

Celebrating 50 years of Venceremos Brigade solidarity with the Cuban Revolution

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This year was the 50th anniversary of the Venceremos Brigade delegations to Cuba, a special affair for Cuba and its Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP). We participants can agree with what one former brigadista wrote us, “I went in 1971 and it was one of the most moving experiences of my life. Cuba opened a whole new world to me where human dignity and respect are valued. I may not be on this brigade but I continue to support its mission to end the criminal US economic blockade and travel ban, return occupied Guantanamo Bay to the Cubans and normalize relations between both countries. Venceremos!”

Thanks to the outstanding educational tour put together in conjunction with ICAP, we could learn about Cuba’s socialist model and the impact of the US economic and political [blockade](#) has on

their people. The US has [tightened the blockade this year](#) and increased [travel restrictions to Cuba](#), as [Roger Keeran explains well](#). It has [imposed sanctions on companies](#) that ship oil from Venezuela to Cuba.

Brigadistas over the years may not come back and involve themselves directly in ending this cruel blockade, but their experience does make them more committed to the struggle for social justice at home.

The VB originated 50 years ago in militant opposition to the blockade, with the participants violating the travel ban to Cuba in order to work in the 10 million ton 1970 sugar cane harvest. The US government considered VB a threat, as the [long history of FBI and CIA “monitoring” of the VB](#) attests. No doubt they have just updated their tens of thousands of pages of files on the Brigade.

This year about 155 people from the US participated in this Brigade, spending either five days, ten days, two or three weeks in Cuba. Unlike the original Brigades, our voluntary labor was secondary to participating in many different presentations and exchanges, political, educational, medical, and of course, musical.

The Cuban media widely covered our contingent, and we were honored with a [program at ICAP](#), addressed by Fernando Gonzalez, one of the [Cuban 5 heroes](#), now ICAP president. At another dinner at ICAP we were entertained by the [Colmenita](#), the children’s theater and dance group that could warm the hearts of even the stodgiest of people.

In Cuba the needs of the people are placed at the center of national policy. In the US, corporate interests and profits are. That Cuba prioritizes concern for the human being irritates the corporate 1% ruling the US, who see this kind of society anywhere on the planet as a threat to their interests.

This was brought home in Camaguey where we visited the province’s children’s hospital, which exemplified the great care Cuba gives to the well-being of all their people. Health care, like education, is free in Cuba as a human right. But it goes beyond that: for children who need long term care and recuperation, arrangements are made so that family members can live together in a section of the hospital. One six-year old girl who requires continual medical vigilance has lived in the hospital with her family most her life. The entire hospital staff treat her as family, recently throwing her a hospital birthday party. If Cuba cannot meet any highly specialized health care needs of a child, the child is sent to the most sophisticated hospitals abroad, even to the United States, and the Cuban government pays the bill.

All hospitals, like universities, have a trade union open to all: the entire staff, from doctor and nurse to custodian, are able to belong to the same union.

There are 800 doctors and medical personnel at this hospital. When I asked how many had volunteered to serve in any of Cuba's world famous humanitarian medical missions abroad, I was told some personnel volunteered in the very [first mission in Algeria](#), and since then 1400 have.

Over the entrance of another hospital in Havana reads a large sign, "The life of a single human being is worth more than all the property of the richest man on earth." This quote from Che comes close to the very opposite of what greets us upon entering a US hospital.

The value Cuban hospital personnel place on caring for the sick, especially children, goes beyond medical attention to personal care and even affection, akin to what we can sometimes see here between some young schoolchildren and their teacher.

In stark contrast, the doctors told us of young children who slowly died in the hospital because of the lack of medicine, denied to Cuba because of the inhumane US blockade policy. It was painful to feel the loving attention paid to children in Cuban hospitals compared to the shameless killing of sick children caused by the policies of the rulers of our country.

These opposing policies towards improving people's lives was again made clear in the [Havana Literacy Museum](#), devoted to the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign. Before the revolution, 500,000 children were without schools, 8,000 teachers without jobs. One million Cubans were illiterate. The literacy campaign mobilized 380,000 volunteers, including 100,000 schoolchildren over the age of 10. There was one teacher for 2-3 students, with the student teacher living and working with those they taught, typically in the countryside. After the 1961 campaign, Cuba became the first Latin American country to end illiteracy.

The response of US to this historic achievement was not to offer support, but to launch a military invasion at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. US backed forces deliberately targeted the schoolchildren teachers, murdering 13.

One student literacy teacher wrote:

Companero Fidel,

Like the Brigadista that I am, I want to tell you about the four months that I lived with the peasants: I saw how hard they worked for a life without much, without culture. The food wasn't good, but I always worked hard at my tasks, and if for the revolution I have to sacrifice something more, I'll do it, because I know good revolutionaries never falter. So tell me what I can do next.

Julio Vasquez

Today, almost 60 years later, I ran into this same ennobling spirit while walking the town of Segunda Frente, near the US base at Guantanamo. There I met some female Cuban soldiers, aged 18-22. Serving in the army is compulsory for men for a year, voluntary for women. These young

women's commitment to serving Fidel, defending Cuba no matter the cost, made me see that Cuba is made up of people who will fight and never surrender in order to maintain their independence, national dignity, and loyalty to Fidel. The US could kill all the country's leadership, but it would have to murder millions to recolonize the land.

In every city we visited we received an official welcome by leaders of the local and provincial governments, combined with commemorations of Cuban national heroes: July 26 combatants in Artemisa, Ignacio Agramonte in Camaguey, Che Guevara in Santa Clara, Carlos Manuel de Cespedes in Bayamo, Antonio Maceo in Santiago.

Cuba honors its national patriots by educating the people about their example and sacrifice. Not just the patriots of the July 26th Movement and after, but throughout the independence struggle back to 1868 with Cespedes, a landlord who freed his enslaved Africans and led them to fight the Spanish occupiers, and even before that with the Taino hero [Hatuey](#).

We in the US know little of the accomplishments of the heroes of our own struggles against the rule of the 1%, whether Mother Jones, Tecumseh, John L. Lewis, Paul Robeson, Ida B. Wells, John Brown, Daniel Shays, Marcus Garvey, Eugene Debs, and so on.

The first ten days of our delegation we stayed at the [Julio Antonio Mella International Camp](#), home to many international brigades coming to Cuba. We received presentations from a national secretariat member of the Cuban trade unions (CTC), from a member of the Peoples Power National Assembly, members of a local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, a leader of CENESEX, Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), Young Communist League (UJC), Association of Combatants of the Revolution (ACRC), and others.

In Artemisa, adjacent to Havana, we visited the memorial to those from that province killed in the July 26 Moncada Barracks attack in Santiago. Later we met with [Victor Dreke](#), a combatant who served with Che, and other retired military figures who had fought in the Cuba military, either at home or overseas.

We visited Granjita Siboney, the planning center for the July 26 Moncada Barracks attack which resulted in five of the attackers killed in the fighting and 56 were shot or tortured to death after taken prisoner by Batista's troops. July 26 was a crushing military defeat, yet Cuba is a country where a military disaster has been elevated to a national holiday, National Rebellion Day.

Our trip included the Moncada Barracks itself, the Granma boat landing, the Rebel Army's headquarters in Sierra Maestra. Before the climb to the headquarters we were entertained by [Quinteto Rebelde](#), who in 1957 were six young boys from a nearby town Fidel recruited as their "cultural weapon" for the Rebel Army.

We traveled near to the US Guantanamo military base and torture center, where the US still holds [40 prisoners in a lawless prison](#). This US base not merely occupies the outer bay, but it cuts off

the region from making use of an excellent deep water port, thereby stifling its economic development. [All Guantánamo is Ours](#) describes the current and historic damage imposed upon the people by U.S. occupation of their territory.

On our countrywide travels, I was struck by how green Cuba is. Due to its reforestation program, forests now cover [over 31%](#) of the land. Before the 1959 revolution, this stood at [13.6%](#). Cuba has achieved world renown as a [model of sustainable organic agriculture](#). The World Wildlife Fund has recognized Cuba for having [the most sustainable model of development on the planet](#).

In Santiago on August 13, Fidel Castro's birthday, we laid flowers next to his tomb. Cuba honored our delegation by scheduling us to pay our respects right after Fidel's wife. We also laid flowers at the graves Jose Marti, Cespedes, [Frank Pais](#), and [Mariana Grajales](#) (the [Rebel Army women combatants](#) were named after her). Nearby were the tombs of July 26 fighters as well as those soldiers from Santiago de Cuba who died fighting South African apartheid troops in Angola. The documentary [Cuba: an African Odyssey](#) reviews this struggle that changed African history, yet distorts the [victorious outcome](#).

Fidel's tomb represents a symbol of Cuba today. Only "Fidel" is written there. No birth or death date: Fidel continues beyond time as a presence. A boulder is his grave: he, like Cuba itself, is an immovable rock. In my month in Cuba, I never felt the Cuban people considered Fidel had died. Rather, they feel his presence and are faithfully defending what he stands for and what he has built.

Cuba stands out as a shining example of a humane society, a model of what human beings can accomplish. Fidel's Cuba embodies the vision of a just and humanitarian society that our own great leader, Martin Luther King, had sought to bring into being.