

Cuban unionists tell U.S. colleagues embargo is chokehold on their nation

by: Mark Gruenberg
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BALTIMORE (PAI) - The 60-year-old U.S. trade embargo against Cuba is "a chokehold" on the Caribbean island nation, Cuban union members told their U.S. colleagues during nine U.S. unionists' recent research trip there.

Speaking May 22 at the Baltimore meeting of the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild, two of the unionists on the week-long trip - WBNG members Rick Ehrmann and Elise Bryant - said their group returned with a joint statement saying the embargo should be lifted, travel restrictions should be dropped, and normal U.S.-Cuba relations should be established. They promised to push their unions for those goals.

As for the embargo, "The U.S. has a chokehold on Cuba, and they're asking us 'Just take your hands off of our neck,'" Bryant said.

Bryant, Ehrmann and members of AFSCME, the Government Employees, the Postal Workers and the Carpenters undertook the mission to confer with and study trade unions in Cuba. Their three daily meetings with Cuban workers - including a session with Salvador Valdes Mesa, president of the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC), the Cuban labor federation - left the U.S. unionists with little time to see sights and no trips outside its capital, Havana, and surrounding suburbs.

What they saw, Ehrmann said, is that "Cuba is a poor country with one of the best health care systems in the world, an excellent educational system and a people proud of their accomplishments" and generous to their visitors. And it is a nation recovering from "a serious setback," they said, when subsidies from the Soviet Union and its allies ended after those governments' 1991 collapse.

The embargo, Ehrmann and Bryant quoted their Cuban colleagues as saying, hurts - a lot.

The Republican Eisenhower administration imposed the embargo in 1960, a year after Fidel Castro won the Cuban Revolution, ousting dictatorial Gen. Fulgencio Batista. Before that, the U.S., 90 miles from Cuba across the Florida Straits, was the island nation's main trading partner, and dominated its economy. The Cuban unionists stressed they do not want or plan to return to such economic and cultural domination.

The embargo has drawn bipartisan support and bipartisan opposition in the U.S. It was imposed because of Castro's decision to seek an alliance with and aid from the U.S.S.R. One of the last relics of the Cold War, the embargo is maintained due in large part to the voting strength of upper-class Cubans who fled the revolution and settled in the U.S., mostly in southeastern Florida. They vote as a bloc for the GOP.

There was occasional relaxation of parts of the embargo under the Democratic Carter and Clinton administrations, Ehrmann noted. He added that 34 farm-state lawmakers from both parties want to dump the embargo on agricultural trade, and called prospects "good" for passage of that bill. No other nations embargo Cuba.

If the embargo ends, U.S. farmers would gain a market, and Cuba could more easily feed itself, Ehrmann explained. Cuban unionists said their nation's mostly volcanic and poor soil cannot support many staple crops or fresh vegetables.

Staples such as wheat are imported, at double the normal prices, from nations such as China, Cubans told the U.S. unionists. That's because the embargo's sanctions mean that any ship - even from a third nation - that stops in Cuba is barred from U.S. ports for six months.

The embargo is felt in other fields, Ehrmann and Bryant added. In another example, Cuba bought \$78

million in advanced medical machinery from Phillips N.V. and from Siemens, which are Dutch and German firms respectively, several years ago. It needs parts to update those machines, but can't get them because exporting to Cuba would threaten the companies' right to do business in the U.S.

"The impact of no Soviet Union was tremendous, they told us," Bryant said. Sharing and bartering occurred, she added: "If you didn't need sugar and your neighbors didn't need flour, you traded. People are doing what they can with what they have." Other aspects of Cuban life the unionists learned included:

The other top cause of Cuban unionists, besides the end of the embargo and normal relations, is freeing "The Cuban 5," jailed in the U.S. Those Cuban residents, after securing initial promises of U.S. cooperation, came to track down evidence of the Miami anti-Castro Cubans' involvement in a shoot-down of a Cuban civilian airliner on the way to Venezuela years ago.

The downing of the airliner, orchestrated by a rich anti-Castro Miami Cuban with previous CIA ties, killed 150 people, Ehrmann noted.

But when Cuba sent the five to investigate, after the initial U.S. promise of cooperation, the FBI instead locked them up as spies. "There are shrines to the Cuban 5 in every workplace," Ehrmann said. Several U.S. unions have also demanded release of the Cubans.

Malnutrition was wiped out in the 1960s. Its elimination was one goal of the revolution. But it returned after 1991 and the halt of imported subsidized food from the U.S.S.R. and its allies, Bryant added. Malnutrition has been eradicated again, but at higher-than-necessary expense due to the embargo, the two unionists said.

The AFL-CIO does not recognize the CTC due to Cuban labor federation's government sponsorship. CTC represents 68% of non-agricultural workers in Cuba. (Data shows 21.2% of Cuban workers are in agriculture.) CTC is also part of the policy structure: Valdes Mesa, its leader, sits on the Communist Party's Politburo, in the National Assembly (Congress) and on the government's 31-member Council of State.

Ehrmann also said CTC has a major policy impact. In one example, CTC objected and rallied opposition to a plan to raise revenues by imposing Cuba's first-ever income tax. The idea was dropped. CTC does not have dues check-off, but collects dues voluntarily, "through peer pressure," Ehrmann added.

Cuban unions are most active in handling grievances. Joint Councils of Workers Justice are established in plants "with several workers, a CTC rep and a plant manager" to hear grievances, Ehrmann said. Councils can overturn managerial discipline. Losing workers can appeal rulings to local municipal or provincial councils.

The meeting with Cuban journalists "was not satisfying," Ehrmann admitted. "The press in Cuba is not independent. Here, it's controlled by corporations. There, it's controlled by government or the unions. But that (control) has changed because of bloggers" who challenge the government-run media. That includes "some funded and supplied by the U.S."

The U.S. budget for the year ending Sept. 30 includes \$29 million for communications to Cuba, down from \$48 million under the GOP Bush government, Ehrmann noted. "The Cubans view that money as dedicated to the overthrow of their government," he added. The anti-Castro refugees have pushed hard, and successfully, over the years for those funds.

Cuban medical school is free and "Cuba exports doctors" to developing countries, Bryant noted. Three thousand doctors, out of 6,000 counted around Havana, fled the 1959 revolution, but Cuba now has 74,554 doctors and a better patient-to-doctor ratio than the U.S., Ehrmann added. Its infant mortality rate is lower than in the U.S., life expectancy is equal to that of the U.S., and "there's free quality primary care."

Bryant said she found no evidence of discrimination against Afro-Cubans, but one guide told Ehrmann that "fighting for gay rights in what is still an extremely macho society" is continuing. He quoted the guide as saying the Cuban constitution recently added an amendment guaranteeing gay rights in everything except marriage.