

PRISONERS OF COLOR

ISLAS WILL DEDICATE A PAGE IN EACH ISSUE TO THE AFRO-CUBANS SERVING TIME IN CUBA'S PENAL SYSTEM

In many countries people are detained for trying to exercise their rights of freedom of expression, association, assembly, or movement. Some are imprisoned because they or their families are involved in political or religious activities. Some are arrested because of their connection with political parties or national movements that oppose government policies. Trade union activity or participation in strikes or demonstrations are common causes for imprisonment. Often, people are imprisoned because they questioned their government or tried to publicize human rights violations in their own countries. Some are jailed on the pretext that they committed a crime, but it is in fact because they criticized the government. People who are imprisoned, detained or otherwise physically restricted because of their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, color, or language and who have not used or advocated violence are considered to be prisoners of conscience.

Iván Hernández Carrillo: a Brief Biography of an Activist

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I was particularly moved knowing that Iván Hernández Carrillo was one of the pro-democracy activists who was unjustly detained during the repressive wave known as the Black Spring of 2003.

About ten years ago, I met Hernández Carrillo, this defender of human rights since his youth, who is also an independent journalist and librarian. We would run into each other at various activities and acts promoted by our respective organizations. As one of the youngest, best-known oppositionists since the mid-1990s, he stands out for his seriousness, decency, simplicity and admirable manners; all qualities that go hand in hand with the staunch firmness of his convictions and his intransigent attitude in facing the unjust regime he opposes.

This brief biography is intended to pay homage to a sincere and profound friendship that blossomed in the bosom of a shared identity of convictions and hope. It also serves



to reiterate the admiration and solidarity felt by many for this young warrior, who is a model of humility and intransigency.

Iván Hernández Carrillo was born on May 24, 1971. As a young man, he was expelled from the polytechnical high school, where he studied because of his oppositional activities.

In 1992, he completed his first politically motivated jail sentence. He was sentenced to two years in prison for the alleged crime of enemy propaganda and contempt for the "Head of State".

Upon leaving prison in 1994, he joined the Democratic Solidarity Party and by 1999, he was working for the Luis Boitel Party for Democracy, where he served as Secretary of International Relations.

In 2002, Hernández Carrillo began his job as an independent journalist, acting as a correspondent in Colón, Matanzas, for the Patria agency, one of the affiliates of the Nueva Prensa Cubana [New Cuban Press] project. Additionally, he directed the Juan Gualberto Gómez II independent library. The young activist is a Catholic and is also honorary president of the Independent National Confederation of Workers in Cuba.

Upon being sentenced to 25 years in prison, in April 2003, Carrillo is incarcerated in the Provincial Prison of Holguín, more than 500 kilometers from his home and family, and by which manner the Cuban government reiterated its practice of also punishing the loved ones of political prisoners. A practice, which is in violation of one of the basic and universally recognized rules of penal systems.

While in prison all those years, Hernández Carrillo has been the victim of all

forms of abuse and reprisal. With that, his jailers attempted to punish and bend his admirable strength of conviction and character.

At different times he has been the victim of threats by dangerous, common prisoners; the most basic prison rights have been denied him, particularly better medical attention for his serious hypertensive condition. Even the medications his family sends to him have been delayed or denied.

During the month of October 2003, Hernández Carrillo carried out a 21-day hunger strike in protest of the fact that the prison authorities denied him adequate medical attention. Likewise, in the early months of 2004, he and other fellow political prisoners in the Holguín Prison carried out an extended hunger strike in protest of his imprisonment in an area for common criminals. This strike, which lasted several weeks, put the health of a number of the prisoners at serious risk.

In January 2006, Hernández Carrillo was transferred to the Youth Prison in Villa Clara. The mistreatment and rights violations continued there; during the early days of his stay at that detention center, he even had to sleep on the floor.

On innumerable occasions, Hernández Carrillo's family members made request to authorities for adequate attention for his illnesses; requests that have gone unmet by the functionaries responsible for the penal system.

Iván Hernández Carrillo is an exemplary, committed and indomitable fighter for democracy; a paradigm for young Cubans who today face the challenge of building a nation with liberty and justice for all.