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## Friendshipment Caravan to Cuba challenges Trump's travel restrictions

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**By Betsey Piette**

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Members of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization/Pastors for Peace Friendshipment Caravan to Cuba received a warm and enthusiastic welcome in Philadelphia on June 12 at a gathering hosted by the Philadelphia International Action Center. Their 30th Cuba Caravan will travel to Havana and Cienfuegos from June 22 to July 5, visiting 40 U.S. cities before they depart.

A diverse audience of over 50 people attended the event at Calvary United Methodist Church. It was endorsed by Black Alliance for Peace; Comité Boricua Filadelfia-Camden; Socialist Unity Party; Struggle — La Lucha; Workers' Solidarity Network; and Workers World Party/Mundo Obrero.



In Philadelphia, some of those supporting the Friendshipment Caravan to Cuba were, left to right, Berta Joubert-Ceci, Michelle Strongfields, Gail Walker, Megan Murray, Carmen Guerrero, Pam Africa and Yahne Ndgo.

Cuba is celebrating the 60th anniversary of its revolution in 2019. This year also



marks the 50th anniversary of the Venceremos Brigade to Cuba, which will begin in July and continue for three weeks.

Since the successful Cuban Revolution in 1959, the U.S. government has imposed a criminal blockade on the socialist island. However, in recent months, U.S. imperialism has sharpened its attacks against Cuba and Venezuela, intensifying criminal sanctions against both countries, and supporting an attempted coup in Venezuela.

Inspired in part by the revolutionary example set by the Cuban people, the Bolivarian Revolution began in Venezuela in 1999 to build a socialist society there, under the leadership of Hugo Chávez. The bond of solidarity between Cuba and Venezuela has been and still remains unbreakable.

The solidarity event with revolutionary Cuba, Venezuela and other countries in Latin America and around the world under threat from U.S. imperialism took on new importance in light of the travel restrictions imposed June 4 by the Trump administration on U.S. residents traveling to Cuba. They ban group educational and cultural travel to the island, popularly known as “people-to-people” trips.

### **Women speakers praise Cuba**

An impressive, multinational panel of women activists addressed a question posed by Philadelphia WWP moderator Megan Murray about what solidarity with Cuba means to them. Pam Africa, minister of confrontation for the MOVE organization, stressed the humanitarian care Cuba has extended globally, setting an example for all. She spoke of the warm reception she received when traveling to Cuba on behalf of U.S. political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Carmen Guerrero, immigrant activist with the Coalición Fortaleza Latina, responded: “Cuba is an example of ‘Si, se puede!’ (Yes we can!) for their policies of peace, brotherhood, liberty, humanity and justice. For people in my home country of Mexico, where we are dealing with many killings and disappearances, Cuba shows that when the people have the power we can do many things together.”

Yahne Ndgo, activist with Black Alliance for Peace, told of her month-long experience living in Cuba earlier this year. There she found she couldn’t access funds from her bank account because of U.S. restrictions. Just buying eggs for breakfast became a burden until her Cuban neighbors turned up at her door with eggs and other food to share.

Ndgo said: “I witnessed a human drive to be part of community versus what you see

under capitalism where people are taught to extract as much as they can for themselves. Cuba is the example that another reality is possible.”

Berta Joubert-Ceci, of Comité Boricua Filadelfia-Camden, described her native Puerto Rico and Cuba as “two wings of the same bird.” She noted how these two countries and Venezuela all struggled against Spanish colonialism: “Even before Trump, U.S. administrations have sought ‘regime change’ to regain power and destroy Cuba. They want to destroy the promise of socialism.”

Taryn Fivek, International Action Center representative, who will participate in the upcoming Venceremos Brigade, explained: “Socialism is not just something you say or wear on a shirt, but what you do. Cuba is a prime example. President Bolsonaro in Brazil just expelled all the doctors whom Cuba previously sent in solidarity to especially treat Indigenous populations who are now having their land stolen. Sixty years ago this revolution challenged homelessness, poverty, the lack of health care, education and more. The U.S. doesn’t want people to see how Cubans have learned to liberate themselves.”

Keynote speaker Gail Walker, executive director of IFCO/Pastors for Peace, opened her talk by acknowledging a young Black woman in the audience who had just applied to study medicine at Cuba’s tuition-free Latin American School of Medicine. She said, “Cuba’s scholarship gifts to young people to study medicine are intended to be passed on as gifts to the communities they will eventually serve.”

Walker recounted Cuba’s key contributions in the field of health care, which include developing treatment for diabetes, fighting Ebola in Africa and setting up clinics in Haiti. She addressed Cuba’s contributions to hurricane preparedness, environmental justice, education and the struggle to combat homophobia. Walker noted that women comprise nearly half of the members of Cuba’s Parliament and three of six Cuban vice presidents.

Another advancement Walker noted is that Cuba has taken measures to limit the scourge of gentrification plaguing countless Black and Brown communities in the U.S. “Cuban law restricts any one individual from owning more than two houses — one in a municipality and one in the countryside or at the seashore.”

### **Despite ban, ‘caravans will go on’**

Walker addressed the travel ban, noting that her father, the Rev. Lucius Walker, founder of IFCO/Pastors for Peace, who died in 2010, first initiated a people-to-people caravan to Nicaragua in 1988. There, two people were killed by a Contra attack

and Walker was wounded.

“The U.S. policies around Cuba, starting with the Kennedy administration, are nothing short of genocide,” stated Walker. “Trump’s policies are nothing but an extension of this. He is trying to frighten people from going to Cuba, experiencing it and making up their own minds. Trump nixed the ‘people-to- people’ travel, but not the ‘solidarity-with-people’ visa travel option, which is usually selected by elements intent on supporting opposition inside Cuba to the current government.”

Walker continued: “What Trump has done will have a chilling effect and to some extent it is working. But travel to Cuba is not a crime. We have been indoctrinated about Cuba since birth with so many negative connotations thrown at us. Our intent is that people should see for themselves. We do this as an act of civil disobedience.”

In concluding, Walker emphasized: “We know we face potential fines and even jail terms, but the U.S. blockade and travel ban against Cuba are wrong. They are criminal. We will continue to do caravans until we see this policy change once and for all.”

(Photo: Joe Piette)



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