

## → Introduction

1. Fire This Time Movement for Social Justice has been participating in various delegations, conferences, and solidarity trips to Cuba since 2005. Over 18 years we have published articles, pamphlets, interviews, and books (with Battle of Ideas Press) about the exchanges and enriching experiences our organizers have had with the Cuban people, Cuban NGOs, and members of the Cuban government. In 2019, a Fire This Time organizer became the National Coordinator of the Che Guevara Brigade, a project of the Canadian Network on Cuba, a cross-Canada coalition involved in Cuba. The Che Guevara Brigade traveled to Cuba in November 2021, and returned once again in April/May 2022. The first-hand eye witness accounts in this report will reflect the lived experiences on the ground of organizers with Fire This Time Movement for Social Justices who participated in those two recent brigades, which followed on the heels of the Covid-19 global pandemic and arrived in Cuba weeks after Cuba reopened for tourism and international travelers following the pandemic.

## → Healthcare a human right for all in Cuba

2. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. 2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection."<sup>1</sup>
3. We witnessed first-hand how Cuba makes access to free and world class healthcare a human right for all. On each edition of the Che Guevara Brigade, we visited hospitals and clinics in both urban and rural settings, and spoke with healthcare providers who gave an overview of their healthcare system, and answered questions from members of our group. Most impressive was learning that free and accessible healthcare is not just guaranteed in urban environments, but in rural communities too.
4. On May 7, 2022 the brigade visited Jibacoa, a village of about 3,000 people in the Villa Clara province, in the Escambray mountains. We learned that the clinic is well staffed with doctors and nurses and that the clinic is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with healthcare providers living in the community they serviced, and many are in fact locals that studied to become doctors and nurses. The inhabitants of this town could count on emergency room care, consultations, maternity care, x-rays, ultrasounds, lab tests and a host of other services that encompassed what we would expect from a family doctor, emergency room and more specialized medical care. We learned that the clinic had the ability to transfer patients to the provincial hospital in Santa Clara if the patient's condition required it, and that specialists from out of town, such as gynecologists, make regular visits to the clinic. While walking through the clinic, members of the brigade noticed a sign on the wall listing the cost of specific medical services, along with the words, "Your health services are free, but have a cost". The doctor accompanying us explained how this was public education for patients who are so used to receiving free healthcare to understand the real cost of these services to the government and Ministry of Public Health.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

5. Some features of Cuba's healthcare system stood out to the brigade members. We heard from both healthcare providers and Cubans who are or have been patients receiving care. The concept of doctors making house calls and living within your neighborhood, is unheard of for members of the brigade, but a norm for Cubans. The fact that Cuba has 8.3 physicians per 1,000 people makes this level of care possible.<sup>2</sup>
6. The focus on preventative, primary, and community-based healthcare was a cornerstone of presentations given by doctors on our visits to hospitals. This is evidenced in the report "Lessons from Building a Sustainable Healthcare Exchange between the Netherlands and Cuba" published on the US-based National Library of Medicine website. The report explains, "Cuba's primary care system is focused on the family doctor, who usually will live within the community. The doctor works from the "consultorio" in conjunction with at least one nurse. Working as a team, they ensure every person is seen twice each year. This includes house calls to see patients in their home. This systematic approach allows them to know each person medically and socially."<sup>3</sup>
7. Brigade members were especially interested in learning about Cuba's "medicina verde" (naturally sourced green medicine). As was explained to brigade members, Cuba's incorporation of green medicine alongside pharmaceutical medications help to alleviate the shortages of medicines due to the U.S. blockade, increase Cuba's self-sufficiency and also provide patients with medications that have natural sources and contain less side effects.
8. Alongside visiting the CIGB institute to learn about the development of the Abdala vaccine, brigade members also learnt how Cuba's community-based healthcare system aided in the rapid vaccination campaign. As of March 8, 2023, Cuba ranks 6th worldwide for total vaccination coverage.<sup>4</sup> This includes children as young as 2 years old receiving vaccinations, and Cuba being the first in the world to start vaccinating infants. During a conversation with a young American living in Cuba as part of the Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective, she explained that while getting her vaccine in her neighborhood clinic, she saw how healthcare providers had intimate knowledge of the people in their community. For example, they kept one woman longer to monitor after receiving the vaccine, knowing she has high blood pressure, and sent a neighbor to remind another community member to come down for their appointment.
9. Cuba's community approach to Covid care was evident all throughout the brigade. During the 2021 Brigade, brigade members visited the University of Pedagogical Sciences "Enrique José Varona" in Havana, for an exchange with students and professors of the Foreign Languages Faculty. Brigade members learned that while studies were suspended during the most critical moments of the Covid-19 pandemic, many students volunteered at quarantine and treatment facilities, and considered it a duty as youth to help their fellow Cubans during the most difficult periods of the pandemic. On another visit during the 2021 brigade, we visited Varadero and stayed at the Roc Arenas Doradas hotel, where we learned that while tourism was closed during the pandemic, hotels were repurposed as treatment and quarantine centers.

<sup>2</sup> "Global Health Workforce Statistics Database," n.d., <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/health-workforce>.

<sup>3</sup> P. Jonas et al., "Lessons from Building a Sustainable Healthcare Exchange between the Netherlands and Cuba," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 18 (September 17, 2022): 11742, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191811742>.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Schellekens, "Cuba, One of the Most-Vaccinated Countries," *Pandem-ic*, March 11, 2023, <https://pandem-ic.com/cuba-one-of-the-most-vaccinated-countries/>.

Furthermore, with tourism on hold, many tourism-industry workers had the option to keep working in these facilities. This reflects Cuba's commitment, not only to the human right to healthcare, but also the human rights to work and to free choice of employment (Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).<sup>5</sup>

10. Another example of Cuban institutions and facilities being repurposed to care for Covid-19 patients was evidenced in the fact that the accommodation usually provided to brigade members, Campamento Internacional Julio Antonio Mella in Caimito, Artemisa province, had been dedicated to housing pregnant woman infected with Covid-19.

#### → Freedom of Expression & Peaceful Assembly in Cuba

11. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Article 20 states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association."<sup>6</sup>
12. While visiting Cuba on the 2021 and 2022 Che Guevara Brigade, visiting members had an abundance of interactions and exchanges with the Cuban people, from a meeting with a member of Cuba's National Assembly, Raúl Alejandro Palmero Fernández, who at 26 years of age wasn't even the youngest member, to conversing with the young women working as cooks and cleaners in our accommodation. Throughout the trips, we found conversations with the Cuban people and opinions on a variety of issues to be candid, and expressed freely.
13. During the Fall 2021 Brigade, we participated in an annual march commemorating the lives of eight medical students who were executed by the Spanish colonial government on November 27, 1871 in Cuba. Brigade members were in awe at the streams of young people who filtered out of side streets and avenues before sunrise to gather on the front steps of the University of Havana, with tens of thousands of people, mainly youth and students, joining of their own free will. For such a large demonstration, brigade members noted there was virtually no security, military, or police in sight, just community members from the neighborhood Committee's in Defense of the Revolution (CDR) standing as informal marshals on the sidewalks. Enthusiasm was palpable throughout the march, with youth carrying Cuban flags, flags of Cuba's revolutionary July 26th movement, and banners from their student and faculty associations. Following the march brigade members were approached by Youtubers from the channel "Guardianes de la Salud"<sup>7</sup> who had livestreamed the march to their 12.2K followers and were interviewing participants about their sentiments. This interaction was a perfect example of Cuba's expanding access to the internet despite challenges to connectivity imposed by the U.S. blockade, and freedom of expression both on the streets and online.
14. Other street mobilizations, rallies and marches gave brigade members a first hand experience of the support Cubans, particularly Cuban youth, express in support of their social system and revolution. This includes mass mobilizations such as the May 1 International Workers' Day march which the 2022 Brigade participated in, with over a million people participating in Havana and over 5.5 million across the country.

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>7</sup> Guardianes de la Salud, "Pa La Calle En Cuba!!!! Hoy Si!!!!!!," November 27, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyXhQdWsbF8>.

15. Brigade members also participated in a demonstration outside of their planned program. On November 25, 2022, the anniversary of the passing of Cuban leader and former President Fidel Castro, a commemoration march was organized in Havana by Los Pañuelos Rojos, a grassroots organization of students, youth, and artists. This unexpected but welcome interaction imparted a strong sentiment of defiance and defense of their country that youth in Cuba feel against the harsh measures imposed on Cuba through the U.S. blockade and Cuba's inclusion on the US State Department's State Sponsors of Terrorism list.
16. We witnessed through each of these events how peaceful mass mobilizations take place in Cuba. Cubans chant, play music, and dance in the streets demonstrating the exercising of the human right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

→ **The right to work and free choice of employment**

17. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. [...] 4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests."<sup>8</sup>
18. As Cuban workers enjoy strong protections and benefits, the expression of Cuba's pride in their workers associations and trade unions is expressed especially on May 1, International Workers Day. The 2022 Brigade members witnessed the parade of over a million Cubans marching in Havana on this day, and the enthusiasm of Cuban workers taking part in this march cemented the understanding among brigade members that Cuban workers take pride in their professions, while also feeling supported by their unions, associations, and the Cuban state.
19. The Che Guevara Brigade had many opportunities to exchange with workers in many sectors about their rights and working conditions. One of the most striking examples of Cuban state support for workers and specifically working women was evident when the Fall 2021 Brigade visited Cuba, soon after the Cuban Council of State approved a decree-law "On the Maternity of Working Women and the Responsibility of Families"<sup>9</sup>. The law expands already existing maternity benefits, including equal benefits to mothers who work both in Cuba's public and private sector, additional assistance for children in need of special care due to illness or disabilities, paternal leave and also benefits for grandparents caring for newborn babies, particularly where the mother is a student to encourage the continuation of studies. Cuban maternity benefits provide paid leave from 34 weeks of pregnancy, or 32 weeks in the case of multiple pregnancies, and the mother receives 100 percent of the average salary received in the 12 months prior up to taking leave. In an exchange with doctors at the "Arnaldo Milián Castro" hospital in Santa Clara on May 4, 2022, brigade members learned that mothers receive their full salary for up to 18 weeks after the birth of a child, and a portion of their pay for up to a year. Another example of the rights working women enjoy in Cuba is that they can return to their job and position for up to 3 years after taking maternity leave. This demonstrates Cuba's commitment to the human right to just and favourable conditions of work.
20. Another aspect of working life in Cuba that amazed brigade members was learning about the lengthy paid vacation time that Cuban public employees enjoy, with 30 days paid annual leave, plus 10 paid public holidays. In talking with our Cuban hosts and

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>9</sup> Ana Luisa Brown, "Decree Law on Maternity Reinforces Rights in Cuba," *Prensa Latina*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.plenglish.com/news/2022/01/19/decree-law-on-maternity-reinforces-rights-in-cuba/>.

friends we met throughout the brigade program, we learned it is common for workers to take trips out of town to accommodations that are subsidized for Cuban workers, and that taking work along on your vacation - a practice increasingly common in North America - is frowned upon in Cuba.

→ **Conclusion**

21. In this report we have highlighted our eyewitness accounts of Cuba's respect for the right to healthcare, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as well as the right to work and free choice of employment. Through travels to Cuba with the Che Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade in 2021 and 2022, organizers with Fire This Time Movement for Social Justice experienced firsthand the dedication and commitment of the Cuban people and Cuban government to upholding and strengthening universal human rights of every Cuban.