

## COMMENTS ON

### “The Condition of Cuban Workers During the Special Period in Peacetime” by Córdova

Lorenzo Cañizares

I would have loved to make the emphasis of my response to Mr. Cordova's paper the last point he made: “left to its own, the revolution floundered in both the economic and social realms. Only the political fabric remained intact.” This statement fascinates me because there is no doubt that the experiences that Cuba has gone through in the last few years should have toppled the Government.

But I was asked to react as a trade unionist.

1. *On Unemployment:* I have to say that it is amazing that in spite of the economic debacle that the Cuban government is facing, they have been—at least on paper—so incredibly generous. Not only unemployment benefits are double in length to what we receive here. But also unemployed workers do not lose their medical benefits or are in danger of going homeless. Regarding the choices that Mr. Córdova fears between mobilization and starvation, it is also a choice being faced in many different parts of the non-socialist world. And without the benefits of the social net that Cuba provides.
2. *Work as Duty:* This concept definitely has not been invented by Cubans. Anyone who has followed the Welfare Reform debate in the U.S. Congress is aware that work as a duty is a position shared by many. Let's not forget the Protestant ethic. I agree that 65 hours per week is definitely humanly taxing. But I can tell you there

are many people out there in the good, old USA who are working double shifts, 5 days per week in order to maintain the life style that they used to have. The victims of downsizing.

3. *Compulsory Trade Unionism:* This is the topic of a major fight in labor contracts in New Jersey since the Reagan days. Labor history tells us that for a period, American workers, at least in the north, could expect that winning union recognition at a worksite would mean that every worker would belong to the union. But since our own special period things have changed. The opposite to compulsory affiliation of workers to their unions is the “right to work” concept that we in the American trade union movement view as measure to weaken the power of labor and ultimately destroy unions.

I believe the point to highlight here is the limitations of the Cuban trade union movement to be able to act as an independent political force on the issues that concern workers. But, again, even on this point, many U.S. trade unionists here will tell you there is not much difference with our experience. But there is no doubt that vibrant, energetic leadership with a mind of its own has room to roam in the U.S. labor movement. I believe the Cuban labor experience calls for degrees of cautiousness unknown here.

4. *On Different Categories of Workers:* Again this is not a Cuban invention. I will like to remind the audience that even in the best days of U.S. capitalism (when we had a large middle class) we had a situation kind of similar. We had the labor aristocracy in high paying jobs like in the automobile industry, airplane manufacturing, unionized construction work, as a first level. Second level were jobs manufacturing minor consumer goods, mining, transportation, hospital work, etc. And the third level was composed of low-skilled service and manual workers. I hate to recognize it, but discrimination among workers—or any other profession for that matter—is part and parcel of any system of belief that rewards people according to status. And to tell you the truth, I don't know that the human race has been able to devise anything better yet. That the Cubans reward in the levels indicated is because of their choice of values. The same way we have our own set of values.

5. *Labor Discipline:* It might be that Castro is trying to become like us. The probationary period for most U.S. workers was at one time of three months. Nowadays in most U.S. contracts, employers are calling for six months probationary periods. In terms of discipline I don't think it can be any worse than in the State of New Jersey, the second richest per capita in the U.S., where public workers if they call in sick have to stay home or face disciplinary measures if they get called and are not home.

The concept of progressive discipline which was a major victory won by labor in the U.S. is now under attack. Only those workers with a fighting union behind them have a chance to win an arbitrary disciplinary decision.

6. *Labor Inability to Negotiate Wages:* This is a point where I agree wholeheartedly with Mr. Córdova's indignation. This is an outrage and goes against all labor principles. It is a mechanism of control to keep workers without the ability to bargain for their own well-being. As a trade unionist, I am very conscious of the need to think on behalf of the common good, but the ex-

cuse of the common good should not be used to obliterate labor and human rights. Again I ask, where are the Cuban trade unions?

The acceptance of this *modus vivendi* gives rise to the mentality that excuses the abuses committed against workers for refusing to participate in projects not to their liking. The Cuban trade unions who have clearly expressed that not all Cuban workers are Communists cannot in good conscience stand by and allow these transgressions of labor rights.

Let me also add that I don't see the official Cuban trade unions as a totally useless outfit. I am not an scholar on the Cuban trade unions. But I do know that the Cuban trade unions were the only government controlled organism that defied Fidel Castro and openly requested the reestablishment of the farmers' market.

This leads to another point where I strongly agree with Mr. Córdova—that the move made by the Cuban government towards an economic opening was not easily made. Castro's greatest fear is the development of an independent source of power that will challenge his arbitrary powers. To explain crudely the Cuban dilemma, the Chinese could not have accomplished what they have if Mao Tse-Tung was still in control of China. Cuba still has its Mao Tse-Tung.

In regards to Mr. Córdova's conclusion, I also agree that the special period has been the culmination of past mistakes, like the total servile reliance on a foreign power, the arbitrariness of Castro (as an example the incredible occurrence that during the beginning of the special period, there was serious scarcity of food in Cuba that could have been solved immediately, as it was later done through the reinstatement of the farmers' markets).

But the ability of Castro to survive is not only the result of some good policies that have been structuralized. In the main, Castro owes his survival to his ability to be able to wear the mantle of David fighting Goliath. And the sad part of this is that those who claim to be his most ardent opposition continuously ball him out by providing an objective reality to his claims.