

WORKING TOGETHER

Education and Unions in Cuba

REPORT OF THE 2018 NEU SOLIDARITY DELEGATION



Impact of the US blockade

THE US BLOCKADE or 'el bloqueo' as it is known in Cuba – is a collection of US laws and legislation which restrict Cuba's ability to have trade and normal relations with the US, and in some cases, other countries too.

The US government first imposed economic, commercial, and financial restrictions on Cuba in October 1960 shortly after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. In February 1962, the blockade was extended to include almost all imports. Further legislation in the 1990s further strengthened and codified the blockade into US law, meaning that it can only be fully lifted by an act of Congress. On 4 March 2019, the Trump administration threatened to tighten the blockade further by imposing Title III of the Helms-Burton Act. Title III gives the US the right to sue foreign companies which utilise properties nationalised after the Revolution. Title III has never been enforced by any president, Republican or Democrat, since it was introduced in 1996. Over 200,000 lawsuits are anticipated if implemented.

From our delegation's experience, we could see that the Cuban education system is among the best in the world. At the heart of every community is quality education. And yet the Cuban people have had to fight hard for education and this is still a constant struggle. The blockade has a significant impact on Cuban students. Teachers do not have access to resources needed; exercise books are precious and the students write two rows to every line on the page. In one school, we saw that the teacher had drawn an entire word search on the blackboard and the students were spending a great deal of time copying it into their books by hand. This task would have taken seconds with the right IT equipment.

The special schools we visited, in spite of the obvious investment by the Cuban government and enviable teacher:student ratios of 1:4, clearly lacked resources. Several visually impaired students were forced to share a single mechanical braille machine as these contain parts made in the US and so are included in the blockade. Our delegation took 12 braille machines to the schools we visited, bought with funds raised by teachers in Britain, as an act of practical solidarity.



We also heard first-hand about the external impact of the blockade. Lecturers at Pinar del Rio University told us how they often signed over rights to their own academic work to American universities and academics so that it could bypass the academic blockade enforced by the US. This was happening particularly with medical research. Their belief was that the need for this research outside of Cuba was greater than their right to put their names to it. In 2017, the Open University refused to accept a Cuban student because of the blockade, further denying the opportunity to Cuban students to access what the rest of the world can take for granted.

Finally, there is the political and diplomatic aspect of the blockade. The US puts significant pressure on a range of governments, international aid organisations and NGOs not to work with and, in some cases, to be actively critical of Cuba. The reliance on a large number of these organisations on funding from within the US means that a lot of criticism of Cuba is circulated which proves to be misleading or inaccurate.

The material solidarity the NEU has provided through both the braille machine campaign and the *Play for Cuba* campaign, which has collected two shipping containers full of musical instruments for young Cuban musicians, has made a real difference to the lives of young people in Cuba. Our lobbying of the Open University in 2017 helped to force them to reverse their ban on Cuban students. Such work to expose and end the illegal blockade is vitally important for the future of all Cubans.

Working Together for Education

IT WAS AN absolute privilege and honour to lead the first ever NEU delegation to Cuba.

It had been a long-standing tradition of the NUT and it is fantastic to see that the NEU delegation this time was equally as amazing and have come back inspired to develop the union's international work at a grassroots level, and also been inspired to become more involved in trade union activity.

The title of this report is taken from a banner we saw in one of the schools, which said:

“Working together, we Educate ourselves”.

That is exactly what we saw in Cuba, a culture of collectivism and working together combined with a fierce sense of independence and responsibility. Everyone, from the very youngest students, takes responsibility for their own education and strives to do well, but equally sees it as their responsibility to support their peers and for everyone to achieve.

This fierce independence is sadly necessary because of the US blockade and the terrible effects that it has on the everyday lives of Cuban people and their communities.

It was humbling and very moving to see that by working together, Cubans have overcome this adversity to produce an amazing, accessible and truly equal education system in which everyone is involved and has pride.

Despite facing the blockade Cuban people are the first to offer enormous amounts of international solidarity by sending teachers and doctors to crisis situations across the globe.

There are so many lessons to learn from the Cuban people. It is vital that we stand with them as they stand with each other.

On our last school visit I gave a promise to the students and the staff, a promise that the NEU was a new union that would stand with them into the future and never desert the Cuban people.

We are proud to stand by that promise.

Amanda Martin

Senior Vice-President
National Education Union



OCTOBER 2019 NEU CUBA DELEGATIONS MEMBERS

Linda Bradshaw, Leicester

Lucy Coleman, Oxfordshire

Krisna Foster, Bromley

Aretha Green, Fareham & Gosport

Roxane Haigh, Windsor & Maidenhead

Andrea Hanson, Bromley

Kuldip Hoonjan, Leicester

Marcia Hylton, Harrow

Frederique Jaffeux, Kirklees

Kristian Jones, Cambridgeshire

Carol Jumps-Graham, Hillingdon

Gawain Little, Executive

Camille London-Miyo, Leicester

Amanda Martin, Vice-President

Daisy Maxwell, East London

Rebecca Moncreaff, Havant

Julie Nisbett, Leicester

Kennedy Okoth, Windsor & Maidenhead

Megan Quinn, Camden

Bernard Regan, CSC

Malcolm Richards, Devon

Julia Simpkins, Bolton

Neil Sledge, Wirral

Sidney Sutton, Gloucestershire

Philip Yeeles, Cambridgeshire

Delegation organised by the
NUT Section of the NEU



Findings – Education

CUBA HAS one of the highest levels of social spending in the world, as a percentage of GDP. The Cuban government puts 50% of its budget into education, health and welfare.

This was clearly in evidence in the schools we visited. Teacher-pupil ratios were high and staff were well-qualified, with many of the teachers we met being trained to masters or doctorate level. Cuba has a class limit of 25 but a number of the schools we visited had much better ratios – including 1:4 in the school for the visually impaired in Havana. Classrooms were comparatively well resourced, given Cuba's GDP, but the impact of the US blockade is felt everywhere and many of the resources we saw in classrooms had been made by the teachers themselves.

The breadth of the curriculum in the schools was striking, particularly compared to our system, with visual arts, dance, drama, humanities playing a central role alongside Spanish, maths, history and the sciences. This breadth of educational experience clearly came across in the students we met, who were confident and eloquent and seemed equally comfortable dancing salsa, reciting poetry or speaking to us about maths education.

As a delegation, we were particularly interested in the experience of black teachers and students in Cuba and the role of 'race' in the education system. Again, the differences with our own experience were striking. Cuba is engaged in a conscious process of decolonising its schools and the curriculum. That is not to say that racism doesn't exist in

Cuba – that would be a staggering claim for a country with Cuba's long history of colonial exploitation. However, this legacy is openly recognised and combatted in Cuban schools and black role models and leaders are evident in all walks of life, including in the leadership of the schools and the union.

Student voice was another area of significant interest. Cuba has a national union of school students, which all students of primary and secondary school age can join. Elected representatives of this union are involved in key decision-making on issues such as the curriculum, testing and school organisation. This process is replicated in the schools, where every class elects its own student president, who make up the student council. The elected student president for the school then sits on the decision-making bodies of the school, alongside teachers and parents and plays a full role in the direction of the school.

The Cuban approach to pedagogy is very much based on linking practical work with academic or theoretical work and one of the teachers involved in a regional trial of a new national curriculum described to us how mathematical problem solving is linked to concrete examples and models in order to aid student understanding.

In spite of the obvious problems caused by the blockade, what we saw in Cuba uplifted and inspired us that another education system is possible if education is a priority. As one delegate put it, "They are sharing what they have, not what they have left over."

Findings – Trade Unions

AS TRADE UNIONISTS, the role and operation of Cuban trade unions was of particular interest to us and we were keen to have first hand exchanges with Cuban trade unionists in their workplaces.

Just as in Britain, national, regional and local trade union leaders are elected by their membership by secret ballot. Cuban unions, like ours, are voluntary organisations which Cuban workers may choose to join and their elected representatives are not paid additionally for their union work but are simply given release time from their job. Unlike most unions in Britain, however, Cuban unions enjoy particularly high levels of support and participation, with over 90% of Cuban teachers belonging to the education union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, la Ciencia y el Deporte SNTECD).

Part of the explanation for this may lie in the fact that, in addition to their role in representing workers in local and national disputes with their employers, Cuban unions have a far greater role in policy formation than their British counterparts. For example, when the Cuban government wanted to embark on a reform of the national curriculum, their first step was to approach the SNTECD and ask them what teachers thought should be changed in education. SNTECD convened members' meetings in every workplace to ask for proposals and these were taken up through the union structures and presented to government as the basis for a discussion of the curriculum.

Cuban teachers and union leaders expressed surprise at the idea that educational reforms could be implemented in Britain without first seeking agreement from the education union!

Most of the work of Cuban unions is done through workplace branches and local committees and we had the opportunity



to visit the Pinar del Rio section of the SNTECD. Much of the work they described would be familiar to a trade unionist in Britain, in terms of producing responses to management proposals, taking up member grievances, running campaigns on pay, etc. However, it was noticeable that unions in Cuba have greater rights to intervene than we are used to here. For example, in a case of a teacher who has had a negative evaluation, the union has the right, not only to represent the teacher but also to sit on the panel that decides on the case, with an equal say as management and local education representatives. Similarly, they are not constrained to commenting on issues of process or simply 'bread and butter' industrial issues but have the right to intervene on educational and pedagogical questions.

The recognition and rights which Cuban trade unions have, in comparison to those our own unions enjoy in Britain, left many of us envious of a system in which working people have a real say in the decisions which affect their day-to-day lives.



Making a difference – the empow

“The delegation to Cuba was truly life changing for me. It was refreshing to learn about how an education system works which really puts teachers’ expertise and more importantly, the rich education of children at the heart of its values. It also galvanised me to become more active in the NEU and apply to become an International Solidarity Officer for my district. Since returning I have been inspired not just to fight for change in this country but to promote solidarity with our colleagues around the world.”

DAISY MAXWELL
(2018 delegation)

“Being part of the delegation to Cuba made me really understand the importance of union activism and seeing first hand what unions in Cuba have been able to achieve has inspired me to be more active in the National Education Union. I’ve presented at local meetings, spoken at the Latin America conference in London and I’ve written two published articles, things I never would have even considered doing before the delegation. I have also just been elected Vice President of my local district.”

LUCY COLEMAN
(2018 delegation)

“I was really inspired by the warmth of the Cuban people. Since coming back from the delegation, I have been inspired to talk about Cuba and my positive experience whenever possible. I have spoken at the Bromley Trades Council, the Black Teachers’ Conference and Bromley NEU. I am now joint International Solidarity Officer for Bromley.”

ANDREA HANSON
(2018 delegation)

“Going to Cuba had a lasting impact on me. Visiting schools, speaking to local people and engaging with members of other unions gave me the confidence to talk about what I’d experienced when I got back. I became more involved in my local CSC and in the international solidarity work of the union. Delegations build activism because not only do you see first-hand how worker-to-worker exchanges enable us to create strategies to support each other but they also enlighten, enrich and strengthen our resolve to make changes in our own schools and workplaces when we return.”

SUE PIPER
(2016 delegation)



Powering legacy of our delegations



“The delegation to Cuba has continued to inspire my praxis every day. I have seen the fruits of collective consciousness; empowered learners who are critical thinkers. My students are enjoying my attempt to step away from an exam factory classroom.”

ARETHA GREEN
(2018 delegation)



“Cuba’s commitment to lifelong, state funded and comprehensive education for all galvanised my determination to continue the fight against academisation of our schools, against high stakes testing and against the narrowing of the curriculum. These are the principles on which I stood and was elected for the new NEU National Executive Committee.”

KAREN PARKIN
(2016 delegation)

“It was a privilege to be a part of a delegation to Cuba and see the amazing work Cubans do to support the education of students there. Their education system built on limited resources outperforms the policies and procedures we follow by miles, and the sense of community they have and welcoming approach to all is something I would love to see spread worldwide. It has inspired me to stay committed to the work of the National Education Union in campaigning for an education system that puts our students first as well as creating a community spirit where everyone is confident to grow and learn in a positive and healthy environment.”

NIPA NESSA
(2016 delegation)

“Travelling to Cuba and experiencing its education culture showed me what was possible in this sector. It showed me what could be achieved with collective activism which kept teachers and pupils at its heart, and that there was a way for national policy to be truly led from the grass roots. It inspired me to become a rep for the NEU, and now I work for the Union full time because I know what can be achieved through teacher action. If they can have such an amazing system in Cuba, what’s stopping us here?”

MARI BURTON
(2016 delegation)

Braille Machines for Cuba Appeal

Since 2016, the union has worked alongside the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and Music Fund for Cuba to send refurbished Braille machines to special schools in each of Cuba’s 15 provinces. More than £10,000 has been received in donations and 23 Braille machines delivered so far. Many of these were presented directly to the schools involved by NEU/NUT delegations.

■ Find out more and support the appeal at www.musicfundforcuba.org.uk

Play for Cuba

Following our 2017 delegation, NEU - NUT Section launched a joint campaign with the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and Music Fund for Cuba to collect new and used musical instruments for young musicians. A network of local contacts across the country co-ordinated donations and two shipping containers have been filled. These will be launched from the first NEU conference in Liverpool.

■ To find out more visit www.playforcuba.org

The blockade is still in place, but together we can work to end it once and for all

Affiliate to the Cuba Solidarity Campaign today

Special offer for NEU districts and branches

FREE BOOK: *In the Spirit of Wandering Teachers: The Cuban Literacy Campaign 1961.*

Plus *CubaSí* magazine four times a year, AGM voting rights, regular speakers and invites to events and conferences.



NEU district/branch:

Position:

Name:

Address:

Postcode:

Email:

Phone:

We enclose a cheque for £40 (annual branch affiliation fee)

Plus a donation of £ Total £

Please make cheques payable to the address below.

The Cuba Solidarity Campaign campaigns for an end to the US blockade of Cuba and for the return of the illegally occupied territory of Guantánamo Bay.

Find out more at www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk
Cuba Solidarity Campaign, c/o Unite, 33-37 Moreland Street,
London EC1V 8BB

JOIN THE 2019 DELEGATION TO CUBA

19 – 26 October 2019

Two centre study tour travelling to Havana and Pinar del Río and Viñales to examine current educational provision in rural and urban environments.

Visits to primary, secondary, special educational needs and arts schools; professional meetings with teachers and trade unions, the Federation of Cuban Women and student organisations; plus historical, cultural and community visits.

Package includes flights, accommodation, transfers, visas, English speaking guide and translator, and some meals. Exclusive to NEU members who need to be nominated by their districts or branches.

Contact international@neu.org.uk for details.



National Education Union
Hamilton House, Mabledon Place
London WC1H 9BD
T. 020 7388 6191
E. international@neu.org.uk
www.neu.org.uk

For more details contact Gawain Little, Chair of International Committee gawain.little@exec.neu.org.uk

Get involved

Join the Cuba Solidarity Campaign today and help end the US blockade; US interference in Cuba's independence and sovereignty; and the illegal occupation of Guantánamo Bay.

www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk