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Cuba Healthcare & Education Systems Viewed As Success

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(This is a guest Column written by Luther Washington, COPE Director for the Greater Kansas City AFL-CIO and Troy Nash, Kansas City City Councilman)

Recently, we were invited by the "People to People" Ambassador program to join a delegation to Cuba. Question: Who could find fault with a country known for its tropical climate, rum, and cigars? Answer: Fidel Castro.

Despite these enemies, Castro built a country in which healthcare and education are viewed as successes throughout the region. One indicator for the quality of a country's healthcare system is the infant mortality rate. Prior to the revolution, Cuba's infant mortality rate was 60 percent of every 1000 births. Now, it stands at 7.1

Before the revolution, the "People to People" Ambassador program to join a twenty five percent of Cuban adults were illiterate. Another million were semi-illiterate. And, seventy percent of the rural community had no schools. Cuba's present literacy rate is 94.5 percent. And, education is a free from kindergarten through university and universal.

But, Castro did not accomplish this by how Cuba's economy is run. But, what has happened to them since the revolution?

Cuba. Prior to the revolution, land was owned by a few. Poverty and unemployment was extremely high. And, education and healthcare for the ordinary Cuban citizen was nonexistent. Change was inevitable. At the vanguard of the revolution were students, peasants and trade unionists. After the revolution the students got universal and free education. The peasants got land reform. And, Castro did not accomplish this by



Luther Washington



Troy Nash

In the Corona Cigar Factory, the average wage was \$20 US per month, however, workers received other benefits. The cigar factory workers take home two cigars a day and they usually sell them. The workers are also allowed to smoke as many cigars while at work as they like. Added to these benefits, the workers gain from meeting production goals. They received a bonus for exceeding these goals. In most cases, it was not difficult to receive \$40 US per month. Workers began their day around 8:00 am and finished around 4:00pm. They are given an hour for lunch which is usually subsidized by the company. The factory provided employees with lunch for one peso, the equivalent of 10 cents US. They work for 5 days one week then six the next.

Some workers' benefits are very good such as maternal care and maternal leave policy. If a woman is pregnant, she usually works until her 7th month and then she can take off until her child is three months old. The mother can take any amount of time off that she wishes and she received up to 50 percent pay for one year. In fact, the employee has the right to her job for one year, even if she chooses not to work. In some respects, this policy is similar to our National Family Leave Act.

Any mention of workers' rights or conditions would be remiss without talking about retirement. According to one source, "Women retire at the age of 55 while Cuban men retire at 60. The men, if they are in mining to another hard industry, may retire at 55. After reaching retirement age, many workers choose instead to continue working to earn supplemental income. Pension benefits vary according to the length of one's service. The benefit represents a percentage of the person's salary. Senior citizens without family to support or take care of them live free of charge in hogares de ancianos." During our trip, we failed to see anyone begging, homeless, or malnourished. But, freedom of speech, as we understand it, is significantly curtailed. However, the involvement of trade unions in the decision making is substantial. They are involved in the economic goals of the country, down to the shop floor. And, they decide about the priorities for shoring up the economic pie.

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