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# VISITING CUBA THROUGH THE EYES OF A YOUNG CANADIAN ACTIVIST

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MEMOIR OF A TRIP WITH  
ADVENTURE, EDUCATION  
AND POLITICS!

OR

*How I Learned  
to Love Cuba!*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS



“ABOUT THE AUTHOR”.....	1
DEDICATION.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	2
PART ONE.....	3
PART TWO.....	7
PART THREE.....	13
“CUBA’S ACCOMPLISHMENTS” .....	20

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### SOPHIE ZINER



*Sophie Ziner, 2006 Pastors for Peace send off at Peace Arch Park, Vancouver BC-Washington State Border Crossing*

In 2005 Sophie made her first journey to Cuba, with the Pastors for Peace Caravan. 2007 is the third year that she is participating in the Caravan from Canada to Cuba. For the 2007 Caravan Sophie is not only a participant, but a 'route speaker', helping to spread the demand "Lift the Blockade on Cuba" all across the United States.

When she is not making the trip to Cuba, Sophie lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada and is a young worker and social justice activist. Sophie grew up in the city of Courtenay on Vancouver Island. She became active in Cuba solidarity work in 2004 as a founding member the Free the Cuban Five Committee-Courtenay, right after she graduated high school. Today she is an organizer with Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba (VCSC). VCSC formed in May 2004 immediately following the first installment of the US's "Plan Bush", which, among other attacks, tightened the blockade on Cuba. Sophie is currently a childcare worker and in December 2007 she will be entering trades training.



DEDICATED TO THE

GREAT REVOLUTIONARY FIGHTER

**VILMA ESPÍN GUILLOIS**  
1930-2007

This booklet is dedicated with the greatest admiration, and most sincere respect to a heroine of the Cuban Revolution – Vilma Espín Guillois. From her days in the Llano (the urban underground anti-Batista movement) as Deborah, to her leadership in the Federation of Cuban Women, Vilma has been a teacher, an inspiration and a revolutionary example. Her writings and her memory will go on to prove achievable the hopes of a new generation, the hopes that a world based on liberation, equality and humanity is possible.



Vilma died on Monday June 18<sup>th</sup> 2007, at the age of 77. In the words of Cuban President Fidel Castro on June 20<sup>th</sup>, "*Vilma's example today is more necessary than ever. She devoted her entire life to the struggle for women's rights when in Cuba most women were discriminated against as human beings, the same as in the rest of the world... Vilma is dead. Long live Vilma!*"

# INTRODUCTION

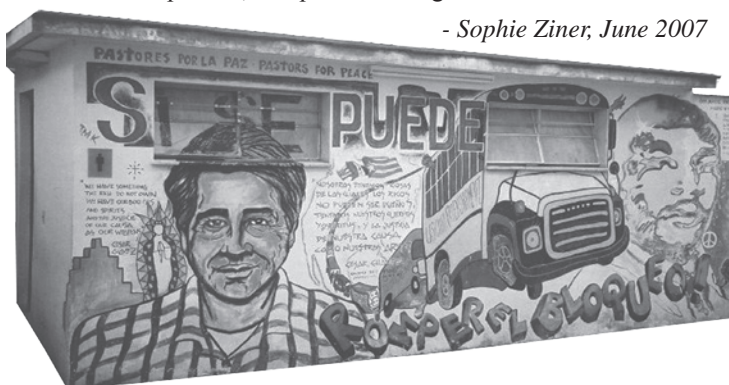
As this booklet is being published, the 18<sup>th</sup> Caravan to Cuba is getting ready to depart Vancouver on another journey through Canada and the US on its way to Cuba. This will be my third trip on the Caravan, but traveling with me from Vancouver will be eight others, for most of whom it will be their first trip to Cuba. Since 1992, the IFCO/Pastors for Peace Caravan has been taking people from all over the world to participate in an action that directly defies the US blockade, and most importantly educates tens of thousands of people about Cuba and the about the blockade.

IFCO/Pastors for Peace began traveling to Cuba with humanitarian aid at a time when Cuba was going through the most difficult part of the "Special Period" – the period when the Cuban economy lost 80% of its trade with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the US government passed several inhuman laws making the already brutal blockade much more severe for the people of Cuba. In 1992, IFCO/Pastors for Peace Executive director Rev. Lucius Walker, Jr. led a team of mostly priests and pastors to bring a small amount of aid destined for Cuba across the US-Mexico border and were brutally blocked by US customs. The attention that this act caught activated social justice organizers from all over the progressive and religious spectrum in defense of Cuba. The 18 caravans that have followed year after year have constituted the single largest coordinated act of solidarity for Cuba in North America.

Traveling to Cuba challenged the foundations of my perspective of the world and especially of myself and my life as a human being. For everyone who travels with the Caravan to Cuba, the challenge is not only against an unjust, immoral law of the US government, the challenge is also to all the participants, having seen and experienced the dynamism of the Cuban Revolution, to take up the torch of actively fighting for Cuba's right to self-determination and their right to continue to develop and expand the gains of the revolution – a revolution that has been continuously dynamic since the 1959 overthrow of the US puppet regime of Fulgencio Batista by the Cuban people, under the leadership of now-president Fidel Castro.

The bus that we will ride from Vancouver will travel down through the US this summer, one of 14 routes visiting over 125 cities in 47 US states and six Canadian provinces, until we will come together with up to 150 other participants in McAllen, Texas. The Caravan will have made stops from Pocatello, Idaho to Austin, Texas, from Montréal, Québec to Mobile, Alabama, everywhere spreading a message of unity in the face of the blockade, a sentiment that, in the spirit of all that Cuba has accomplished, it is possible to fight back and to win.

*- Sophie Ziner, June 2007*





## PART ONE

*"THE TRUTH MUST  
NOT ONLY BE THE  
TRUTH,  
IT MUST BE TOLD."*

*- FIDEL CASTRO*

Last summer, I had the opportunity to travel to Cuba. It came about while we were up to our necks in organizing the rally that Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba held against anti-Cuban terrorist Luis Posada Carrilles.

I was supposed to travel back east for a family gathering, but, being preoccupied with the rally, I missed my plane, and most of my family was very angry with me. But a few days later, I got a call from my great Uncle Irv, who said, "I've just heard that you're interested in Cuba. I go on a trip to Cuba every year, and I was wondering if this year you'd like to join me?" Of course, I said, "YES! I'd love to!"

I first learned about Cuba through the Free the Cuban Five Committee - Courtenay in my hometown on Vancouver Island, and since moving to Vancouver last spring, have been organizing with the Free the Cuban Five Committee - Vancouver and Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba. For a young person, and someone who cares about social justice, Cuba is a very inspiring place, with its legendary free universal education program, its universal health care program, the advances in agriculture and the thousands of other gains that we hear about.



Cuba, after throwing off Spanish colonial rule, found itself still crushed by US imperialism in the first part of the 20th century. Through a series of US backed dictators, Cuba was turned into a gangster's paradise, full of casinos and prostitution. Most of the people of Cuba lived in dire poverty, and with disease and illiteracy.



*A 1960 march in Havana, Cuba, for the victory of the literacy campaign - Cuba is 100% free of illiteracy!*

In 1959 however, a popular revolution in Cuba chased US imperialism out to sea. The revolutionary government immediately nationalized the land and instituted health and education programs, and ever since has continued to fight to build a dignified and humane society in the face of the ruthless aggression of imperialism.

Under the grips of a US imposed blockade for 44 years, the people of Cuba have had to face great restrictions to medicine, food and technology. They have also suffered from terrorist attacks committed by groups funded and backed by the FBI and the CIA.

Yet in spite of this Cuba has more doctors per capita than any other country in the world, and has free universal health care and post secondary education. Looking at the example Cuba shows us, resource rich countries like Canada really have no excuse for the constantly diminishing access to social services that are basic human rights, like education and healthcare.

It was with these thoughts in my head that I took a bus down to McAllen, Texas, to meet my Uncle and the group of people we would be traveling with. We were going to Cuba with a group called Pastors for Peace, an organization based in the US, which has worked for many years in solidarity with Cuba to break the US blockade. Pastors for Peace had organized Caravans of buses, which traveled North America collecting humanitarian aid (medical supplies, computer equipment, sports equipment etc) in a symbolic gesture of solidarity to bring to Cuba. One hundred twenty people met in Texas, the aid was sorted, and we embarked on the trip across the border.





*Unloading one of the buses after it became clear that US authorities would not let the caravan leave the US with its aid intact.*

Five of the busses were named for each of the Cuban Five, Gerardo Hernandez, Antonio Guerrero, Ramon Labanino, Rene Gonzalez and Fernando Gonzalez, the five Cuban heroes who have been held in US prisons since 1998 for collecting information about terrorist organizations who work out of Miami to routinely attack the Cuban people. The Five had collected the information and turned it in to the FBI. They were immediately arrested and charged with a range of charges, from espionage to conspiracy to commit murder. The Cuban campaign to free the Cuban Five is huge, and because of it, committees for the release of the five have been organized around the world. It was in the spirit of the unrelenting determination of Cuba and of the Five to expose the hypocrisy of US imperialism that we faced US customs. This was the 16th Caravan to Cuba that Pastors for Peace had organized, and because of the ever tightening restrictions the US administration has been placing on Cuba, we knew to expect resistance at the border from US customs officials.

When the first of six busses attempted to cross the border, it was stopped and towed, and Customs agents began unloading everything and confiscating everything that was computer related. The rest of the busses pulled back, and we began carrying the aid from the first bus by hand, with the hot midday sun on our necks, over the border to Reynosa, Mexico.



*US authorities confiscating donated items from the caravan.*

Once we returned over the border, it was decided that we would pull the rest of the aid off of the remaining busses, remove out the computer equipment, put it all on one bus, which would stay behind, and reload the rest of the busses back up and attempt to cross again.

We worked in the dusty field behind the "Whattabuger", lifting boxes of medical

equipment, school supplies, bikes, all sorts of things that people had donated as the caravan made its way through Canada and the US for the several weeks before. It took us until 3a.m. to unload and reload all 180 tons of goods onto the busses, but when we were finished, we got back on them and were able to cross the border. The bus filled with the computer equipment was left behind with a small group of organizers who would remain with it, campaigning to have the computers that were confiscated released, and to be allowed to take all the computers across the border.



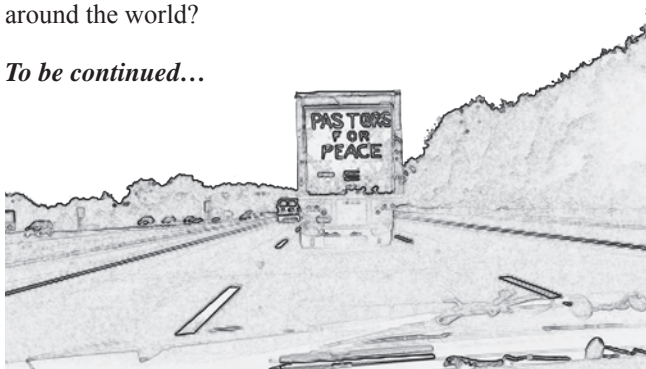
*Mexican dockworkers volunteer to help load the aid onto barges headed for Cuba.*

After meeting up with the 30 people from Mexico who would join us in Cuba, we set off the next morning and traveled from Reynosa to Tampico, in the south east, the busses were loaded onto a barge, and we boarded our Air Cubana flight and took off into a bright blue sky, to Cuba.

I sat in my seat on that airplane and could hardly sit still I was so excited. Cuba to me was a place where, in the face of ever growing attacks on humanity all over the world from the forces of imperialism, a struggle for justice, for genuine gains for regular people was still being fought fiercely. To me Cuba was a place where you could "Imagine all the people, living life in peace..." just like John Lennon sang.

The clouds broke beneath us, and all of a sudden, we could see the island, edges crisp in a blue gray sea, perfect and green. As we began our decent into Havana, my heart beat faster- would Cuba live up to my expectations, to the hopes and dreams it represented to me and to so many people around the world?

*To be continued...*







## —PART TWO—

*"WORDS THAT DO  
NOT MATCH DEEDS  
ARE UNIMPORTANT."*

*- ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA*

The wheels of our plane hit the hot tarmac at the Jose Marti international airport in Havana, came to a stop, and with my heart beating hard in my chest, I climbed off the plane and set my feet- for the first time, on Cuban soil. The first thing to meet my eyes was a huge sign, running the length of the building in front of me reading "Patria es Humanidad"- Humanity is my Homeland. At the end of the nineteenth century Jose Marti said that short quote while fighting for Cuba's independence from imperialist intervention. As I would learn over my next week in Cuba, this powerful idea has a presence everywhere in Cuba, and I would see its impact everywhere we visited.

The group I was traveling with, Pastors for Peace, is a



*Jose Marti International Airport, Havana, Cuba.*

US based solidarity group, which has traveled to Cuba collecting and bringing humanitarian aid through the US for the last 16 years, intentionally breaking the US law in a symbolic gesture against the US blockade of Cuba. Having crossed the US/Mexican border at Reynosa with 180 tons of aid, the 150 of us "Caravanistas" had gone on to Tampico, where the busloads of goods had been loaded onto barges, and we had boarded a plane and flew to Cuba.

In Havana, I stayed in the Martin Luther King Memorial Centre, a Cuban organization that help co-organize the Caravan's stay in Cuba, along with the Cuban Council of Churches and the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP). It's a big sunny building attached to a Baptist Church, with dormitory rooms. This is where we stayed for most of the trip.

Our bus into Havana brought us past carefully painted billboards, promoting not perfume and cell phones, but literacy, community, safe sex, volunteer work, organic gardening and mobilization. I noticed that there were people standing alongside the road, people in suits, people dressed for all sorts of work, and I asked someone if everyone was waiting for busses. They weren't waiting for busses, they were hitchhiking- it turned out that in most cases, in Cuba it's illegal not to pick someone up if you have space in your car!

Havana, compared to grey and rainy Vancouver, was full of colour and sounds, people and traffic, bikes, smoke and horns. Old buildings and old cars were interspersed with lush and expansive community gardens, mangos dripping off trees behind fences, red tomatoes peeking out through rows of beans. The Malecón, a long broad boulevard running the length of the shore in Havana, looked just like the pictures I had seen, only on the days we were visiting, it was not full of the millions of people marching in one of Cuba's famous mobilizations.

The first few days in Havana were packed with events and visits. We got to visit churches, farms, schools, clinics; had evenings with cultural performances and dancing (one night we got a special performance from one of Cuba's great hip hop crews- Anonimo Consejo which was incredible).

It was through these visits that we began to be introduced to the goals and principles that Cuba works with.



*One of the many Cuban billboards we saw carrying revolutionary messages; "Truth cannot be blockaded"*

The Cuba we were seeing was a place where peoples' well-being was a priority. We learned about every thing from the programs to set up University satellite schools in remote areas, to the program where every child under the age of 7 is guaranteed one litre of milk a day. No Cuban we met was a millionaire. No Cuban we met owned a shipping company, or a sugar plantation or a chain of



*"In Cuba, Children in School: 100%" - Another of the inspiring billboards that line Cuba's highways.*

stores, personally. As it was explained to us, these things are not a priority in Cuba, the priority is to make sure every-one has the

basic things they need to live with dignity, and to develop in good health.

We also got to see the limitations that the 46-year-old US imposed blockade of Cuba has brought. Costing the Cuban people an estimated \$82Billion over the years, the blockade continues to prevent Cubans from accessing medical supplies, technological equipment, food, and many other much needed goods and services. Where Cuba has more doctors per capita than anywhere in the world, hospitals and clinics are still undersupplied with medicines and equipment- things as simple as disposable syringes and latex gloves. While school is free to everyone from kindergarten through post secondary, and universally accessible, books, computers, musical instruments are still limited.

And yet, Cuba develops its richest resource, people. And they don't just do it to make Cuba better. Cuba sends tens of thousands of doctors and teachers and professionals all over the world.

During our third day in Cuba we visited the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM). The school was out for the summer, but there were still some students and staff around. It's this big huge complex of white buildings on the shore. It used to be a navel academy, but in 1998, as a part of the Battle of Ideas, it was turned into the medical school. The concept came out of the tragedy of the series of Hurricanes that year that killed over 30,000 people in Latin America, after which Cuba sent thousands of doctors and nurses to over 20 countries who had been stricken.

Dr. Luis Silva, the director of the school, talked about this in his introduction. He explained about how the Na-

vel Academy had been up for sale as a resort, but how Fidel and Raul Castro had intervened and said that there was a need to set up an international school of medicine—so that Cuba could help Latin American and Caribbean countries, not just by sending them doctors, but also by training them for free and having them return to their communities permanently.

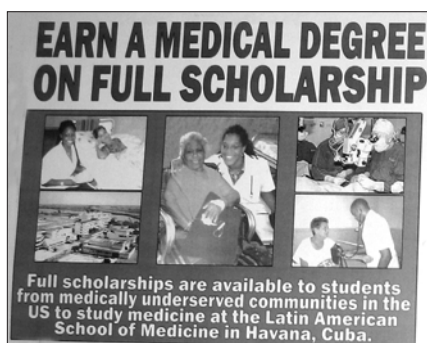


*Cuban students celebrate Mayday in Cuba.*

He talked about the spirit of internationalism that the school is founded on, how at first the school was only open to students from Latin America, but how they realized the effectiveness of the school and the need that people all over the world had for doctors and they expanded it to give spaces to students from any country. There are currently almost 4,000 students at the school, from 24 countries, with over 33 ethnic groups represented.

Incredibly, there are also 500 spaces available for US students, but because of the travel blockade and red tape the US administration puts up, there are only 71 American students at this time. August 1<sup>st</sup>, the first students graduated from the school. The school takes a holistic approach to medicine, training doctors on three principals—Academic Science, Social Commitment and Professional Development.

After the introduction, a young black woman got up and spoke. She was American, from West Philadelphia, which is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in all of North America, with the highest rate of crime and the



*A photo from the journey through the US - a Pastors for Peace poster promoting the Latin American School of Medicine.*

highest percentage of adults who are functionally illiterate. She got up, and she had barely introduced herself when she started crying.

She talked about how she was never one of those kids who dream all their lives of

becoming a doctor, because where she was from, it just isn't on the list of possibilities, and now here she was at medical school, with a huge world opening before her.

The school provides all upgrading needed, and Spanish courses so any applicant who shows an aptitude and seriousness can get in, regardless of their academic history. She was in her third year. She talked about moving to Cuba, living there, and going back to visit her sister last summer in Philly (the school pays for students to return home each summer), and the contrast between what she saw in America and what she saw in Cuba- Cuba being the 3<sup>rd</sup> world, America being the wealthiest country in the world. She talked about how when she graduates and goes back to Philly (the one requirement of the school, which covers all expenses for eight years of studying, is that when you graduate, you return to your community and practice there for two years) she's not just going to be a doctor and provide community service with it, she going back with a spirit of internationalism and will also be working to advocate for the better world Cuba is trying to build.

It was a very moving speech- everyone was in tears by the end of it.

Later in the summer, upon returning home, I would see reports all over the news, about a horrible hurricane that ripped through the gulf states of the US. I would watch news reports showing thousands of poor, mostly black and latino people, their lives reduced to shambles, virtually abandoned by the government of the United States. I would also read about Cuba's response to this tragedy- an offer to send 1,500 fully equipped doctors to assist the people of New Orleans, only for the US to turn this offer down. As I would read these things through August and September, I would think constantly of that young woman from Philly, and the offer that she accepted and why.

The impact of these visits, not just to the ELAM, but also to the other schools, the churches, the clinics, the farms, the community gardens, all of it- of seeing real life in Cuba, began to accumulate, on my fellow caravanistas and me. Questions were flying around- of "why Cuba?"



*International students studying in Cuba join the Mayday rally.*



How could a country, so small and under so much attack do such great things? And why? Why didn't the countries we were coming from have the same values, the same institutions? What did Cuba have the United States didn't have? Canada?

My mind kept coming back to the same thing, time after time- the first thing I saw in Cuba. "Humanity is my Homeland". The foundation of the Cuban Revolution, the vision that the Cuban Revolution was built on- fighting for all human life- not just in Cuba, but also for every single person around the world.

One of the most viscous attacks that Cuba has faced since the revolution is the constant slander from the ruling class's media in the US, including the accusation that Cuba is a violator of human rights. The people of Cuba are great at exposing the US on this accusation though- a friend I met told me

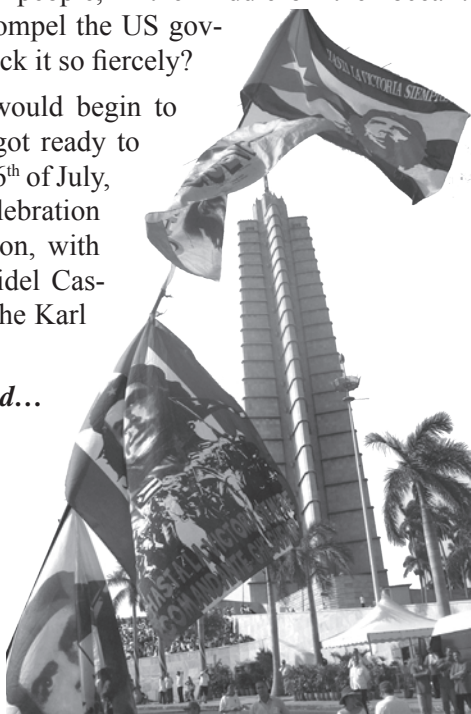
"Oh, there are human rights violations that take place in Cuba- they just all take place in the US military base in Guantanamo Bay." (In Cuba you never see a flag at full mast, there is always space at the top, to remember that all of Cuba is not free because Guantanamo is still occupied and people are suffering there.)

I started to see that it went beyond that too though- that not only was the blockade of Cuba a horrible violation of these human rights that the US claim to treasure so much, but that the things that Cuba had fought for and gained in spite of this blockade were representing REAL human rights.

So why Cuba? What is so threatening about this island of 11.5 million people, in the middle of the ocean? What would compel the US government to attack it so fiercely?

The answers would begin to unfold as we got ready to celebrate the 26<sup>th</sup> of July, the national celebration of the revolution, with a speech by Fidel Castro himself at the Karl Marx theatre.

***To be continued...***





## —PART THREE—

“¡CUBA SI!  
¡YANQUI NO!”

- A POPULAR CHANT  
HEARD IN CUBA

**F***i-del, Fi-del, Fi-del*”, a sea of people beneath our balcony were chanting. It was ten minutes to 6:00 on July 26th, and we were in the Karl Marx Theatre in Havana. The 3000 other people that were chanting, waving flags and singing were the representatives of schools, unions, neighborhoods from all over Cuba. Two young women on stage with microphones were calling on different delegations, and that group would stand up and do a cheer.

Cubans celebrate on the 26th of July to mark a significant battle in 1953, in which a fledgling group of revolutionaries attempted an attack on the military barracks in Moncada. This attempt sparked a series of events and actions that would eventually, in 1959, lead to the overthrow of the oppressive US-backed dictatorship of Fulencio Batista and the establishment of a revolutionary government.

So that’s what Fidel started out his speech talking about- the attacks that Cuba had faced over the last year. He spoke on the tightening of the blockade by the US administration, of the five Cuban heroes that are currently being held in US jails for investigating terrorism against Cuba in Miami, and the constant slander and



*Here I am eagerly waiting in line for the July 26th Celebration at the Karl Marx theater in Havana!*

attacks by the media of imperialist countries. He outlined these things and then went into Cuba's response to them- that is to continue to build, to fight for the gains that have been made for the people of Cuba in the face of these attacks.

Fidel finished his speech by talking about the importance of the ever-growing connections between Cuba and Venezuela, about how the changes Venezuela is going through show how the ideas of the Cuban revolution can never be blockaded or killed.

The opportunity to hear this historic figure, this revolutionary was unbelievable.

I was in Cuba hearing Fidel speak on the 26th with a group called Pastors for Peace, a US-based solidarity group. Since 1992, Pastors for Peace has traveled to Cuba, carrying humanitarian aid down from Canada and the US and across the US border to Mexico, intentionally breaking the US blockade of Cuba. Traveling with 150 other "Caravanistas", we had taken 180 tonnes of humanitarian aid across the Texas/Mexico border, loaded the aid onto a barge, and traveled on to Cuba.

Pastors for Peace is one of many Cuba solidarity groups around the world which have taken up the task of defending Cuba from the attacks it faces. As a young person and a social justice activist, I had become involved in Cuba solidarity organizing after learning about how Cuba has fought for the human lives and dignity of its people.

This trip was my first time traveling to Cuba.

The next day, we left Havana for a trip to the Isle of Youth. After a boat ride on a 100% Cuban made, state-of-the-art ferry, we arrived at the city of Nueva Gerona, and were met coming off the boat by chil-



dren giving us all roses and a full band playing.

The Isle of Youth is famous for its arts schools, and our two-day visit there featured several wonderful cultural events with music, dancers, a contortionist and many other incredible things. We also continued to visit clinics, museums (such as the Presido Modelo Prison, where Fidel and others were held for two years following their capture during the attack on the Moncada Barracks, where Fidel wrote his famous speech "History will Absolve Me"), foster homes, schools etc.

We met up with representatives from the Island's UJC- Union of Communist Youth. We sat facing each other. There were maybe 40 of us, and 30 of them. Several people spoke from both delegations, including the young woman who is the head of the UJC for the province. During discussion that followed, a young man from



*Many of the children we danced with at a CDR party!*

the Cuban delegation got up and said "We see that there are young people in your group, and I wanted to ask them a question specifically- I want to know why young people in North America are interested in Cuba, and why they

would choose to support the revolution."

I realized then that I definitely had something to say on this subject, and that the question cut to the heart of why I was in Cuba, so I spoke up. I reiterated what had been said- that young people and students are marginalized in North America- and how we understand that we are under attack by capitalism, our education suffers while money is spent on military, we face low wages and low job security, but that we also see that there are many other people in this world who face these attacks and attacks from the same source. I talked about feeling connected to the struggles of people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti and Palestine, and the struggles of Indigenous people all over the world. I said that we see these connections and we want to fight for them too, but it's a huge fight, overwhelmingly so, and it's easy to get demoralized and frustrated. So to deal with that, we turn to the leadership of those who are at the forefront of the struggle against imperialism- Cuba. I talked about how the leadership of Cubans, especially young Cubans, reminds us of the world we want to build and leaves us

with no choice but to join them.

After dinner, we got back on the bus and went into the city and to a neighbourhood party organized by a Committee for the Defence of the Revolution, or CDR. In Cuba there is a CDR in every neighbourhood, and they are the most local level of government. In each neighbourhood, representatives are elected and represent their communities on a municipal level.

The head of the CDR introduced several dance and singing performances by several children. She then announced that she wanted to give us a glimpse of what their CDR was like. She first asked everyone who was part of the Jose Marti Pioneers to put their hand up. (The Pioneers is an organization for children in Cuba, sort of like Scouts or Guides.) All of the children put their hands up. She then asked for everyone who was part of the High School Students' League to put up their hands, and many of the teenagers did. She asked everyone who was part of the University Federation to raise their hands, and many of the young adults put up their hands. Out of maybe 150 people, almost all of the adults put up their hands when she asked for everyone who was part of a union to raise their hand. Most of the women were part of the Women's Federation. She went on, asking for those who were in the Communist Party, asking for those who were part of the block watch, on and on, and then finally she asked:



*Members of the children's organization  
"the Pioneers"*

"Would everyone who fought with Fidel and Che in the Sierra Miestra please put up their hand?" and sitting at the front, one old man put up his hand- and every one cheered and applauded, and it was very clear how proud the neighbourhood was to have him part of their community. After that, the music started again, and soon we were all dancing, eating and chatting.

It was amazing to see how connected everyone was, how these almost 150 people in the neighbourhood seemed like one family, and to see the energy and excitement and pride they had for their CDR and for Cuba.



I left thinking about the place where I grew up on Vancouver Island, where even though it was a small town, we rarely talked to our neighbours, and where I maybe saw the mayor or the MLA for our area once a year in a parade. Cuba has a 97% average turn out for each election, compared to a 64.7 % rate of eligible voter turnout in the January 2006 general election in Canada. The comparison between the attitude of Cuban people towards their government and their communities, and their commitment, energy and confidence is completely different to what I've experienced growing up in Canada.

When we returned to Havana the next afternoon, I spent some time with a friend of mine that I had made at the facility where we were staying. My Spanish is not great, and in a halting and stumbling conversation with Julio, I guess I accidentally used a French word, and we discovered that we could both speak French.

Julio spoke French because his grandparents were from Haiti. Haiti is a country 90 miles away from Cuba to the East, where the people live in



*Ricardo and I... Alarcon that is!*

stark contrast to the people of Cuba. Already devastated for hundreds of years by colonial and imperialist intervention, in 2004, the US, Canada and France invaded Haiti, expelling Haiti's first democratically elected president. The turmoil that the people in Haiti have experienced since has dropped them to the poorest nation in the western hemisphere.

Julio talked about a lot of things- the challenges of life in Cuba under the blockade, the position he saw Cuba in the world, his hopes for the international Cuba Solidarity movement. He talked about going to school in Cuba, and about the "Special Period" Cuba went through after the fall of the Soviet Union, which had devastating effects on the Cuban economy.

In fact, almost every Cuban I met told me something similar- that life in Cuba wasn't always easy, that Cuba IS still a third-world country, and that the blockade makes getting things as simple as an aspirin almost impossible sometimes. But they also told me that they would never, ever go back to the Cuba of pre-1959, the gangster's paradise, the poverty, the illiteracy, and the disease, and that they would defend the gains that have

been made to the last drop of their blood.

On our last day in Cuba, we had a very exciting meeting with the families of the Cuban Five, as well as the President of the National Assembly of People's Power and Vice President of Cuba, Ricardo Alarcon.

The Cuban Five are five Cuban men who have been held in US jails since 1998. They were arrested for investigating the terrorist groups that work out of Miami. Sent there by the Cuban government, they had collected hundreds of pages of documents outlining the plots that these anti-Cuban government groups were intending to carry out to terrorize the people of Cuba. They turned the information in to the Cuban government and to the FBI- an agency that is supposed to be fighting terrorism in the US. Instead of gratitude for information about terrorist threats in their own country, the US authorities threw the five men in prison, and continue to deny them many rights and fair treatment.

Fernando Gonzalez's mother opened the meeting, talking about the history of the case, and the international



*The event with Ricardo Alarcon, President of the National Assembly, and the Family members of the Cuban 5 spoke.*

campaign that has been going on for seven years. Then Mr. Alarcon spoke. He talked about the case in a political context of Cuba being under attack by the US, and using the case as a tool to expand Cuba solidarity and expose the hypocrisy of the US administration, and their so-called "War on Terror". He talked about the corporate media in the US and their cover-up of the trial and case. He said that we need to be confronting the lies put out by the media of the imperialist countries where we live, but also creating other means of media.

Tears running down my cheeks, I sat quiet on the bus that night driving out of Havana to the airport, my head full of the things I saw and learned. My brief glimpse of Cuba, of the Cuban revolution, the gains, the contradictions, the visions and goals, the people and the institutions had given me a whole new perspective of the world

I lived in. Returning to Vancouver, I thought about what Ricardo Alarcon said to us that day in Havana: that Cuba solidarity, which is so important to the continuation of the revolution, needs to grow. The lessons that Cuba gives us here in Canada, a major imperialist power, of what regular people must fight for and can gain are vital to any social justice work we do. The example of Cuba, the leadership of Cuba, needs to be part of the arsenal of weapons, the ideas that us oppressed people must fight with. Under attack for 47 years, the Cuban people still fight, not just to protect what they have gained, but for real gains for all people around the world. Cuba's resistance to imperialist attacks sets an example for all people in struggle, and with them we share our humanity, our hopes and our resistance.

I left Cuba changed, inspired and motivated.



# CUBA'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

## 1959 TO PRESENT

(A PARTIAL LISTING)



**1959 January:** The victory of the Cuban Revolution and the overthrow of the brutal US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista.

**1960 August:** To advance the “Revolution within the Revolution” (the full liberation of women) the Federation of Cuban Women (Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas, FMC) is formed. Today it has a membership of 3.8 million members consisting of 85% of all women ages 14 and older.

**1961 January:** The Cuban government initiates a national literacy campaign. Hundreds of thousands of young people mobilize to defeat illiteracy – the goal is achieved in a record 11 months.

**1962 April:** Cuban exiles, trained, armed and funded by the CIA, invade Cuba at Bay of Pigs. Mass mobilization of the Cuban people, together with the Cuban army defeats the invading force in less than 72 hours.

**1975:** The Family Code bill establishes the official goal of equal participation between men and women in the home.

**1976:** The Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, establishing the socialist principles of the democratic organization of Cuban society, was enacted and proclaimed.

**1987:** Cuban troops help Angola in the decisive defeat of the Apartheid South African invasion at Cuito Cuanavale causing a major set-back for the South African Apartheid regime. According to Nelson Mandela, Cuba's role was a key factor in his 1991 release from prison.

**1987:** Law #62 on the Penal Code is introduced which recognizes discrimination, based on any reason, and the violation of the ‘right of equality’ as a crime.

**1987:** Cuban infant mortality is lowered to 13.6 deaths per 1000, a lower figure than the rest of South America and even the U.S.

**2000:** The Cuban government awards over 4,000 scholarships to students to study medicine in the Latin American School of Medicine

**2000:** Elián González, the Cuban child who was kidnapped for seven months in the USA returned home. Large popular rallies in Cuba and international solidarity combined to achieve this victory.

**2000:** Cuban youth launched a large scale “Battle of Ideas” to increase the information levels, culture and education of Cuban people, preparing for the great challenges Cuba will face in 21st Century.

**2001:** Cuban test scores and literacy levels top those of the rest of Latin America, reports UNESCO

**2004:** Cuba and Venezuela sign an agreement under the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and agree to exchange of medical resources and petroleum between both nations.

**2005:** Cuban doctors working abroad delivered more than half a million babies, carried out 1,657,867 operations and did almost 9 million vaccinations for free in foreign countries

**2006:** The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) announced in its Living Planet Report 2006 that Cuba is the only country in the world which meets the criteria for sustainable development, based on its ecological footprint and UN Human Development Index

### TODAY

- The unemployment rate in Cuba is 1.9%, lower than the 3% established by international organizations as full employment
- Between 1963 and 2005 more than 100,000 Cuban doctors and health workers worked in 97 countries, mostly in Africa and Latin America. By March 2006, 25,000 Cuban health professionals were working in 68 nations.
- Cuba has 591 doctors per 100,000 citizens, the highest average in the world.
- Over 27,000 youths, mostly from third world countries, are currently studying for free in Cuban universities