



A PUBLICATION OF THE NIGERIA LABOUR CONGRESS

# STATE OF THE STRUGGLE

The Voice of Nigerian Workers

September 2020

## SEPTEMBER OF STRUGGLES

Dare to Struggle... Dare to Win



Electricity and Petrol Price Increase – Another Challenge! | Editorial Comment | Cover Story  
Interviews | The International Window | Articles: Fuel Price Hike: The Fact of the Matter

**BREAKING NEWS: LABOUR SUSPENDS NATIONWIDE STRIKE AND PROTEST**



# INTERNATIONAL WINDOW

## INTERVIEW WITH THE CUBAN AMBASSADOR TO NIGERIA, HER EXCELLENCY COMRADE AMBASSADOR CLARA PULIDO ESCANDELL, BY THE EDITORIAL TEAM OF NLC STATE OF THE STRUGGLE E-MAGAZINE



*HE Clara Pulido Escandell and Deputy Ambassador Pavel Fuesta with members of the NLC SOS Editorial Team  
-Comrade Chirs Uyo, Comrade Echezona Asuzu and Comrade Denja Yaqub*

1. The Cuban Government and People have endured the longest economic blockade in modern history as orchestrated by the United States of America? What is the secret behind the great resilience by the Cuban people and government to this blockade?

You have asked many interesting questions. But before I start answering them, let me recall that on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1960 Nigeria had independence and will commemorate 60 years of independence, 1<sup>st</sup> October next week, and I think this is a good time to congratulate the Nigerian people and especially

Nigerian workers for the Independence Day. As you know Cuba and Nigeria; we have a lot of historical and cultural connections. A huge part of our population are descendants from Nigeria and so culturally speaking every Cuban is also a descendant from Nigeria because we have huge influence from Nigeria into our nation and our population.

Let me start with the topic of the blockade. The question on the blockade and how the Cuban people have been able to persist all those years, is a brilliant question. First, I must state that the blockade is conducted by the US government against the people of

Cuba. The blockade is not the only thing thrown against the Cuban revolution, rather it is a punishment against the entire Cuban people by the USA government. We learnt from our leader, Fidel Castro, that there is a huge difference between the USA government and the people of the United States. We are talking about a criminal blockade from the US government. So, when we talk of blockade, we are talking about US government blockade.

Secondly, they presented the blockade as sanctions against the Government of Cuba. That is not true! All of us Cubans are suffering from these sanctions – from bottom to top, from left to right from front to back. All of us are under this very criminal policy. A policy that has many aspects in terms of Commerce, in terms of Finance, in terms of Credit. So, really it is a very comprehensive policy based in numerous laws. And even this week it has been reinforced once again. President Donald Trump has just announced that Americans cannot sleep in Cuban hotels, and cannot even have a private visit to Cuba – those who get the permission to come – they cannot go back to the US taking with them Cuban Cigars and Cuban rum - two Cuban products much liked by US citizens.

We can assert that the blockade is illegal. It is not a bilateral issue as the defenders evoke. There is a framework of laws and regulations made by the Anti-Cuban forces since the 1960s, which were reinforced with two very important laws in the 1990s: Torricelly Law and Helms Burton law. With this appeared the extraterritorial character of the blockade, primed to bar other countries from dealing with Cuba. For example, if there is a product that has up to as small as around 10% of American raw materials in it, such products will not be allowed by the US government to be sold in Cuba. Also, if your son or daughter, for instance, is studying in Cuba and you want to send money to them, you cannot use US dollars because your own money would be frozen by actions directed and enforced by OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) to prevent the entrance of US dollars into Cuba.

In recent months during the Covid-19 pandemic, which

is affecting all the world, the American government has not allowed many companies to deal with or sell to Cuba, reinforcing a real persecution against them. You remember that at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, Alibaba group, a Chinese consortium made donations to many countries including Nigeria, but in the case of Cuba the US government prevented the entrance of the company carrying the medical products. So, the Chinese company had to find another way to deliver the supplies to Cuba. Even when all the countries of the world are trying to practise solidarity because of the seriousness of the Covid-19 health emergency, US government is putting this kind of extra punishment on Cubans.

Coming straight to the second part of your question, I will say there are a number of reasons why we Cubans have resisted the blockade. The first one is People's engagement. No government can survive this kind of criminal pressure from the biggest power of the world if you do not have the support of your population. And if your population is not consciously involved in the political process. So, for me this is the first key issue – **the Engagement of the Population**. And the engagement of the population is not because you have a leader who says: "follow me". That can be a starting point. You can follow a leader at the very beginning because the person is charismatic but you will not follow a leadership for solid sixty years if you are not convinced that you have to be engaged in that socio-economic and political process.

In Cuba, there is a primary connection between leadership and the followership at the grassroots. So, there is a very conscious effort to follow up national policies and we seek to learn from our own national history. And our national history taught us the pertinence of unity. There is also unity among the Cuban population around some concepts and some ideas. This unity has been reinforced by an **Inclusive and Popular Policy on Education**. This is the second reason behind the resilience of our people. In Cuba, we have a minimum of nine years of education. There is no way in Cuba that a child with capacity to learn cannot finalize nine years of





*Cuban Ambassador to Nigeria HE Clara Pulido Escandell at a point during the Interview*

education. Our education has given us enough capacity to think by ourselves and to be able to develop. We try to use the advice of science, technology and research to give strong base to our development. For example, most of the key drugs used in managing Covid-19 in Cuba was of our own production. Not only are we able to produce these drugs but also because several of these drugs have come from the scientific efforts and results of Cuban scientists.

Thirdly, I cannot avoid to mention this point. The third reason is **International Solidarity**. The General Assembly of the United Nations has condemned the blockade and has called for a removal of the blockade. That happens every October year after year, and if in this occasion we have not yet presented the Resolution during the 75 General Assembly of the UN, it is going to be updated before its closure next year. The second example are the countries and companies that are not afraid of the blockade and continue to deal with Cuba. In

recent years, for example, a growing number of companies are entering our Free Trade Zone at Mariel to expand business in Cuba. Also, we have the Solidarity movement of which the Nigeria Labour Congress has been in the forefront for many years now condemning the blockade through numerous press statements and addresses. We are grateful for this solidarity. This is important in practical terms and also in giving us a lot of courage to push on because there are some things you cannot do without friends. We are happy that NLC has been part of our struggles and proved its protagonist role organizing the 6<sup>th</sup> African conference in solidarity with Cuba on October 2019 in Abuja.

**2. The United States of America claims that the for the blockade against the Cuban people is the absence of democracy and respect for human rights in Cuba. How do you describe the Cuban democracy and the respect of human rights in Cuba?**

For us, there is no way you can do a revolution without the people. A revolution without the support of the people is no revolution. Period! This is as simple as it is. Since the struggle against the Batista regime as you mentioned, Fidel himself has been very concerned about the participation of the people, and he made decisions based on this conscious analysis. And that has been a very important part of the history of the Cuban peoples' participation since the first days of the revolution. Fidel is very popular for his speeches but for us also we could react to what Fidel was saying. He was always interacting with the people. More than a speech, he was making a conversation with us. And even sometimes during his speeches, he would ask questions. And he was able to read several questions that come to him. So, that created a space of comradeship between him and the masses. And this practice has continued through



different political structures in Cuba.

You said that we have been able to have transitions, we always prefer to say that we have had a process of continuity. There is a fact, different people have occupied different positions in government. But we say continuity because we all come from the same political persuasion.

Let me give you the most important recent example about democracy in Cuba. Before, let me underline that there is no way you can review even a single sensitive law in Cuba that is not discussed by various segments of society affected by that law. When we produced our new national constitution, in every neighbourhood, every social organization, at every working centre, we discussed the constitution. The process was organised in a way that every single opinion was considered.

Your opinion could appear in the final writing or not. Some issues would not be taken because they did not garner the required consensus. The most important thing of that discussion is that my contribution could be taken or not but must be considered. Even if my contribution was not included, it means that the one whose contribution was taken had a contribution better than mine. So, at the end, we produce a very strong

constitution based on national consensus and we approve it through referendum.

Second is the issue of elections. We practice a very participatory election. The notion out there is that the Cuban Communist Party participates in elections. No, the Cuban Communist Party must not participate in elections by law. The members of the National Assembly might be members or not of the Cuban Communist Party but that is not the point. Nobody can say because I am a member of the Cuban Communist Party vote for me. You would be breaking the electoral law. It is the people who propose and elect the candidates whether at the municipal or national level. The municipal level is very important to us because that is the base of the Cuban democratic system.

So, it is the people that elects, and it is the people that can impeach. For us elections are very important. In Cuba, it is children that protect the ballot. This is because we know that children have no bad thinking, they are not corrupt, they are innocent and pure. So, if a child says that someone has done something wrong, believe the child. I can show you the pictures of Cuban children defending the ballot box. Overall, the most



*L-R Cuban Ambassador showing Comrade Chirs Uyo and Comrade Echezona Asuzu some things of interest during the interview*



*Cuban School Children Guarding the Election Ballot Box*  
important thing for us in Cuban democracy is people participation.

3. Despite the prolonged economic blockade, the Cuban people and government has been able to build a very robust, effective and service efficient healthcare system? What is Cuba doing differently that the rest of the world needs to learn from?

Notwithstanding the blockade against the Cuban people, we have medical missions deployed all over the world. The first medical brigade from Cuba was in May 1963 coincidentally with the creation of the Organization of African Union, in which people like Kwame Nkrumah, had a fundamental role. In a chat, Ahmed Ben Bella, President of Algeria, was telling Fidel Castro that his country needed huge medical personnel resource. At that time Cuba had about 6000 medical doctors and half of them left on the aftermath of the Revolution mainly to places such as United States. But Fidel took a decision to send a team of 56 medical personnel, most of them doctors to Algeria. That was the first Cuban Medical Brigade as far as May 1963, it came to the African soil.

A principle in the formation of a Medical Doctor in Cuba, is that you do not work only for science but also for Conscience. So, the idea in Cuba is to work for the people. Ernesto Che Guevara, a greatest internationalist himself, and a medical doctor by profession is a source of inspiration to many of our medical doctors. Health and education are strong part of the basis for our socio-economic and political system in Cuba.

A very important step in our international cooperation came in 2005, after the Katrina Hurricane. Many people in the US, especially blacks, were suffering and dying because of floods and other disasters caused by the hurricane linked with lack of healthcare. Fidel told the US government that Cuba was ready to help. That led to the establishment of the Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade. The name was an honour done to a citizen of that country who left the United States to fight alongside the Cubans during the fight against Spanish colonization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The young American, Henry Reeve, was one of our celebrated generals during that liberation war. So, that was why we decided to honour his memory by naming the International Medical Brigade after him. Well, despite our sincere and best efforts, the US government refused our offer. But it did not impeach Henry Reeve Brigade to go to other countries.

The Ebola case is very touching. Nigeria was the only country that managed its Ebola crisis very well with minimal deaths and sick people and with its own capacities. The same was not the case in some other African countries particularly Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. So, the intervention of the Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade was very helpful in the fight against Ebola. Thousands of Cuban volunteered to come to Africa to fight Ebola, even few of them refused to fully disclose to their families that they were going for such a dangerous mission. It is noteworthy that only one among them got infected with Ebola disease and when he recovered chose to go back to finalize the mission. This tells a lot about the quality of people we have in Cuban healthcare system.

4. Of recent, the Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade is gaining a lot of accolades in the global arena owing to its humanitarian missions. There is also an international campaign to nominate Henry Reeve for a Nobel Prize Award, what is your take on this?

It is an honour to be a member of the Cuban



Medical Brigade. They do not only work where you have medical emergencies. They also work where you have environmental disasters. Currently the Henry Reeve Medical Brigade have been deployed to fight against Covid-19 in different parts of the world. Their performance and the very humanistic way they work with affected populations really implied that they deserve such a prize.

At the same time, I can tell you that every Cuban medical professional working in any part of the world are also fighting the Covid-19 challenge. Recently, we heard the story of a Cuban nurse who was not a member of the Henry Reeve Medical Brigade but received a case of a woman who had Covid-19 and delivered before full term of the pregnancy. They put the surviving child in an incubator. The nurse had to perform the body to body surface contact for the child which is a very important process for the child to survive and the small little baby survived. So, we are proud of our medical brigades all over the world not just Henry

Reeve but our health workers in our Medical Brigades all over the world.

5. Given the current struggle for affordable energy in Nigeria, what is the state of access to public utilities especially electricity and petrol in Cuba? Do you have refineries? Are they working? How affordable is your petrol and electricity?

In answering this question, I must state that the Cuban people have elected "Socialism Forever" as a way of life. Our leaders always tell us that their major problem is how to make sure that every Cuban benefit something from every public resource available to Cuba. This is the reason why the commanding heights or major public sectors are managed by the government including our Power and Oil Sectors.

We have a Power Company that has been able to make electricity available to most parts of the country. We have about 96% of electricity access. The remaining parts are those in hard to reach terrains. And for those ones, we are deploying solar power in a collective way



*L-R Counsellor Pavel Bauza-Fusté, Comrade Echezona Asazu Comrade Chirs Uyot and HE Clara Pulido Escandell and Comrade Denja Yaqub after the interview*



of access. Our power sector relies heavily on oil and gas. So, we rely much on the import of oil and gas.

In line with our social policy, we have different tranche of payment. For the population if you use a little power, you are put in the first tranche with a lot of subsidy from government and if you consume higher you enjoy lower subsidy or none according to a scale list, if you overpass the average figure you have to pay extra on no subsidy basis.

In the state sector, there is a limit of power that you can use so you have to adjust your plans that you don't overreach your subsidy ceiling, so, you have to organize your work, production or activities according to that in order not to exceed your limits. If you do so, then you have to cover your needs paying higher tariffs. Since last year, we have been under a very harassing policy from the US Government regarding imports of oil and gas. We still have the bite of the blockade where even companies that want to supply oil to Cuba are turned back. So, it has been like a magic for us to get the quantity of oil to keep up with our energy needs. Apart from importing finished refined petroleum products, we also try to refine as much as possible because we have some oil and gas which is not enough for national consumption. When you refine crude oil, it is cheaper to import, and helps in creating jobs. It also helps in helping you to achieve your own self-sufficiency. So, it is good to refine your own crude oil and part of our energy needs we import.

6. Finally, what lessons can the rest of the world learn from the Cuban Revolution in terms of popular participation, efficient use of public resources and political stability especially in comparison with other Socialist States as Venezuela?

Our national policy is that of non-interference. We believe that you allow the people of a country to shape and determine their own destinies. The last word by every country must be given by the people of the country themselves. This is the reason we cannot determine for Nigerians what they want to do in their own country. It is up to them.

So, for Venezuela, it is wrong to tell Venezuelans, "this is your President" - that is wrong. That is interference. They are having their legislative elections in December this year according to their constitution and Electoral Law which have been approved by their people. If there is one country that has been able to conduct as many elections in recent years, it is Venezuela. So, why do you have to dictate to them how to conduct their own elections. Our position is to respect their preference. If they decide to make a change, it would be their choice and they should be allowed to make that change, if they decide to continue their political process, the Bolivarian revolution, that will be also their own sovereign decision. Our relationship with them is very good and we will continue with that.

Each country has its own experience. At the same time, we are always ready to share our own experience and know-how with other countries.



*Comrade Echezona Asuzu Presenting to the Ambassador NLC Letters Supporting The Nomination of Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade for Nobel Prize*