**Cuba: The Bitter and Never-Ending Story of Cuban Tobacco**

By Miguel L. Fernandez and Ernesto Perez Chang

HAVANA, Cuba. - In spite of the fact that the pandemic has posed a challenge to the world’s economy, Cuban cigars continue to be exported and, according to information published in the official press, its production has not been affected. In fact, it has remained stable and in accordance to plans.

Alejandro Gil himself, the Minister of Economics, has assured us that, even in the midst of national crisis, export of this product surely could generate an annual income of over 300 million dollars. In 2018, and due to Chinese involvement, the sale of cigars increased by 12% compared to previous years; the largest profits were reported for 2017 to the tune of $500 million dollars in exports.

So much on a roll are things going that this year’s sales are expected to surpass 2019 sales, a year for which Tabacuba, the tobacco state enterprise, reported over 260 million dollars in net profit from cigar sales abroad, where a single, superior-quality cigar reaches exorbitant prices. Its price is so high, and so attractive is the product in the market, that a significant part of Cuba-bound tourism is drawn by tobacco.

Undoubtedly, acquiring a cigar in a specialized shop inside Cuba is much cheaper than buying Cuban cigars in Europe or in Asia, whether they are purchased legally or through contraband. In duty-free shops at Cuban airports, any cigar can cost upward of $30; at the Cohiba Atmosphere shop located in the Manzana Kempinski Hotel in Havana, a Cohiba Pirámide Extra can cost over $30, a bargain when considering that the average price on the Internet is around $50 per unit.

**Worth Its Weight in Gold**

At the auctions held during the highly promoted Festival del Habano – the Cigar Festival- the initial bid – and not the final sale at auction- of a box of 50 Cohiba cigars has been fixed at 200,000 Euros, according to information provided on the Habanos S.A. website. At the most recent convention, held in February 2020 by Christie’s of London, sales reached close to 5 million dollars; two humidors were auctioned off, each containing a special selection of flagship-brands, sold at close to 2.5 million USD each.

For those annual celebrations, even the regime -in spite of the lip service it pays to “anti-capitalism”- has dished out hundreds of thousands of “enemy” green dollars for a single performance by Tom Jones for a high-note finale to the bidding festivities, as it happened in 2014 when it seemed that the differences between Cuban Communists and the U.S. government were being smoothed over and new strides were being made to attract the great fortunes of the gringo market. In 2020, the guest performer was Gloria Gaynor.

The individual “activities package” for a tourist wanting to attend the Festival del Habano (which did not include other expenses like lodging, meals, airline tickets, etcetera) was fixed at $2,075. It covered: a welcoming reception admission for one (US$ 350); visiting a tobacco plantation in Pinar del Rio province and a traditional cigar factory (US$125); attending the experts’ seminar (US$400) and the pre-auction gala (US$500); and being present at the closing ceremony, attended by close to 3,000 individuals, at a price of US$700 per person.

Although it is not possible to know with certainty the exact amount raised by the Festivales del Habano – there are no detailed reports officially published on this topic-, according to information scattered among different publications such as *Excelencia S.A.* and the actual webpage of Habanos S.A., together with testimony by certain individuals responsible for organizing the event, we could estimate that figure to be above the 20 million-dollar threshold. This takes into account the direct and indirect profits generated by tourist purchases and services alone, as well as profits generated by the cigar industry for direct sales during the Festival proper and the signing of new export deals and foreign investment contracts.

**The somber side of Cuban cigars**

All this notwithstanding, inside the cigar factories and the tobacco fields of the industry there are, lamentably, sharp contrasts between the scandalous waste of money and the glamour of tourists who come to the island for the pleasure of savoring a cigar either at the Manzana Kempinsky Hotel or the Varadero Beach resort on the one hand, and the harsh reality of the cigar industry workers, farmers, technicians and other employees and craftsmen on the other. Industry employees number approximately 60,000 workers, according to the most recent data from Tabacuba Enterprise and the state’s Tobacco Gathering, Processing and Rolling Companies / *Empresas de Acopio, Beneficio y Torcido de Tabaco* in the various provinces.

This represents but a handful of people who, due to low wages and poor working conditions, do not benefit at all from the more than 300 million dollars generated annually by the sale of cigars in Cuba, be it for export, for commercializing abroad, or for the regime to gift in order to influence favorably the perception of “Cuba” as a commodity in international circles.

It was in early June of this year that the news of the collapse of the roof of the old and emblematic Partagás factory in Havana made the headlines in news outlets, and provoked anger among workers who for years had insisted that restauration of the building be completed rapidly. That restauration was started ten years ago, but more than 80% of the restoration plan is still not executed, according to several project investors consulted by CubaNet.

The Partagás factory, which will celebrate the 175th year of its founding this November, is located just behind the same National Capitol building whose renovation was recently completed to coincide with the 500th anniversary of the founding of Havana. This for a structure that reports no income for the economy, on the contrary: it demands tremendous expenditure to house a Parliament that is in session for only a few days of the year and operates in a political context that renders it unnecessary, for the power of decision-making rests not in its members but in the Communist Party.

The restauration of the Partagás building has been among the projects most delayed from among a roster of restauration projects of the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana. Work was started in 2011, in the very year that one of the greatest corruption scandals in the Cuban tobacco industry surfaced, involving the then vice president of Habanos S.A. and over a dozen company officials. It seems that the millions embezzled by its administration caused the slowing down of investments in the industry.

“Everything came to a grinding holt while the investigation was ongoing,” Teresita Rodríguez, a member of the financial staff at Partagás at the time, said to Cubanet. “Other facilities were repurposed, employees were left to work in worse conditions than before and facing the danger of the roof collapsing and killing some of them.”

“It’s a difficult task because they have not wanted to vacate the building temporarily,” spoke one of the architects overseeing the investment process under condition of anonymity. “They have not wanted to move operations elsewhere so as not to disrupt production. That has made everything much slower, on top of the fact that there is no respect for the allocated budget; materials go missing because other projects are prioritized. Everything changed after the roof collapsed, but I have listened to the workers and they are very unhappy because, if the building is being restored but, in reality, their working conditions are not improved, then they continue to work in a poor setting, their salaries are low, and regulations have increased. In the end, they will have a nice building to attract tourists, but what benefit is it to them?” he concluded.

**The life of a tobacco worker**

Armando lives in a housing development of Los Sitios neighborhood, in Centro Habana. He is a young man still, but has been working for almost a decade as a cigar roller at the Partagás factory. He comes from a family tradition of tobacco workers, and although he earns less than US$100 a month, he says he is in love with his craft. Recently, however, he has thought of finding a job that pays better, or even start rolling cigars on his own, but he knows that tobacco contraband is punishable by imprisonment.

“Regulations have increased, working conditions are not good and the quality of raw materials gets worse every day, none of that helps; people say ‘Hell, it’s a good salary’, but $100 in Cuba today means nothing, you have to live without a wife, or children, or a home, with nothing, that money is what you need to barely survive alone, and that is not a life. Doing less than what I do daily and selling to foreigners on the street, I could make that same amount in one day. Hey, when I see that the same cigar I roll and for which I am paid pennies is being sold at Manzana [Kempinsky Hotel] for $10 and as much as $40, it makes me so angry,” Armando states.

Gabriela, a cigar bander at the Partagás factory, talks about abusive regulations and compares working conditions to those under which slaves worked.

“The regulations are extreme, quality control is very demanding in spite of the fact that they bring us the worst raw materials to work with, the means of production are the same as they were ten years ago. In my case it’s not so complicated, but one has to listen to the cigar rollers complaining because of the low quality of the tobacco leaves they are given to work with, and of course, to be able to make 2000 pesos (approximately 80 dollars) is very difficult. And what’s worst, you can’t complaint because if you do, one month’s wages are deducted from your earnings as punishment. That is tantamount to being a slave,” states Gabriela.

In the tobacco fields, things are not any better. Tobacco plantation maintenance costs go up every year at the same rate as do the cumulative debts incurred by the Ministry of Agriculture’s state enterprises. These enterprises are responsible for gathering the tobacco leaves, but they pay late the pertinent fees, thus endangering production itself and putting at risk the farmers’ loyalty to tobacco farming, a crop that needs more personal attention than any other.

There is a shortage of fertilizers and plague-control chemicals which, although budgeted for, are not being imported in the required quantities. This has damaged the quality of harvests, and in turn translates into further difficulties for the cigar rollers for whom it’s very difficult to meet established regulations. Also, the production of certain high-quality cigar brands has stopped because those brands require the highest level of excellence in raw materials.

“Many farmers have stopped growing tobacco. It’s not cost-effective. What they are paid at the end of the year seems like a lot, but it’s actually not. On television, they brag about $1000 and $2000 harvests where dozens of men have worked; but if you divide that amount into the number of workers, you end up with a very low income, not considering that at times they must wait another year to collect their money,” explains Jose Luis, a tobacco grower from Pinar del Rio province.

“What’s worst is that they supply you with nothing, but still you are required to deliver a perfect tobacco leave, and the last straw is when they take your land away if you stop growing tobacco, a condition of our tenancy. One can do other things on the land, like raise hogs, but if you stop growing tobacco, they take the land away from you and give it to someone else, so it’s best not to complain. It’s pittance what you get paid, but since you haven’t seen a nickel for a whole year, the day you get 20,000 or 30,000 pesos it seems like a lot, even though it lasts you for barely a month. The rest of the year, you have to wing it, catch banana rats or fish by the water dam, because you can’t live from tobacco alone, that is a lie,” says Pedro, also a tobacco worker from Pinar del Rio.

**Discontent is on the rise and complaints reach social media**

Although discontent has not been strongly expressed by the tobacco sector as would be expected from an industry with a long tradition of rebellion –tobacco workers were an essential force during the 19th Century struggle for independence in Cuba as well as in the exile community inspired by Jose Marti- the workers at the Partagás factory have not stood idly by. There have been individual protests that have had collective repercussion on social media and garnered expressions of solidarity.

Several days ago, a young worker was sanctioned for throwing his blade to the ground in protest for measures imposed by the administration to increase production without granting more benefits to workers or guaranteeing better working conditions. The act of throwing the semi-circular blade to the ground is a disapproval gesture employed by cigar rollers in Cuba since the 19th century. Many of the workers thought the sanction was absurd, overreaching and contrary to general tradition.

“This is the first tobacco worker since Christopher Columbus discovered Cuba to be sanctioned for exercising the blade-throwing tradition,” wrote with indignation a user of a public Facebook group named “Gremio de Artesanos” (Craftmen’s Guild). He was referring to the administrative sanction imposed against tobacco worker Leandro Leiva Alvarez, of the Partagás factory.

This is not the first time at Partagás that a cigar roller throws his blade to the ground. According to what has been published in social media, several workers have been sanctioned for this act of protest: “This administration adopts and cancels rules when it so pleases. They have sanctioned him by barring him from the factory for a whole month. That is called abuse of power,” commented another worker at the factory.

“If old Don Jaime Partagás were alive, he would support this worker, for he was a tobacco worker first and foremost,” wrote someone else.

“Well, yes, it happens that now I cannot throw my blade to the ground to show my disagreement with wrong decisions that this administration makes. They always wait for workers to start a commotion before sharing and transmitting information of interest to them. In the 174 years since its founding, this administration is the worst one that Partagás has ever had. The saddest thing is that no one in Cuba worries about the situation of workers at this center, even though we are treated like slaves. For the above, and for the alleged incorrect use of a face mask, I was barred for 30 days from work. Imagine, misuse of a facemask –taking it off every so often. Masks make working under these dire conditions very difficult due to the demanding regulations, the poor quality of raw materials and tools, and patterns that are in terrible condition…” wrote another member of the above-mentioned Facebook group. Other entries also reveal the somber side of Cuban tobacco, a very different reality from the official idyllic images associated with the Cuban cigar, designed purposely to attract buyers and tourists.

“The raw materials supplied will not do if one it to meet the technicians’ demands, but the chain is only as strong as its weakest link,” wrote another Partagás factory cigar roller on the Facebook page of “Gremio de Artesanos”.

“We are slaves, modern-day slaves mind you, but slaves nonetheless,” commented another tobacco worker.

“That Cuban cigars are sold at outrageous prices is fine and good, but it’s abusive to the working class that so little of the profits reaches the worker,” says another member of the group.

“We continue being slaves, regardless of race, we keep working for the lowest minimum wage imaginable for the great job that we do, in spite of the malnutrition we endure and the lack of a dairy diet that our kind of work requires because of the chemistry of tobacco…” stated another individual as part of the debate.

On November 18th, the Partagás Royal Cigar Factory will commemorate the 175th anniversary of its founding. Maybe by then, and without announcing salary increases or improvements to the working conditions, Habanos S.A. and Tabacuba will flood the official press with reports about how well Cuban cigars sell in Europe, or about how genuinely Cuban both labor and product are, a source of wellbeing and pleasure which, like the cigar itself, has been absent from our everyday lives for more than half a century. What is barely Cuban about a “Cuban cigar” is the sweat and the hardships of those who harvest the crop and roll its leaves.