U.S. Railroaders Get To See Firsthand A Cuban May Day Celebration

By Fritz Edler

This Spring, a delegation of U.S. railroaders - comprising well over 100 years collective experience across the industry - toured Cuba to meet with railroaders and visit rail facilities. Others have described other aspects of our visit. Here, I will focus more on the overtly political and international working class exchange, which was a valuable learning experience for all of us. Because our delegation had been invited by the Cuban trade union federation, we were included with thousands of others from around the world as international guests for the May Day mobilization.

You have to be there to comprehend how big a deal May Day in Cuba really is. Other events took place across the island, but apparently Havana is where people really want to be. That meant a logistical nightmare potentially, just in getting people where they needed to be, due to the sheer numbers in the streets. In practice, for us and many others, it meant getting up in the wee hours of May 1st.

We were staying at a hostel in Havana, owned by the Cuban Association of Small Farmers, that is maintained to guarantee that its members from across the island have accommodation when visiting the capital on business or vacation. Our hosts arranged for a pot of coffee and snacks so we could be on our way by 3:30 AM. This was important because it was clear from the sounds in the street, that many people in the neighborhood around us had already gathered, with music and boisterous activity. It was already clear that for everyday Cubans, this day was both a celebration of themselves, pride in their achievements, and defiance of those who would overturn their progress.

There were so many groups making their way to the plaza that our bus had to make several detours. But we finally got to where we could get out and make our way to the centrum, where thousands of international guests were assembling. Despite the darkness, we could readily see, by their flags and banners, that delegations of unionists and activists from across the planet were there to participate.

The massive parade that was the centerpiece for all this didn't actually kick off until about 10 AM. But when it began, it quickly became clear why this is such a big deal for the small island country. The huge square became completely full and stayed packed for more than 4 hours, as rank after rank from every neighborhood, organization, and workplace moved by like an ocean. It was also clear to anyone paying attention that the participants were extremely happy to be there. The diversity of the banners and signs also showed the broad range of their expectations and demands in defense of their country and its workers' and farmers' government. There was absolutely no way that what we saw could have been anything other than genuine enthusiasm. We later participated in meetings with other international guests, sharing our Spanish language flyers from RWU, which were excitedly read by delegates from various countries like Argentina, all happy to see U.S. railroaders working to build international worker-to-worker solidarity.