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‘First on the Fifth’: Marching with Cuba’s Cenesex on a historic May Day

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Havana, May 5. SLL photo: Melinda Butterfield

Havana — May Day in Cuba. Nothing quite like it - even if it takes place a little later

than expected.

Havana is renowned for its huge, colorful, and powerful marches every May 1, International Workers' Day. This year was already planned to be different. Because of severe fuel shortages caused by the U.S. blockade, it was decided to focus on local marches in Cuba's provinces and the various municipalities that make up Havana.

Then severe weather struck. Havana's May 1 celebrations had to be postponed. Instead, it was "the First on the Fifth" — the great workers' action was held on Friday, May 5, the 205th birthday of Karl Marx, the founder of scientific socialism.

Another difference: in an additional move to conserve fuel for urgent people's needs, the usual march through the Plaza of the Revolution was changed to a mass rally along the Malecón, Havana's famous sea wall.

I arrived in Cuba from New York City on May 3 to attend the VII International Colloquium on Trans Identities, Gender, and Culture, hosted by the National Center for Sex Education (Cenesex), together with Serena Sojic-Borne, a comrade from the New Orleans chapter of Freedom Road Socialist Organization.

Comrade Mariela Castro Espin, director of Cenesex, invited the international delegates from Mexico, Italy, the United States, and other countries to join the center's delegation in the May Day action, a proposal we gladly accepted.

Queer youth for socialism

In the U.S., it's impossible to imagine a city full of workers rising well before dawn to defend the system they live under. U.S. workers are exploited by their bosses, lied to by politicians, overworked and underpaid, without universal health care or the right to housing.

How different is Cuba! In Havana, workers from every sector, along with students and other organized groups, began gathering by 4 a.m. As the international delegates walked by the University of Havana, contingents of young people were already starting to arrive, chanting, singing, and drumming.

Across the wide boulevard, workers representing Radio Rebelde (founded by Che Guevara) and other media outlets were gathering around their banners.

As we reached the intersection where Cenesex was gathering, outside a movie theater, comrade Mariela Castro was among the first to arrive — greeting people, keeping the group motivated and excited. Organizers from TransCuba Nacional, the national network of trans women, distributed trans flags to the many young queer people as they arrived and kept folx from wandering too far afield.

At the intersection where we gathered, we witnessed young people organized by the Committees in Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) blocking streets and directing traffic away from the marchers. A CDR leader took time to snap some group photos of our contingent for Mariela.

‘Love is the law’

The dozens of queer youth who gathered with Cenesex, a majority of them Black Cubans, carried an enormous rainbow flag and a lead banner that read, “Por todas las familias, el amor es ley” — “For all Cuban families, love is the law.”

This refers to the revolutionary new Families Code approved last year, which expands the rights of all families, including LGBTQ+ families and chosen families. May is also the International Month Against Homophobia and Transphobia and is celebrated in Cuba much like Pride Month is in the U.S.

For Cenesex and the networks of trans, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, this is a key time to educate the queer community and the broader Cuban public about the

provisions of the new code.

As we marched down the wide, dark street toward the Malecón, more people streamed into the contingent at each intersection. We took our place among the tens of thousands already gathered beside the sea, while revolutionary songs played over gigantic speakers that reached everyone in the rally.

Dozens of hands of all colors and gender expressions took hold of the massive Pride flag and shook it in time to beat. Beside the Cenesex group were health care workers' unions, unions of the economic ministry, parents holding small children on their shoulders, and portraits of Marti, Fidel, and Che, all awaiting the inspiring words of Ulises Guilarte, general secretary of the Cuban Workers Federation (CTC).

The beautiful sunrise over the sea slowly spread across the massive demonstration — a beautiful symbolic moment.

Together we sang, chanted, and celebrated the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the achievements of socialism despite the punishing and illegal U.S. blockade, and the continuing struggles of the world's workers and oppressed.

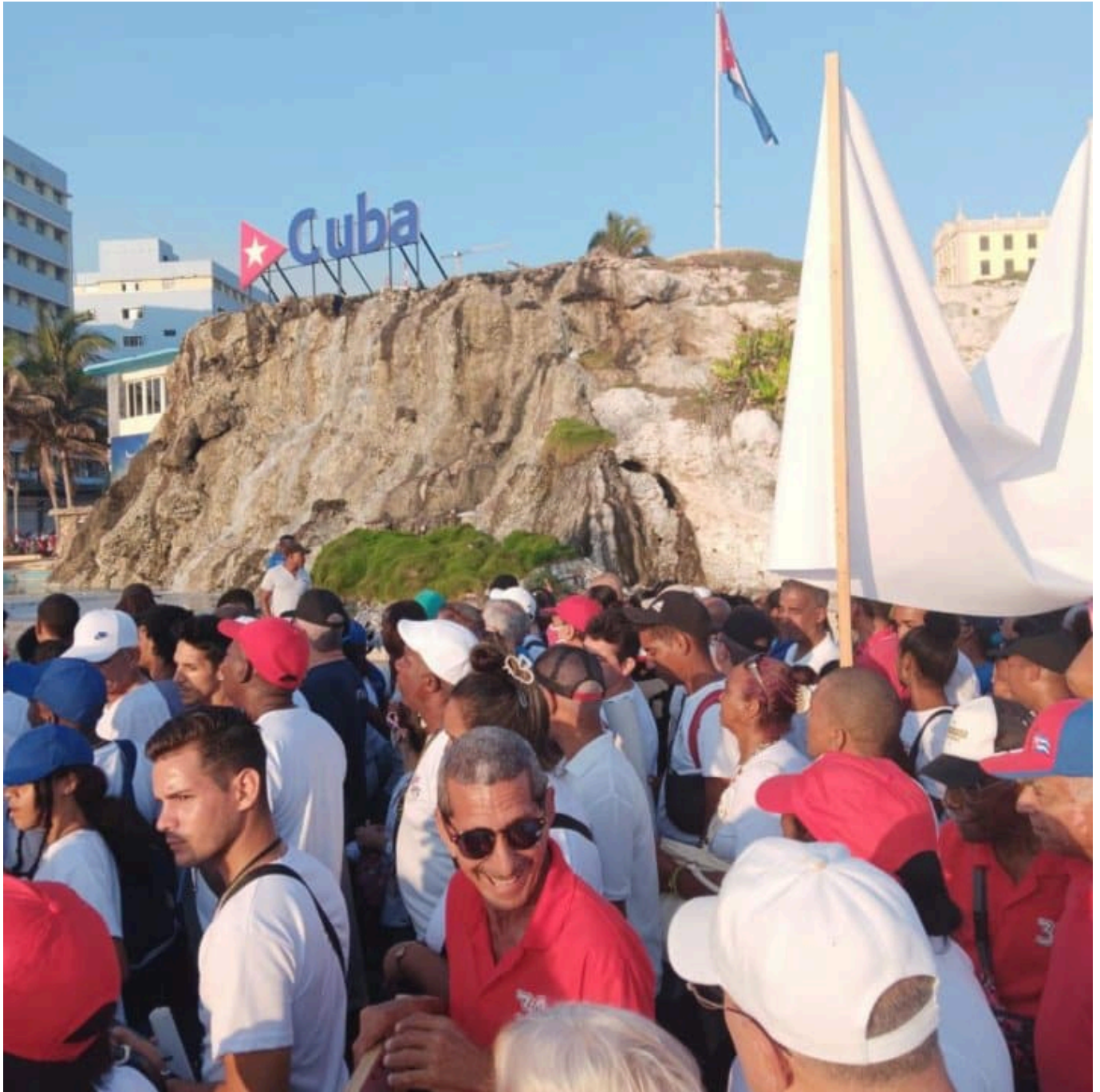
Viva Cuba! El amor es ley!



SLL photo: Melinda Butterfield



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