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Cuba: Independent Self-Activity vs. the State

Pride & Anarchism Against All Odds

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Fifth Estate #404, Summer, 2019, accessed October 5, 2019 at

[https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/404-summer-2019/](https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/404-summer-2019/cuba-independent-self-activity-vs-the-state/)

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This May was a very exciting time for anarchists in Cuba, full of both inspiration and anxiety. On the positive side, the Anarchist Social Center and Library (ABRA: Centro Social y Biblioteca Libertaria) hosted the Fourth Libertarian Spring Conference in Havana, from May 4 to 11.

Photo shows a joyous crowd in a park setting with rainbow flag prominently displayed.

Anarchists from the island and other countries including the U.S. attended and joined in presentations and discussions of four major themes: freedoms, democracy and activism in Cuba; anti-authoritarian art and education; sexuality, genders and autonomies; ways to obtain and utilize environmentally friendly food.

The Miami local of the Black Rose Anarchist Federation assisted with fundraising for the conference and sent members.

Events that are not approved by the government are illegal in Cuba. Before the conference the police attempted to intimidate the

organizers into canceling it, but in the end they allowed it to proceed without interruption.

Also in Havana, the twelfth annual “Conga against Homophobia and Transphobia,” Cuba’s gay Pride parade, was scheduled for May 11. Since 2008, the Cuban government permitted the parade as part of its liberalization of policies toward LGBTX people on the island. Many anarchists intended to participate.

However, a week before the designated date, the government’s National Center for Sex Education (Cenesex), announced the cancelation of this year’s Conga. This was in part due to pressure from right-wing evangelical Christians who have gained increased strength in recent years in Cuba as in other Latin American countries.

In the context of tightening U.S. government sanctions, the move was also likely designed to punish LGBTX activists who most Cuban officials generally regard as too sympathetic to Yankee imperialist culture. Cenesex claimed that certain groups, emboldened by the Trump administration, planned to use the event to undermine the Cuban government. See “Cuba’s New Constitution, Bye-Bye Communism & Gay Rights; Hello Private Property & Censorship,” *Fifth Estate* #403, Spring, 2019.

This time LGBTX activists, anarchists among them, were determined to stand up against the state’s censoring of expressions of pride and solidarity. They decided to march without government authorization. This was a brave choice since independent social and political activities are viewed by the authoritarian Cuban government with hostility, and the consequences are not predictable.

Early in the morning of May 11, as Isbel Diaz Torres and Jimmy Roque Martinez, two LGBTX anarchist organizers set out for the march, they were arrested and held for almost 24 hours to prevent them from participating.

Nevertheless, approximately 300 people (including activists and allies) marched with rainbow flags, signs and music, shadowed by police and plainclothes agents.

Demonstrators shouted, “We do not need Conga [the official Pride Parade],” “Long live a diverse Cuba,” and, “We march for our rights.” When they reached the Malecon, a popular esplanade along the Havana seafont that attracts many young Cubans as well as foreign tourists, the police stopped the parade and activists were attacked and a few detained.

The participants in the parade were rightfully proud that they resisted being silenced by the government and succeeded in organizing a public demonstration without government permission.

Before the Castro takeover in January 1959, Cuba under the Batista regime had laws criminalizing homosexuality that dated back to the colonial period, while the police and judges protected the Mafiosi who ran the highly-lucrative sex tourism trade, which included the exploitation of LGBTX people. Traditional Spanish machismo and the Catholic Church both denigrated those not conforming to rigid gender roles.

After 1959, the Castro regime took up the persecution and politicized it. Bars, other meeting places, and cruising areas were designated centers of counter-revolutionary activities and periodically suppressed. From 1959 until 1980, LGBTX people were blatantly excluded from career options, fired from government jobs, arrested in street sweeps, beaten, and incarcerated in labor camps.

In 1965, the country-wide Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP) program established prison camps for disciplining gay men, hippies (those who wore tight jeans or flamboyant clothing, grew long hair and beards), along with anti-military conscientious objectors and members of pacifist religious groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses. These camps became notorious both inside and outside Cuba for their brutal treatment of inmates and poor living conditions.

In response to the criticism from many quarters, the UMAP camps were officially closed in 1968, but the incarceration and forced labor of these categories of nonconformists continued

under the military until the late 1970s, emphasizing hierarchical discipline, sacrifice, and obedience.

Over the years, there have been times of loosening of repression and several periods when repression was intensified. In 1997, several nightclubs known to have gay clientele and other meeting places were raided, and people beaten and detained.

In 2001 and 2004, the police once again closed down meeting places and attacked LGBTX people in the street.

Over the years there have been some significant improvements for LGBTX people in Cuba. Private, adult, non-commercial and consensual same-sex relationships were decriminalized in 1979.

A gay and lesbian civil rights organization, the Cuban Association of Gays and Lesbians, was formed in 1994. Unfortunately, it was effectively shut down and members arrested in 1997.

The Cuban Government began paying for sex reassignment surgery for qualifying Cubans in 1988, but then suspended the program for two decades, reinstating it in 2008.

The political elites' hostility to and repression of grassroots autonomous organizing leaves the population vulnerable to the whims of top-down authoritarian bureaucratic policies in several other areas beyond the treatment of LGBTX people.

Throughout its 60 years of rule, the regime also systematically gutted independent labor activity, banning strikes, taking complete control of union organizations, often persecuting labor activists, especially anarcho-syndicalists (see "Anarchists Confront the Marxist State in Cuba, Fifth Estate #394, Summer 2015, as well as many other articles about the situation in Cuba in FE back issues).

For decades, it also suppressed Afro-Cuban independent organizing, while proclaiming that the revolution had ended racism, prohibiting discussion on the topic.

The attempts of Cuban women to assert their autonomy from the state have been held in check by the macho militaristic attitudes of government and Communist Party officials.

In general, individuals and groups seeking greater freedom have experienced some liberalization of the laws and increases in government tolerance, especially since the 1990s, but also clear reversals. Through it all, they remain closely watched and constantly subject to possible repression by the Cuban government.

The support of anarchists from outside the country is needed by those inside Cuba who are struggling against the authoritarian state.

At a time when all previous blueprints have proven useless for truly transforming existence for the vast majority, when marxist authoritarian states and social democratic parties have demonstrated their support of the megamachine it is time for people to defy top-down hierarchical rule and create new, autonomous, non-authoritarian communities and social solidarity.

SK is a longtime supporter of Cuban anarchists.