Putting Workers First

FIRST Union – Individual Periodic Review submission – Cuba – October 2017

First Union is one of New Zealand's largest private sector unions, representing in excess of 27.000 members over 5 different sectors: retail, transport & logistics, finance, textile/clothing and wood. FIRST Union has amalgamated with a number of different unions over the years, with the earliest of our contributing unions having formed as far back as 1919. We have a long and proud history of fighting and campaigning on behalf of the interests of the working people of New Zealand. Many of our members are in low paid and insecure work and live in communities of high unemployment and depravation. Given this, as well as our position of support and advocacy for better wages and conditions for our working members, we are an organisation that actively works for the rights of those in our country that suffer in growing numbers from: homelessness, unemployment, poverty and lack of access to healthcare and education.

As a union we are also active participants in the international trade union movement and we take seriously our role in supporting trade unions and workers worldwide, and it is primarily in this capacity that we wish to make a submission to this third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review on human rights in Cuba.

1) We note firstly that Cuba is a strong proponent of trade union rights and most workers in Cuba, including small businesses, have access to union membership and are covered by collective agreements. The freedom to belong to a union is one that many workers in more industrialised nations fight on a daily basis to attain, often against insurmountable barriers. Cuba is to be commended for the strength of its commitment to worker's rights and the right of workers to organise collectively.

2) We also wish to acknowledge that in the international trade union movement Cuba is recognised as a strong supporter of workers worldwide in their struggles for justice, fair pay and decent work and has stood in solidarity with the workers of other nations in their fights for fair and free access to unionisation.

3) Cuba constantly faces an international narrative that paints it as anti democratic and aims to attack it on its performance on human rights. These accusations are incorrect and unfounded. Cuba is a sovereign socialist state of workers, organised with all and for the good of all as a united and democratic republic that promotes the enjoyment of political freedom, social justice, and individual and collective well-being. Cuba has ratified 88 ILO Conventions and 44 international human rights instruments and its Constitution recognises and upholds: the right to freedom of expression, opinion, and religious and political beliefs. Cuba has made itself open to inspection by Human Rights organisations and the United Nations Rapporteur on Human Rights for Human Trafficking Victims, resulting in positive reports on Cuba's efforts in these areas. The Cuban political system is the expression of the will of its people and it constantly strives to increase their participation in it. It aims to foster their involvement in leading and directing society, and ultimately to attain the changes it needs to make to improve outcomes for all Cubans.

4) It is impossible to address Human Rights in Cuba without discussing the most egregious violation of human rights against Cuba; namely the international blockade instituted by the United States and in place now for over 50 years. This economic, commercial, financial and cultural blockade places severe restrictions on the rights and ability of Cubans to progress their society, to prosper and to improve their living and working conditions with the same rights and abilities exercised by the peoples of other countries. Despite the depravations and difficulties the blockade creates, the Cuban people remain committed to their country and their government and they wish to be able to decide the structure of their government and society independently of foreign interference and dominance.

5) The Cuban government and its people have made great efforts over the last few years, to update their economic model, and to increase opportunities for their people in commerce, to develop new businesses, to develop tourism, power generation and food production, and to continue with their innovative green and organic agricultural practices. We note that the Cuban state works to ensure that all of its citizens have access to food and housing. It is unfortunate that they do all of this in the face of the hostility of the blockade which is a major roadblock to the ability of the Cuban people to prosper in peace and freedom. Cuba should be commended that despite this they still strive to improve the living and working conditions of their people with their full participation.

6) Members of our union have visited Cuba and experienced first hand their health system, which is the envy of many other societies. Cuban healthcare is free and accessible to everyone and is of a very high standard. Cuba recognises the human right to healthcare that is not made universally available in much more developed nations. Not only do Cubans benefit from this commitment to universal healthcare,

but Cuba has provided healthcare, education and support to people all around the world, both in times of crises and disasters and also as part of a systematic programme of training doctors in order to improve public health outcomes for these countries. In our region of the world, around 200 students from Pacific countries have started medical studies in Cuba, with a number of them having already graduated as doctors. We believe this programme speaks loudly of Cuba's commitment to human rights.

7) Cuba has an excellent global human rights record. Cuba is especially known for the promotion of economic and social rights throughout the world. This can be seen especially in the rights to health and education where Cuba provides large technical assistance. Cuba also provides major support to countries and peoples following natural disasters and is doing so in the Caribbean as this is being written. Finally, Cuba plays a strong role in the human rights areas of conflict resolution and peace around the globe.

8) In making this submission we wish to applaud the work that we believe Cuba has done towards improving the working and living conditions of its people and its efforts towards advancing the rights, freedoms and opportunities of all Cubans. We believe that it is important that the international community does all it can to both recognise these improvements and to help Cuba to achieve even greater results by removing all impediments towards it furthering its course to progress Cuba towards a modern fully functioning society.