

U.S. workers welcome Cuban union leader

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Victor Manuel Lemagne Sanchez, secretary general of Cuba's hotel and tourism union and elected delegate to Cuba's National Assembly, is on a two-week tour of 11 U.S. cities. Landing first in northern California on June 27, Lemagne will conclude his visit in the Baltimore/Washington, D.C. area on July 11.

This is the first multicity U.S. exchange with a representative of the Cuban Workers Central Union (La Central de Trabajadores de Cuba, CTC) since 2000. Lemagne is also the first Cuban elected representative to be granted a U.S. visa.

Lemagne's warm reception from U.S. workers and the organized labor movement is in sharp contrast to the bellicosity displayed by the Trump administration.

In the first two days, Lemagne met with leaders of the San Francisco Labor Council, San Jose/South Bay Central Labor Council and University of California/Berkeley Labor Center. He was received on the floor of the California Senate and Assembly in Sacramento, the first Cuban elected official to be invited there.

Lemagne spoke at an Organize Sacramento reception. UNITE HERE, which organizes hotel, restaurant and casino workers in the U.S., hosted receptions

throughout northern California and will do so in Los Angeles and San Diego.

A public event initiated by the International Committee for Peace, Justice and Dignity, and supported by many Cuba solidarity organizations, overflowed the hall of the University Professional and Technical Employees, Communication Workers Local 9119 at Berkeley on June 29. The meeting featured Lemagne and Clarence Thomas, retired International Longshore and Warehouse Union militant and former Local 10 secretary-treasurer.

Lemagne: 'We will forge ahead'

Lemagne read a CTC statement responding to Trump's speech in Miami: "We fully support the declarations of our revolutionary government in response to the statement by the U.S. President Donald Trump on June 16 which attempts to bring back the epoch of the Cold War which has been characterized as interventionist, rhetorical and manipulative."

Lemagne explained: "The measures ... have been called national security measures with respect to strengthening the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba, [but they are] actually a step backwards in the small steps forward gained through the agreements with Obama, harming not only the people of our country but the people of the U.S."

"Every maneuver and aggression by the empire are destined to fail. [Cuba's] response is to continue the economic development of our country. We will continue to forge ahead with infinite loyalty to our revolutionary process. ... We will not be taking any steps backward. We will never give up. History has shown that even in the worst situations we have been able to win over all obstacles."

Lemagne reviewed the history of the U.S. blockade and its cost to health and other essential sectors. He emphasized that Cuba is the only country that U.S. residents cannot travel to freely. A U.S. law prohibits vacationing in Cuba.

Lemagne said that unions in the hotel and tourism sector donate part of their tips to support health care and the fight against cancer. "Over the years I have been a leader in this union, the workers have contributed more than \$23 million to this," he said.

Lemagne stressed that the vast majority of workers in Cuba are union members. Union membership is voluntary, and the workers have participated in updating the Cuban labor code. Assemblies in every sector discussed proposed changes and collected opinions and proposals; 75 percent of these amendments appear in the new code. The code applies at all workplaces. In joint ventures, the property belongs to the state and to the workers and people of Cuba. If managers mistreat the workers, they are removed.

U.S. workers are fighting for benefits in their contracts that already exist in Cuban law, such as health care and vacations, explained Lemagne. “Workers take up issues at monthly workplace assemblies. It is the employer’s responsibility to implement the agreements.”

Longshore workers’ solidarity with Cuba

“The bonds between U.S. and Cuban workers cannot be broken. Not by any president,” Thomas asserted. He reviewed the ILWU’s long solidarity with Cuban workers and their unions, predating the 1959 socialist revolution and continuing after it.

In 1947 the ILWU participated in a Havana meeting establishing an international sugar workers’ committee. An ILWU representative was elected chair. Cuban union leader Jesus Menendez was elected vice chair, but he was brutally assassinated the next year by U.S.-backed sugar bosses.

As the U.S. began its economic war against the Cuban Revolution, the ILWU maintained political independence from U.S. foreign policy. A rank-and-file union
