COMMUNISM

In Cuba, many are on the job but not at work

Reform talk causes shudders in nation where employment has long been guaranteed

HAVANA — At a state project to refurbish a decaying building in Old Havana, one worker paints a wall white while two others watch. A fourth sleeps in a wheelbarrow positioned in a sliver of shade nearby, and two more smoke and chat on the curb.

President Raúl Castro startled the nation recently by saying that about one in five Cuban workers may be redundant. At the work site on Obispo Street, those numbers run in reverse.

It's a common sight in communist Cuba. Nearly everyone works for the state, and official unemployment is minuscule, but pay is so low that Cubans like to joke that "the state pretends to pay us and we pretend to work."

Now, facing a severe budget deficit, the government has hinted at restructuring or trimming its bloated workforce. Such talk is causing tension, however, in a country where guaranteed employment was a building block of the 1959 revolution that swept Fidel Castro to power.

"We know that there are hundreds of thousands of unnecessary workers on the budget and labor books, and some analysts calculate that the excess of jobs has surpassed 1 million," said Raúl Castro, who replaced his ailing brother as president nearly four years ago.

In his nationally televised speech in April, Castro also had harsh words for those who do little to deserve their salaries.

"Without people feeling the need to work to make a living, sheltered by state regulations that are excessively paternalistic and irrational, we will never stimulate a love for work," he said.

Indeed, the process of labor reform may already have started. Workers in the tourism sector say some of their colleagues have been furloughed during the lean summer months, while others have been reassigned to jobs on state-run farms.

"Since we are now in the low season, the hotel where I work has sent many workers home for two or three months," said Orlando, a chef in Varadero, a sand-and-surf enclave east of Havana.

With the government giving no details of its thinking, rumors have spread that as many as a fourth of government workers in some industries could lose their jobs or be moved to farming or construction.

Carmelo Mesa-Lago, a Cuba economics expert and professor emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh, said Cuban officials have spent months debating cuts in the labor force and economic reforms. He said they know what's needed but face "a problem of political viability."

Salvador Valdes Mesa, secretary-general of the Cuban Workers Confederation — the only Cuban labor union allowed — has written that "reorganization" will ensure that redundant workers are reassigned rather than fired. He said the government wants more jobs in construction and agriculture.

Still, 35-year-old computer engineer Norberto fears for his job. He thinks it's unfair to keep workers under communist domination and yet call them unmotivated.

"I didn't graduate from college to now work as a day laborer or a peasant," he said.

Anne-Marie Garcia, The Associated Press