

ANNIVERSARY GLOW WARMS WINTRY WOES

NUJ member Mike Starke was a member of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign's winter work brigade from 13 December 2008 to 3 January 2009. The following is a report of his experiences.

CELEBRATION was in the air in more ways than one as our Air Cubana flight climbed out of London's rain-swept Gatwick airport and headed west towards the winter sun of Cuba.

After weeks of preparation and anticipation, I was off to join the 50th biennial Nordic Work Brigade, courtesy of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC), and, most significantly, at the time of the 50th anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in Havana.

With me on board the packed aircraft were the majority of the 29 members of the British contingent of the 166-strong 2008/09 winter work brigade. A few had travelled to Cuba ahead of the main party and one, James Harris, a teacher, who had spent some three years working in Central America, joined us from there. Our group was drawn from a wide age range with a broad spectrum of backgrounds and experiences. Several members had previous experience of work brigades, which proved a great help to those of us who were novices.

We had first got together at the CSC preparation day, where we had elected our co-ordinating Jefe (chief), Dave Bartram. Many kept in touch on line before we left for Cuba on 13 December, when we used the ten-hour trans-Atlantic journey to get to know each other better.

Soon the lights of Havana winked their greeting to us from below as we descended into Jose Marti International airport. The Caribbean night air was as warm as the welcome from our hosts from the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos (ICAP). We stumbled sleepily onto the dilapidated, but largely reliable, old blue coaches, which we were to become familiar with over the next three weeks, and rumbled through the night on the 45-minute journey to Julio Antonio Mella international camp, named after an early-20th century Marxist revolutionary, in the rural Caimito township.

Our first full day in the camp gave those of us new to the surroundings the chance to take stock. CSC had advised us: "It's not a holiday camp, but it's not a boot camp." On the whole, I found the facilities were more akin to the former than the latter establishment. A bright and airy canteen served wholesome meals, with fresh ingredients, many from the camp's own kitchen gardens. Rice and beans accompanied each serving, as the Cuban equivalent of "chips with everything", but altogether more healthy as part of a balanced diet. Tips to take sauces with us proved well-founded, as the camp's chefs seemed strangers to seasoning and unaware their own vegetable plots included a well stocked herb garden.

We were accommodated eight to a room with four double bunk beds. Borrowing some of the Cubans innate ingenuity and gift for improvisation, the room I shared soon became a home from home, with shelves for our belongings and a washing line outside for our laundry. Cold communal showers and washing facilities were no hardship in temperatures up to 29 degrees centigrade, although the less-than-robust lavatory flushes proved not the most popular aspect of the sanitary amenities.

The extensive camp grounds also accommodated indoor and outdoor auditoriums for our education and entertainment, sports pitches, a bar and barbecue area and a shop, with a small stock of souvenir goods and domestic essentials, plus liquor and cigars. I soon realised the value of the CSC briefing list of basics to take with you to the camp and was glad of my stock of washing powder and other everyday creature comforts.

Day two, and the work brigade proper got under way. One of our first tasks was to make our brigade banner, designed beforehand by one of our number, Eng Su, whose professional expertise produced what was hailed as the best of the banners on display for the duration.

We soon got to know our fellow Nordic Brigade members, who were from Scandinavia, the largest contingent being 94 Swedes, with one lone Belgian.

Our ICAP guides and mentors, Raul Cardoso Cabrera and Ariama Hernandez Sierra, along with their colleagues, led us in the three-week programme of activities.

I had come prepared for manual labour in the fields or on construction sites, but found this only formed part of the itinerary. It was explained to us the four mornings of agricultural work we undertook was intended to be “symbolic”; engaging us, literally and metaphorically, with the agrarian roots of rural Cuba and its people. Some brigadistas were disappointed those among us with artisan skills were not being used to best advantage. It may be there is scope for exploring specialist work projects in future to address these concerns. For my part, though, there was a bonus at this stage of the activities when I asked to be shown an example of the organic smallholding farms at the forefront of Cuba’s sustainable reform of its agro-business. I was able to see how traditional farming practices, hand-in-hand with innovative organic methods, were making Cuba more self-reliant in food production and better able to combat global climate change, while thwarting, in part, the US blockade on machinery, fuel and agro-chemicals

ICAP staff emphasised to me they had expended considerable time and effort devising the current format of the work brigade, with the main emphasis being on giving brigadistas a diverse experience of the triumphs and trials of the Cuban revolution within the fabric of Cuban society after half a century.

To this end we were addressed at seminars on various aspects of Cuban life. They included an overview of the first 50 years of the Revolution, to the activities of the young communist league, trade unionists, the Confederation of Cuban Women, social work within the community, plus medical and information technology education.

All of these were thought provoking and sparked lively discussion, but by far the most memorable event of this kind for me was a presentation by relatives of the Miami Five, the Cuban heroes incarcerated in the United States for the “crime” of exposing terrorist cells operating freely on American soil.

We were addressed by Mirtha, mother of Antonio Guerrero; Irma, mother of Rene Gonzalez, and his wife, Olga, plus Elizabeth, wife of Ramon Labanino. The composed dignity and fortitude of these women in the face of the nightmare of injustice inflicted on their families was as agonising as it was inspirational. I was not alone, filing from the lecture hall, in being unable to speak for a while; overcome by the emotions generated by the occasion. It regenerated in me a determination to redouble efforts to help in the struggle to end this grotesque travesty of justice and see the five returned to their loved ones in Cuba, where they belong.

So moved was the brigade as a whole that a statement calling for the release of the Miami Five was drafted and agreed, to be sent to the United States government and to US embassies in all the countries represented in the brigade.

Most of the second week was spent in Sancti Spiritus province, some 250 miles east of Havana. Our new home was the chalet hotel of Villa San Jose de Lago, in a small township near the municipality of Yaguajay. I appreciated the relative luxury of our accommodation after the more Spartan conditions of the camp. It also highlighted something more significant to me. During a holiday in Cuba in 1994, at the heart of the Special Period, hotels were restricted to us tourists, to earn vital hard currency. It was heartening to see, 14 years on, that I was rubbing shoulders with Cuban tourists and their families, enjoying relaxing festive season holidays at San Jose de Lago. A sure sign of advance, despite the strictures of the US blockade.

There was no rest for us brigadistas, though. We were taken to a hospital to see Cuba's world renowned national health service in action and to an elementary school, where Cuba's national theme of "the battle is with ideas, not with weapons" was being put into action. Again, lively discussion, coupled with question and answer sessions, left me well informed about the strengths of the Cuban health and education sectors. I was aware that 50 years ago the Revolution had to start from ground zero in both areas, which makes the advances all the more extraordinary.

A highlight for me was an opportunity to pay tribute to my personal revolutionary hero, Camilo Cienfuegos, one of "los tres rebeldes" (the three rebels), the others being Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. We were taken to his memorial and museum at the site of his decisive defeat of dictator Batista's forces in Yaguajay.

Next day, 24 December, and the 50th anniversary of the crucial battle, we were taken to Camilo's forest command post at Jobo Rosado and his guerrilla camp deep among the trees. Here we had the privilege of being joined by veterans of the fierce fighting that had taken place there. Their memories gave me a vivid picture of the armed struggle half a century ago. One of them, 13 years old at the time he joined Camilo's column, summed up his experiences then with the simple reflection: "That was a battle..." His eyes spoke volumes of the pain and hardship behind those quietly-spoken four words.

It was a timely reminder to me that, while I rejoiced in the triumph of 50 years of the Revolution today, this had been hard won, with the blood, sweat and tears, not just of the figurehead heroes, but of the ordinary people of Cuba, too. A struggle that still goes on.

A less sombre, but still important, contact with Cuban people came at a social evening with community members. Armed with bottles of rum and small gifts of snacks and sweets, we were warmly welcomed by our hosts. Mine were from a farming co-operative and I was able to compare notes with them from my own rural home environment while the dancing and partying went on. Their delicious buffets spread was a tribute to their warm hospitality, and put our meagre offerings to shame.

All too soon it was time to say goodbye to our new-found friends, but I came away with a deeper appreciation of everyday life of the campesinos of the countryside. Meeting them re-emphasised the overall impression the three-week brigade gave me that Cubans seem to have an innate resilience and resourcefulness, coupled with irrepressible good humour, all of which, I believe, has contributed to their 50 years of triumph over adversity.

Our last week was back at camp, where a further highlight for me was a visit to a Havana community arts project in a city suburb. Here exuberant public art, with half a dozen artists producing self-financing works, had clearly enlivened and united residents, particularly involving young people in the activities.

Evenings at camp were punctuated by performances from top-quality Cuban musicians, as well as events staged by brigadistas. These included a gourmet night, where the British contingent excelled with a vegetarian curry. We also had to prepare for an entertainment evening, under the direction of our elected producer, Theo Barry-Born, an accomplished musician in his own right. Our offering was last on the bill but voted best in entertainment value by generous members of our audience later. A spirited rendering of "What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor" was followed by a sketch comprising a "leaked" version of President George W. Bush's farewell speech to the American people. The finale was a rousing version of The Proclaimers' "500 Miles". The post-production party continued deep into the night.

Free time in Havana and Trinidad were built into the programme and this gave us an opportunity to meet Cubans. Strolls in the capital's back streets would be rewarded by Habaneros breaking off from their al fresco domino sessions to wave us over for a friendly greeting and a chat. My schoolboy Spanish and their, often

shaming, command of English, plus last-resort hand signals, led to a more than adequate level of communication and mutual understanding.

Our return to ice-bound Britain was heralded by emotional goodbyes to our ICAP hosts, as well as the friendly and cheerful camp staff, who had worked tirelessly on our behalf throughout.

One last formal event was an open-air dinner and celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Revolution. The British contingent was privileged to be called upon to respond to the main speaker on behalf of the whole Nordic Brigade with congratulations to the Cuban people on their half-century of achievement.

I returned home firm in the knowledge the brigade programme had succeeded in its aim of giving me a symbolic taste of labour among the Cuban people, but, most importantly, a detailed view of a wide range of aspects of the ever-developing Cuban Revolution.

It is also my belief that the 50th Nordic Work Brigade did not end after three weeks. As a brigadista, I feel an obligation to share my experiences with others, with the hope of sparking their enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution as mine has been ignited. And this means, above all, reaching out to those who may not share my views, rather than staying in the comfort zone of like-minded supporters of Cuba.

Small steps, perhaps, in realising the eventual reality of Ernesto Che Guevara's exhortation: "Hasta La Victoria Siempre!"