

Women of the Cuban Revolution Today: Katia deLlano

By Terry Burke



While Cuba is the second most popular overnight destination for Canadian tourists (Statistics Canada, 8/26/10), U.S. law denies most Americans the right to travel to Cuba.

WAMM hosted Cuban leader Katia deLlano twice in June to discuss women's status in Cuba. At fifteen, Katia was a leader in the underground 26th of July Movement to overthrow the Batista dictatorship. After the revolution, she helped found the Federation of Cuban Women, studied economics at the University of Havana, and went on to become a professor and the economics advisor to the president of the Cuban Assembly.

The U.S. government's 50 years of propaganda and covert wars against Cuba have been successful in turning many Americans against the Cuban revolution. While Cuba is the second most popular overnight destination for Canadian tourists (Statistics Canada, 8/26/10), U.S. law denies most Americans the right to travel to Cuba. 62% of Americans have an "unfavorable" opinion of Cuba (Gallup, 6/20/11). Even left stalwarts like In These Times publish articles critical of Cuba without seeming to understand the context of the 50 years of economic warfare, sabotage and propaganda by the U.S. government against the Cuban government. (In These Times, 12/01/09)

Is it any wonder then that voices like that of Katia deLlano are seldom heard? On a recent visit to the U.S., she accompanied her partner when he came to the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota to teach a class for a semester. Katia spoke at events about the remarkable advancements for Cuban women in the last 50 years. While a 1953 census showed that women were only 3% of the professional workforce, they now comprise over 60% of all technical workers and almost 40% of people in leadership positions. In the first years after Batista was overthrown and the new government of the revolution was established, many former domestic servants received training as bank clerks, taxi drivers and dressmakers. In addition, 100,000 women who had been engaged in prostitution were given training in specific trades.

Cuba's remarkable achievements in education are almost unknown in the U.S. As a result of intensive work by the revolutionary government, literacy went from 76% in 1959 to 96% in 1961. Today it is effectively 100%. Acceptance to the university is based on grades and test scores, not ability to pay (education is free). With educational opportunities open to them, so many women have excelled that they have become a disproportionately high percentage of university graduates (over 70%). As a result, Cuba recently implemented affirmative action to allow men with lower test scores acceptance in the university.

Katia commented that one of the most difficult aspects of the revolution was implementing the Family Code which establishes the absolute equality of the rights of each spouse. This law eliminates all vestiges of subordination of the wife in respect to the husband. When a woman works or studies, her husband is required, by law, to assume an equal share of the chores and family responsibilities.

Putting men and women on equal footing in carrying out domestic duties required much education and went up against decades of patriarchal and machismo culture. While men today do take on more child rearing and household responsibilities, women still do disproportionately more work in the home. The Women's Federation continues to work for changes in this area.

Katia spoke of the tremendous hardship that women have suffered under the economic conditions, as well. The tightening of the U.S. economic embargo in the 1990's made it even more difficult for Cuba to trade with other countries. Women often bear the brunt of the many scarcities because of their domestic

responsibilities, because they have less time after waiting for the bus, and after waiting in lines for scarce items.

When Katia also spoke at a forum at the University of Minnesota, she described the many economic changes the Cuban government is implementing now—from distributing state-owned land that lie uncultivated to private farmers for long-term use to the openings for private business. She spoke wistfully of the revolution she and many contemporaries had dreamed of in the early years and the “revolution they were allowed” due to severe limitations caused by the U.S. economic blockade and sabotage. Going forward, Katia said that she hoped Cuba would retain the ideals of the revolution with the concept of a state that serves everyone.

As it stands, the survival of the revolution in Cuba and its many programs in education, healthcare, housing, and equal rights is an astounding achievement in the face of fifty years of covert war by the most powerful country in the world. For more events and information on Cuba, check out www.minnesotacubacommittee.org. If you would be interested in a legal trip to Cuba that is coordinated with the Federation of Cuban Women, please contact the WAMM office at 612-827-5364.

Terry Burke was active for many years in opposing the U.S.-funded contra war on Nicaragua, serving as director of the Nicaragua Solidarity Committee, and traveling to Nicaragua. She went to Cuba in 2010 as part of the 40th Venceremos Brigade. Today Terry is active with WAMM, serving on committees and the WAMM Board. She has continued to initiate creative actions, including on-the-spot interviews with the public on issues of peace and justice; see worldwidewamm.org and the WAMMToday blog.