

Nebraskans for Peace forum discusses Cuban Revolution

BY JACQUIE HENDERSON

LINCOLN, Neb. — Fifty-five people participated in a public forum and discussion on “What Will Changes With Cuba Mean for U.S.-Cuba Relations?” organized by the Lincoln chapter of Nebraskans for Peace March 31 at the Unitarian Church. The meeting was co-sponsored by the Black Cat House and the Unitarian Church of Lincoln.

The four panelists were Hendrik van den Berg, an economist and professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Frances Mendenhall, an Omaha dentist who recently visited Cuba on a tour organized by Code Pink; Dan Schlitt, a Quaker and longtime advocate for fair treatment for Cuba; and Rebecca Williamson, a leader of the Socialist Workers Party who participated in the Havana International Book Fair in February. Paul Olson, a veteran leader of Nebraskans for Peace, chaired.

“I have been watching the U.S. negotiations with Cuba closely and I have to say that I am highly suspicious of our intentions,” van den Berg said.

He described working with U.S. government agencies in Latin America for several years in the 1970s. “Every country we ‘helped’ there ended up with a military dictatorship promoting the interests of U.S. businesses.”

“Capitalism is a very powerful system,” van den Berg said. “It creates the idea that you can get rich, which of course is only true for the very few, at the expense of the lives of millions.”

“But I am worried. I hope Cuba negotiates very carefully, to protect what

they have accomplished over the past half century,” he said.

Cuba’s revolutionary leaders “are well aware that 11 U.S. administrations — from Eisenhower to Obama — have tried every means they could to wipe out the revolution made by Cuban workers and peasants in 1959 and defended by them ever since,” Williamson said.

“We should demand an end to the economic embargo against Cuba, the return of the Guantánamo Naval Base to Cuba, and oppose any attacks on Cuban sovereignty,” she said. She added that Nebraskans for Peace can be proud of its participation in the fight against the U.S. government frame-up and imprisonment of the Cuban Five, who are now free and working in Cuba to defend their revolution.

“Attacks against Cuba of various kinds have been going on for decades,” said Schlitt, who got involved in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee in Chicago in the 1960s. “This country organized an invasion of Cuba in 1961 in an attempt to overthrow the revolution.”

“As a Quaker I have followed the question of religious freedom in Cuba,” he said. “I think it is worth noting they don’t seem to have a policy of interfering in religious questions, but that not all the churches have always had a reciprocal policy.”

“I think we should concentrate on working with the religious communities here to help improve conditions for the people in Cuba,” Schlitt said.

Visiting Cuba was like “walking into a different kind of world where medical



Militant/Jacquie Henderson

“Cuba is a different world where health care is something everyone is entitled to,” said Frances Mendenhall, standing, March 31 at Nebraska panel on changes in U.S.-Cuban relations.

care is treated as something everyone is entitled to, where treatment is not related to the amount of money you have,” Mendenhall said. “This is something everyone in Cuba took for granted. They explain it has been this way since the beginning of the revolution.”

She pointed to the severe shortages of medical and other supplies and joined other speakers in demanding an end to Washington’s economic embargo.

“I don’t have enough time to tell you about the impact of Cuba’s medical aid throughout major parts of the world,” Mendenhall said in response to a question on Cuba’s international role. “Even before they sent hundreds of doctors and nurses to fight the Ebola epidemic, they already had doctors working throughout Africa. And not for financial gain, to help those most in need.”

“This is something that I agree with Rebecca on, this is selfless internation-

alism,” she said. “But the government in Cuba has much too much control. They have kept the Internet out of Cuba, and that is a problem.”

“The Cuban government is for Internet access,” Williamson replied. “Cuba has never acted in isolation from the world. It was the U.S. companies and government that cut off Cuba’s means of communications — cutting the phone cables, denying the right to travel to and from Cuba, cutting Internet access, putting Cuba on a ‘terrorist state’ list, trying to isolate them.”

Joel Gajardo, a Presbyterian minister, spoke in the discussion on how Cuba wiped out illiteracy. Commenting on several questions on religious freedom in Cuba, he said Fidel Castro’s government never aimed to limit religious or other freedoms, but only to prevent acts against the people carried out in the name of religion.

Matthew Gregory, a member of the Nebraska Farmers Union, asked what could be done to help farmers who are having difficulties selling their crops get more of a chance to work with Cubans in need of food products. Mark Welsch from the Omaha chapter of Nebraskans for Peace said that lifting the embargo would help farmers here and in Cuba.

The lively discussion continued for almost an hour after the meeting ended. The Grand Island chapter of Nebraskans for Peace has set April 26 to have a similar panel on Cuba.

Bedouin demand Israel recognize Negev villages

BY SETH GALINSKY

“We don’t have electricity. We don’t have health care. It means no paved roads and in the winter they’re so muddy you can barely drive your car. The government can demolish your house any second,” Amir Abo-Kweder said by phone April 6, describing conditions in Al Zournog, where he lives, one of 36 unrecognized Bedouin villages of the Negev in southern Israel.

Abo-Kweder, an organizer with Shatil, which fights for civil rights in Israel, was one of hundreds who joined a march from the Negev to the house of Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in Jerusalem just days after the elections to

Israel’s parliament. The four-day march, demanding recognition of the villages and access to basic services, was initiated by Ayman Odeh, head of the Arab-based Joint List, which won third place in the elections.

When the State of Israel was formed in 1948 most of the up to 95,000 Bedouin living in the Negev were expelled or fled. While the 11,000 who remained were given Israeli citizenship, the government has systematically dispossessed them of the land they had lived on for hundreds of years.

“The state demanded all kinds of complex legal requirements,” Michal Rotem, a spokesperson for the Negev

Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, who helped organize the march, said by phone from Beersheba March 30. “They made it impossible for the Bedouin to prove their land rights. The government then argued that since no one owned the land, it belongs to the state and built Jewish villages there.”

The Israeli government has tried to relocate the Bedouin, now numbering more than 100,000, to a handful of authorized townships. Entire villages have been repeatedly razed by the government and then rebuilt by the Bedouin.

“My late grandfather had 40 sheep and goat, it was an essential part of our identity,” Abo-Kweder said. “But now we have very little livestock.”

“Today we work as laborers in Israeli factories, in construction or on farms. In the last decade more of us have become teachers and government employees,” he said. “Some own small businesses.”

While the Bedouin villages, including 13 that were granted legal recognition, can’t get even basic water and electrical service, “you have prospering Jewish communities with electricity and granted subsidies for agriculture just a few minutes away,” Abo-Kweder said.

“I am Jewish,” Rotem said. “I’m happy that we held the march after the elections. I think the biggest problem is that not enough people in Israel are aware of the problem, that the Bedouin are without running water, that their children don’t have schools. The elections didn’t change anything on the ground.”

Capitalist morality behind gas blast

Continued from page 6

and bribery in the city, Dillard told Trowe, “New York is run on a handshake and a wink.” What’s missing, she added, “is a sense of community.”

Trowe agreed, “Workers need to look out for each other and the people around us. And fight to shut down any worksite that is unsafe.”

There are 6,300 miles of natural gas pipes underneath New York City streets, the *Times* reported, and there are thousands of leaks every year. Nearly half of the gas mains are more than 75 years old and more than half are made of cast iron, wrought iron or unprotected steel, prone to corrosion and cracking.

Con Edison replaced 60 miles of the

most deteriorated pipes in 2014 and plans to up this to 70 miles in 2016, company spokesperson Alan Drury told the *Militant* April 6. At this rate, it would take nearly 30 years to replace the pipes. Drury said Con Edison is “willing to further accelerate the pipe replacement pending future rate cases,” a euphemism for raising gas prices. In an April 7 note he added that some of the “old pipe in the ground ... is in excellent condition.”

“The bosses don’t start with how to save lives,” Trowe said after visiting the East Village. “They start with the bottom line. It’s part of the capitalist mentality. Working people have to take the opposite approach.”

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