

# The Fuel Shortages in Cuba Are Worse Than You Think

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*One hundred and fifty young people from the United States and Canada arrived in Cuba in late April 2023, just days before International Workers Day. As members of CODEPINK's youth cohort, our goal was to understand the Cuban political system, the US blockade and its impacts on everyday life. We sat in a room upon our arrival, listening to our trip hosts explain the issue of fuel shortages on the island. Before they were done talking, the microphones went silent. The power had gone out. The rest of the presentation sounded like faint whispers to the delegates sitting in the back of the room. We tried our best to hear, trying to silence all the background noise to no avail. Thinking of it now, there was no better way to understand how dire the situation was than to see it for ourselves.*

In 1960, following the Cuban Revolution that propelled Fidel Castro to power, a memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs was written and later declassified. It stated that a majority of Cubans supported Fidel, and if the US wanted to counter the rise of communism in its backyard, it would have to deny "money and supplies to Cuba, decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation, and an overthrow of the government."

The US imposed a blockade which still restricts necessary items from entering Cuba and prevents other countries from selling them to the island. On top of the embargo, the Biden Administration keeps Cuba on a state-sponsor of terrorism list, further restricting economic development. The goal of these policies are explicit in the 1960 memorandum: the US is trying to starve socialism out of Cuba. The purpose of the US policy towards Cuba is to create misery, and it's proudly displayed on the State Department website.

And we certainly saw misery with our own eyes. Usually for May Day, millions of Cubans rally in Havana, celebrating socialism and workers. May Day was scaled down this year due to fuel shortages – Cuba has to conserve the fuel it has for farming and other necessities. US

media certainly reported on it, but without any mention that it was the US government that was causing shortages of all kinds in Cuba.

Leading up to May Day, a massive storm swept through the island, causing emergencies that the Cuban government couldn't effectively deal with because of the lack of fuel. We sat through multiple power outages, even in a hotel that had decent fuel access. We toured neighborhoods in transformation, learning how Cubans were developing their own communities to have better access to medical care, food and other life affirming services. Even those tours, full of hope and self determination, were plagued by outages. Tourism is a huge industry that helps sustain the Cuban economy, so tourists like us are usually shielded from occurrences like this. We had no way of truly grasping the day to day effects that these power shortages were having on Cubans outside of Havana.

Even though the people we met in Cuba had a thorough understanding of what our country was doing to theirs, they welcomed us with open arms. Not only were they kind to us, they were also hopeful for the kind of future we would build together – one where our two countries can base foreign policy on the person-to-person relationships we build rather than deferring to the dinosaurs in Washington who value the victory of their ideologies over millions of Cuban lives.

Our cohort visited the Blas Roca Contingent where we were warmly welcomed with fresh coconuts, t-shirts, and hats. We joined delegations from all over the world: Switzerland, Australia, Uruguay, Panama, just to name a few. It was amazing to see union leaders and organizers from all over the world come to Cuba to show support for the Cuban project. It was also transformative to see how well Cuban workers are taken care of. The entire facility we were in was a place for the workers and their entire families to come for food, community, and fun. The union even obtained 3 farms in the area in order to grow food for the workers and their families.

Later, a smaller group of us took a tour with a worker at the facility. He told us how his father had grown up very poor before the revolution and how much his family's life changed for the better after the revolution. He spoke of the hardships of the blockade, especially not having access to fertilizers for farming which could easily double their yields. He also mentioned how he has had family emigrate to the USA and while he doesn't fault them for leaving, he himself could never leave the Cuban revolutionary project behind. He is a revolutionary through and through. His story is the kind that the policy makers in the US choose to ignore. Cubans on the island are charting their own course outside US hegemony and it is clear that the US's policy is to try and deny them that right.

All of us, like the delegations that have gone before us and the countless ones who will go after, returned to the US with a deeply held commitment to end our country's blockade on the Cuban people.

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*Eli Smith and Kaitlin Blanchard are members of the CODEPINK youth cohort the Peace Collective.*

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