

ICFTU questions human rights in Cuba

*Tensions have emerged in the international trade union movement after the ICFTU lodged a complaint against the Cuban government with the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The **Labour Bulletin** spoke to the leaders of the **Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC)** and **International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)** about the allegations of violation of human and worker rights.*

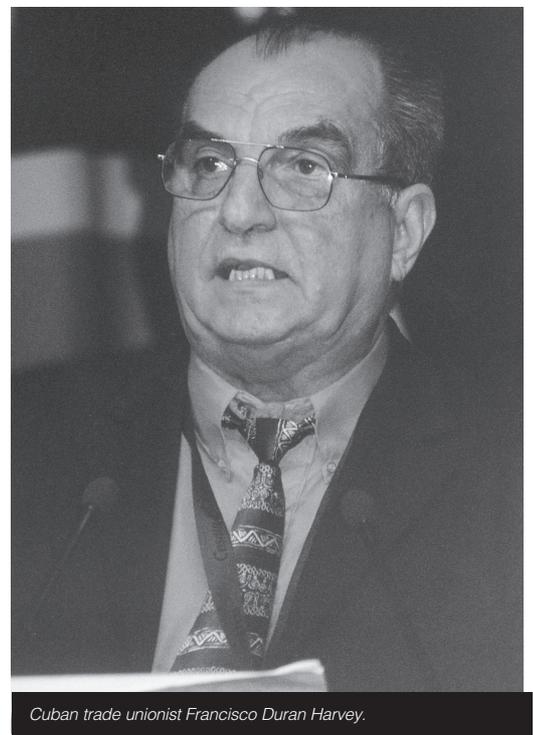
Earlier this year the ICFTU (which represents 158-million workers in 231 affiliated organisations in 150 countries) lodged a complaint against the Cuban government with the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association. The ICFTU claimed there was a 'ban on independent trade unions, the persecution and arrest of numerous independent trade unionists, denial of the right to strike and the right to collective bargaining, political discrimination when hiring new recruits, and more. These are all examples of ongoing violations of freedom of association in Cuba.'

The ICFTU claimed this complaint was lodged after the Cuban government failed to keep its promise on legislative reform. 'The country's only authorised trade union confederation, the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), is still totally controlled by the state and the communist party. The few independent trade unions that attempt to carry out

union activities are forced to operate in an extremely hostile environment. Workers who try to organise are persecuted and risk losing their jobs or even going to jail.'

The ICFTU believed that the Cuban government was engaged in a campaign of repression targeting all independent union activity. In April this year, seven trade unionists were sentenced to long prison terms for 'treason and conspiracy' ranging from 13 to 26 years. The ICFTU also complained to the ILO director-general about the infiltration of the independent trade union movement by agents of the state security forces. During the trial of trade unionists, the government admitted that it had infiltrated independent trade unions.

In June the International Labour Conference of the ILO adopted a resolution condemning the government of Cuba. The ILO called on the Cuban government to accept ILO direct contacts missions to help deal with



Cuban trade unionist Francisco Duran Harvey.



ICFTU's Guy Ryder.

serious trade union rights violations. Following the adoption of this resolution, ICFTU general secretary Guy Ryder wrote to all the global labour federations requesting them to 'urge the Cuban government to respect human, trade union and social rights, and to free the imprisoned colleagues, who have been sentenced for 'treason against the fatherland' simply for defending human and trade union rights'. Ryder said: 'The resolution shows the growing awareness of the international community of the lack of freedoms and blatant violations of international law being committed by the Cuban government against workers, the trade union movement and the general public.'

The Cuban government, he said, has signed 88 ILO conventions but that has not prevented it from avoiding implementing these international undertakings or simply flouting them.

existence of a different political system just 90 miles away from imperialism.' There are some trade union organisations, he said, who are participating in 'these campaigns against Cuba, by playing the same game of those who are trying to destroy the generous work carried out during 40 years of revolution'.

During an interview with the *Labour Bulletin* Duran said the Cuban unions had a long history of struggle. He claimed unions and workers have all the rights they need but they find themselves without the necessity of having to strike because 'our government is a popular government'. This is different to what propaganda is saying, he said. He argued that there is no law which compromises worker rights.

Duran believed the ICFTU was trying to 'cause problems'. Why is it, he asked, that people talking generally

Prior to Cosatu's national congress an approach was made by the CTC to get Cosatu to intervene in order to request the ICFTU to retract its allegations.

During his speech to the congress, Francisco Duran Harvey, deputy general secretary of the Cuban CTC outlined the US blockade and its impact on the Cuban people. He said: 'The enemies of the Cuban Revolution will never accept the fact of the

about human rights have failed to condemn the blockade which had cost the Cuban government hundreds of millions of dollars. The ICFTU had never been an organisation which supported the cause of the Cuban government, he said. The ICFTU, he said, did not have a critical attitude towards the criminal policies of the imperialist government of the US towards Cuba. How is it, he said, that an organisation of the working class (ICFTU) failed to identify with the Cuban revolution. 'Whose interests is the ICFTU serving,' he asked.

In response, Ryder said the CTC was a state-run organisation. Workers, he said, could not organise outside of the CTC and those that have tried have faced state oppression. 'I understand the historic sympathy for the Cuban revolution. However, if we see violations of trade union and human rights we must act.' Ryder said the ICFTU had opposed the war against Iraq and the position adopted by Bush. 'We are not playing a cold war game against Cuba. Whether it is politically correct or not, can trade unions globally allow their political affiliations or empathy to prevent them from seeing the reality?'

Questions have been raised about the ICFTU's agenda. Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi stated in his secretarial report that most ICFTU positions were relatively progressive and 'our weight is beginning to be felt... moreover some governments, including SA, view the ICFTU as having a colonial bias, divisive and as being weapon of the cold war.'

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