



US-CUBA LABOR SOLIDARITY

Organize & Mobilize

Trade Unions

History

The Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC, Cuban Workers Central) has been the unified union federation in Cuba since 1939. Today it unites 17 sectoral unions, which are organised in more than 81,000 workplace branches, and in elected municipal, provincial and national committees of each union.

In every region, unions own and run training schools for thousands of union representatives. Key topics recently have been health and safety, collective bargaining, and implementing the legal Labour Code. The CTC's national newspaper Trabajadores (Workers) is known for being a source of information and advice, and a powerful voice of constructive criticism in Cuba.

Unions and the law

The law guarantees the right to voluntarily form and join trade unions. Unions are legally independent and financially autonomous, funded by members' subscriptions. Unlike in the UK and US, Cuban unions are not constrained by hostile legislation (contrary to US propaganda, strikes are not illegal in Cuba).

Workers' rights

The Labour Code, which has legal status and was revised in 2014, sets out the rights of all unions and workers. Unions have the right to participate in company management, to receive management information, to office space and materials, and facility time for representatives. Union agreement is required for lay-offs, changes in patterns of working hours, overtime or rest day working, and the annual safety report.

Workers have the legal right to participation through unions and workplace assemblies. These assemblies debate and approve production plans, and the obligatory workplace Collective Bargaining Agreement, negotiated by the union, that covers local pay systems and the implementation of all employment law.

Legal worker rights protected by unions include a written contract, a 40-44-hour week, 30 days' paid annual leave in the state sector, guaranteed weekly and unions have the right to stop work they consider dangerous, as part of comprehensive health and safety policy. Grievance and disciplinary complaints go before workplace boards called Organs of Labour Justice, the majority of whose members are elected workers. The unions operate a nationwide legal advice and representation system for members in conjunction with neighbourhood law centres.

Wages

Cuba has a national, state sector salary scale, established in consultation with unions. It is based on qualifications, with the minimum wage applying in the non-state sector too. Cuba's Constitution supports the 'socialist principle of distribution' which rewards individuals according to their contribution. Local bonus schemes are negotiated by the unions and approved by the workers' assembly. Basic salaries, as the government admits, remain too low. A central purpose of the economic reforms agreed in 2011 is to raise national income and raise legal salaries.

Non state sector

The new Labour Code elaborates new rights for non-state sector employees: to written contracts, minimum salaries and maximum hours, rest periods and paid holidays, and health and safety at work. Unions are recruiting and representing the self-employed workers expected to make up a third of the workforce by 2016. There are already some 1,500 union branches of self-employed workers.

US funding of 'independent' unions

Unions see the self-employed as especially important, as this is a sector in which the US has declared an intention to sponsor 'breakaway' unions. The US government department of USAID already funds and promotes so-called 'independent unions'. These are intended to be part of a movement to overthrow Cuba's constitution and its socialism. They are tiny groups that do no trade union work at all, and are mainly a means for individuals to access US cash and equipment. In December 2014, just days after the two countries stated they would start discussions with a view to normalising relations, the US government announced it would make \$11 million dollars available to advance its "interests" in Cuba - singling out funding of trade unions as one of its focus areas.

Supporting socialism

In all of their work, Cuban unions accept a dual responsibility of organising and defending workers on the one hand, and on the other promoting Cuba's socialist development, that has delivered world-famous free health and education services to the people, and guarantees the constitutional right to work, as well as universal legal rights such as state pensions, maternity leave and pay, accident and unemployment benefits.

Political role and influence on national policy

As well as their economic role, unions have a political role, as one of Cuba's 'mass organisations' (others include the small farmers association, national women's federation, students union). The unions manage mass consultations over national government policy, and proposals such as the revised Labour Code, convening the meetings and organising the responses to the National Assembly. Unions chair the commissions that present candidates for the National and Provincial Assemblies. And crucially, the unions have a constitutional right to be consulted over employment law, and have the right to propose new laws to the National Assembly.

International

Cuban unions affiliate to many international union bodies and maintain links with sister unions abroad. 89 ILO Conventions including 7 of 8 ILO Core Labour Standards have been ratified. Unlike the US, Cuba is committed to protect unions' rights to organise and to collective bargaining (Convention Nos.87 and 98).

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