

Women's Leadership and Solidarity with Cuba Crosses Borders and Builds A Movement for Racial and Economic Justice!

By Noy Thrupkaew and Jan Strout for WILPF's Peace and Freedom publication, Summer, 2002

NATIONAL WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SUMMIT ON CUBA

From May 3-5, progressive women activists from around the country convened at Stonehaven Ranch in San Marcos, Texas, for the first annual National Women's Leadership Summit on Cuba. Hailing from Washington State to Washington DC, the 40 US-based participants gathered at the three-day conference to work towards building a strong women's movement to normalize US-Cuba relations, and to strive towards social and racial justice in the United States. Reflecting ethnic, age, sexual orientation and geographic diversity, these leaders represented over 20 organizations from women's rights, racial & economic justice and Cuba solidarity.

The momentum for the Summit culminated out of the work of three supporting organizations: WILPF's Women and Cuba Campaign; Hermanas: Sisterhood in Central America and the Caribbean (based in New Jersey); and the EveryWoman's Movement for Cuba/LELO (based in Seattle). This Collaboration project has consulted for over a year with women leaders in the US to obtain ideas, endorsements, outreach and education about building a US Women's Movement for Normalizing Relations with Cuba. Working closely with the *Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas* (Federation of Cuban Women or FMC) which represent over 85% of women and girls 14 years and older. Our vision is to build a multi-racial, multi-cultural network of women formed to end the blockade of Cuba and, through this work, contribute to building a women's movement for racial and economic justice in the US. We ultimately hope to dramatically increase the leadership and public policy roles of progressive anti-racist women of all races and classes.

Joining the US attendees were four special guests: two Cuban women diplomats from the Cuban Interests Section in Washington DC and two from the foremost women's organization in Cuba. Opening for the Summit and kicking-off their speaking tour of the Western US states were Alicia Gonzalez Gutierrez and Arelys Santana Bello from the FMC National Headquarters in Havana. For Arelys, this was her first visit to the US and our journey to get permission for the FMC to travel from the US State Department proved more harrowing than crossing the Florida strait's ocean of political turbulence!

This background of transnational feminism and racial justice work provided the Leadership Summit's three-part framework of education, analysis, and strategic planning. On the first day of the summit, Olga Fernandez Rios, 1st Secretary, and Lourdes Bassue, 2nd Secretary, of the Cuban Interests Section offered a historical perspective on the US-Cuba relationship, detailing both the military and economic aggression that have typified official US attitudes towards Cuba, and the spirit of collaboration and solidarity that flourishes between US and Cuban activists despite US governmental mistrust. Mavis Anderson of the Latin American Working Group and Maggie Becker from the Free the Five! Cuban political prisoners Campaign provided analysis of the US embargo of Cuba and the US campaign against five Cuban men who were sentenced and jailed for being alleged spies; the Cuban government has maintained that the men were defending their country against hostile attacks from the conservative Miami-based Cuban factions.

The next morning, the FMC's Alicia Gonzalez Gutierrez and Arelys Santana Bello spoke about the ongoing challenges facing Cuban women; they also detailed the great achievements that Cuban women had made in bettering their lives and those of others since the Revolution. Linda Burnham, Director of the Women of Color Resource Center, Nancy Hartsock, founding Director from the Center for Women and Democracy, and Andrea Smith, Director from Incite! Women of Color Against Violence then detailed the problems facing US women, particularly women of color: harsh welfare reform policies, lack of educational opportunities and access to healthcare, and a punitive justice system.

Participants spent the next day in small workshops and discussion groups, working on analyzing the impact of racism in the United States and in progressive movements. The Summit then concluded with the outline of a three-year strategic plan to increase and amplify the voices of a diverse women's movement dedicated to working towards racial, economic, and social justice in the United States, and towards lifting the embargo against Cuba.

WILPF leaders Gwen Braxton, Marge Van Cleef, Tamara James, Mary Day Kent, and Jody Dodd from the Board of Directors and national office staff and well as members Cindy Domingo, Nancy Hartsock and Jan Strout, were among the participants at the Leadership Summit. Peggy Edwards and Lisa Valanti represented the US & Cuba Sister Cities Association. Caryn Mandelbaum was the Summit coordinator. Additional communication and outreach strategies of the

Plan of Action include annual women's delegations to Cuba, Cuban women's speaking tours, video festivals, legislative organizing and advocacy, the Free the Five! Campaign, media strategy, women's leadership development and anti-racist training, and finally, integrating activities with International Women's Day and Mother's Day to increase global sisterhood and solidarity.

FMC SPEAKING TOUR: WOMAN POWER BUSTS THE INFORMATION BLOCKADE

Following the Summit in Texas, the two Federation of Cuban Women representatives traveled to Seattle to start their 10-day West Coast speaking tour on "Women's Rights and Development in Cuba." Speaking to hundreds of college students and teachers, labor unions and other economic justice organizations, meetings with feminist philanthropists, women's rights and racial justice groups, WILPF members, Sister Cities projects and media interviews, Alicia and Arelys were kept busy while visiting Seattle, San Francisco, Berkeley and Oakland as well as Los Angeles, California. We would like to thank the host organizations—responding with little notice due to the US government's timing in approving the Visas to travel to the US—who organized incredible educational programs and many opportunities for dialogue to work toward the normalization of relations between Cuba and the US.

At the same time we were planning the FMC Speaking Tour, more repressive legislation recently passed by both the Senate and the House using the (so-called) War on Terrorism to deepen the information blockade about Cuba. *The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2001* prohibits the issuance of non-immigrant (including tourist) visas to persons from countries that are "sponsors of international terrorism" as defined by the Department of State. Cuba is on the list. This means that any Cuban citizen applying for a non-immigrant visa for a temporary visit to the United States is presumptively inadmissible, unless and until the Secretary of State and the Attorney General waive the ground of inadmissibility on a case by case basis. The applications for the visas for our two FMC *companeras* were held up until the day before they were scheduled to leave Cuba to travel to Texas. We now believe that our ability to advocate to the US Interests Section in Havana, the US State Department and now the US Attorney General reflects the strength of women when powerfully mobilized for peace and freedom of expression!

UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

Women's Rights and Development Delegation to Mexico and Cuba is scheduled for October 2-14, 2002. As part of the AWID Forum that will bring together over one thousand women from around the world, our delegation will begin in Guadalajara, Mexico. We hope to learn and exchange with Mexican women's organizations working for gender and economic justice through site visits organized by *Semillas* (or Seeds), a Mexican women's fund. We will participate in the AWID Forum, *Re-thinking Globalization* and present our workshop, Women's Resistance to Globalization. Then, on October 5 or 6, we will depart for Havana. While in Cuba, we will be hosted by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) and will have the opportunity to travel for two nights to the province of Santa Clara, following the footsteps of Che Guevara. During this time we will explore our delegation theme with site visits to the new School of Social Work, Latin American School of Medicine, *Casas de las Mujeres*, women's economic development projects and more! Don't forget the music and dancing at night in addition to *Casas de las Culturas*!! We will travel legally to Cuba with the WILPF license issued for information gathering and educational purposes. We are still determining travel expenses; some scholarships will be available to support grassroots women activists. Space is limited; deadline for registration is September 1st.

Copies of the **Women and Cuba Plan of Action** presented at the WILPF US Section Triennial Congress in Vermont are available to WILPF members by contacting Jan Strout or the WILPF National Office. **Women and Cuba Study Guides** from the National Women's Leadership Summit on Cuba are also available for \$10.

For more information about the Delegation or the WILPF Women and Cuba Campaign, contact co-leaders in Seattle: Cindy Domingo (206/782-2565 or gomojo@earthlink.net) or Jan Strout (206/547-0940 or janstrout@msn.com)

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