

# CUBA



## REPORT

by Newcastle latin america  
study group visit april 84

This report is dedicated to...

...friendship and understanding amongst people...

...all the people who made our study trip possible...

...Margaret Chard, who first enthused and kept us going...

...the other members of the Study Group, who put up with disruption, and helped so much...

...Colin Groves and Charlie Legg of B.C.R.C., who led the inexperienced by the hand and made our requests possible...

...the large number of Cubans who generously gave their time, friendship and enthusiasm, in particular René Castro in London, and our Cubatur guide José Angel.

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## INTRODUCTION

Twenty one members of the Latin American Study Group, mostly from Tyne and Wear, went to Cuba on a fifteen day study tour in April 1984. The trip stemmed from an idea during a W.E.A. course on Latin America. Organising such a trip was very hard work at first - then it snowballed, but everyone is agreed that the experience of Cuba amply justified all the work involved. We are now trying to consolidate our various individual responses into an overall picture of Cuban life. We must stress that as we were only there for two weeks, the picture is impressionistic despite extensive background reading before we left.

By far the dominant impression was the vitality and political involvement of the people. No way has state intervention swamped individualism as we might expect it to do. The Cuban people love dialogue, always inviting criticism and eager to learn about your country. The revolution is vividly alive to all Cubans and very much an ongoing process.

Before the revolution, Cuba was America's "sin bin", with rampant prostitution and mafia based crime. Now everyone feels safe and relaxed in their everyday life. There is no evidence of the abject poverty associated with third world countries. Children are well fed and adequately, if not stylishly, dressed, and school uniforms are free. We were immediately struck by the lack of consumer goods. How could they cope with such depleted shops - and yet how refreshing not to be bombarded with slick advertisements.

Despite every gradation of colour from black to white, there appears to be very little colour problem in Cuba. This is particularly evident in the schools, where absolute equality is spontaneous amongst the children and is endemic in the social system. The articles that follow describe many of the formal visits arranged by I.C.A.P. (the International Friendship Association) and Cubatur, and we thank both very much for the immense care taken to see that our diverse interests were adequately covered. Only time stopped us doing all we wanted to. Some visits and interviews we arranged ourselves after our arrival.

Of course there were criticisms - safety at work left much to be desired.

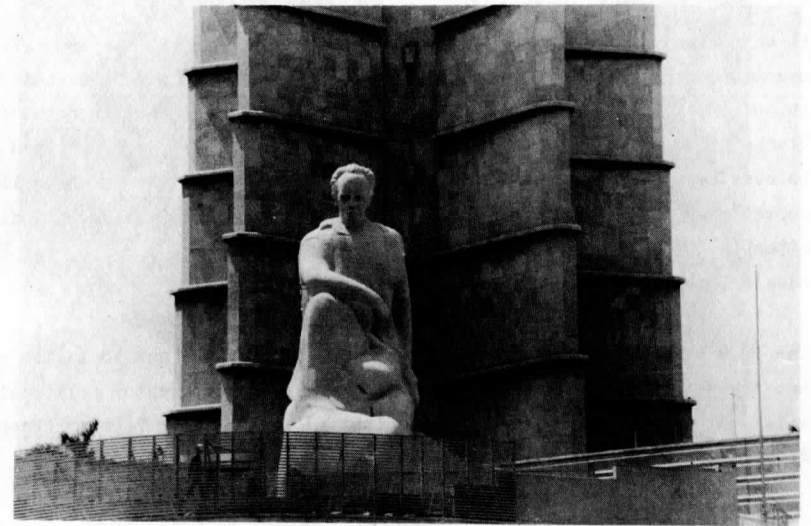
Inevitably questions and doubts arise as to whether colour harmony is as real as it seems; how strong a force is the military; is it morally right to encourage political interest from such an early age? All controversial matters according to Western eyes. All we can say is that the buzz from Cuban life is vibrant and infectious. We would all like to return and stay longer - you cannot impose happiness, and Cuba seemed to us a very happy place.

#### CUBA'S HISTORY - A BRIEF OUTLINE

It is impossible to visit Cuba without being made aware of the island's history. Everyone we spoke to was anxious to put the achievements of the revolution, whether in health or education, agriculture or industry, into a historical context.

Cuba is the largest island of the Antilles, in the Caribbean, with an area similar to England. For four hundred years it was a Spanish colony with an economy based on slavery. Initial attempts to find gold were largely unsuccessful, and the main products were agricultural - sugar, tobacco and coffee. Havana, the capital, was also the main trading city for Spain's American colonies. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the autocratic nature of Spanish rule, and the aspirations of the Spanish bourgeoisie led to a ten year war of independence (1868-1878) which ended in an armistice at Zanjón. But by 1895 the struggle broke out again, inspired this time by José Martí, a thinker and teacher, recognised today as Cuba's national hero and intellectual father of the revolution. Martí was killed in 1895, but the war continued until 1898 when the United States, seeing the weakness of the Spanish, intervened and brought the war to a conclusion.

The Cubans, who had struggled so long, were finally cheated of the fruits of their victory when Spain surrendered the island not to them but to the United States. Spanish colonial rule had been more or less replaced by U.S. domination.



Statue of José Martí In Revolutionary Square, Havana

Soon afterwards, the notorious Platt Amendment was passed by Congress, giving the U.S. the right to intervene militarily in Cuba if they thought fit, and paving the way for the naval base at Guantánamo which they hold to this day.

When we visited Santiago de Cuba, at the eastern end of the island, we were made very aware of the important role played both by it and the province of Oriente in Cuba's revolutionary struggles. Surrounded by the Sierra Maestra it was from here that both the 19th century wars of independence were launched. And it was here that Fidel Castro came to begin the armed struggle against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. In July 1953, Castro and 134 companions attacked the Moncada Barracks in Santiago, Cuba's second largest and containing more than 2,000 soldiers. Partly due to faulty information, the attack failed. Most of the attackers were captured and many later killed in cold blood.

Castro and more than 20 companions were imprisoned on the Isle of Pines before being released in a general amnesty two years later. He went to Mexico, but returned in 1956 with 81 comrades in the yacht 'Granma' to resume the struggle. Despite having only twelve men, Castro was able to build up a substantial force in the Sierra Maestra, and, once the war spread to other parts of the country, it was over in less than twelve months. Batista fled on January 1st 1959.

At that time, Castro's July 26th movement was more a revolutionary nationalist movement than a socialist one, and indeed there were many disagreements between it and the Communist Party. But the hostility of the USA and its economic blockade forced Cuba to turn to the Soviet block for support. American attempts to overthrow Castro led to the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion and while that defeat made the USA wary about repeating the same kind of intervention, attempts at destabilisation, assassination, sabotage and the economic blockade have continued to this day.

The 1960's was mainly a period of consolidation for the new socialist state but the second decade has seen economic expansion and greater political involvement of the people through the instigation of Poder Popular (Peoples' Power), elections for which were taking place during our visit.

#### FIRST SOCIAL PRIORITY: HEALTH CARE

Before the revolution, medical care was available to those who lived in the cities and could afford it. Despite the departure by 1964 of 3,000 (50%) of Cuba's doctors, the health profile of the people improved dramatically in the ten years between 1960 and 1970, due to the priority given to health (and education) in government spending after 1959.

Major causes of death shifted from infectious and parasitic diseases to heart disease, cancer and strokes. This shows the success in eradicating many of the "diseases of underdevelopment": malnutrition, Yellow Fever, T.B., Malaria and Polio. How was it done? Through policies to improve sanitation, together with community based health education programmes which incorporated immunization campaigns and increased people's awareness of hygiene and the need to seek early health care.



Pedro Gonzales Corona - Provincial Health Directorate, Santiago de Cuba

The central focus of the health service is the local 'Polyclinic', (Rural Hospital or First Aid post in outlying areas); the next level is a Municipal Hospital coping with 90% of possible problems. Provincial hospitals offer more specialist care and there are still others which exist to deal with single complex problems.

The Polyclinics originated to provide medical care, each for approximately 3,000 people, while co-ordinating the activities of community health workers and lay organisations such as local C.D.R.s. Here volunteers co-ordinate health education and immunisation programmes within their locality. New approaches to health care include doctor/nurse teams within a clinic, each responsible for approximately 120 families (a sector). They are involved in home visiting, meetings with local groups in the sector, and they participate in patient/specialist consultations.

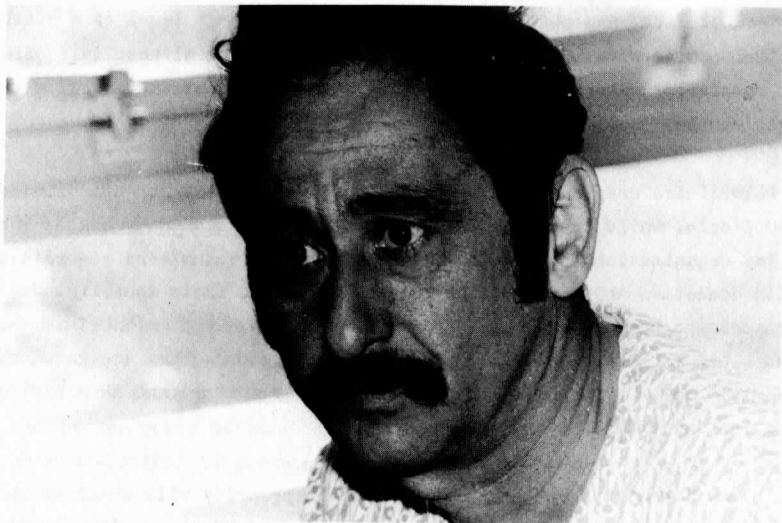
Cuba's commitment to health as the top social priority will continue in the foreseeable future. From 3,000 doctors in 1960, and 23,000 in 1980, by the year 2000 Cuba will have 65,000 doctors whose education, while resembling European models, emphasises the humanistic approach. Doctors as well as nurses are highly conscious of the social nature of their work: many train specifically

for community based work, and, after training, all doctors work for two or three years in rural areas.

Similarly reflecting Cuba's humanistic approach is the move in two hospitals to allow families of intensive care patients to stay with them (counselling is provided for these relatives). In psychiatric illness, rehabilitation is important, through integration and participation as far as possible, as the use of drugs is strictly regulated.

The economic embargo imposed by the U.S.A. since 1961 has caused a serious shortage of drugs in Cuba. They are now working to overcome this major problem by producing their own drugs - some 85% at present.

While the major health problems facing Cuba now are those of contemporary Western society, because of the integration of health and lay personnel, and the freedom from the pressure of advertising, Cuba seems better equipped to tackle these problems.



Mario M. Manduca, Cuban Construction worker in Grenada. Seriously wounded during United States invasion of the Island. We visited him at the Almejeiras Hospital in Havana where he is recovering.

## SECOND SOCIAL PRIORITY: EDUCATION

'Cuba es una gran escuela'. This statement that Cuba is one huge school was made to us during an interview with Ariel Ruiz, at the Ministry of Education in Havana. The claim certainly seems to be borne out by the facts, with one in every three Cubans receiving some kind of education or professional training, excluding lower grade jobs or in-service training courses carried out by Trade Unions or the Communist Party. And a comparison of illiteracy figures before the Revolution (25% in 1953) with the 1977 figure of 4% speaks for itself. It is therefore interesting to examine how Cuba has managed to make so much progress in the field of education in such a comparatively short space of time.

Within a socialist planned economy such as Cuba's, resources can be made available for priorities such as education. Cuba finds solutions to her social and economic problems by combining the ideal with the pragmatic: an early example of this was the literacy campaign undertaken in 1961 to combat the high levels of illiteracy, especially in the countryside, which obtained at the time. Those who could read and write went out into the countryside to teach those who couldn't. This meant that agricultural productivity was unaffected, as the peasants had their classes after their day's work in the fields. This immensely successful campaign was succeeded in 1975 by another aimed at ensuring that everyone attained at least sixth grade in their education, which was extended in 1980 to the 'battle for the ninth grade'.

The stated aims of the 1981-5 plan include the improvement of the material base of schools throughout the country as well as an increased emphasis on the selection, training and permanency of teaching personnel. The importance of education is recognised and adequate resources are made available. The curriculum is planned according to the needs of the economy, so that there is a direct relation between that and the country's development overall. Education is viewed as a fundamental part of the revolutionary and political process.

The 'Schools in the Country' (Escuelas en el campo) were also inspired by a combination of idealism and pragmatism. The one visited by our group, named after Ernesto Che Guevara, was located in an idyllic setting, with well designed, cool airy buildings and attractive gardens. These schools are boarding schools, though pupils go home at weekends if they are near enough. During

the week they spend part of their time in the classroom and part of their time in the fields cultivating citrus fruits and strawberries. The pupils also participate in the running and cleaning of school buildings, as well as having time to enjoy the excellent leisure facilities which include an Olympic-size swimming pool. The ideology motivating the setting up of such schools is the prevention of the creation of an elitist intelligentsia. Pupils are encouraged to appreciate the value of manual labour and learn of the important role agriculture plays in the country's economy. This combination of education with work is regarded in Cuba as 'the only way to solve the problems of an under-developed country'. The children are helping to pay for their education as well as learning useful skills. The export earnings of the 'Escuelas en el campo' last year amounted to \$1,480 million pesos, and the cost of the schools was \$1,200 million pesos.

The provision of education in Cuba is motivated by two important principles: firstly, the principle of universalization, whereby education should be openly accessible to all groups of society no matter what their educational level, age, sex or occupation. Women are able to participate in the educational process through the increasing provision of nurseries (Circulos infantiles) and pre-school education for 4-5 year olds. The second principle on which the system is based is that it should provide the possibility of progress for the for the majority rather than just for the academic highfliers. This is achieved by a parallel system to which students transfer in the 7th grade if they fail the state examinations more than twice. Within the parallel system, students receive training as skilled workers.



## HOUSING

Housing was not a main focus of interest of the group prior to the visit to Cuba. In retrospect, this was unfortunate as Cuban housing policies reflect both the gains of the revolution and the problems it faces in the next decades.

The problems are obvious. For example, 20% of the Cuban population live in the capital, Havana, many in overcrowded conditions in buildings that have received little or no maintenance since 1959. This is due in some measure to blockade induced shortages of key building materials, but also to a system of political priorities that has directed scarce resources into other sectors like health, education or industry. Another problem, according to at least one architect we spoke to, is that the systems built programme of new flats is replicating some of the problems of similar designs in the West.

But the socialist innovation is there too. Innovation in the method of building by microbrigades of workers who do construction work in their own time with no guarantee of a home for themselves at the end of it. Innovation in the allocation of housing on the basis of a person's contribution to the society as well as on criteria of housing need. And innovation in the system of priorities within housing that directs resources and imagination to the 'new towns' in the countryside, or to thinking through new forms of housing appropriate to a post revolutionary society.

Most of all perhaps, housing in Cuba symbolises new forms of social relations. 'Ownership', which is the tenure form for some 75% of the population, implies rights to use a house, not the right to exchange values by buying and selling on the market place. Renting for 15 years gives the rights of 'ownership' - but the dwelling reverts to the state on death if no member of the immediate household is in housing need. Housing provision and maintenance, then, is seen and recognised as a collective, not an individual, responsibility; and the current shortfalls are straightforwardly acknowledged by the central organs of the state.



Old Havana - Habana La Vieja

The housing developments we saw reflected the differences between Cuba and much of the rest of Latin America in the absence of shanty towns, in the provision of model housing for peasants, in a clearly thought place for housing within a system of socialist planning. But we left with the feeling that housing, despite its relatively low priority in government circles currently, will be a major issue in the years ahead.

#### AGRICULTURE

Following the 1959 Revolution, there were great hopes that Cuba would be able to break what was seen as a neo-colonialist dependence on sugar. However sugar remains of paramount importance to the Cuban economy. Indeed, commentators have seen post-revolutionary Cuban development as the industrialisation of a sugar economy.

A major problem of the sugar economy inherited by Castro's government was that the technology of sugar production had been very labour intensive. Whilst efforts to diversify agriculture were undertaken during the 1960s, it was not until the 1970s that the mechanisation of the sugar harvest allowed other sectors of the economy, such as construction and manufacturing, to increase. Sugar (a substantial proportion of which is sold under long term contracts to the Soviet Union) remains the major foreign currency earner for Cuba, allowing imports of capital goods which are essential to the development process. Unfortunately, given the importance of sugar for the Cuban economy, bottlenecks remain in its production; in particular, low recovery rates of sugar from cane due to elderly mills.

Although our group did not have the opportunity to see the sugar sector, we were able to observe the diversification of Cuban agriculture at first hand. We visited a very large dairy project at Valles de Picadura, initiated under the inspiration of Fidel Castro's brother, Ramon, towards the end of the 1960s. In pre-revolutionary times, milk was largely imported from the United States, but Cuba is now self sufficient in milk and milk products such as yoghurt. The Picadura project covers some 55,000 hectares of hill land in an area which had previously been little used. Approximately 4,000 people work on the project, of whom 1,000 are women, and they are housed in two communities. Such concentration of population in rural areas is encouraged, since it makes it possible to provide amenities such as doctors, nurses, first aid, an ambulance, taxis and buses.

Breeding of the Holstein cattle (initially imported from Canada) on the project is linked with a genetic enterprise in Havana. Good milk yields are achieved, despite the difficulties the cattle have with the heat, but at present such yields rely on supplements of imported cereal feed. It is hoped eventually to develop a feedstuff using the by-products of sugar cane.

Projects like Valles de Picadura, which diversify Cuban agriculture, are the basis for the nutritious diet that Cuban people have increasingly been able to enjoy. During our visit, we were able to meet some of the people who worked on the project, and at the home of one 'campesina' were given locally made yoghurt and rum.



## WOMEN

The experience of the women on the trip (a majority in the group) can perhaps best be defined as culture shock. Most of us would describe ourselves as feminists. None of us were quite sure how we would react to the machismo for which Latin America is renowned. Machismo does exist in Cuba, but so too does it here in Britain, albeit in a different form.

The cultural context in which we worked was important. We had to look at the relevant historical processes to understand women's position before the revolution. Cuban women have suffered the worst effects of living in a less developed society which was both economically exploited and culturally dominated by the U.S.. In 1959, only 9.8% of women had jobs, mainly as domestic servants, and many more were prostitutes. Contraception was not widely available, and abortion illegal.

Because half the population lived in homes which lacked basic amenities, women did domestic labour without adequate fuel or water supplies. Women also had the highest rate of illiteracy. Prevalent social attitudes are summed up in the phrase: "La mujer en la casa, el hombre in la plaza" (roughly 'A woman's place is in the home, a man's outside).

During the revolution, women played an important role. They organised demonstrations and were active in the underground. Some were guerillas, despite the belief at the time that women should not be involved in politics.

Female participation in politics continued after the revolution with the formation of the C.D.R.s. Women are also organised in the F.M.C. (Federation of Cuban Women) and form part of the militia. Propaganda emphasises women's participation in the wider society. Through the F.M.C., women organise themselves and fight for women's incorporation in the labour force. Access to adequate day care facilities is recognised as necessary, but unfortunately some of the building has been hampered by the U.S. economic blockade.

By 1974, only 24% of the female population worked. Women still had the

double burden of labour inside and outside the home. At the Poder Popular (People's Power) elections in 1974, only 3% of the candidates were women. This stepped up the struggle for women's equality. Women's education was to be improved and labour saving devices made more generally available. Alongside this, an ideological campaign was waged to educate the whole population on women's rights and the need for men to do housework.

Today the process is continuing. While in Cuba, we saw the importance of the family as a form of social organisation, and many women still choose to remain in the home.

We met representatives of the F.M.C. who see European feminists as lacking a class perspective, and who themselves do not always define their emancipation in European terms. But machismo is recognised as a problem. The Cuban revolution is a relatively young one. The issue of women's equality is on the political agenda and accepted as legitimate - something women here have still to fight for.



Meeting with the Federation of Cuban Women - FMC -

## RACE

Race is always a complex and emotive subject and so it is impossible to give a comprehensive view of the racial situation in Cuba from such a short visit. Nevertheless it is a topic that interested us all and so we felt some exploration was necessary as Cuba has all shades of colour from black to white, and since we ourselves come from a multi-coloured society.

In Cuba, there has never been the rigid dichotomy between black and white as present in other countries. Intermarriage was always tolerated; and blacks and mulattos were at the forefront of Cuba's long struggle for independence. Unfortunately, America's economic domination once again reinforced the inferior/superior ideology of racism. It was practised through the usual channels of job opportunity and recreational facilities that so often tend to fuse colour and class divisions within a society.



Castro however quickly exposed what he saw as the silent conspiracy of discrimination and said that it could not be tolerated in a free Cuba. He believed that the divisive educational system was a primary source of perpetuating racism so he banned private schools and made education free and the same for everyone. It was lovely to see how well and freely the children

mixed irrespective of colour. The revolutionary government is often attacked for not enacting policies of positive discrimination to offset the residual inequalities of past discrimination. This has been deliberately avoided by the government because it feels that such policies are contrary to the egalitarian goals of the revolution. It strongly believes that by making an issue of the colour of one's skin you perpetuate its importance instead of eradicating such differences as meaningless.

Perhaps Cuba's response to race is best summed up by Castro's statement that they are a Latin-American people. Certainly today Cuba has established the structural basis for full equality and total integration of all its people. Whether it effectively permeates all strands of society needs a longer stay and more specialised study. What we can say is how impressed we were by Cuba's vitality and apparent unity, how eager the Cubans were to work towards some form of international brotherhood that respects the rights of all men irrespective of creed or colour and how confident they were that they at least were in control of their lives.

## GRASSROOTS POLITICS: C.D.R.s (The Committees for the Defence of the Revolution)

The C.D.R.s were set up on the 28th September 1960, amidst a climax of continuous counter-revolutionary activities financed and directed by the C.I.A., at a time when there was an evergrowing polarisation between those who were willing to make sacrifices and work hard for a better future, and those who did not want to lose their privileges and were not willing to work for a new society. It is within this context that the C.D.R.s came about. In a speech, Fidel Castro defined the objectives of the C.D.R.s as the collective effort by the Cuban people - to protect, defend and consolidate their revolution.



Pioneros (school Children) looking after ballot boxes during elections for Popular Power

Over the years they have become the most important mass organisation in Cuba, with a membership of 4,800,000, 80% of the population over 14 years old. Their activities have extended from the original intention to one of active participation in the building of a free and equal society. For example, they are involved in health, education, campaigns, control and distribution of food, raising of the political awareness of the people, voluntary work, discussions concerning the needs of the country, the decision making process concerned with the development of their revolution and many more tasks. They are the expression of a people who have their destiny in their hands.

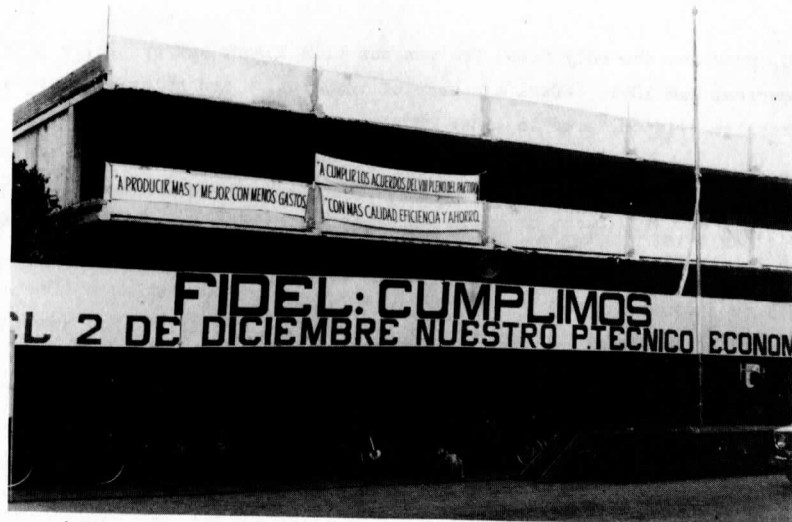
#### REVOLUTIONARY ART

An initial and welcome first impression of Cuba is a lack of advertising, quickly replaced by the impact of the rich street Poster Art. Bright, bold images indicate the daily processes of revolution - more production, recycling of materials, value of voluntary work, the undesirability of drinking and driving - and also portray and celebrate recent history and current events, for example the anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Posters are produced by Ospaal, the film institute I.C.A.I.C., and various museums. Art exhibitions were varied, and of particular interest in Havana was an exhibition of posters made by members of C.D.R.s. The C.D.R.s are instrumental in encouraging popular participation in art and help provide individuals with materials which are still very scarce. On the first Sunday of our visit we experienced elections at local level. C.D.R.s exhibited an attractive array of posters, for example encouraging women to vote, appealing for blood donors, and proclaiming the virtues of voluntary labour. Children's work formed an integral part of the display.

Cartoon images are also much used in posters, magazines and cartoon strips. Cuba has its Andy Capp equivalent - Mogoyon - who presents the antithesis of the modern Cuba of today.

We visited many monuments and museums, and especially in Santiago noted the style of simple practical tributes to leaders of the revolution. The museums were very impressive; all were simply but clearly laid out, and many had blown up photographs and drawings along with large print text. Informed and interesting guides conducted our visits, and on one occasion these were 8 - 12 year old "Pioneros".



Slogans outside the Ariguanabo textile Mill encouraging workers to 'produce more at less expense', and informing Fidel of their achievements.

2. Safety warnings on imported machinery could be translated and safety devices adapted against local working practices and "shortcuts".
3. Awareness of health and safety, and the use of personal protection, could be increased perhaps at no great cost in time, effort or money. European trade union courses and methods might be adaptable for educating union leaders and factory supervisors. The workforce could be reached through notices, meetings and campaigns which emphasise the importance of safety.

The urgent priority of building Cuba's first real industrial base can only be aided by improvements in health and safety. International solidarity can contribute by helping with educational materials and personal protection, such as ear plugs and face masks, which are currently unavailable.

## POSTSCRIPT

In two weeks you can hardly begin to know, let alone understand, a society as complex and as different from our own as Cuba is. Inevitably many questions remain unanswered: can the enthusiasm and energy of those who made the revolution be sustained in the post revolutionary generations? How easily can a small country like Cuba pursue its own individual concept of socialism free from external influences? And what does that vision really involve?

And yet our visit was an incredibly educative experience. We were kept busy, sometimes twelve hours a day, with visits and meetings. All our questions, however naive or ill informed, were answered patiently and fully. But it was often our spare time, when we were free to wander round on our own, that was the most rewarding. One of the memories that sticks in my mind is of approaching a group of people outside a C.D.R. office to ask them directions, and still being there two hours later having shared the best part of a bottle of rum and discussed everything from the elections in Cuba to Greenham Common. Above all our experience was an enjoyable one, made so by the natural warmth and friendliness of the Cuban people.

If this short report has a message, it must be that anyone who has an interest in Cuba and the development of a socialist society should try to go. Fortunately it is becoming easier and cheaper all the time. And it is an unforgettable experience.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION....

on travel to, and links with, CUBA, please contact

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SUGGESTED READING

Cuba for Beginners - Rius

Cuba: the Second Decade - Ed. Griffith

The Youngest Revolution - Elizabeth Sutherland

Under the Eagle - Jenny Pearce

Cuba: Dictatorship or Democracy - Marta Hanecker

