

Canada Steelworkers organize meetings for Cuban 5

Union convention pledges fight to win freedom for five revolutionaries framed up by Washington
(feature article)

BY JOHN STEELE

TORONTO — Some 1,000 people heard Adriana Pérez speak about the international fight to free the Cuban Five at meetings here and in Vancouver. The April 15-20 tour was organized by the United Steelworkers, one of the largest unions in Canada, in collaboration with Cuba solidarity organizations.

Pérez is the wife of Gerardo Hernández, who is serving a prison term of double life plus 15 years — the longest sentence meted out to the five framed-up revolutionaries. After the Five were arrested by the FBI in 1998, Pérez, along with Olga Salanueva, wife of René González, has been barred entry to the U.S. to visit her husband.

In Vancouver, Pérez spoke to the 650 delegates attending the April 16-18 USW national convention, which unanimously adopted a resolution pledging that the “USW will continue working with Workers Uniting to secure the prompt freedom of the Cuban 5.”

On the eve of the convention some 100 people, the majority Steelworkers, came to a public meeting with Pérez.

In Toronto, 200 attended an April 20 meeting at the Steelworkers hall organized by the USW and Friends of the Cuban Five committee. The event was endorsed by the United Food and Commercial Workers union and other organizations.

Pérez spoke about the impact of the struggle on the Five and their families and about the importance of the solidarity movement.

“They and their families have stayed strong thanks to people like you,” she said. “These men need us now to bend every effort to win their freedom.” U.S. President Barack Obama “will not free them because he is a good guy,” Pérez continued. It will take a “jury of millions” to win their freedom.

Steelworkers National Director Ken Neumann sent greetings reiterating the union’s support for the Five, which were read by Mark Rowlinson, USW assistant to the national director. A message was also read from Olivia Chow, New Democratic Party Member of Parliament in Ottawa, who called on Washington to drop the immigration restrictions on Pérez that prevent her from visiting Hernández in prison.

Other speakers included author and Cuban solidarity activist Keith Bolender, who recently published *An Oral History of Terrorism Against Cuba*, and lawyer Juan Carranza, who outlined the defense habeas corpus motion for a new trial based on evidence that dozens of journalists were on the U.S. government payroll when they broadcast or wrote prejudicial material against the Five during their trial in Miami.

Responding to questions from the audience, Pérez talked about the harsh conditions the Five have endured in U.S. prisons and the rapport and respect the revolutionaries have earned among fellow workers behind bars.

Like many workers incarcerated, long periods of solitary confinement have been among the methods used by prison officials to try to break the spirit of the Five. “In Angola the experience of living underground in a small space helped prepare Gerardo for his 17 months in solitary confinement at the beginning of his term in prison,” Pérez said.

Hernández, Fernando González and René González were among some 375,000 Cuban combatants who volunteered to be part of an internationalist mission that lasted from 1975 to 1991 to help repel military invasions of newly independent Angola by the white-supremacist regime of South Africa.

Once, Pérez said, Hernández was invited by an inmate to eat with a group of African-Americans in his unit. When one objected on the basis of Hernández’s race, the prisoner responded, “This white man fought for us in Angola!” and Hernández sat down to join them.

The Steelworkers resolution calling on Washington to free the Five “is an example of international solidarity,” Carolyn Egan, president of the USW Local 8300, said from the floor during the discussion period. “We got a unanimous vote. It is our hope that this resolution will help unions in the United States do the same thing.”

“People ask, what can we do in Canada?” Javier Dómokos Ruiz, Cuban Consul General in Toronto, said in concluding remarks. “We can use the example of the USW. This is the kind of commitment the Cuban Five need.”

Ruiz and Pérez both called for a big contingent at “Five Days for the Cuban Five” actions in Washington, D.C., May 30-June 5, which includes a June 1 rally in front of the White House.

Organizations that built the meeting sold literature on the Cuban Five at the back of the hall before and after the event, including a collection of poetry by Antonio Guerrero. At the end, Morteza Gordzadeh of the Toronto Forum on Cuba took the floor to urge participants to pick up a copy of *The Cuban Five: Who They Are, Why They Were Framed, Why They Should be Free*. Thirty copies of the book were sold off the Toronto Forum on Cuba table.

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