

Pride and the Cuban connection

Mike Jackson reports on the stunning reception he received on his visit to Cuba

IN spring 2018 I went with my sister on our first holiday to Cuba. Before I went, I contacted the Cuba Solidarity Campaign to find out if our LGSM movie *Pride* had been seen in Cuba. It turned out that it had been shown on television and that Mariela Castro Espina, the daughter of Raul Castro, the former president of Cuba, had given a 10-minute introduction to it.

CSC helped me to make contact and I heard that Mariela was delighted I was going over and that I should time it with their week of activities against homophobia and transphobia in May. I could march on the Conga (think Pride march) with them and give a talk about the movie.

Mariela is Director of Cenesex, the government department that supports and develops LGBT+ inclusion. Her mother was Vilma Espin, one of the women involved in the armed struggle and later the revolutionary government. She founded the Federation of Cuban Women in 1960.

We attended a social for international trade unionist supporters of Cuba. We met British Unite and RMT comrades and people from Canada, the US, France, and Ireland.

The first LGBT event we attended was a spectacular gala held at the Karl Marx theatre.

There were around 4,000 guests and we were treated to wonderful dancing and singing. I had the honour of being invited on stage to be given an award by Mariela on behalf of Cenesex. Later I was interviewed by a journalist from the Cuban national newspaper *Trabajadores* (Workers).

The next afternoon was the LGBT Conga (Pride march). We arrived with our LGSM banner and our hosts quickly spotted us (many of them were wearing our LGSM Pits and Perverts T-shirts) and squeezed us into the third position from the front.

Leading was a huge Cuban flag, followed by an equally huge rainbow flag, then us and Cuban comrades holding our LGSM banner.

There was a big pink 1950s' American car immediately behind us. Mariela jumped into it, saw me and beckoned me to sit next to her on the back of the rear seat. I've never seen so many cameras. She is adored by the Cuban LGBT+ community.

I was having to pinch myself that this was actually happening. I'd decided to wear my Orgreave T-shirt with that infamous photo of a row of police on it. Mariela asked what it was about and I told her it was about the abuse of human rights in the UK. I enjoyed that.



Mike Jackson, left, at the 2018 Labour Party Conference with Cuban ambassador to Britain Tere-sita Vincent Sotolongo, OTJC Secretary Kate Flannery, miner's wife and OTJC activist Chris Horne, and Cuba Solidarity director Rob Miller.



Mariella Castro and Mike Jackson at the 2018 LGBT Conga (Pride march) in Havana.

The march set off and I was surrounded by wonderful revolutionary banners including 'Soy Fidel!' – 'We are Fidel'.

As we approached the park where the stage was, our car slipped away from the marchers into the grounds of a municipal building. Lots of police and sol-

diers poured out of the building. Mariela turned to me, pointed at my T-shirt and, smiling, said, 'Don't worry, they are here to protect the marchers, these are revolutionary soldiers and police!'

I thought back to my first Gay Pride march in London in 1973 when we were flanked by double rows of police who certainly weren't there to protect or reassure us!

The final event was to give a presentation at Cenesex, where I shared a platform with three other activists. The first speaker was a courageous Colombian mother of 13-year-old Sergio Urrego, who had taken his own life as a result of relentless homophobic bullying. She has set up a foundation in his memory to campaign against homophobic bullying in schools. Next were two inspirational trans activists, Dani Vega, an actress, from Chile, and a Gaby Gygy Castil-

lo, a documentary maker from Guatemala. That Cenesex would invite international speakers is very much Cuba's approach: internationalism, support and inclusion.

Late last year I took an opportunity to return the kindness of Mariela and Cenesex by organising a meeting for her when she visited London for the Latin America conference. The aim of the meeting was to introduce her to key people representing LGBT+ best practice in the UK.

I live in central London amidst great wealth, yet I see homeless people everywhere. I saw no-one sleeping rough in Cuba although it is a vastly poorer country than Britain.

They have a world-class health service which provides free medical scholarships to students from Latin America and Africa. Cuba spends 13% of the GDP on education compared to 5.6% in the UK and US. All this despite the devastating effect of the US embargo.

Tourism is an important income for the island so go and enjoy a holiday there!

2019 is the 60th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution and the Cuba Solidarity Campaign will be celebrating with many events and activities.

For more information about the Cuba Solidarity Campaign please contact them at: Cuba Solidarity Campaign c/o UNITE, 33-37 Moreland Street London EC1V 8BB. Email: communications@cuba-solidarity.org.uk



Mariella Castro meets UK LGBT activists in London.