in Cuba, who must have spent a great deal of time arranging the accommodation, transport and events which made the trip so successful. In Cuba, we were ably looked after by a team of folk who took us around the country and ensured that we got everywhere on time, intact as a group, with the correct itinerary for that day. specific thanks goes to Teresita, for all the arrangements and paperwork. On the ground , we had a team of 3 Cubans who looked after with outstanding kindness. David (pronounced Daveed) , translated every word from and to English over the 15 day period, a mammoth task in itself but done with a gentle sense of humour and dignity. Landy, our other translator who became a good friend to the delegation and who started learning English 5 months before we came but still managed to discuss complex political ideology and had a fairly good knowledge of Scottish politics. finally, Orelvis, our driver who, without any English could still laugh and joke with members of the delegation.

Added to the people above was a plethora of party officials, communist youth, trade unionists and workers who all went out of their way to welcome, inform and debate with the group.

THE VISITS

Below is a selection of reports from the meetings to give a flavour of the trip. it would be unhelpful to have a full report of every meeting in this document, however, they are available from delegation members.

CENTRAL COMMITTEE

The Cubans are clearly hell-bent on acclimatising us to the political situation before our bodies can get used to the extreme heat as on day one, meeting one, we are to meet the central committee of the Communist Party. No pressure then.

As we all brought formal wear for such an occasion, the shorts and t-shirts remain in case for a little longer as shirts, ties, dresses and kilts are worn instead.

We set off convinced in our own heads we each resemble the fine figure that adorns porridge boxes. However, the looks from ordinary Cubans suggest we are more Charles Haughtry in Carry on Up the Khyber and it's more 'good grief' than Scottish beef.

To add to our identity crises, our meeting turns out to be an informal discussion with Teresita Trujillo the secretary of the CP's international committee. It is no less informative as the two hour meeting proves to be completely fascinating. Even though we are accompanied by our translator David or 'Davide', Teresita speaks perfect English and his services are not required.

She explains in depth the situation Cuba currently finds itself in and the period it has just come through.

She tells how following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Cuba's battle to adjust to the situation with the loss of much of its income and market, the country spent the best part of a decade simply trying to survive and protect the gains of the revolution.

This led to some economic reforms which resulted in to some concessions to the private sector particularly with regards to farming.

Once Cuba came through what is referred to the 'special period' the government felt sufficiently empowered to look at social planning within Cuba.

It has now in the process of improving and upgrading Cuba's infrastructure, dealing with roads and transportation.

Being international secretary, Teresita also dwelt on the international situation, however other topics discussed included climate change, the global credit crises, Cuba's political system, education and the political situation in the UK and Scotland, which she knew a great deal about.

Asked on how Cuba's political system involves ordinary people, she explained how trade unions and work places are all consulted and invited to amend government legislation.

Following the meeting we are given a tour of the Jose Marti museum and some of us also decided to visit the hugely impressive museum of the Revolution.

It is then back to our unimaginatively named 'Hotel 41' for our evening meal - the amount of food bestowed on us is frightening and actually leads to us asking if we can get less.

Like all good Scots, we then head for the pub and meet some very friendly Cubans who ply us with beer, Cuba Libre and salsa steps.

When the tab arrives, the reason for their hospitality beams on us all like the morning sun through an un-shuttered hotel window.

We empty our pockets and wander back to the hotel with faces longer than Fidel's with his beard at its grandest.

Our acclimatising is clearly not restricted to sun and socialism.

ALIMAR URBAN AGRICULTURAL CO-OP



At around 6'4" and taller than most Cubans, the president of the Alamar urban agriculture project, that we had come to visit cut an imposing figure in his camouflage work gear and gaucho hat.

As we gratefully gathered in the shade of the projects' café we were glad to accept another of the small intense coffees we have come to appreciate at each visit.

clearly accustomed to international visitors and obviously a very busy guy, he got straight down to business.

the project is a co-operative, democratically run, producer of food and medicinal plants.

the president, along with the executive committee are elected by the members in a secret ballot for a five year term.

the co-op is able to provide, fresh organic fruit, vegetables etc. a a low price to the people in the surrounding community.

employing 170 workers, who receive shares in the co-op, the salary is 4 times higher than the average salary.

The co-op president outlined the importance of changing attitudes and raising the status of working on the land, professionalising a job that was traditionally viewed as unskilled and unattractive.

As we have travelled through the different regions of Cuba, we have noticed smaller urban co-ops. a minimum of 6 friends or neighbours in an area. the land is leased free of charge and tools and seeds are provided to help these groups make a start.

we were told food production is of vital importance in Cuba . Through necessity the huge state farms were broken up, during the "special period" in the 1990's and today between 70% and 80% of all agricultural land organised under some kind of co-operative system.

historically, Cuba was the biggest sugar growing country in the world, but when the soviet bloc collapsed , so did Cuba's ability to export her crop and had to go through a period of diversification which had a huge impact on food production around the country leading to food shortages.

Now food co-ops, like the Alimar project, help provide some of the local community's needs , giving food to the local schools and nurseries but also provides for other community development including employment, access to financial loans, free meals three times a day for workers and training paid for by the profits of the co-op.

unlike other co-ops. Alamar, receives EU funding, but has rejected funding where the criteria could not be agreed on but the two remaining EU partners are respectful of the projects aims and continue to fund the project without interference and as the president said," one of the biggest frustrations for we Cubans is that we know the way but lack the resources"

Good Health!

With an average life expectancy of 78.2 years and an infant mortality rate of around 2 in a 1000, the advancement in health care is one of the proudest achievements of the Cuban Revolution. This morning we were taken to visit the Chiqui Gomez Polyclinic, one of eight in Santa Clara, to see first hand some of the work they do.

Most of the polyclinic patients are referred there by a family doctor to see a specialist and, because they are much more localised than the hospitals, they are much more convenient for the patients. However, they are also available to walk-in patients and emergency facilities are ready if required.

Among the areas we were able to see were the dental facilities, complete with fully modern equipment and 24 hour emergency care. As in Scotland, patients are encouraged to attend every 6 months for check-ups; unlike Scotland, patients are not charged for the privilege.

Of course, one of the most impressive aspects of the Cuban health system has been their ability to share these resources with other countries including Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Angola. When asked why they did this given the

scant resources available, Clinic Director Pedro Ruiz Alvarez told us that, as doctors, they believe that poor health care anywhere was "ethically unacceptable."

In Pinar del Rio, where I am as I update this, there is one doctor to 215 people, compared to a UK average which is closer to one for every 500. It is this investment in 'human resources' to which Pedro credits the success of the system. The blockade obviously has an impact on their resources, but he insisted that they were learning to live with it, adding, "In the long term, the blockade will be more of a loss to the [US] government."

The Appliance of Social Science



The INPUD factory in Santa Clara has been producing domestic appliances for the country since it was opened by Che in 1964. Today it can boast that at least one of its products- coffee makers, pressure cookers, ovens, fridges, fans- is in every home in Cuba.

However, it's not been straight forward over the 45 years. They were hit hard during the special period due to a lack of raw materials, 90% of which used to come from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. However, given the lack of availability of petrol, the factory was re-equipped and the workers retrained to make bicycles, which contributed to its continued productivity and met a new need.

During the visit, we met Ruperto China Martinez who has worked there since it opened and is known to his colleagues as the 'Father of the Factory.' He talked about the feeling of belonging to a family and the satisfaction of benefiting directly from something they have produced themselves.

We next met with Pedro Manuel Mendoza, the General Secretary of the Trade Union in the factory. He explained their role in ensuring that the health and safety of the work force and some of the other benefits they have secured such as medical facilities, full payment during times when the factory is unable to open (eg following hurricanes), and its own educational facilities where workers can study, amongst other subjects, for a degree in industrial engineering.

We also met with the Marketing Director, Marisel Montero Lago. She explained that she had studied at university before starting work on the shop floor of the factory. When asked how much more she earns in what we would consider to be a senior management role her answer was quite surprising. "My wage is capped at 500 pesos per month. [Workers on the shop floor] can earn up to 800 pesos, but that's only fair because they're doing the producing."

CHE MEMORIAL



During the latter part of the Cuban Revolution, Che' Guevara, with little over 300 men under his command, liberated the city of Santa Clara. This was a pivotal point in the revolution as it left the path clear for the rebel army to march upon Havana and hastened the departure of the dictator Fulgencio Batista who fled the country soon after, taking refuge in

Franco's fascist Spain. The people of Santa Clara have never forgotten their liberator and the city is a fitting location for his final resting place. The Che' Guevara memorial is everything it should be, striking and imposing yet dignified and respectful. The large statue that stands atop the memorial complex is a symbol of his connection to Santa Clara. It gazes towards the mountains from which he and his brave guerilla fighters approached the city and wears a sling just as Che's had on that day to cradle his broken arm. The statue is cast from bronze many of which came from objects personally donated by the citizens of the city to be melted down and included in the formation of the statue.

Below the statue a complex houses a museum dedicated to Che' and also his mausoleum. The museum is filled with many of Che's personal belongings and photographs less well known than Alberto Korda's iconic picture. It allows an insight into the man who became a legend. When entering the mausoleum the reverential atmosphere is striking. The room is filled with green vegetation, decorated with a smooth stone floor and intricate wood panelling in the ceiling which is somewhat lower than would be expected. All of these ingredients combine to create the serene enclosed atmosphere of a jungle. The memorial is not just the final resting place of Che' but also for the brave guerillas that died with him in the jungles of Bolivia. Their faces are carved on stone markers behind which those whose remains have been recovered are interred. Che's marker stand forward from the wall in front of his comrades, symbolically leading his men even after death.

As a socialist it isn't really the done thing to have heroes. However I find it difficult to think of any other way to describe how I feel about Che' Guevara. The visit to his memorial was one of the most profound and emotional experiences of my life and is the closest thing to a religious experience that I am ever likely to encounter. Che' remains a symbol of defiance for millions around the world and as long as there are people willing to fight against poverty, tyranny and inequality then the spirit of Che' Guevara will live on, hasta victoria siempre!

UNIVERSITY OF PINAR DEL RIO



On arriving at the university we were ushered into the "protocol room" where we were met by officials of the communist Party, Young Communist League and students from the Federation of university students. on sitting down we were asked if we had any questions? but, as we had very little information so we asked for an overview of the university.

The university of Pinar del Rio, founded in 1962, is made up of a main campus and university branches across the province. the main campus has around 3000 students, 2000 daily courses and 1000 part time workers courses. overall the university has 17,000 students , 10,000 of which are post graduate. 270 of these student are from overseas countries, mainly the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa.

the courses offered include forestry, economics, geology, telecommunications, law, social studies and mechanics. 12 students are self financing but the rest are paid for by the state or by bursary.

There seems to be a close working relationship between the communist party and the young communist league and with the student federation and the trade unions.

we asked if the students had ever been involved with a demonstration against the government or the policies.? the answer was yes, but in support of the government!!! the last action the students took was against the Israeli bombing of Gaza.

we then asked what extra curricular activities students get up to in Cuba ? we expected much the same as in Scotland - drink , dancing etc. but Cuban students are very involved in their communities and they explained about student brigades where students have a space to debate the issues that effect them. they also do community work, for example

they might work in the community running classes for workers or, in the case of last year when the area was hit by 3 large hurricanes in a short space of time, they worked in the rural areas to repair houses to make them habitable as quickly as possible. students also go into schools and give career and study advice to school students. but its not all work. the university has sports and cultural associations to keep the students fit and healthy.

universities across Cuba run a conference in Havana every two years as an exchange of ideas, with the next on in 2010.

the students then asked us about the SSP.

how do we find space in a multi party state to get our ideas across?

what is the most important issues for capitalism in Scotland?

all too soon the meeting came to an end and after exchanging email addresses with the students and presenting them with a banner, we left for the Communist Party hotel.

PROVINCIAL PARTY



Just as the weather seems to be a hot topic of conversation back in Scotland, it is also the case here in Cuba. However, the chat does not concern the blanket of snow currently covering Caledonia, but the hurricane which devastated Cuba in September 08.

Winds of up to 140 mph wreaked havoc across the entire island, leaving scars in the shape of ripped off roofs visible to this day.

The weather - or rather the hurricane - is what we mainly hear about when Marbel Pilotes Hernandez, a member of the Executive Bureau of the Provincial Party in Pinar del Rio, welcomes the SSP delegation to the area.

The province is the most western in Cuba with a population of 731,000.

Two of its main industries are agriculture and tobacco, which makes it easy to understand why the people of this area share the Scottish fascination with the weather.

Joining Marbel Hernandez is Nestor Rodriguez Maury, a member of the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party. He says through an interpreter: "We have seen on our news how the weather is affecting the UK.

"We had a similar severe weather experience with the hurricane."

He is far too polite to point out that the current Scottish experience is merely an inconvenience and that it has not left our country devastated, but it's one we are aware of.

Marbel Hernandez continues: "Over 113,000 homes were damaged and 30,000 were completely destroyed.

"Naturally our agriculture was severely affected but we are recovering."

Other interesting nuggets of info we learn about the province include the fact it has one doctor for every 215 people and 100 per cent of its students finish their studies.

Following the welcome we head off into central Pinar del Rio, for a tour of the area.

The day concludes with us (well some of us. Okay me and Steve) drinking ridiculously cheap rum until 4am before Alison chases us off to bed.

Like the hurricane, there is a heavy price to pay afterwards.

THEY LIKE THEIR TITLES IN CUBA



To ascertain the role of women in the Cuban revolution and indeed in wider Cuban society, the SSP spoke to Eneyda Lopez Peralta who has the very impressive title of Head of International Relations of the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba in Villa Clara.

The province takes in the town of Santa Clara which is of course famous as the final burial place of Che Guevara. His remains are located in a monument in the town along with those of 34 other revolutionaries who died fighting alongside Guevara in Bolivia.

One of these included a woman named 'Tanya' and it is her and a host of other women including Celia Sanchez - one of Fidel Castro leading comrades - and Vilna Espin, a founder of the womens organisations in Cuba, who Eneyda refers to when explaining women's part in shaping Cuban history.

Standing at just over five feet, Eneyda Peralta exudes warmth and affection.

However, once the topic turns to politics it is clear this 'Guevara gran' retains a great deal of revolutionary zeal.

"Women have always played a prominent role in the history of the Cuban struggle," Eneyda explains in very expressive and animated terms.

She continues, "It goes all the way back to the wars of independence with the Spanish, to the struggle with the Batista dictatorship in which individuals such as Melba Hernandez and Heydee Santamaria played crucial parts and were involved in guerilla warfare.

"And women's influence in Cuban society continues to this day."

The statistics do paint an interesting picture.

For a country often accused of being macho, Cuba appears to have an impressive number of women on prominent and influential positions in its society.

In general employment, less than two per cent of Cuban women are unemployed.

Women account for:

Almost 64 per cent of all general doctors.

Over 51 per cent of all researchers.

Over three quarters of all social workers.

Over 25 per cent of the self employed.

In education women account for 65 per cent of all university graduates of which over 45 per cent are technical and professional graduates and 40 per cent are scientists.

The political and legal institutions are no less populated with women making up over 43 per cent of the parliament of which 38 per cent are in leading positions and 30 per cent of vice ministries - though disappointingly they account for only 12 per cent of Cuban ministers.

Over 70 per cent of all attorneys in Cuba are women, over 60 per cent are judges, and 47 per cent are judges in the supreme court.

Eneyda concludes: "When I think about what woman have done for Cuba and what they are achieving, it makes me proud to be a woman in Cuba."

LUNCH WITH OSCAR

Unusually, the lunch today is a formal occasion, in that we are dining with Oscar Martínez Cordovés, deputy head of the international relations department of the Central Committee of the the Communist Party of Cuba (Cubans like their titles !!!) and Teresita Trujillo, Official of the Foreign Relations Department of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. the first thing to say is that meeting Teresita is always like meeting an old friend and Oscar, despite his position is friendly, down - to- earth and chatty. This is going to be the most informal of formal lunches !!

Our hosts are interested in information about the SSP and we discuss our upcoming conference, where Luis Marron will address the party on the 50 anniversary of the Cuban revolution. they want to know what issues we will be discussing and we outline some debate we have had on our election strategy and changes in our party structures over the last couple of years.

For the delegation, one of the big questions is , what would the Cubans like us to do when we return to Scotland - Teresitas reply ? "I have a list !!!"

Oscar and Teresita went on to explain that solidarity with Cuba is very important and they thank the SSP for its support but that would not be enough if people in Scotland did not have the information about Cuba and, maintaining contacts with the central committee directly and through Scottish Cuba Solidarity Campaign is vital. Teresita explained that a practical example of this would be for us to contact all US senators and representatives with a Scottish background or family history, to give them information about the appeal process of the Cuban 5. At home, contact with our own MP's, MSP's and MEP's would put the pressure on the political establishment in the UK to support the return of the unjustly imprisoned Cubans.

The delegation were quite pleased that there was a practical direction that we could all channel our enthusiasm when we get home. We were told earlier that this SSP delegation was an unusually large delegation (9 people) and that we have stayed for a longer period of time (15 days) typically a delegation is 2-3 people and come for 2-5 days. we have been occupied with many meetings, information gathering and travelling, but still we have only scratched the surface, but with all the political stuff comes so much kindness from our hosts that one of the delegation has coined a new phrase joining holiday and delegation to describe our trip as a "holigation" which I think sums up the trip nicely.

CONCLUSION

Each one of the delegation will have a slightly differing experience of the trip and it would be fair to say that the high points and low points of the trip will be different, however, the overall mood of the delegation was one of a trip that surpassed all expectations. here we have collated a few of the sentiments that were discussed during the trip.

The group's overwhelming impression of Cuba was very positive and seen as a society organised very differently from anything we have experienced before however, we still had some concerns over a few issues. for instance, Trade unions in Cuba fulfill a very different role to that of their British counterparts and the group got the impression that Cuban trade unions work in partnership with the managers as opposed to being advocates for the workers. also in the bigger cities there seems to be a trade in exploiting tourists , which exists across the world , but we didn't really expected it to exist in Cuba.

On the positive side, one of the lasting impressions we will take from Cuba is that , in this, the 50th anniversary of the "triumph of the revolution", when Cubans talk about the revolution they talk in the present tense and we were surprised that ordinary Cubans still see the revolution as an ongoing, ever present situation. an example of that was when we visited the CDR (see above) and people were showing us their new domestic appliances - Cuba has an environmental project to renew all old appliances with new more efficient and environmentally friendly ones - they said that it was thanks to the revolution that they were able to buy these things , despite the US blockade. we had the impression that people were still living in the revolution rather than seeing it as some historical event 50 years ago.

The involvement of women in the political process was very self evident in almost all the events we went to. Very often when we were greeted by a party official, it was likely to be a woman. Provincial Central Committees seemed to have at least 50% women and the general secretary of the committee in Pinar del Rio Province was a woman.

another fact that ran throughout the visit was the importance Cubans put on History. The youngest of Cubans can tell you the main people not only in the 1959 revolution but the wars of independence of the late 19th century. we even had a conversation where a Cuban knew more about Scottish / British history and the relationship between various kings and queens !!!

finally, it is to the credit of all Cubans, that after nearly 50 years of enforced hardships by the US blockade, we never heard a bad word against the people of the USA and the distinction between the people and the administration is always stated.

WHAT WAS THE POINT OF THE DELEGATION?

The group discussed what we could do when we returned to Scotland, with Teresita and others and, with that in mind, we have agreed to have a fringe meeting at conference, possibly setting up a "Cuba network" to disseminate information about Cuba and reacting to situations where we would be able to take action in support of , for instance, the Miami 5. we will encourage all SSP members to become part of the Scottish Cuba Solidarity Campaign and actively support its activities. Fund raise to support Cuban speakers to come to Scotland to talk to Party and public meetings. Delegation

members will also be available to talk at branch meetings and other community events where we can share both our experiences and our contacts made with student, workers and womens groups.