RACISM, LABOR, AND GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN THE CUBAN TOURISM SECTOR

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DIRECTORIO DEMOCRATICO CUBANO | CUBAN DEMOCRATIC DIRECTORATE
RACISM, LABOR, AND GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION
IN THE CUBAN TOURISM SECTOR

Abstract

The tourism industry in Cuba controlled by the military. The development of the policies of that industry is not inclusive of the view and interests of Cuban civil society. The agenda is drafted and developed according to the specific needs and interests of the Cuban Communist military. Said policy includes specific instance of race, labor, and gender-based discrimination and exploitation. The military establishment allows these issues to proliferate by, among other steps, resisting reforms of long-term employment policies and clamping down on activists. One example is that black and female employees have fewer opportunities to get администative jobs. On the other hand, these segments of the population are significantly affected by the commoditization of race exoticism and sexualization of women to promote tourism to Cuba. In contrast to the Cuban government, a significant percentage of the island’s population and scholars agree on the immediate need to tackle discrimination and inequality.

Keywords:
Cuba, tourism, human rights violations, gender-based issues, prostitution, labor exploitation, Afro-Cubans, racism
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Introduction

From October 2020 to February 2021, Directorio Democratico Cubano “Directorio”, has researched the Cuban tourism sector to understand whether the Cuban regime has addressed race, labor, and gender-based issues in one of the island’s most profitable sectors. Although the regime has claimed that these issues have been mostly resolved, we have found that the tourism sector, which is mainly run by the military conglomerate, falls even behind other areas of the Cuban economy in rights and opportunities for workers, black Cubans, and women.

This perception is shared by Cuban academics, cited in this paper, and by the Cuban population. Cubans’ negative perception about this industry is reflected in the results of a survey conducted, in February 2021, to 62 Cubans in the island. 79.03% of Cubans believe that current tourism employees’ races are not representative of the rest of the country; 85.48% believe that the Cuban government purposely sexualizes Cuban women to attract tourists; and 91.94% asserted that the regime should pay tourism employees in dollars, and not Cuban pesos, as they consider it unfair. In addition, the survey showed that the population sees clear racial, political, and nepotism barriers for employment in this sector. Directorio has concluded that this lack of representation depends on (1) long-term employment policies designed by the Cuban military, known as “política de cuadros,” that keeps black Cubans and women away from management positions; and (2) persecution and silencing of black and female activists.
Race in the Cuban Tourism Sector

In February 2021, Directorio Democrático Cubano sent a survey with 11 questions to human rights organizations in Cuba in 12 provinces.[1] 62 Cubans in the island answered the survey. 33 were male and 29 were female. 27 identified as black or mestizo, and 35 as white. Ages ranging from 17 to 79 years old.

A surprising 91.94% of respondents believed that race or skin color are considered by Employment Agencies when hiring employees in the Cuban tourism sector; in contrast with just 8.06% that believed that this was not a factor. However, this number dipped when asked whether there was fair proportion of black and white employees working in the tourism sector (based on Cuba's racial composition), with 79.03% of people stating that it was not a fair representation of the country, and a slight increase of people who believed that it was fair—to 11.29%.

Though a taboo topic in Cuba, similar surveys have been attempted before by academics in the island. In December 2019, Dr. Lidia Ester Cuba Vega, an Afro-Cuban professor at the University of Havana who was Dean of the Spanish Department, published the results of a survey to 128 people in Havana, where 97.6% stated that tourism and television were two areas that had the lowest black representation in the country.[2] In addition, the respondents claimed that Afro-Cubans participated mainly in stereotypical artistic shows.


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Appealing to exoticism, the tourism industry often exploits Afro-Cubans to attract tourists; for instance, they are paraded outside the most important touristic centers like Havana’s Cathedral, wearing costumes of colonial times and smoking tobacco (imitating the black dolls that the regime sells to tourists at Jose Martí airport), and they are hired as Afro-Cuban folklore musicians to entertain clients outside restaurants and stores. However, their presence at the bottom of the tourism ladder is not replicated at the top, Roberto Zurbano Torres, a Cuban expert in Afro-Cuban identity at Casa de las Americas in Havana, stated in his article “Racism vs. Socialism in Cuba” that “in some institutions, especially in those where the management is mainly white —more than 70%—, there are prevailing prejudices, silencing mechanisms, and ignorance about black people and their culture (...) with demeaning treatment towards those cultures and their protagonists.” And he continues, “That is often seen in the Cuban business world, and it is more evident in the tourism sector.”[1]

In the book Race in Cuba: Essays on the Revolution and Racial Inequality, Esteban Morales Domínguez, an official Cuban intellectual, said that “The new economy that emerged during the Special Period (...), grounded in the rise of mixed corporate property, tourism, and a certain approach to the so-called market economy, is still very exclusive with respect to the presence of blacks and mestizos in leadership positions. This is especially true in those economic activities close to tourism and in decision-making positions of authority. With blacks in particular and with mestizos, the so-called emergent economy tends to operate without privileging them much with respect to employment or access to income.”[2]

Whereas Afro-Cubans are portrayed as dancers and musicians on MINTUR’s social media, mostly white-Cuban students are presented as the future managers and key workers of the industry (November 20, 2020).

Source: MINTUR’s Facebook.


Race in the Cuban Tourism Sector

Black Cubans are usually hired to entertain, but they are virtually absent from all other positions that come into contact with tourists, from managers to cab drivers. Writing in 2011, Amalia L. Cabezas, a professor at the University of California, found that, in the Cuban tourism sector, “the labour process is organized along racial and gender divides, privileging lighter-skin males for the best positions (...)”.[1]

Furthermore, in his book Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba, Mark Q. Sawyer, a political scientist at UCLA, cited a former Cuban government official who had worked in international affairs. The official explained the causes of the racial divide in this sector: “The administration, in its zeal to boost tourism and investment, has sought to cater to the tastes of European tourists and investors (...) That is, they have sought to make the country appear more ‘European’ and at the same time utilize Afro-Cuban culture as an exotic allure. Because the government never clearly realized that the problem with this is that blacks remain in inferior sectors and far from power, they have not worked to ensure that blacks are included in their industry other than as entertainment.”[2]

In this way, black Cuban's participation in the tourism industry is being limited to jobs that do not require a degree or significant training. In 2011, researchers from the Cuban Institute of Anthropology in Havana published an article that found that Afro-Cubans with professional degrees and technical training were significantly more common in other sectors of the economy than in the tourism industry where “most black and mixed workers are hired as laborers and employees who provide indirect services for tourists.”[3]

In 2019, the regime, pressured by critical voices among black independent bloggers in the island, created “The National Program against Racism and Racial Discrimination,” which is led by appointed President Miguel Díaz-Canel. However, black activists have been sidelined and persecuted, unable to publicly share their rejection to the slow integration program that the regime has put forward. As Raul Castro described on April 19, 2018, “There are already some black comrades, though just a few still, working as television and radio hosts. Don't you see that some appear already? I gave those instructions to radio and television organizations, and told I them ‘do that, without affecting anyone.’ But gradually, they have taken some small steps.”[4]

This gradual approach, that deprives black Cuban activists of agency to demand change in their own society is reflected in the results of Directorio's survey, where 72.58% of Cubans believe that racial and gender disparities in the tourism industry will be exacerbated because of unemployment and the economic crisis, with only 11.29% stating that they do not believe that disparities will increase, and 16.13% saying that they do not know what will happen.

Gender-Based Discrimination and Sexualization in the Cuban Tourism Sector

Sexual tourism in Cuba is known as “jineterismo.” It has been a key component of tourism in the island since the opening of the tourism industry in the 90s. The regime has had an ambivalent response to this social issue: At times it has persecuted prostitutes, while regularly tolerates their existence. For this reason, prostitutes and pimps are seen openly soliciting foreign tourists in the streets, in front of bars and hotels, while officials look the other way or ask for bribes.

Tourist employees are also part of this economy, as they direct tourists to speak to pimps. According to a Royal Canadian Mounted Police report in 2011, “cabbies and tourist hotel staffers can procure discreet meetings with underage prostitutes.”

However, in the cases where the regime intervenes, it very rarely arrests or fines foreign tourists, in contrast to the treatment towards the women, who are detained and accused of “peligrosidad social predelictiva” (pre-criminal social dangerousness), issued cartas de advertencia, imprisoned, or sent to rehabilitation centers.

The regime punishes those people who attempt to bring awareness to this issue; for instance, in 2010 the regime imprisoned Spanish journalist Sebastian Martinez Ferraté for 17 months for releasing a TV documentary about underage prostitution in the island.

The regime prefers to deal with these cases in a more private manner, working directly with foreign governments or agencies, and holding close trials without informing the population. One of the reasons for this behavior is that the Cuban revolution and communism were supposed to eradicate prostitution from the island. Therefore, prostitutes are presented as deviant cases and not part of a larger problem about poverty and lack of employment opportunities at highest-paying positions in profitable industries like tourism.

The power dynamics of female employment in the tourism sector is an area where the Cuban population has barely any awareness. The Cuban regime does not release periodic and reliable statistics on job positions of women in the sector. In 2012, the regime created a National Workshop of Women in Tourism (Taller Nacional Mujeres en el Turismo) to study the lack of opportunities for women; however, during their second meeting (in 2015), it was evident that this workshop was politicized and had a propagandistic purpose to praise the 1959 revolution.

The access to important job positions is preemptively controlled by the regime through the “política de cuadros.” These guidelines allow the regime to pre-select employees for future key positions. These employees are prepared and “politically” tested for many years before they are appointed to management positions. At the 2015 Workshop of Women in Tourism, Margarita Rodriguez, director of cuadros at the Ministry of Tourism, stated that about 38.9% of women employed at MINTUR had been selected as “cuadros” for future jobs, and that between 32% to 39% of female MINTUR employees held “decisive job positions” in 2014.

According to statistics provided by then Minister of Tourism Manuel Marrero on national Cuban TV at Mesa Redonda on December 26, 2018, out of the 108,000 tourism employees, about 42% are women. And he stated that “they even represent a majority of [employees] in the service sector” of the tourism industry.
Gender-Based Discrimination and Sexualization in the Cuban Tourism Sector

However, women most often hold gender-based unskilled roles that have lower wages, like cleaning services or waitresses. They are absent from management positions at hotels, as even the regime has admitted. It is less clear, why the regime has not selected women as “cuadros” for management and key positions to hotels, the most lucrative part of the Cuban economy, in over 3 decades. Specially since women represent 66% of the professionals and technically trained workers of the country.[1] It is more puzzling when we consider that some professional women have turned to prostitution to provide basic needs for their families.

Black women, and specifically mixed women, are the segment of the population most exploited in this industry, using the “mulata” stereotype to promote Cuban products abroad, harking back to colonial undertones.

![Image](image.jpg)

In 2015, academics and writers in Cuba decried the constant sexualization of black women in ads like that of Cerveza Bucanero.

Since Raul Castro’s virtual rise to power in 2006, the Cuban regime has also built tourist attractions that promise visitors to give them an authentic taste of native Cuba, where groups of people, mainly Cuban women with apparent taino heritage, are seen dancing with naked torsos next to tourists. This is part of a more ambitious project of the Cuban regime to develop the Guanahacabibes Peninsula as a recreational park for tourists.[1]

[1] Video of tourist dancing at a “taíno” tourist site [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0R5PHojlqQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0R5PHojlqQ)
Gender-Based Discrimination and Sexualization in the Cuban Tourism Sector

Poverty and lack of opportunities are especially cruel to women of color who live in Cuban provinces, other than Havana. Many of them cannot find a job in the capital, and resort to prostitution. This is compounded by the regime’s prohibition to work and move to Havana unless the person is given a special permission. Young women from provinces are often seen accompanying much older European tourists throughout Havana.

Out of the 62 people that responded to Directorio’s survey in Cuba, 87% believed that the regime's tourism industry painted Cuban women in a negative light internationally, only 9.68% thought that women's representation was positive. A slightly lower number, 85.48%, thought that the Cuban government was responsible for sexualizing Cuban women to attract tourists. And again 9.68% people had a positive outlook about the Cuban government’s portrayal of women's sexuality.
The Military-Controlled Tourism Sector (GAESA)

67.74% of the Cubans in the island surveyed by Directorio believed that former military officers are favored for jobs in the tourism industry. One of the reasons for these results is the increasing awareness throughout the Cuban population that the military complex controls parts of this business, as citizens personally know ex-officers who now work in hard-currency stores etc. However, the population ignores the structure of power in this sector: how many hotels, stores, restaurants, spas, clubs, agencies, and service companies the military directly owns. But most importantly, how the Cuban state has developed and built, not only hotels, but complete tourist areas from scratch (mainly at Cuba's military-run small islands and provinces' coastal areas), providing basic services that the Cuban population is regularly denied in their neighborhoods. This parallel infrastructure absorbs the bulk of the building materials the country imports and produces. Access to materials to repair houses is a very delicate issue for Cubans, who spend years attempting to receive state approval to buy them; and in thousands of cases, citizens have been imprisoned for purchasing them in the black market.

In 2018, during Cuba’ International Tourism Fair (FitCuba), Gaviota’s vicepresident, Frank País Oltuski, stated that ‘in a place where everything had to be built from zero (...) the Cuban state today guarantees the supply of water, roads, landscaping, street signs, electricity generation, waste treatment, laundry services, frozen bread factory, a refrigeration plant, and improvements in related facilities located in the AT Comercial/logistics park in Caibarién.’[1]

The Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial, led by a Cuban army General who oversees the Instituto de Planificación Física (IPF)[2] since 2012, has launched a stream of compulsory relocations of settlements near the sea, evictions, and house demolitions. On the other hand, GAESA has continued to expand into coastal areas, building 4- and 5-star hotels. This development has continued during COVID-19 by the military’s Almost Real Estate Company.

On February 24, 2021, the military oligarchy deepened their control over key areas and neighborhoods in Havana by enacting Agreement 8999/2021 (Council of Ministers). This law will increase the “frozen neighborhoods” where residents cannot repair, sell, or exchange (permutar) their houses without official approval, giving the military the opportunity to be the first buyer in key touristic areas like Vedado-Malecon,[3] in front of the famous Havana’s seawall where the regime is intensively building new hotels. This law will also prohibit Cubans from spontaneously protesting before important buildings and avenues (including those close to Havana’s airport), as citizens will have to obtain a permit 20 days before they hold any political or religious activity.

[1]“Gaviota anuncia nuevas instalaciones y servicios en FitCuba” 2018 03 May

[2]In February 2021, the Cuban regime announced that the IPF will be renamed Instituto Nacional de Ordenamiento Territorial y Urbanismo

The Military-Controlled Tourism Sector (GAESA)

Simultaneously—from March 1, 2021 to August 31, 2021—, the military’s Havanatur travel agency is promoting Taino Tours health packages in Mexico that, from $200 to $384 dollars, provide tourists with preventive medicine programs during their 7-day stay in Cuba (that according to the promotion will “prevent infections, including SARS-CoV-2”). And it comprises doctor consultations and medicines like Biomodulina T (an immune system stimulant), and Prevengho-Vir (a homeopathic preparation). The military involvement in Cuba’s health business even extends to the medicine containers that will be given to tourists, as they are produced by GAESA’s Geocuba.

As of February 2021, for a short period of time, Cubans have been allowed to pay for rooms in selected hotels in Cuban pesos at lower prices, as the regime has struggled with tourism downturn in the early months of 2021. However, this is expected to dramatically change in the following months as clients will only be able to pay in dollars (a currency that the cash-strapped regime is currently not exchanging to Cubans at CADECA).[1] Except for some services that may be paid in Cuban pesos, Cuban hotels and venues will be even more out of reach for citizens, deepening differences between the evident social classes of have-remittances and have-not-remittances.

In Directorio’s survey, 85.48% of Cubans said that domestic and foreign tourists are not treated the same at hotels and other venues; 11.29% said that they did not know, an even higher number than the 3.23% that believes that Cuban clients receive the same treatment as foreigners. One of the reasons for these results are instances of either mistreatment or exclusion of Cuban clients at hard-currency stores and restaurants, etc.

[1]Currency exchange in the black market is already much higher than the 1 dollar to 24 Cuban pesos offered by the regime.
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For instance, as recent as January 23, 2021, an independent journalist helped Cuban citizen Malinalli García to denounce that she was not allowed to accompany a foreigner into a Palco store because, according to the store's manager, the Minister of Foreign Relations had dictated that Cubans could not enter those stores where only diplomats can buy products. Before the pandemic, on social media, some Cuban citizens have also shared experiences of denial of services at Cuban hotels because of their citizenship, like Cuban artist Ana Yadira Cabañas:

In Directorio's survey, 80.65% of respondents stated that Cuban tourists do not have access to all the services and facilities at hotels, restaurants, etc., like foreign tourists do; 8.06% disagreed; and 11.29% answered that they did not know. 59.68% of respondent believe that Cubans do not pay the same prices for access to the same services and facilities at hotels or entertainment venues; 22.58% said that Cubans pay the same prices; and 17.74% said that they did not know the answer.

Finally, Cuban respondents were more divided about their expectations for the future of the tourism industry, with 48.39% stating that they did not believe that the government will be able to make the tourism industry efficient after the pandemic; 32.26% of respondents saying that they did not know what would happen; and 19.35% affirming that the Cuban authorities have the capacity to rescue the post-pandemic tourism industry.
GAE S.A.’s Tourism Related Businesses[1]

Hotels, Resorts, and Infrastructure

- **GAVIOTA:** They have 5 regional delegations throughout Cuba. They own 3-, 4- and 5-star hotels on beaches and in important cities. In their resorts, they provide activities like trekking, diving, snorkeling, and catamaran excursions at exclusive nature sites. They manage national parks like Parque Nacional Nicho in Cienfuegos. Access to these parks is limited and tightly controlled by the military. Most Cubans have never entered these exclusive resorts. Other examples are Marina Gaviota Cabo San Antonio (Pinar del Río); Playa Las Tumbas (Península de Guanahacabibes); Marina Gaviota Varadero: (Península de Hicacos); Marina Gaviota Las Brujas (Cayo “Las Brujas”, Villa Clara); Marina Gaviota Cayo Coco (Jardines del Rey, Ciego de Ávila); Marina Gaviota Oriente (Holguín).

- **Habaguanex:** With the taking over of this company by the military in 2016, GAE S.A. has complete monopoly over this area of the country's cultural patrimony, including buildings from colonial times.

- **GRUPO EMPRESARIAL GEOCUBA:** Created from an engineering and geography branch of the Cuban Army, they prepare cartographic studies and topographic mapping for tourism development, including recent development of Mariel and Santiago de Cuba ports for cruise tourism from the United States.

- **Unión de Construcciones Militares (UCM):** A construction firm that builds luxury hotels. In 2016, Reuters revealed that UCM and its foreign partners had hired Indian and Pakistani construction workers, who earned about 1,500 euros per month, in contrast with their Cuban counterparts who earned about $30 dollars (600 pesos). According to a Cuban worker’s testimony, interviewed by Diario de Cuba, the scandal forced the regime to raise the wages of Cubans from 600 to 4000 Cuban pesos (166 CUC). Many of UCM's workers are young men who are doing their compulsory military service. Most recently, during COVID-19, the independent press in the island has reported that neighbors in Havana—who now spend more time inside their houses because of social isolation guidelines—have complained that they cannot purchase construction materials even though the Cuban military is simultaneously building several hotels in their neighborhoods.[1]

- **Almest:** Real estate company that invests in luxury hotels built by the military, including the tallest hotel in Cuba with 42 levels.

- **Inmobiliaria CIMEX S.A.:** Real estate company that rents apartments and houses to tourists.

- **Tarara Residential:** Gated resort in Havana managed by the military.

GAE S.A.’s Tourism Related Businesses

Retail

· Corporación Tiendas CARIBE: The military owns 1920 of these shops throughout Cuba. Up until July 2021, they will continue to sell products to tourists and Cuban citizens in CUC. Currently, the military has selected some facilities to function as MLC shops (in dollar) as the dual currency system is dismantled.

· Corporación CIMEX’s Panamericanas: There are 1467 Panamericana shops. As with Tiendas CARIBE, a couple dozen of these have already been turned into MLC stores.

· TRIMAGEN S.A.: Produces and sells ads, movies, television programs, videos, and photographs. They also record, edit, and commercialize music. They have opened a chain of photo shops, in provinces like Havana and Granma, that sell a variety of products, including Cuban baseball merchandise.

Transportation

· Servicios Automotores S.A. (SASA): Automobile repair shops and gas stations.

· Cimex’s Servicentros: 657 gas stations.

· Havanatur: Travel agency.

· Havanautos: Car rental services, with 162 collection and drop off points across Cuba.

· AeroGaviota: Airline that flies tourists to Cuba’s exclusive small islands in Ciego de Avila (Cayo Coco).

· TransGaviota: Buses for tours and taxis and motor scooters for rent (about 3300 vehicles).

· Marinas Gaviota S.A.: To rent boats.
GAE S.A.’s Tourism Related Businesses

Banks and Financial Institutions

· Banco Financiero Internacional (BFI): In 2016, the military took over the Bank.

· FINCIMEX: Intermediaries for financial activities. They issue the AIS Cards (money transfer and dollar remittances cards) that, after 2020, Cubans have used to buy products and rent rooms at hotels.

Supplies

· Unión Agropecuaria Militar (UAM) and Unión de Industria Militar: Since 1998, they provide food, equipment, and services to Cuban tourism corporations, especially those that belong to GAE.

· CUBAGRO: Production and sale of agricultural and agribusiness products in national and foreign currency.

· AT COMERCIAL S.A.: Created in 1999, they sell imported and national products, and provide services to hotels like laundry and rental services, leasing of linens, cargo transportation, leasing of premises and warehouses, and food services. They have production facilities (Unidades Empresariales) in Havana, Varadero, Villa Clara, Ciego de Ávila, and Holguín.

· Almacenes Universales (AUSA): At Mariel port, they import merchandise, provide storage and transportation services, and oversee the foreign businesses that produce goods for the tourism industry.

· Empresa Comercializadora de Aceite (ECASOL): Created in 1998, they import and offer storage, transportation, and distribution services for vegetable oil, and its derivatives. They export by-products of vegetable oils and fats collected by tourism corporations. They also import raw materials, equipment, pieces, and supplies necessary for the cooking oil industry.

· Tecnoimport: Imports and exports products for all areas of the Cuban economy.
Labor in the Cuban Tourism Sector: Benefits and Salaries

The labor rights of Cuban tourism employees have not been discussed in Cuban society as the population feels resentful towards a group of people (about 108,000 out of 11 million) who have more opportunities to buy food and clothing than them. When compared to the rest of the labor force, the benefits provided to tourism employees (like tips, monthly bonuses, and staple products) show a stark contrast with the rest of the population. Yet, Directorio’s survey found that only 6.45% people believe that the Cuban regime should pay tourism workers in Cuban pesos (while foreign investors pay the regime in dollars and euros); whereas 91.94% of respondents stated that it was unfair. On the other hand, 43 people, out of the 62 surveyed, selected Contacts/Nepotismas the main requirement to be employed in the tourism sector, followed by 42 people who selected “having been members of the military” and “political loyalty.” Only 20 people stated that Education/Training was also important for being hired, and 29 people selected Physical Appearance.

Since 2019, when Raul Castro’s regime enacted Resolution No. 114 (that stated that the monthly productivity of a company or department will determine its workers’ wages), tourism employees have grown more critical of the Cuban labor system. Even though, in December 2020, the Cuban Ministry of Labor and Social Security indicated that this resolution will be either eliminated or updated, some tourism employees have felt emboldened to use the regime’s concepts to compare their contribution to the economy with their real wages. These critical thoughts have even been shared on social media, under official press articles.

The truth of the ‘wealth’ of tourism employees, as perceived by the Cuban population, is based on monthly bonuses of $20 CUC[1] and, most importantly, on illegal transactions: Clerks selling products to tourists for higher prices without the regime’s knowledge; or stealing items to resell them on the black market. Proximity to dollars and scarce products increases the value of their actions towards the resolver behavior also practiced by the rest of society.

In 2019, before the pandemic, the average monthly salary in Cuba was $879 CUP[2](Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información- ONEI); tourism employees who worked at hotel and restaurants earned an average monthly salary of $529 CUP (ONEI) (about $22 dollars). In addition, they received $20 CUC called stimulos (bonuses), which were automatically deposited in companies’ debit cards.

[1]CUC. Cuban convertible peso (approximately equivalent to USD)
[2]CUP. Cuban peso
Labor in the Cuban Tourism Sector: Benefits and Salaries

From January 2021, the estímulos have been suspended indefinitely as the Cuban regime has decided to eliminate the CUC, and it does not have enough dollars to pay their employees. The expected inflation brought about by currency unification has forced the regime to increase workers’ wages to keep up with staggering prices. Minimum wages will now be 2,100 CUP; and the highest paid jobs will reach 9,510 CUP. According to labor officials, they have designed a new system of wages where Cubans will be paid based on hours, education, and job position.

Tourism employees, in the service category, will earn from 2,100 CUP to 2,660 CUP (with additional payments based on specific considerations, including quarterly
Labor in the Cuban Tourism Sector: Benefits and Salaries

However, their reality is not expected to change, employees in this sector will continue to be heavily dependent on tips from clients to make ends meet. They are not paid overtime, and once they retire, their pensions are one of the lowest since estímulos are not considered part of their wages. It is important to mention that on January 1, 2021, savings from estímulos cards were automatically converted to CUP without informing the population, devaluing the money they had saved.[1] This has created confusion in the sector, with workers unsure about their rights and future wages and benefits.

The 13 state employment agencies (Agencias Empleadoras) that function as intermediaries between Cuban labor and foreign firms continue to be the main obstacle for workers to call for better wages and rights. The Ministry of Tourism approves a list of workers, trains them, decides their wages, and pays them in Cuban pesos. Foreign employers’ attempts to directly compensate workers with extra-payments is deemed by the regime as corruptive actions. Even the bonuses must be set by the Ministry of Economy and Planning and must be deposited into the Ministry of Tourism’s stimulus funds.[2] The ensuing problems with efficiency and honesty are a result of the complete lack of agency allowed to the workers. To circumvent this, foreign investors try to hire foreign workers for management or technical positions, as allowed by the Law of Foreign Investment (2014). But this means that Cuban workers are prevented from reaching higher paying jobs.

Cuban workers in the tourism industry are stuck at the bottom of the corporate ladder with a grim future of low pensions. In the short-term, in a period of six months, their savings (dollars or CUC) in banks will be either devalued to Cuban pesos or frozen until the regime determines that it has enough dollars to share with the population. For their long-term future, these workers’ only hope is to become cuentapropistas (or leave their country, helped by their personal relationship with tourists). However, the instability of the self-employed sector, with constant cycles of licenses being granted followed by periods of cancellations, leaves tourism workers trapped in their present professions.

