

Cheering on a dictator

Cuban workers have no rights. So why does the communist regime enjoy the support of the Canadian Labour Congress?

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Canadians love Cuba. And what's not to love? Cuba Si! ads display white, sandy beaches and smiling Cubans in brightly coloured clothes. Come to Cuba, they say; it's "friendly and diverse." Each year, thousands of us go to Fidel Castro's island "paradise" to escape the cold.

But there's a side of the island that many Canadians don't see -- and don't want to see. Soaking up the sun and sipping margaritas isn't quite so relaxing when you know the host government is a violator of basic human rights.

In 2003, Cuba's government rounded up and arrested 75 trade unionists, journalists, and bookstore owners, tried them over the course of a few days, and sentenced them to prison terms of up to 28 years.

Christine Chanet, a reporter to the UN high commission on human rights, condemned Cuba repeatedly for this "unprecedented wave of repression." According to Amnesty International, the Cuban government continues to use "harsh measures to stifle potential dissent," including "beatings, short-term detention, frequent summonses, threats, eviction, loss of employment and restrictions on movement."

When the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), an independent Canadian union, attempted to hand over thousands of signed petitions to the Cuban embassy in Ottawa requesting the release of the 75 prisoners, it was met with locked gates. So in 2004, CLAC sent a representative to Cuba to meet with the wives of nine imprisoned members of the Consejo Unitario de Trabajadores Cubanos (CUTC), an independent union which CLAC has tried to help. For these women and their husbands, life in Cuba is far from the paradise portrayed in glossy ads.

Recently, representatives from the Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond, a federation of trade unions in the Netherlands, also attempted to meet with the prisoners and their families. But on their arrival, Cuban police detained and intimidated them and forced them to leave the island, refusing to allow them access to the prisoners.

Besides the violation of basic human rights, Canadians should also be concerned about the general well-being of Cuban workers and their families. Canadian companies operating in the country pay US\$500 per month per worker to state employment agencies, yet workers receive less than US\$25 per month.



CREDIT: Claudia Daut, Reuters

A roller at work in a Havana cigar factory.

As for freedom of association, it's non-existent. Union choice in Cuba is not an option, as the imprisoned members of the CUTC can attest. Their union is not recognized by the Cuban government, and workers are allowed to join only the one officially sanctioned state union.

Those who gloss over the Cuban government's violation of human rights often portray Cuba as a socialist utopia, one in which diminished freedom is merely the small price paid for cradle-to-grave care by the state. But if this is the case, why do Cubans continue to rely on support from the UN's food program? Why do many Canadian tourists who vacation regularly in Cuba take extra toothpaste along to hand out? They know that even such basic essential items are scarce.

Here's another issue: Why does the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) -- a body that professes to be a defender of workers' rights and the "voice of labour" in this country -- remain one of the last union organizations to support Cuba's one-union, one-party system? In doing so, the CLC has broken with the position on Cuba held by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the world's largest trade union federation, to which it is a member.

In a resolution tabled at its recent 24th Constitutional Convention, the CLC says that "the loss of the Cuban socialist project would constitute an historic setback for working people everywhere." In other words, the CLC supports a regime that claims "freedom of association ... does not translate into the false concept of 'trade union pluralism.' "

Together with its affiliated unions, the CLC will be hosting an event this weekend in Toronto in support of the Cuban government. The rights of Cuban workers sitting in jail for starting an independent union is not on the agenda. When it comes to a choice between human dignity or socialist ideology, the CLC sides with ideology, believing workers are best served by one central authority -- whether in Cuba or in Canada.

Cuba's imprisoned CUTC members disagree. Thousands of ordinary Cubans, struggling to make ends meet, living in fear of losing their jobs -- or worse -- not daring to criticize the government, also disagree. The loss of socialism would not be a loss for Cuban workers. It would be a great gain.

Not all Canadian unions are willing to embrace a tyrant. CLAC -- a union committed to freedom of association -- passed a resolution last Saturday urging the Canadian government to exert its influence to secure the release of the nine CUTC members who remain imprisoned and the remaining prisoners of conscience in Cuba. It has also petitioned Canadian businesses operating in Cuba to take a stand for human rights and use their influence to help Cuban workers.

There is much for Canadians to love about Cuba -- the warmth, hospitality, and courage of its people. Say Si! to Cuba and its people. But say no to its government's deplorable violation of basic human rights.

- Brian Dijkema is a representative of the Christian Labour Association of Canada, an independent Canadian union founded in 1952, and representing 40,000 members across the country.

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