A Morning with Representatives of Cuban Transportation Workers Trade Union

By Jon Flanders

Our rail workers delegation met the Cuban transportation union representatives at the Cuban Workers Federation (CTC) national headquarters in Havana. It was the day before May Day, which is probably the biggest celebration of the international workers holiday (which originated in the United States in the late 19th Century) anywhere in the world, over one million every year.

The Transportation Workers Union (TWU) is responsible for organizing people to attend from all over the Havana region and other cities. This meant that the TWU general secretary could only meet with us briefly. Other leaders filled in for him. The TWU covers all transportation workers in the country, nearly 200,000 members. Of these, 28,000 are railroad workers, of which 82% work directly on the railroad, a nationalized, publicly owned industry, which has been starved of capital investment for many years. We did see indications that investment has picked up in recent years, with new equipment, training programs, track repairs, and other advances.

In the working yards there are five people on a train crew, two engineers, a conductor and two "assistants", which I guess we would call brakemen. They work 15 days-on, then 15-off. The pace and the hours of work during those 15 days-on is a question I need to research. Train crews in the U.S. will find it interesting that it is possible for Cuban workers to vote out managers and supervisors, if deemed unfit for the job. We asked about hazardous trains. It is state policy that when such a train passes through a community, the police, emergency services and the fire department are mobilized until the train is out of town.

Quality health care and education - from day care through trade and university college - are free, so the big issue, that the Cuban railroaders openly brought up to us as their primary concern, is wages. They feel that the low wages contribute to the high turnover rate. This is soon to be taken up with the government as part of the upcoming CTC Congress. The CTC and unions at the job site and “shop-floor” level have a major input in the decision-making process that contributes to economic policies, which are made within world capitalist markets. The training center we visited was quite impressive. Located near a rail yard, there were classrooms with computers (old by our standards) and a simulator. Upstairs there was another classroom with an open deck, a dining room, and a dormitory. You can see pictures of all this in a photo album on the RWU website.

Due to the US embargo, Cuba is saddled with a wide variety of aging equipment. British, U.S., Russian and Chinese locomotives are all currently in service. In the training center we saw three control stands - Russian, Chinese, and North American. Seventy-five new locomotives are on order from Russia, some having been recently delivered. It goes without saying that it would make a great deal of sense for Cuba to buy locomotives from its neighbor. However, the U.S. embargo, not Cuban wishes, makes that impossible for now. Support for track rebuilding is likewise coming from Russia and China, rather than the U.S.