

# WebMemo



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## Cuba Loses a Hero, But Labor Proposals Remain

*By Stephen Johnson*

On August 8, Cuban human rights activist Gustavo Arcos Bergnes succumbed to respiratory and kidney ailments. Suffering years in jail and bad health for peacefully opposing Fidel Castro's dictatorship, Arcos was a tireless, patient crusader for democracy and civil liberties in Cuba. Oddly, Fidel Castro considers himself a hero for holding onto power while neighboring democratic leaders meekly leave office at the end of their elected terms. Unlike Castro, Arcos was the real thing—a courageous figure worthy to stand beside the island's revered poet and 19th century independence fighter José Martí.

Arcos's advocacy is well known among Cuban dissidents, and the labor principles named after him survive in the minds of human rights activists across the globe. The United States, other democracies, and international civil society organizations should encourage the Cuban people and post-Castro successors to adopt them as law to ensure a freer, more prosperous Cuba.

### **Disaffected Rebel**

Gustavo Arcos met Fidel Castro at the University of Havana and eagerly took part in his failed coup against the Batista government in 1953. Upon his release from jail, he raised money and obtained arms for his small band of revolutionaries. After Fidel triumphed in 1959, Arcos served as his ambassador in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark. However, he fretted over Castro's embrace of communism.

In 1965, Arcos refused a posting as ambassador to the Soviet Union and was imprisoned as a coun-

terrevolutionary. In 1981, police arrested him again for trying to leave the country. While in jail, he worked with other inmates to establish the Cuban Committee for Human Rights (CCPDH). Acting on the group's smuggled reports on prison conditions, international human rights organizations compelled the regime to allow limited scrutiny and release some of its political prisoners.

### **Alliance against Slave Labor**

After Cuba's main benefactor, the Soviet Union, collapsed in 1991, Fidel and his defense minister brother Raúl Castro began enlisting the help of foreign investors to make up for lost subsidies by exploiting the island's captive labor force. Foreign partners would provide the infrastructure, and the state would supply workers for as much as \$1,400 per month apiece. Barred from working for anyone besides the state, the employees would receive about \$20 to \$30 a month in pesos. In 1994, Inter-American Development Bank officials Rolando Castañeda and George Plinio Montalvan decided it was time to act and sought out Arcos, then Executive Secretary of the CCPDH.

The three collaborated to develop guidelines for principled commercial relations using the Arcos family name—by then synonymous with human

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rights advocacy, thanks to the work of Gustavo and his brother Sebastian. The Sullivan Principles—a corporate code of conduct written by an African-American clergyman and business executives to combat racial discrimination in apartheid South Africa—served as a model.

Today's Arcos Principles urge all foreign businesses in Cuba to:

- Press the state to replace arbitrary justice with institutional rule of law;
- Counter economic discrimination by allowing ordinary Cubans access to areas and facilities reserved for foreign visitors;
- Permit all Cubans access to the same services and goods available to tourists;
- Hire Cubans directly, not through a government agency;
- Keep politics out of hiring decisions; and
- Allow employees to establish independent unions.

While longstanding U.S. trade sanctions prevent American businesses from entering joint ventures with Cuba, foreign corporations, mainly from Spain, Canada, and Mexico, have shoved principles aside to make money under the dictatorship's rules. In doing so, they reportedly helped the regime violate such International Labor Organization (ILO) workplace conventions as non-discriminatory access to employment (Convention 111), direct payment of wages (Convention 95), freedom of workplace association (Convention 87), the right to organize and bargain collectively (Convention 98), and protection against arbitrary dismissal (Convention 158).

### **Steps for the U.S. and Its Allies**

In 2002, the Northcote-Parkinson Fund, a private U.S. foundation, honored Arcos and Cuban

human rights activist Vladimiro Roca with its Civil Courage Prize. To build on that award, the international community should promote the Arcos Principles, now that Fidel Castro's power seems to be fading with age and illness and Cubans are pondering their future.

The United States should condition lifting its restrictions against American participation in joint ventures and access to U.S. government credit on Cuba adopting the Arcos Principles, complying with the ILO conventions to which it subscribes, and permitting Cubans to own and operate private businesses. That message, and those urging other freedoms, should be communicated frequently to the regime and the Cuban people. For their part, international human rights monitors and non-governmental organizations should urge the directors of foreign companies partnering with the Cuban state to press for the adoption of workers' rights.

### **Conclusion**

Gustavo Arcos may be gone, but Cuba has plenty of heroes still very much alive, such as Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, who was jailed for 25 years for staging a peaceful hunger strike against the Cuban police state. In his Varela Project, Oswaldo Payá has collected more than 25,000 fellow Cubans' signatures on petitions urging the regime to allow a referendum so ordinary Cubans can decide the type of government they want. As long as democrats outside the island stand in solidarity with such brave figures, Cubans have a shot at gaining their freedom.

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