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Cuban Ambassador speaks at UNISON NDC 2015

24/06/2015



Over one hundred and sixty delegates attended one of the biggest fringe meetings of the 2015 UNISON National Delegate Conference in Glasgow to learn about the current situation in Cuba and why solidarity is now more important than ever.

H. E. Teresita Vicente, Cuban Ambassador, spoke on how solidarity helped make possible Cuba's removal from the absurd US state-sponsored lists of terrorism – a list that Cuba should never have been on in the first place. Rather than supporting terrorism, Cuba has been a victim of terrorist attacks from US based organisations, she said, which "left 3,478 dead and 2,099 disabled for life; and many others who were wounded".

Responding to the shift in US-Cuba relations, the Ambassador spoke of how Cuba "will not renounce our ideals of independence or social justice... we will not accept intervention or risk the achievements of the Revolution which were achieved with huge risks and costs... We are not going to give any of it up".

Despite Obama's attempts to improve relations between the US and Cuba, the Republican-led Congress continues to block progress and ensure the blockade and hostility towards Cuba remains. "The blockade continues, in full force, affecting all Cubans, causing hardship and suffering. We need support to end the blockade", she said. Guantanamo Bay must be returned to Cuba if full, normalised relations are to be achieved, she added.

She pointed out the remarkable health, education and social achievements of the Revolution, which are even more impressive given the context that, "Cuba is a small country, lacking in natural resources, that has spent the last half century operating in extremely difficult conditions because of the blockade", but continues to be a beacon for internationalists, she said, with "65,000 Cuban internationalists working in 89 countries in the world".

Kevan Nelson, North West UNISON Regional Secretary, gave a first-hand account of this year's Cuba Solidarity May Day Study Tour.

He noted having the honour of meeting and celebrating with the recently released members of the Miami Five. "The international campaign of solidarity had been very important in securing their freedom and so we had a timely opportunity to share in the celebrations of their victory."

"The highlight of the trip was the May Day celebration itself and this year in Havana's Revolution Square", he said. "The revolutionary spirit on the march was electrifying, marching under the banner of 'United in the construction of socialism.' I particularly enjoyed the high energy MC who repeatedly roared 'Here nobody surrenders.'"

The North West Regional Secretary spoke of fascinating meetings and visits with the FMC (Federation of Cuban Women), CTC (Cuban TUC), CDR (Committees of Defence of the Revolution and ICAP (Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples).

He recalled insightful experiences from meetings with these mass organisations, including Dania from the FMC who, in light of the shift in relations with the US, argued "We defeated them at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, we overcame the special period, we have developed the Revolution in a context where we always lacked basic resources and material things. Everything we have achieved is for the benefit of the Cuban people. As women we value the rights we have won. If the US were to succeed in Cuba it would be our fault. We need to get the blockade lifted - that is the next huge task. Then it is up to us."

Roger McKenzie, UNISON Assistant General Secretary, chaired the meeting and urged UNISON members to affiliate their branches to the Cuba Solidarity Campaign. "Cuba is an inspiration which we can take examples from and take this inspiration into our workplace and unions – Cuba is always the first to help in disaster areas when solidarity is needed most; whether it is Nepal, Haiti, Chile or in Kashmir - Cuba really does show us that another world is possible".

The fringe meeting was sponsored and supported by Thompsons Solicitors, UNISON Greater London Region, UNISON North West Region and UNISON Scotland Region. Tom Jones, from Thompsons Solicitors, spoke of the support that Thompsons gives to the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and how Cuba's remarkable social achievements continue to be a beacon for the developing world.

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