‘Prison paintings are good way to raise awareness of Cuban 5’

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“The Cuban Five have written one of the most heroic chapters of the Cuban Revolution,” Ricardo Lamas, cultural attaché at the Cuban Embassy here, told a meeting in Tottenham, north London July 12.

Fifty people attended the meeting, held at the busy Bernie Grant Arts Centre, to mark the conclusion of a monthlong showing of “I Will Die the Way I’ve Lived,” a collection of 15 watercolors by Antonio Guerrero, one of the Five, depicting the first 17 months of the Five’s imprisonment spent in isolation cells commonly referred to as the “hole.”

Among those who came to the event were 10 residents from the surrounding working-class neighborhood who recently learned about the fight to free the Five when supporters of the *Militant* came to their door selling the paper. As part of building the exhibition, organizers also spoke to some 150 people at local churches — St. Paul the Apostle and Springs of Joy.

Greetings were sent to the event by Rupert Sylvester, whose son Roger Sylvester died in the custody of Tottenham police in 1999, and from Sidi Breika, local representative of Polisario Front, which for decades has led the fight of Saharawi people of Western Sahara against Moroccan occupation. The meeting was chaired by Larry Herman, a photographer active in the National Union of Journalists and a member the national executive committee of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign.

“These paintings and their expression of life in prison are familiar to many working people in the U.K.,” Ólöf Andra Proppé of the Communist League told participants. “They also show how the Five and others resist with creativity and humor.” The Five are in prison, she said, “because they represent the women and men of Cuba who insist on defending their revolution in face of everything U.S. imperialism has thrown at them.”

Proppé quoted remarks by René González, one of two of the Five who have been released, made at the Havana International Book Fair last February: “I’m realizing it’s hard for us to think about that period without recalling

those little details, those creative schemes we came up with … that even in those conditions helped make life brighter and prevented the prosecutors from achieving what they wanted, which was to break us, to make us bitter, to damage us.”

“U.S. authorities refused to prevent terrorist attacks by groups in Miami such as the F4 Commandos, Brothers to the Rescue and the Cuban American National Foundation,” said Lamas. “They’re trying to reverse everything the revolution has achieved.”

“The case of the Cuban Five is a political case, and they are political prisoners,” Lamas said. “Their freedom cannot depend only on their legal defense. Even more crucial is the mass support they get.”

“The Cuban Revolution has been seen as an example by people engaged in anti-imperialist struggle around the world, including Kenya,” Shiraz Durrani, a retired librarian and political exile from Kenya, said during the discussion period. He presented Lamas with three books on the struggle against British rule in Kenya and the history of struggles by toilers there. Durrani had been following the case of the Cuban Five through the *Militant* and had heard about the event when supporters knocked on his door earlier that day.

Yuri Betancourt, a member of the Chilean band Lokandes, opened the meeting with a song by Cuban singer Silvio Rodríguez and closed with one by Victor Jara, who was murdered in the 1973 U.S.-backed military coup in Chile.

Herman urged participants to find more ways of building support for the Cuban Five. “We are not unique in this room, there are many others who will be ready to join the fight.” Several wanted to be contacted about future activities.

“The Chains is my favorite,” said Debbie Dawkins, occupational therapist who recently learned about the case. “You can relate that to yourself. How much freedom do we really have?” At the same time, she said, “the paintings could have ended up being so dark, but they’re actually not. The Five drew strength from each other.”

“I think it strikes everyone that they were put in jail without proper evidence of any crime,” said Ales Majchrak, an electrical assembly worker who heard about the Cuban Five from a co-worker. “These paintings are a good way to raise awareness. Now they need to be shown elsewhere.”