

COVER FEATURE

Alicia Gonzales

A Unique Cuban Ambassador

“What goes on in people’s minds can’t be changed in 40 years! Helen Hill and Helen Harrison of the Fire Brigades Union talked to Alicia Gonzales during her visit to the FBU National Women’s School, Wortley Hall, near Sheffield.

H&H: what is the FMC?

ALICIA: It is the Cuban mass women’s organisation. Any women aged 14 or over can belong to the FMC and 83% of Cuban women are members. It was formed in 1960, so we have just celebrated our 40th anniversary. It was created by the will of Cuban women to defend our revolution and the full exercise of women’s equality. Women are involved in the FMC to further women’s rights within the Revolution. We continue to fight for women’s equality. We can change many things and we have done so, but what passes through human beings’ minds takes more than 40 years. You are talking about 500 years of consciousness!

H&H: What about workers in the Fire Service in Cuba

ALICIA: As far as firefighters are concerned in Cuba we have the same right to training as men, and women work in the fire service but they do not fight fires as you do. But in Cuba we have few fires. We don’t have so many cars and not so much industry. Most fires are forest fires and then everyone joins in to put them out. We have fires from kerosene stoves -but we are replacing these with gas. In Cuba firefighters mainly fight fires.

H&H: What changes have happened for women, both after the Revolution and since the formation of the FMC?

ALICIA: Many changes – one of the biggest steps forward is self-esteem, education and the possibility of work. Before the Revolution 12% of the workforce were women and most did domestic work. Now women are 43% of the workforce. Women are represented in all areas of political, social and economic life. 27.6% of deputies in parliament are women. We have strong



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equality legislation and there have been many gains. Abortion has been legal since 1964 and there have been huge advances in health. Our family code defends the rights of women e.g. when people get married the lawyer reads articles from the family code which favour women and the family.

Women are favourably represented in the workplace in leadership positions – women fill 33% of management positions, 65% of university students are women and 65.5% of all technicians and professionals are women. But we are still not satisfied! In the judicial field we have the feminisation of the judiciary. More than 60% of judges and lawyers are women. The FMC and the Ministry of Labour, now has a programme in favour of single mothers. There are 25,000 single mothers who have been supported by the programme in the last five years, they are helped to find a job, training and day-care centre for the children.

H&H- tell us how the U.S. blockade affects women in Cuba

ALICIA: The U.S. blockade affects everyone, but women more so. Shortages of medicines, educational supplies – many things affect daily family life.

In the financial sphere Cuba cannot receive credit from any U.S. bank and the U.S. does not allow Cuba to have normal trade relations – we cannot buy food from the U.S. – this would be

much cheaper and easier for us – the US is only 90 miles away. We have to trade with far away countries and this is much more expensive. If for example a patient suffers from cancer the government cannot buy the drugs they need from the US. For Cubans it is very difficult to get a US visa. I myself applied for a visa to participate in a women's march in the US and the visa arrived when the march was over.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the years 1992-1994 in particular, were very difficult. The US tightened the blockade to try to defeat Cuba. We had very big discussions about what to do throughout the country – in our organisations a creative consensus was reached about the way forward and little by little things have improved – but we still have many problems. We have received much solidarity from many people in many countries and, of course from the UK, including magnificent solidarity from the FBU and many other Trade Unions in UK

**H&H: The Elian Gonzalez issue
– give us your thoughts**

ALICIA: Elian is happy with his father. His psychological health is O.K. Some weeks ago I met his grandmothers and they are very good people.

There is a U.S. law called the Cuban Adjustment Act, which has been passed only for

Cuban immigrants. The law says that if Cubans put their feet on US land they will be favoured – if they are poor Mexicans they are treated very differently. Cubans will be found a job, a house and many things – just for Cubans. This act is big propaganda. The US says “Cuba is hell. Come to the US”.

The law stimulates migration from Cuba and so people die in the sea. So you have economic promise and O.K., people think about that – of course they do – but if they go to the US interests section they are not granted a visa. So if they go in the normal way they don't get a visa. The US says that if they go on boats they are heroes. It is a very cynical policy and plays with people's lives. If Cubans want to go to the US then let the US grant them a visa in the normal way.

We have migration accords with the US but they don't keep them. We know our enemies – they are very cynical and tricky. But our problems are with the US State and not the us people – there are many people in the US, who would like to see an end to the US blockade against Cuba.

H&H- How important is international solidarity to Cuba?

ALICIA: It is very important. About 5,000 people attended the 2nd World Solidarity Conference, in Cuba, in November last year, from all continents. No country in the world has been so persecuted and blockaded over such a long period and yet has received so much international solidarity.

Cuba has received much solidarity from the UK – from many people through the work of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and British Trade Unions. The Cuban people highly value and respect this.

H&H- Do you think the blockade will end – and what would life be like

ALICIA: the blockade will end but no one knows when it will end. We are a poor, underdeveloped country; we trade with many countries despite the blockade. The US would like to have Cuba, because geographically it would be useful to them – it would be useful strategically. Before the Revolution the US invested a lot in Cuba – there were 100,000 prostitutes in Cuba before the Revolution and the Mafia visited Cuba, from the US at weekends. The US regarded it as its backyard playground.

Before the Revolution, the gap between rich and poor was very great. Cubans rebelled historically against the US and Spaniards. The US interest in Cuba is not new. When Cubans defeated the Spaniards the US said “We will help you” and then they took over. In the lead up to the recent US elections, the Miami Mafia gave a lot of money to Bush – they will expect help in return from Bush. Someday the blockade will end if we defeat it.

Thank you to the FBU for inviting me here to your Women's Conference.

It has been wonderful to be with such hard working sisters and to see such solidarity and support for my country.

