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RELAY

A SOCIALIST PROJECT REVIEW



CONTINENTAL WAGE CAMPAIGN • WHEAT BOARD
STUDENT MOVEMENT • WORLD SOCIAL FORUM IN AFRICA
MEXICO'S FREE MARKET CRISIS • DUTCH ELECTIONS



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About Relay

Relay, A Socialist Project Review, intends to act as a forum for conveying and debating current issues of importance to the Left in Ontario, Canada and from around the world. Contributions to the re-laying of the foundations for a viable socialist politics are welcomed by the editorial committee.

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About the Socialist Project

The Socialist Project does not propose an easy politics for defeating capitalism or claim a ready alternative to take its place. We oppose capitalism out of necessity and support the resistance of others out of solidarity. This resistance creates spaces of hope, and an activist hope is the first step to discovering a new socialist politics. Through the struggles of that politics – struggles informed by collective analysis and reflection – alternatives to capitalism will emerge. Such anti-capitalist struggles, we believe, must develop a viable working class politics, and be informed by democratic struggles against racial, sexist and homophobic oppressions, and in support of the national self-determination of the many peoples of the world. In Canada and the world today, there is an imperative for the Left to begin a sustained process of reflection, struggle and organizational re-groupment and experimentation. Neither capitalism nor neoliberalism will fade from the political landscape based on the momentum of their own contradictions and without the Left developing new political capacities. We encourage those who share this assessment to meet, debate and begin to make a contribution to a renewed socialist project in your union, school and community. For more information on the Socialist Project check our web-site at www.socialistproject.ca or e-mail us at info@socialistproject.ca

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The Day of Action

and the Politics of Student Organizing

Petra Veltri

Despite the fact that the students' national day of action was a success, bringing together thousands of students in 30 cities across the country, it would appear that the students' movement in English Canada faces several other challenges than those posed by governments, corporations and university administrations who are all anxious to leverage public universities for private profit. After 20 years of persistent under-funding, and in the grip of neoliberal orthodoxy, a small but growing number of students are apt to quite literally buy into the logic of commercialization and individual investment. Strangely, the student movement also faces a challenge from 'left militants' who are pessimistic and apathetic about 'boring' protest marches. Fortunately there are many hard-working students – generally operating in and around the Canadian Federation of Students – equipped with olive branches, sound rationale, and a host of opportunities for students now outside the movement to get involved.

On February 7, 2006 as approximately 5,000 students descended upon Queen's Park, they were met by about 15 students from the University of Toronto, King's College displaying signs with slogans such as "Loans, not subsidies", "Get back to class truant hippies" and "Do you want Socialism or Quality Education?" Independent of the facile and misguided nature of their slogans, they represented the views often held by people who wish to maintain university as an elite institution. This is fundamentally a battle between those who believe universities should be "democratized" and accessible to all regardless of economic circumstance, and those who see universities as a bastion for an elite few who can use the inaccessible nature of post-secondary education to their own advantage.

The challenges to the student movement do not just blow from the right. Days before February 7, there was also some criticism from left militants: apparently the student movement was being controlled by a group of elites who were scared of militant action and who would seek to suppress any kind of more "radical" action in favour of more liberal or reformist strategies. The critique suggested that the student movement was still "living in the 90s" and that it needed to re-evaluate its strategy. This group dismissed the Day of Action as a failure before it even occurred. This type of left factionalism - dismissing one form of protest over another simply because it does not follow a particular tactic – is counter-productive and fails to recognise social movement building as a continuous and gradual process informed by larger political considerations.

By its very nature, the student movement constantly faces high turnover. By the time many students have become con-

scious of politics and strategies of protest they are also graduating and moving into the labour market. New students are always joining and wanting to learn about the issues. The goals of the Day of Action were multiple. It was to voice dissatisfaction to the government about its decision to raise fees. It was to also bring in new people and provide a forum for them to voice their concerns informed by their own experiences. It was to raise the issue in a public way so the government would be forced to recognize that there are a lot of students dissatisfied with the policies of high-tuition and high debt. Coalition partners, including many social justice organisations and labour unions, also joined as the funding of post-secondary education is not just a student issue – it is of broad social concern.

The Day of Action is also not the sole action taken or planned by students. It was a public display of ongoing campaigns and activities. Following February 7th, many students are thinking about what now needs to be done to stop the tuition fee increases and start moving the post-secondary system in the direction of greater accessibility. At the local level any student can get involved with and have an influence in the direction of those actions and campaigns. So for some on the left to sit back and argue that public demonstrations are too "liberal" suggests a fundamental disconnect from the world of organising and seems more a rationale for inactivity than a tactic for expanding the parameters of action. Calls for more radical actions are not productively channeled unless the people who wish to shape the direction of student politics in Canada actually become involved in building the movement itself.

Those looking enviously at student movements in Quebec and France, or the student movements of the 1960s, must also consider the political climate that allows for such actions to be seen as a legitimate form of political debate. There is a definite place for more radical actions and demands but they must arise through organising at the local level. There are many opportunities for different student groups to get involved and simply sitting back critiquing what is happening without offering productive suggestions is lazy at best and divisive at worst. Calling for militancy without the difficult organising on the ground will fail – most students will not buy into a radical program promoted by a few organizers, vanguards and theorists of revolution.

The Day of Action brought 5,000 students to action in Toronto – many of whom never had participated in a protest before.

Their concerns for both their own ability to participate in post-secondary education and for those unable to participate because of high and increasing costs led them to the streets. The growth and reproduction of the movement will now rely on both those who organized the Day of Action and those who were motivated to join. And the movement could well use the help of those radical few who have, to this point, only said 'nay'; waiting for a host

of dedicated activists to exhaust themselves in the face of so much self-interest and pessimism is simply not a sound organizing strategy. **R**

Petra Veltri was active in the organising of the Feb 7th student days of action.

STUDENT MOVEMENT STALLED IN MID-90s

Jenn Watt

Ryerson University's Oakham House meeting room is full of student organizers from around the Greater Toronto Area – York, University of Toronto, Ryerson. They're giggling, embracing, handing out campaign material and attaching Day of Action stickers to paper cups.

Spirits are high at the Toronto-wide student Day of Action planning meeting, organized by the Canadian Federation of Students' Ontario office. On this day, their big protest is only 13 days away (February 7) and everyone seems confident that numbers at the Ontario legislature rally will be good.

Janice Folk-Dawson of the Canadian Union of Public Employees is there to share the union's contribution to the campaign: full endorsement, subway ads and a wheelchair accessible bus for the event.

CFS Ontario's chairperson, Jesse Greener is missing. He's at the Sudbury students' mock funeral for accessible education. So, Joel Duff, former Ontario chairperson and current CFS organizer, leads the meeting.

One of the executives of Ryerson's student union reports to the group her most recent contribution to the campaign: a [YouTube video](#) mocking Capital One's "hand-in-my-pocket" commercials. This time, the hand comes not from the bank, but from the provincial government.

Across the country, the tuition situation is varied. Under Manitoba's NDP government, tuition fees were reduced by 10 per cent in 2000 and funding was increased by 40 per cent, says Manitoba's CFS representative, Rachel Gotthilf.

But she says it's not enough.



"It got better in 2000 and got worse since then," she says. In 2003, Manitoba lifted the freeze on international student fees and universities across the province have used ancillary fees to make up for the money they would have received from tuition.

On their day of action, Manitoba students are rallying at the Winnipeg legislature with support from CUPE, the Winnipeg Labour Council and the Canadian Association of University Teachers.

Yet with all of this effort and organizing it is very unlikely that even 50 per cent of CFS Ontario's 250,000 members will come out for the big day.

The last time a CFS day of action had over 10,000 estimated students in attendance was 1995 when thousands of students protested the Chrétien government's education transfer payment cuts. (The CFS maintains that more than 100,000 students nation-wide took part in the 1995 day of action although the media of the day do not confirm this.) About \$5 billion was cut from post-secondary education cumulatively throughout the 1990s (most of that post-1995).

Since then there have been successive national days of action in 1997, 2000 and

Continues on page 29.

The Quebec Student Strike and Rebuilding the Left

Xavier Lafrance

Historically, two different trends have existed inside Québec's student movement. The "lobbyist" trend is represented by two student federations, the *Fédération Étudiante Universitaire du Québec* (FEUQ) and the *Fédération Étudiante Collégiale du Québec* (FECQ), and aims to serve students' interests by bargaining with the state. Linked informally to the *Parti Québécois* (PQ), these organizations are hardly democratic and largely neglect the development of an informed and mobilized student base. It follows, therefore, they often end up managing cut backs.

The other trend, that of 'student unionism' (*syndicalisme étudiant*) first developed during the 1960s and 1970s and was fed by the workers' militancy of the time. In order to defend the right to quality education, this trend recognizes the necessity of forging a favourable balance of power against the state or the local university or college administration before attending the negotiation table. Student unionism stresses the need for direct involvement of the student population in developing the movement's principles and demands and the strategy/tactics it will apply. Created in 2001, the *Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante* (ASSÉ), which launched the 2005 student strike, is rooted in the student unionism trend which it has attempted to revive within the student movement.

This article will present the main features of the 2005 strike in Québec. I will also analyze some broader outcomes of the revival of student unionism, especially the ways in which it might have contributed to the nurturing of an opposition to neoliberalism and the development of a new left party in Québec, the *Québec Solidaire* (QS).

The Eighth General Student Strike

At the end of the 2004 winter semester, the provincial liberal government re-

formed the loans and grants system, including the conversion of \$103 million of grants into loans. The ASSÉ immediately began to plan a campaign against the provincial government's reforms. In August of the same year, it organized a congress, which took a strong stance in opposition to the reform of loans and grants, the ongoing privatization of the CÉGEPs network and tuition increases for international students. To promote these demands ASSÉ would stage larger actions leading, if necessary, to a general strike. During the 2004 fall semester, the ASSÉ and its member student unions informed students about the neoliberal attacks on education and around our demands. At the same time, the demands were developed and detailed in general assemblies at the 'campus' level and in congresses at the 'national' level.

The demands were presented in the media and pressure against the government was brought about by multiple actions on campuses, a national demonstration in October and an occupation of a regional office of the Ministry of Education. After weeks of campaigning and still facing an arrogant and unrelenting position from the government, an ASSÉ congress held in late November decided to call on student unions to adopt strike mandates in their general assemblies. When 7 unions passed such a mandate, it was decided, the eighth general Québec student strike would be launched. In the other trend of the student movement, facing the stubbornness of the government, the student federations were progressively pushed towards mobilizing their members. However, the federations promoted demands that were not democratically reached but rather imposed on the movement from above. The demands were also more narrow, limited to the return of \$103 million in grants that were transformed into loans by the education reform.

On February 24, 2005, when 7 student unions affiliated with ASSÉ had obtained their 'strike vote', the strike was therefore

launched and a couple thousand students spontaneously took to the street in Montréal. The next weekend, the ASSÉ called for the first congress of the *Coalition de l'ASSÉ Élargie* (CASSÉÉ – Coalition for an Enlarged ASSÉ). The formation of this coalition was intended to provide a democratic organizational space to the non-affiliated campus unions that would join the strike and to form a left-pole in the strike movement to ensure that the student federations would not takeover its representation in the negotiations with the government. (This step was a response to the fact that during the student strike of 1996, without a single member union on strike, the FEUQ took over control of the negotiations with the PQ government in power at the time.)

The CASSÉÉ set its demands as the following: 1) elimination of the reform of the loans and grants system; 2) an end to the decentralization and privatization of the CÉGEP network; 3) holistic steps that would ensure free access to education at all levels and of the elimination of student indebtedness. The creation of the CASSÉÉ allowed the gathering of campus student unions representing 80 000 out of the 185 000 students on strike, and even some member unions of the student federations did join the CASSÉÉ. However, CASSÉÉ was still excluded from the negotiation table and only the student federations were admitted, after they went on strike in the beginning of March. To justify this move, the Minister of Education, Jean-Marc Fournier, claimed that he would not negotiate with a 'violent organization' – the CASSÉÉ purportedly being such an organization.

This was obviously a bogus claim. The 'violent actions' of the CASSÉÉ – route blockages, office occupations, etc. – have been used in the past by trade unions and social movements to pressure the state and this never ruled them out of negotiations, rather the contrary has more often been the case. Moreover, the student federation

themselves and their member unions often used of ‘violent tactics’ during the strike. What Fournier was really after was to deal with the representatives who would offer the easiest way out of the strike. Nevertheless, without being at the table, the CASSÉÉ exercised influence on the negotiators on both sides. This was most notable when it forced the head of the FEUQ to end the federation’s slide towards more concessions after the first round of negotiations with the Ministry. He had told the media he would consider a reinvestment less than \$103 million in the second week of March.

On April 1, the Ministry announced a second offer – the first having been rejected unanimously by the strikers. The policies offered, and accepted by the student federations, have now been put into place by the government. These included no retroactive reinvestment for the year 2004-2005, \$70 million for 2005-2006 and a full \$103 million for each year from 2006 to 2010. An important share of this money would come from Ottawa, thus compensating for a substantial disengagement by the provincial government in the financing of post-secondary education. Also, no commitment at all was won from the Ministry on the issue of ending of the process of privatization of the CÉGEPS. In regards to the historic balance of power built up in favour of students during the strike, there is no doubt that this agreement was less than what students could have extracted from the government. Even if the agreement put an end to a 7 week strike, 115,000 out of the 185,000 students that participated rejected the offer in their general assemblies. This must be acknowledged and remembered, but we also need to analyze the important gains derived from this spectacular strike.

Gains from the Strike

The gains from the strike were significant. The huge pressure exercised by the strike was able to win back at least a part of the amount cut from the loans and grants system. For tens of thousands of students, this made a big difference. The strike has also brought about a deepening of democratic life in a large number of student unions throughout the province. For seven weeks, thousands of students gathered in

general assemblies, often more than once a week, to discuss education as a social right and the best means to defend it. Going further than the immediate issue of the loans and grants, the students were able to launch a broad debate in Québec’s population about the place of education in our society and the issues of accessibility to and public funding of post-secondary institutions. Editorials, journalists and even artists and other public commentators engaged in the debate, many backing the students’ demands and principles.

All over Québec, answering a call made by the CASSÉÉ, literally hundreds of thousands of individuals wore a red square symbol to support the strike and defend education – even opportunistic PQ’s MPs forming the opposition at the Assemblée Nationale showed up with a little red square on their suits! During the period of the



strike, polls indicated that more than 70% of the population of the province backed the students. Students, increasingly conscious of their power, began to radicalize and adopted a more progressive vision of education as a right. Thus, several student unions non-affiliated to the ASSÉ voted for free and quality education (elimination of tuition and integral public funding) as a fundamental principle of their struggle. Moreover, the strike showed – for the first time in a long time – that the defence of the public interest and checking of the neo-liberal agenda requires collective action to

build up a balance of power against the state and the ruling bloc. This lesson was sadly not heeded by the leaders of Québec’s major public sector unions during the negotiations in the fall of 2005.

This mobilization and its impact on the population in general and the student population in particular surely helped stimulate the push for a broad left party in Québec. After the creation of Québec Solidaire (QS) in early 2006, a considerable number of students were drawn to the QS. The creation of the – still small – collectives *Masse Critique* and *Presse-toi à Gauche*, seeking to push QS more to the left and beyond electoralism towards anti-capitalist and/or socialist politics owe much to students who joined (most of them having been active during the strike of 2005). Furthermore, as Richard Fidler reported in *Relay*’s last issue, the radicalization of QS’s draft platform, especially on the issues of tuition fees and policies regarding the Québec wind industry by the convention can be traced to broader social movements. No doubt that they can be linked to the student strike and to the collective mobilization launched by environmentalists and social movements against the creation of a new fossil-fuel power plant in Suroît in 2004 – both campaigns having forced the Liberal government to retreat, at least partially.

In spite of these encouraging elements, one must not overstate the impact of the student strike in the shaping of Québec Solidaire. Unlike the present student struggle going on in Greece, the strike of 2005 in Québec has not been able to force an unification of the students’ organizations with the workers’ organizations and other social movements, which would certainly have contributed to build a important ‘social base’ for political organization inside a party. In fact, opposition to the neo-liberal agenda of the ruling class taking place in Québec is marked by sporadic and isolated mobilizations and gains and by the incapacity of the left to organize itself to properly turn back this agenda. Moving beyond electoralism, will be a central task of QS if it is to increasingly assume such a coordinating role. **R**

Xavier Lafrance was spokesperson for CASSÉÉ during the student strike of 2005.

Who Benefits from Dismantling the Canadian Wheat Board?

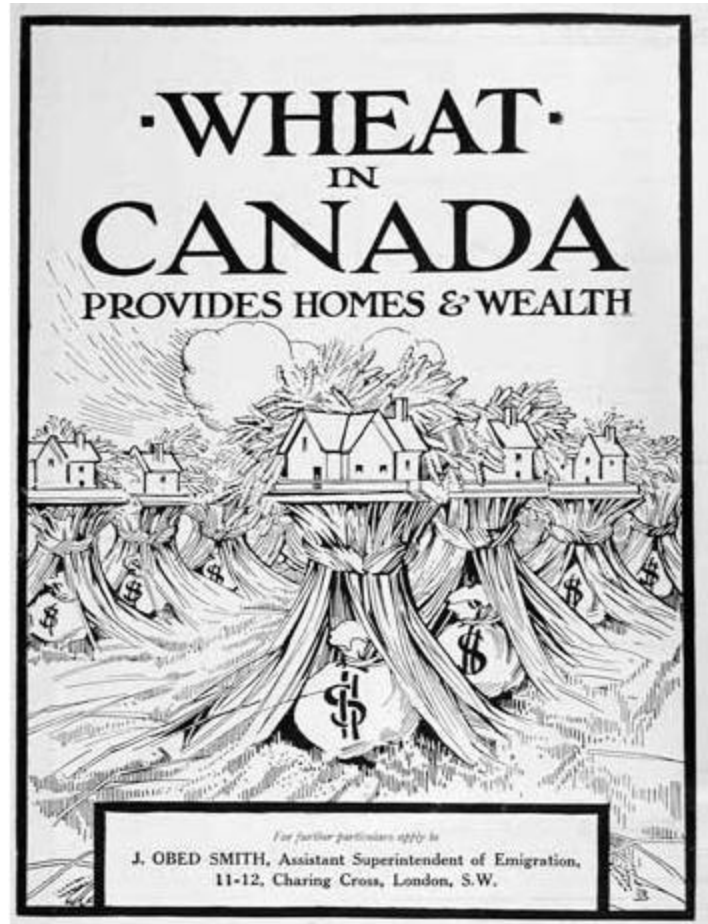
Ken Kaltornyk

Although it was not one of the “five priorities” set by the Conservatives during and after the last federal election, the dismantling of the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) now appears to be at the top of the Harper government’s agenda. However, it seems that the Conservatives seriously underestimated the support for the CWB amongst Canadian farmers and have now backed themselves into a corner over the issue. In addition, Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl’s initial insistence that the CWB monopoly on selling western wheat and barley could be eliminated without a plebiscite of eligible farmers not only contravened the law but also exposed the sham promise of the Conservatives and their Reform-Alliance predecessors to bring democracy to Ottawa through regular referenda on important issues.

When confronted with the legalities of the Canadian Wheat Board Act (which he appears never to have read), Mr. Strahl was forced to back down and propose a plebiscite on ending the monopoly of the CWB on barley sales. As big producers increasingly dominate barley production, the Conservatives seem to think that opponents of the CWB monopoly could win such a vote. Even so, in order to shift the balance further in their favour the Conservatives added a phony third option to the barley plebiscite in which the Wheat Board would continue to exist alongside the so-called “free market.” (Even the option of a “free market” is a phony option, since the “free market” actually consists of two or three huge multinationals. The real option is between private or public monopoly control of grain marketing.) Strahl has also been forced to promise a similar plebiscite for wheat sometime in the future. A non-binding plebiscite carried out by the Manitoba government early this year showed that farmers in that province support the Wheat Board monopoly on wheat sales by a margin of two to one, with support for the Wheat Board monopoly on barley sales was only slightly less.

The question naturally arises as to why the Harper Conservatives are so determined to dismantle the CWB that they would risk the wrath of prairie farmers and the potential loss of several seats in parliament to ram it through. Why are they so determined to block the democratic will of farmers on this issue? To answer that question, it is only necessary to look at who would benefit from the dismantling of the CWB and, clearly, that is not prairie farmers.

The main beneficiaries of an end to the wheat board would be the big grain multinationals – particularly Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) which are the biggest American grain companies. These multinationals, along with ConAgra, Louis Dreyfus and Bunge and Born, are contending among themselves



to control all of the world’s grain supplies. Canada and Australia, together representing close to 20 percent of world wheat exports, are the only countries where wheat is marketed through government-established marketing boards and is, therefore, outside of the control of one or another of these huge monopolies. The destruction of the CWB would greatly enhance the profitability of the big grain monopolies because they would be able to dictate prices to thousands of individual producers rather than having to deal with farmers collectively through the WCB.

The contention between the U.S. and European grain monopolies is at the heart of the impasse at the World Trade Organization over the issue of grain export subsidies provided by the U.S. and European Union. These subsidies allow the U.S. and European grain exports to undercut domestic supplies of grain in most of the developing countries. This, in turn drives down the prices paid to farmers for grain in developing countries. Since the big

U.S. and European grain multinationals are the main buyers of grain in those markets, as well, they profit both as buyers and as sellers. With the refusal of the U.S. and the European Union to end their massive subsidies of grain exports, many developing countries are considering setting up their own centralized grain marketing boards, using the CWB as a model, in order to put an end to the tyranny of the grain multinationals. If such a practice were to become widespread, the profits of the international grain monopolies would plummet. Therefore, they are determined to destroy the CWB as soon as possible.

Thus, it is understandable why Cargill and ADM have financed much of the so-called “grassroots” opposition to the CWB over the past couple of decades. It is also understandable why the U.S. government and the European Union have put so much pressure on successive Canadian governments to dismantle the CWB. Responding to the demands of Cargill, ADM and other big U.S. agribusinesses, the U.S. government, has launched repeated trade challenges over the past 20 years, alleging that the CWB unfairly subsidizes Canadian wheat and barley producers. All of those challenges have been rejected by the relevant trade dispute bodies, but the challenges continue.

In addition to the U.S. agribusiness monopolies, the Canadian railway monopolies – Canadian National (CN) and Canadian

Pacific (CP) – are also major proponents of dismantling the CWB. At present the railways, which transport almost all of the wheat and barley produced in western Canada, must negotiate rates with the CWB, acting on behalf of all prairie farmers. If the wheat board did not exist, farmers would be forced to individually negotiate the transportation rates charged by the railways. It is obvious that, in such a situation, the railway companies would be able to set whatever rates they desired since they could literally hold farmers to ransom.

In these circumstances it is obvious that the seemingly irrational drive by the Conservative government to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board, even at the risk of losing the next election, does not come from pressure from below, from their constituents, as they claim. Rather, the pressure is coming from the highest levels of the monopoly capitalist class, from the massive agricultural and transportation monopolies, which are striving to further maximize their profits at the expense of Canadian farmers. It is heartening to see that Canadian farmers are not taking this attack lying down but are determined to fight for their own interests. Farmers deserve the support of the entire Canadian working class and people in this fight. **R**

Ken Kaltornyk works for CUPW in Winnipeg and also is a printer for Open Door Press.

Third Annual Israeli Apartheid Week a Great Success

Zac Smith

The week of February 12-17, 2007 saw various North American and British campuses take part in the third annual Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW). This year's week of events included a series of critical lectures, film screenings, a host of cultural events, and in some cities, demonstrations. A keynote speaker was Jamal Zahalka (MK), a Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset who spoke on “Debunking the Myth of Israeli Democracy.” Attracting not only large crowds and significant media coverage, the content of the week and its spread to an even wider network of campuses indicated a growing understanding of Israel as an apartheid state.

Over the course of the last year and a half there has been a dramatic rise in activism and analysis around boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS). Individuals and organizations have begun to take steps in support of the declaration issued in July

2005 by Palestinian unions and other grassroots organizations calling for an international BDS movement until Israel meets its obligations under international law. The declaration demanded: full equality for Arab citizens of Israel; an end to the occupation and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza; and the implementation of the right of return and compensation for Palestinian refugees in accordance with UN resolution 194. Significantly, a number of important strides were made in support of these demands in 2006.

IAW initially grew out of the initiative of the Toronto based Arab Students' Collective during the winter of 2005 as a response to these events. Since then, in a period of just over three years, participation in IAW has grown from that of an event of local importance to one that has proven to be international in scope. Underscoring this point was the fact that

this year's Israeli Apartheid Week was held concurrently with universities in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, New York, Oxford, Cambridge and London.

Toronto: Largest IAW Ever

This year, over 800 people attended Israeli apartheid week events in Toronto, making it the largest and most successful event to date. A central aim of this year's IAW 2007, as with ones previous, was its introduction to students and a wider audience the analysis of Israel as an apartheid state, similar to that of South Africa and other settler-colonial states – Canada included. A series of lectures were held on the first day of the week which highlighted the differences and similarities between patterns of domination and displacement, and emphasized the shared struggles of those engaged in resistance – be they in →



apartheid South Africa, occupied Turtle Island (North America) or occupied Palestine.

A major theme of the week was elaboration of the historical processes that led to the current situation in Palestine. Lectures and film screenings discussed topics ranging from the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, where around 800,000 Palestinians were expelled from their lands and denied their right of return; the consolidation of apartheid, including land expropriation and early legislation in Israel proper during the period of the military government from 1948-1966; and of the condition and political situation of Palestinian refugees in places such as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq since the US invasion in 2003.

Intimately related to this history has been the ideological pretensions of the Israeli state in general, which has attempted to present itself as the “only democracy in the Middle East,” despite the ongoing colonization of Palestinian land. Powerful examinations of the ideological underpinnings of the Zionist project were made by Walter Lehn, who co-authored with Israeli academic Uri Davis *The Jewish National Fund*; documenting the institution’s role in the ethnic cleansing and illegal acquisition of Palestinian land for Jewish only settlement as well as a presentation by photojournalist Jon Elmer, who recently

returned from assignment in Gaza. Elmer documented the effects of Israel’s military campaigns “Operation Summer Rains” and “Operation Autumn Clouds” of this summer and fall, and of the devastating effect that the Western boycott of the Palestinian Authority has had on a general population under siege, something that has largely gone underreported by the mainstream media.

Further examination of Zionist ideology was presented by Gabi Piterberg, a leading scholar on the development of Zionism, and US-based activist and scholar Joel Kovel, author of the recently published *Overcoming Zionism* (Pluto 2007). Each tied Zionist thought and practice to similar settler-colonial movements such as the European colonization of North America.

The highlight of the week were lectures given by keynote speaker Jamal Zahalka (MK), a Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset with the National Democratic Assembly. Zahalka noted that “Israel is implementing apartheid policies in Palestine by building the apartheid separation wall, bypass roads for Jews only in the West Bank, restrictions on movement of Palestinians, hundreds of checkpoints, in addition to the siege and daily violation of basic human rights of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.” His participation and comments during the week led to calls from Israeli Knesset members for his indictment for incitement, further underscoring the limited scope of democratic freedoms for Palestinians in Israel. Even Canadian Justice Minister Irwin Cotler weighed in and said Zahalka had “gone too far in his actions against the country he is supposed to represent.”

Zahalk’s talk centered around “Debunking the myth of Israeli Democracy,”

in which he spoke of the contradictions of Israel’s version of democracy. In order for it to be “democratic” he noted, it must in fact carry a Jewish majority if it is to retain its Jewish character. In order for their to be a demographic majority, however, required population transfer, or the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. This conscious policy of ethnic cleansing as a prerequisite for democracy was the “original sin,” according to Zahalka, the foundation on which Israel’s so-called democracy was built upon. He also spoke of the second-class status of Palestinian citizens of Israel, their physical separation, their neglect at the hands of the state, and of the “real Palestinian tragedy” of not only Palestinians separation from their lands and properties, but of Palestinian separated from Palestinian in the occupied territories.

This year’s Israeli Apartheid Week proved to be the most successful yet. It picked up on the national and international momentum that had been gained during 2006, and spread to an increasing number of campuses across Canada, Britain and the United States. It also again proved to serve as an important outlet for the dissemination of material and analysis of Israel as an apartheid state, increasingly accepted internationally, and as a vehicle in the push for boycott, divestment and sanctions against the apartheid state of Israel. The week garnered significant interest amongst the world’s press and public, as well as students, many of whom will no doubt contribute to the week’s further growth and success in 2008. **R**

For more information about IAW, please see: Students Against Israeli Apartheid – www.endisraeliapartheid.net.

Zac Smith is a member of the Palestine Solidarity Committee, York University.

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The Ugly Canadian

Yen Chu

In the 1963 film the *Ugly American*, Marlon Brando plays Harrison Carter McWhite an ambassador who is dispatched to Sarkhan, a fictional Southeast Asian country where the Americans are building a road called Freedom road. The anti-imperialists, in this case communist, have been attacking efforts to construct the road. McWhite doesn't understand his friend's opposition to the road; after all it is suppose to help the country and its people with transportation. His friend, Deong, a leader of a nationalist party who is contemplating joining the communists, sees the road as a symbol of imperialism and dismisses the humanitarian propaganda of how the road is to help his country. The road is intended to facilitate the movement of military vehicles into rebel territory, but is being promoted as a goodwill gesture from the Americans in the hopes of winning the hearts and minds of the Sarkhan citizens. The film, based on the 1958 novel of the same name, was staunchly anti-communist, but was a harsh indictment of America's foreign aid policy in Southeast Asia. It criticized the Americans for failing to win hearts and minds in the region because of their arrogance and ignorance towards the local citizens.

Over 40 years later, the *Ugly American* still speaks to geopolitical events in our world today. The plot in the film practically mirrors Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, where Canada is also constructing a road. The road, known to the Canadian military as Route Summit, is being built through the Zhari district, west of Kandahar. It is being promoted as part of the reconstruction efforts to improve the country's transportation system. But its intention is to transport military vehicles through the rough terrain to fight against the insurgency. The construction of the road, started in the fall of last year, is yet to be completed due to attacks from the Taliban. Last fall, three soldiers were killed defending the road.

Rather than helping the Afghan people, the road has created further tensions. The Canadian Press reported that many farmers were frustrated by the construction of the road as they were not consulted and the road dissects across their farms where they had grown grapes, melons and wheat before the war. It is not lost on the Canadian military that many who joined the Taliban were poor farmers and so compensation has been given to the farmers for the damage to their land.

The road along with other foreign aid projects is part of



Canada's effort to create a humanitarian spin to the war in Afghanistan. Winning hearts and minds abroad and particularly at home through humanitarianism is a political strategy used by the West to bolster support for war. This strategy (along with fear-mongering) is essential. A democratic nation can go to war without public debate, but in the long run it is difficult for a democratic nation to sustain a war with little or no support from its citizens, especially if it claims to be spreading freedom and democracy. It is also an effective strategy in obscuring political and economic grounds for war with moral ones. With support for the war in Iraq losing ground in the USA, the humanitarian argument is crucial in the debate on Afghanistan.

Iraq has widely been seen as an illegitimate war, whereas the argument for security and humanitarianism somehow legitimized the war in Afghanistan for many. Iraq was not endorsed by the United Nations, whereas Afghanistan was. In the United States, while the Democrats are now calling for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, some are arguing that they should be redeployed to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is being promoted as a humanitarian success both by NATO and the United Nations, but reports from NGOs and even the media have disputed those claims.

No Humanitarian Success

In January, Foreign Affairs Minister Peter McKay visited Afghanistan to counter claims made by an American journal that the country was sliding into chaos. He promoted the success of Canada's reconstruction and development projects by citing new schools, hospitals, and roads. He also announced that Canada will send an additional \$10 million to the Afghanistan Law and Order Trust Fund and additional funding to the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development's micro-credit loan projects. →

Shortly after his trip, the major media outlets, while still supportive of the war, started to question Canada's achievements in reconstruction and aid in Afghanistan. It was reported that Canada had earmarked \$100 million for reconstruction, aid and development: of which \$10 million went to the World Bank. The amount of the reconstruction budget is a tiny fraction of the military budget. The Conservatives approved \$15 billion dollars in military spending last June. Canada has already spent billions of dollars in its military budget, but most of the money allocated to reconstruction has yet to be spent. Senlis Council, an international think tank, released a report in January on health care in Kandahar. The report found that hospitals there lacked heating, air-conditioning, essential medical equipment and medicine. Edward McCormick, one of the authors of the report, stated that there was no sign of international aid and that the state of health care in Kandahar was an indication of a humanitarian crisis.

While the Senlis reports contradicts Conservative claims of success in aid and development, the Council continues to support the war but argues that Canada is fighting the war ineffectively because it fails to properly link combat with aid, stating that Canada needs to improve their foreign aid or else they will lose the battle in winning hearts and minds, fuelling the insurgency.

However, the failures of foreign aid go beyond mismanagement and lack of foresight, it is symptomatic of the politics of imperialism. Imperialism is the process where one nation expropriates and dominates the resources, labour, land and markets of another nation. In the case of foreign aid, the donor country of-

ten expropriates the markets of the recipient by requiring recipients to purchase resources and services from corporations or companies of the donor country instead of using local organizations and local resources. The local population also has no say on how the aid is to be used. The World Bank provides aid in the form of loans in which the recipient is often required to pay back with interest, putting the recipient further into debt and impoverishing their country in order to meet the demands of the World Bank. The World Bank is currently providing most of the Afghan government's budget.

In response to the criticisms on the success of Afghanistan's reconstruction, the Conservatives at the end of February announced an additional \$200 million in foreign aid. The money, however, does not address the issue of health care. Instead, it will go to policing, counter narcotics, de-mining, governance and development, and road construction. It is evident that this funding is to benefit Canada in the long run.

Branding through Women's Rights

In her article, Dust in The Eyes of the World, Anna Carastathis writes in ZNet that the war in Afghanistan from the very beginning was promoted as a way to restore women's rights through overthrowing the Taliban. This strategy was effective in demonizing the Taliban and Islam as many people including some feminists believed that the war would help women. But women are being used as pawns in an imperialist strategy to assert moral

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superiority to justify war. In the past, European colonizers used racism to justify violence and exploitation for profit by claiming that they were bringing civilization to the colonies, as the locals were morally inferior. The argument is pretty much the same today in Afghanistan.

In Caratathis' interview with Roksana Bahramitash, a feminist scholar at McGill University, Bahramitash points out that there is no historical evidence that war has ever liberated women. Furthermore, conditions for women have actually worsened with the start of the war. According to a 2005 Amnesty International Report, women and girls live in fear of abduction and rape, they are still forced into marriages, and they are being traded for opium debts.

While it is important to acknowledge that women were victims of violence and oppression under the Taliban, it is also important to acknowledge that they are also victims in this war. Feminists must recognize that victims can be agents and that the political struggle against violence and oppression against women is universal and not limited to Afghanistan. Part of this struggle includes exposing and challenging Canada and America's claims on women's rights. The Americans supported Islamic fundamentalists for years against the Soviet occupation and was an ally to the Taliban afterwards without too much thought to the conditions of women. The feminist struggle should also be linked with the struggle for refugee rights by demanding an end to restrictive and inhumane refugee policies.

The politics of the refugee system

The U.S., claiming that they are helping women in Afghanistan, does not recognize gender persecution as part of their refugee system. Women who face domestic violence or persecution in their country face an arbitrary system in which they could very well be deported. Gender persecution is recognized in Canada, but Canada's refugee system is also arbitrary with hearings presided by a single person who is often a political appointee. Women still face deportation to countries in which they face persecution. Last year, Canada's Federal Court rejected an anti-sharia activist's refugee claim that she would not face persecution if she were deported to Iran. This verdict came down despite evidence of Iran's poor record on human rights and women's rights. She has since won an appeal on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. Also, the arbitrariness of our immigrant and refugee system is taken to the extreme when our democratic government can detain people without charge on security certificates without ever facing a trial. It was only recently in late February that the Supreme Court overturned the federal security certificates ruling they were unconstitutional.

According to UN there are over 6 million refugees from Afghanistan, the second largest group of refugees after the Palestinians. Most Afghan refugees flee to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran where they live in refugee camps with deplorable conditions for years in limbo as the West increasingly restricts their refugee policy. In 2005, Canada accepted only 35,768 refugees. Of this total only 2,644 were from Afghanistan. This number is extremely low when you consider that Canada admitted nearly 40,000 Hungarian refugees in 1956 and 60,000 Vietnamese boat people in 1979. Both groups were from communist coun-

tries considered enemies of the USA. Canada's immigration and refugee policy is anything but humanitarian, but based on politics and economics that are in line with their foreign policy, which often parallels American foreign policy.

In Harsha Walia's article [The New Fortified World](#) (NS magazine May-June 2006), Walia documents Canada's racist immigration policy before and after 9/11. Canada's immigration policy has always been based on economic need, yet it is also a policy that marginalizes and criminalizes immigrants and refugees. Walia points out how the state separates refugees into genuine refugees, those who are forced to flee, and economic refugees, those who flee searching for a better life. However, both refugees are victims of Canada's and the West's foreign policy, which have eroded living conditions with structural adjustments programs and globalization, consistent with war and imperialism.

Troops Out

No war is ever fought for humanitarian reasons. In this case the war, brought on by the events of 9/11, is being fought to maintain NATO's political and economic control and influence in the Middle East. The USA's long history of dominance and imperialism in the region is being challenged and unfortunately for the left, the anti-imperialists happen to be the Taliban and other extreme Islamic fundamentalists. This has resulted in some divisions on the broader left; some are unwilling to condemn the war believing that life will be better for the Afghan people with the NATO occupation. However, a political and historical understanding of imperialism shows that throughout history there have been many totalitarian regimes that the U.S. has propped up and supported, including the Taliban, to further their economic interests or to prevent the spread of communism, which has resulted in declining living conditions, increasing poverty and more war. While it is tempting to argue that Afghanistan would have been better off under the Soviets, a nation foremost has a political right to self-determination. A country must find its own way and external interference only serve to aggravate further conflicts.

Canadians are pretty much evenly divided on the war, however the humanitarian propaganda seems to have some impact. According to a CBC-Environics poll conducted in November 2006, 24% of respondents believe Canada is in Afghanistan for peacekeeping and 18% believed Canada is providing humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, whereas 22% of respondents believed that Canada is in Afghanistan to support U.S. foreign policy.

The war in Afghanistan ended Canada's myth as neutral peacekeepers. But by adding a humanitarian dimension to the war, pro-war advocates have blurred the distinction between war and peacekeeping. One of the solutions the NDP and other leftists have put forward is to change the mission in Afghanistan from a military deployment to a peacekeeping one. But how will a peacekeeping mission be different? Who will the peacekeepers keep the peace between? The insurgency is fighting against Canadian and NATO troops because they want the foreign troops out of their country. A peacekeeping mission will look much the same as the current military mission. The only solution is to pull the troops out. **R**

Yen Chu lives in Toronto.

Development & Resistance

to the Empire of Capital

John Saul

Realizing “developmental socialism” which, as recently as the 1970s, seemed a prospect worth fighting for has come, to many, to seem much less so now. True, the goal still has moral force, this encompassing the judgment that people can resolve economic and political tensions and potential contradictions collectively and democratically rather than having to build centrally on competition and the entrepreneurial greed of the few as the ultimate central keys to the welfare of everybody else. One cannot afford to be naïve, of course. Quite apart from questions of divergent class interests, it is also true that “human nature,” however much misshaped and distorted it may be within a world of ascendant market norms, will, even in the best and most propitious of times, be pulled between the claim of individuality (and family) on the one hand and that of humane collectivity on the other. It is the relative balance between the two that is the issue, however, not classic appeals to “fallen man” [sic] and the supposed fall-out of original sin. Some human inequality of condition is, perhaps, to a degree inevitable but it is indefensible nonetheless and should always be reduced. So says the socialist.

Nor is the case against capitalism (and also for socialism) merely expressive of a moral distaste for the former. There is also a powerful practical logic to socialism, especially in the settings of the global South. As Giovanni Arrighi and I wrote, in *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (1973), of Africa almost forty years ago:

One does in fact find the productive potential of African societies and therefore their development and structural transformation, constrained by the present pattern of world and domestic economy and society; the available surplus is ill-utilized – drained away as the repatriated profits of overseas firms or consumed by self-indulgent domestic elites – and the generation of a larger surplus from, for example, an aroused and mobilized populace discouraged. As this suggests, it is the pattern of current inequality, in particular, which tends thus to hamper a rise in productivity.

We did acknowledge that perhaps “the changes of surplus utilization [centred around ‘a serious attempt at disengagement from international capitalism or reform of the power base of the African governments involved’] which we have seen to be necessary for real development are not possible under [then] present historical conditions.” But this could not, we concluded, “invalidate the historical necessity of the change itself, which should therefore be of central importance in socialist debate.” In fact, such

changes seem equally necessary now – for, as Colin Leys and I have much more recently noted, “the dream of a transformative capitalism in Africa remains just that: a dream.” This is true even if, confronted with an ever more ascendant globalized capitalism, the goal of a developmental socialism, key to the only genuine “development” that is really possible for Africa, seems at least as difficult to realize as it did when Arrighi and I first wrote.

Of course, the African case may be, globally, the most extreme example of capitalist failure. Nonetheless, more generally, the logic of socialism (but also the extreme difficulty of realizing it) seems clear, at least to those who care to look. For Africa, like much of the rest of the underdeveloped world, is now “invited” (in fact, largely forced – by the IMF, World Bank, WTO and the individual governments of the advanced capitalist world) to “compete” in the global market place by entering, without any resort to the defensive mechanisms of local state action open to them in the immediate post-colonial period. The result is, perhaps, predictable, but at the very least clear. Them as has gets more and the grim workings of a global hierarchy, created over centuries by imperial dictate, colonialism and unequal “market forces,” become, in Arrighi’s phrase, grim manifestations of an “iron law of global hierarchy” that locks the presently impoverished in their millions, notably throughout the global South, into a place of subordination for the foreseeable future.

Renewing a Socialist Imaginary

What is needed, then, in the present movement for resistance and change is a greater sense of why one is both against “Western imperialism” and also against “global capitalism” and, more precisely, how, and in terms of what imaginary, one might work to displace the malign ubiquity of both. For me at least it seems impossible to so imagine the necessary historical initiative without returning, self-consciously, to the thrust of an overtly (and, it bears stressing, decisively renovated) socialist project, one that is at once firmly anti-capitalist and firmly democratic. In short, it is not enough, however important it may be also to do so, to attack the symptoms of capitalist induced distemper – to either excoriate it on the one hand or merely seek to reform it bit by bit on the other – without ever quite advertising, even to oneself, just what one is doing. How much more effectively might this might be done, I would argue, in terms of a renovated socialist imaginary – and this, too, without abandoning battle along the full range of other fronts (patriarchy, racism, religious intolerance, ethnic oppression) upon which injustice is encountered? In fact, this is the best way

to give each such front greater resonance as a salient node of progressive struggle.

At the core, then, but not exclusively so, should be the goal of collective ownership of the means of production by a democratically empowered and self-conscious majority of the affected population – initially, perhaps, in diverse corners of the world by mobilized peoples prepared to defend themselves and such projects but also as linked to others in other such “corners” similarly motivated. An increasingly socialist South against a capitalist North: perhaps in part, although this in itself will not be easy to conceive of nor to achieve, especially as China, prior to any revolution of its own by its horribly exploited domestic population, slips further into, in effect, “the Northern column.” Nor should “Northern” mobilization and resistance be merely and summarily written out of the revolutionary equation. For everywhere, within the swirling milieu of anti-war and anti-globalization preoccupations there has begun the revival of some signs of relevant and apposite practices grounded in increasingly socialist understandings and assertions. To concrete signs that such a revival is occurring we now turn. “Capitalism has an address,” Brecht once famously asserted, in order to help focus and concretize ever more relevant attacks on wielders of power. Similarly, and crucially, socialism has an address too.

The Revival of a Socialist Practice for the 21st Century

For there is emerging a conjuncture that manifests a certain revival of global confrontation along these lines – one highlighted by a move from diverse, if bracing, active expressions of “mere” resistance to capitalist globalization towards the clear signs of attempts to retotalize diverse experiences and understandings in ways that seek more hegemonically to contest the empire of capital. Though, Africa – despite the momentary promise of a more radical fall-out from the victorious liberation struggle than has proven possible to sustain – seems, for the moment, fairly firmly ensnared within the toils of global capitalism, this has not proven to be the case in other settings. Perhaps the most salient front of a new and assertive practice of active skepticism concerning global neoliberalism is much closer geographically to the United States itself, in Latin America. Said to now be the ‘continent on the left’ and driven by “Latin America’s new consensus” in terms of which “the region’s emerging leaders are making deals that threaten U.S. dominance.” As Greg Grandin has recently written of it:

Over the course of the past seven years, Latin America has seen the rebirth of nationalist and socialist political movements, movements that were thought to have been dispatched by cold war death squads. Following Hugo Chavez’s 1998 landslide victory in Venezuela, one country after another has turned left. Today, roughly 300 million of Latin America’s 520 million citizens live under governments that either want to reform the Washington Consensus – a euphemism for the mix of punishing fiscal austerity, privatization and market liberalization that has produced staggering levels of poverty and inequality over the past three decades – or abolish it altogether and create a new, more equitable global economy (*The Nation*, April 19, 2006).

Momentarily Brazil seemed poised to take the lead in this increased tilt leftward that Latin America was evidencing. Here the focus was on Lula and his Worker’s Party (PT). But, many would now argue, this was not to be, as Brazil seemed instead to follow the path to dramatic accommodation with global capitalism that South Africa, for example, has also been evidencing, despite the momentary promise of something more positive. Thus, after only two years of Lula’s PT government, and “to the astonishment of his followers, Lula’s government opted for conservative economic policies, with strict adherence to IMF rules, and even introduced some of the neoliberal reforms that the Workers Party had formerly resisted...” As Branford and Kuchinski, in *Lula and the Workers Party* (2005), conclude,

the dominant view within [his] party [had become] that Lula’s neoliberal policies were not just an imposition from outside nor a tactical option to last only until he felt strong enough and confident enough to implement change, but rather that Lula [had] made an ideological option and that his policies will not change. As a result, Lula will not substantially alter the structure of power in Brazil, far less change Brazil...The left now defines Lula’s government as “social-liberal” – social on account of some important programmes it is implementing to help the poor, and liberal due to its adherence to a neoliberal view on how the economy should be run.

Thus, Lula’s various “progressive public policies,” important as some of them have been in their own right, “are unable alone to annul the overall neoliberal character of the government’s macroeconomic policies.” Of course enough was done that, by 2006, his project could be electorally reconfirmed in dramatic fashion. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the answer of many in Brazil continues to emphasize the need for *more* democracy if any real progress is to be sustained. As Marcus Arrada, a Rio-based militant, argued: “We need to mobilize to get the authorities to move away from anti-social policies like those imposed by the IMF. The only way we will get change is through pressure from below, from the landless, the poor, workers, the unemployed, the marginalized.” More, and even more effective, democracy – imagined and articulated from the left – is needed then: in Brazil, too, the struggle continues.

Meanwhile, Latin America’s radical centre-of-gravity has apparently shifted. As Branford and Kuchinski continue, in sharp contrast to Lula’s enthusiastic reception at the Third World Social Forum’s rally of progressive forces from around Latin America and around the world, “at the Fifth World Social Forum in January 2005, also held in Porto Alegre [Brazil], Lula was no longer seen a solution in the struggle against neoliberalism, but rather, for many, as being part of the problem. Indeed, Lula’s two-year experiment was seen as additional evidence of the strength of world financial capital and its grip on political structures worldwide.” And, in that forum, “Hugo Chavez, the combative president of Venezuela, replaced Lula as the dominant left-wing Latin American icon” and Venezuela became, increasingly, a point of reference for a global left that continues to insist on seeing its hopes reignited. An analysis of this case would therefore be in order, although it is possible to sketch only the baldest and most →



preliminary lineaments of such an analysis here. In fact, other sources should therefore be canvassed, but perhaps it will be useful to at least note the following not only of the Venezuelan case but of Latin America more generally.

For Venezuela seems a particularly promising case of “structural reform” in one country. Of course, the regime has been given room for manoeuvre denied to Lula by virtue of large oil revenues. But it has also begun to entangle capital within the terms of a nationalist project that begins to manifest and keep alive the parameters of a possible long-term socialist practice. Not that this is an entirely straightforward process. While praising the impressive sweep of the Chavez regime’s egalitarian social and political practices Richard Gott quotes one left economist’s view of Chavez that “He’s very radical everywhere else but he’s conservative in the economic sphere” (*Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution*, 2005). Yet Gott also notes the ever increasing economic-policy radicalism of many of those politicians around Chavez, driving to beef up the democratic state’s activist economic role. As for the evolution of Chavez himself, there is this recent testimony by one well-informed commentator:

...on January 30, 2005, in a speech to the 5th world social Forum, President Hugo Chavez announced that he supported the creation of [a] socialism of the 21st century in Venezuela. According to Chavez, this socialism would be different from the socialism of the 20th century. While Chavez was

vague about how this new socialism would be different he implied it would not be a state socialism as was practiced in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe or as is practiced in Cuba today. Rather it would be a socialism that would be more pluralistic and less state-centered.

Indeed, as Chavez has said in another more recent speech (mid-2006), “We have assumed the commitment to direct the Bolivarian Revolution towards socialism and to contribute to the socialist path, with a new socialism, a socialism of the 21st century, which is based in solidarity, in fraternity, in love, in justice, in liberty and in equality.” Nor is the form of this socialism pre-defined and predetermined. Rather, added Chavez, we must “transform the mode of capital and move towards socialism, towards a new socialism that must be constructed every day.” And, even as he moved in early 2007 to nationalize companies in the telecommunications and electricity industries and promised to seek greater control over natural gas projects, he greeted his own inauguration as freshly re-elected President by “vowing socialism” and citing Jesus as “the greatest socialist in history”!

In short, neoliberalism increasingly is seen to call for a socialist response in Venezuela but, it is broadly hinted, socialism must itself be recast in such a way as to be far more responsive than previously to the full range of democratic rights and legitimate demands that the exploited and oppressed are more conscious of in the 21st century than ever before. For, as Mike

Leibowitz has effectively argued of Venezuela, the struggle to establish more firmly the political and cultural prerequisites of transformation (in which the further focusing of power “from below” and the assault on “continuing patterns of corruption and clientalism” must figure prominently) will indeed continue.” For there can be no doubt that historically significant questions of great importance are being reinvented and clearly posed there.

Moreover, in Latin America, Chavez seems determined that his leftist, Bolivarian project not be trapped in one country but instead reach out, across national boundaries, to magnify the project’s significance through links with emerging left wing assertions throughout his region (and around the world). And, indeed, one does begin to see the stirrings of new demands, new imaginaries elsewhere in Latin America as well: in Bolivia, under Evo Morales who states firmly that “capitalism has only hurt Latin America,” extensive nationalization has recently been carried out; in Argentina, under Kirchner, and elsewhere; even in Mexico where, after a recent flawed election of the more conservative of the presidential candidates, a “class war” is said to “loom.” Here is a kind of multi-national “structural reform” wherein the growing radicalization of an entire region may, quite possibly, be carrying radical assertions forward, increasingly self-consciously, towards an envisaging of the possibility and practice of yet more radical transformation. As some form of struggle revives (and continues), in Latin America and elsewhere, a culture of left/socialist entitlement and forward momentum may be reestablished beyond the seminar room. It can begin, in short, to provide a global regrouping, real rather than merely theoretical, for ever more tangible socialist resistance to the empire of capital. True, it can be argued “that the Latin American left remains riddled by contradictions,” protagonists of a “rebellion against unbridled [capitalist] globalization that risks [merely] falling back on nationalism and the developmental state.” Clearly, there is much political work to be done, but can we not say that the work has at least begun?

We must also remind ourselves of the full implications of the broader context within which this is all occurring, a context at once both daunting and, paradoxically, encouraging. For the war in Iraq certainly cuts both ways in global terms. It does mean that, for the moment, in Iraq and perhaps throughout the Middle East the central position within the anti-imperialist phalanx has been occupied by religious fundamentalist categories (and sub-categories) of people, rather than by protagonists of more secular and socialist initiatives. Nonetheless, world-wide, the picture is far from being entirely rosy for the empire of capital either. For the United States and its coalition of willing class allies has not been able to impose its will by the arbitrary exercise of imperial might as it no doubt envisaged. Moreover, so preoccupied has the “coalition of the imperially-minded” been with the problems confronted by “empire” in just one-country that it has had less energy and weaponry at its disposal for, say, suppressing Chavez as one fears it might have moved to do in the absence of entanglements in Iraq to pin it down.

Resisting the Empire of Capital

How, then, to conceive a growing and grounded resistance to the empire of capital in the 21st century? The question marks

are many. I’m tempted myself, as seen, to advocate working towards democratic and open movements that, nonetheless, aspire to enough discipline of purpose and organization to mount an appropriately hegemonic/counter-hegemonic project. Such a movement would also, I think, be one embracing a necessarily national setting for primary, but not exclusive, revolutionary attention (and one that would, in addition, build out from a working-class base while expanding upon it both definitionally and practically). Moreover, this would, at its core, imply a project that prioritized – beyond “anti-capitalist,” “radical democratic” and human rights claims – an explicitly socialist imaginary (albeit one complemented by firmly and overtly gender – and other emancipatory aspirations), a project set in opposition, at local, national and world-wide levels, to a globally capitalist one.

Of course, I return by this route towards a projected regrouping of socialist practice that may sound to be lodged in a very old place and to echo what may seem to some to be an all-too familiar refrain. But, as stated the principal enemy of emancipation contemporaneously remains capitalism, however much it may also be inflected by patriarchy, racism and western arrogance of purpose. Moreover, we have learned something. For there will be, must be, important variations upon what was preached by many on the left so often in the past: we need, for example, increased sensitivity to democratic imperatives (and to the more subtle and finely-balanced workings of the dialectic of leadership and mass action); we need increased attention, as suggested, to the expansiveness of the notion of class (not least “working class”) and the greater openness of such a class-problematic to the parallel claims for redress cast in terms of gender, race, religion, ethnic and environment; and we need increased awareness of the imperative of sharing sensibilities and struggles across borders in a firmly global and internationalist manner, a form of ever more positive “globalism” made especially imperative in our current quite shameless era of capitalist-driven “globalization.”

As a result, just what the continuing failure of capitalism – at the vast “margins” of the system and as expressed in human terms, in environmental terms, in terms of genuine equity – will bring remains to be seen; similarly “remaining to be seen” is the ultimate response by the “wretched of the earth” to their relentless “recolonization.” The permutations and combinations of a possible global struggle against the empire of capital in its various guises are legion of course – whether they be expressed vis-a-vis issues of arrogant political power and/or of rapacious economic capital, whether found in the global North and/or in the global South, in the “centre” and/or on the “periphery” of the global system, and whether focused primarily at local, national, regional or global sites. Self-evidently, any struggle (for liberation from capital and on behalf of democratic socialism) that is either in train or possibly forthcoming in such a context is and will be extremely complex and endlessly challenging – and, of course, eminently debatable. At the same time, the costs of not winning such a struggle will also be substantial. *On s’engage, puis on voit.* **R**

John Saul teaches African studies at York University. This is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *Decolonization and Empire* (Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2007).

In from the Margins:

The Dutch Socialist Party Sends an Earthquake through the Netherlands

Bryan Evans

We have all been closely following the dramatic and significant political events in Latin America for good reason, but on November 22, 2006 the voters of the Netherlands gave the anti-neoliberal Left of the Global North what may be the most significant electoral breakthrough in thirty years. On that day Dutch voters sent a rather unambiguous signal, just as they did in voting down the European Union Constitution the year before with a 61.6% No vote, by nearly tripling the votes and seats of the equally unambiguous anti-neoliberal Socialist Party (SP). The precise meaning of this result will unfold over the next few years as the SP will be pushed, pulled and subjected to hitherto unknown scrutiny.

A Mass Party Rooted in the Working Class

In 1994 the SP's membership stood at 15,000. Twelve years later it stands at over 50,000 rank and file members. Remember, this is in the context of a national population of some 17 million. In terms of social and economic background, 49% of party members are workers, 17% are unemployed, and 5% are students. One-third of party members belong to trade unions. This too must be considered in the context that trade union density in the Netherlands is very low, where only 13% of all employees are union members. Women compose 40% of the membership and 13% are under the age of thirty. Obviously the SP is a mass party clearly based in the Dutch working class. And this has presented the

party with enviable opportunities but such success also presents real issues as to the SP's political objectives.

Background to the SP: Political and Ideological Developments

The SP was founded in 1972 as a maoist party composed of federated branches and more or less remained so until the 1987 to 1991 period whereupon it set out on a process of re-evaluating its official 'Marxism-Leninism'. Its political approach and tactics were very much based in local, grass-roots issues and activism. It focussed on concrete issues such as tenants rights and working on organizing the unemployed or more marginal workers. It even went so far as to establish its own medical clinics and hire its own doctors to provide local services if none were to be found.

By its 1991 party congress the SP had determined to move beyond the pockets of support it had established and attempt to become a significant force on the national stage. A 'minimum programme for a socialist Netherlands' was adopted and in the 1994 parliamentary elections the party, now with 15,000 rank and file members, entered parliament with two seats. The 1999 congress adopted a new program that stated the party's essential political and ideological orientation:

"We are determined to break the tightening grip of 'capital' over society. We refuse to hand society's management over to the free play of market forces. We do not accept that capitalist economic laws determine the margins within which politics can operate. For these reasons we are striving to break the current neoliberal trend. This means working inside and outside parliament to improve the representation of the people and our contacts with the population as a whole" (1999 Manifesto: The Whole of Humanity).

The general elections of 2002 turned into a real voters rebellion against the governing 'purple' coalition of social democrats and market libertarians. The governing coalition parties were halved, to the benefit of the new populist party of Pim Fortuyn (murdered ten days before the elections), the opposition Christian democrats and the Socialist Party. The results proved that the SP had become a factor in Dutch politics in winning nearly 600,000 votes thus giving it an additional four seats for a total of six. And at the same time the party membership passed the 30,000 mark. Just a few months later the new right wing coalition of Chris-



SP leader Jan Marijnissen

tian Democrats, libertarians and Fortuynists collapsed and new elections ensued.

Again the SP succeeded in increasing once more its number of votes but this did not result in more seats. Nevertheless the SP became the fourth party in Parliament, overtaking the Green Left which had been constructed out of the remnants of the old Communist party, and became one of the major opponents of the right wing government.

In 2005, together with the trade unions and other Left parties, the SP organized the biggest demonstration ever in the Netherlands, against the government's policy of social retrenchment. In addition, the party played a very important role in the campaign against the neoliberal European Constitution. All the major parties – Labour, Christian Democrat, libertarians, and Green Left – supported the Constitution with only the SP campaigning for a No vote. In the end, nearly two thirds of Dutch voters said 'No'. This was followed with the huge success of the SP in local elections in 2006 where it doubled its seats on local councils.

The 2006 Elections

The SP programme called for rolling back the government's proposal to 'reform' health care, renationalizing the railway system, raising taxes on the wealthy and withdrawing Dutch troops from Afghanistan. On Nov. 22 2006, the party almost tripled its number of seats in the Lower House, Parliament's main legislative chamber, to twenty-five and overtook the historic libertarians (Party for Freedom and Democracy) as the third party of the Netherlands, both in seats and membership. In the country's two largest cities, Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the party came second overall winning 18.4% and 17.6% respectively. In the industrial centre of Eindhoven the vote share totaled 23.8%.

Election Results; 2003 and 2006

Party	2003		2006	
	%	Seats	%	Seats
Christian Dem.	28.6	44	26.5	41
Labour	27.3	42	21.2	33
SP	6.3	9	16.6	25
Libertarian	17.9	28	14.7	22
Green Left	5.1	8	4.6	7
Freedom (anti-immigrant)	-	-	5.9	9
Democrats 66 (social liberal)	4.1	6	2	3
Animal Rights	-	-	1.8	2
Fortuyn	5.7	8	0.2	0

While the broad Left – social democrats, SP, Green left and Animal Rights – together won the largest vote for the Left in Dutch history they still lacked sufficient numbers for a majority. Similarly, the right failed to win enough to form a clear majority. The only immediately obvious solution was a coalition of social democrats and christian democrats together with the SP. The SP, after

initial discussions, walked away from an invitation to join the government stating it had nothing in common with the christian democrats. In early February, the social democrats agreed to participate in a christian democrat led government.

Explaining the SP's Success

Perhaps more than anything the policies of the government led by Christian Democrat Jan Peter Balkenende gave the SP an opening. His government had sought to reduce claims on social benefits by two thirds and in the process disintegrated the sick and disabled, the unemployed, and cut pensions while raising the retirement age from 62 to 65. In addition, his government sought to expand privatizations in the energy, health care and transportation sectors. Second, the social democratic Labour party proved incapable of offering opposition to these policies as some had in fact been initiated by its own previous government in the early 1990s and it refused to rule out working with the Christian Democrats in the future. The SP thus became, as the Dutch business press expressed, the "close friend of social discontent". In addition, drawing on the lessons and success of the 'No' vote in the EU Constitution referendum, the SP was able to draw the links between the policies of the EU emanating from Brussels and the economic and social realities of life in the Netherlands. Liberalization and marketization were translated directly into a weakening of social protections, expanding insecurity, and declining living standards. Even the European Monetary Union was called into question – as one worker said "The Euro is killing us!!"

And From Here, Where?

The Dutch SP is in an enviable and yet at the same time precarious political position. In 1991 the party began a turn toward a more 'pragmatic' political approach. It remained the most resolved and single voice of opposition to neoliberalism in the Netherlands. At the same time, while the critique of neoliberalism deepened and was popularized, the nature of the alternative became fuzzier. The party came to speak not of 'socialism' but rather 'social ism' – that is an emphasis on a more humane, perhaps humanist, perspective and political approach rather than class analysis and struggle. The SP no longer calls for significant nationalization of strategic sectors and no longer demands that the Netherlands withdraw from NATO. Even its symbolic demand that the quaint Dutch monarchy be abolished has disappeared. It may well and fairly be argued that the SP may well be contending to replace the discredited (for now) Labour party as the authentic voice of social democracy given that Labour has embraced neoliberal policy nostrums with enthusiasm when given the opportunity.

None of this should detract from what is a remarkable case study in successful strategies combining local organizing, mass struggle, and electoral. Whether the SP's attempts to become the authentic voice of social democracy or seeks to deepen a very deep resistance to neoliberalism in the Netherlands remains to be seen. **R**

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Confronting the Climate Change Crisis

Ian Angus

Recently, we've been treated to the bizarre spectacle of George Bush and Stephen Harper each declaring their deep concern about "the serious challenge of global climate change." The U.S. president and Canada's prime minister, both long-time opponents of any action to limit greenhouse gases, now want us to believe that saving the environment has become a top priority of their governments.

Truly, the hypocrisy of capitalist politicians knows no bounds! They and their corporate masters want to avoid action on climate change, and they have been doing just that for years. Their eagerness to clothe themselves in inappropriate green has everything to do with public relations – and nothing to do with saving the earth.

Stephane Dion, recently chosen to lead Canada's Liberal Party, is setting the pace for politicians. While he was Environment Minister, Dion did nothing to stop Canada's greenhouse gas emissions from rising 30%. Now that he is leader of the Official Opposition, he says that he'll make the environment his top priority if he wins the next federal election.

Dion's real position on stopping greenhouse gas emissions was revealed in his response to expansion of the Alberta Tar Sands project. Extracting oil from tar sands generates two-and-a-half times as much greenhouse gas as conventional oil production. The Alberta Tar Sands project is the largest single reason why Canada's emissions have risen drastically since this country signed the Kyoto Accord. But when asked what he would do about it in May 2005, Dion shrugged: "There is no minister of the environment on earth who can stop this from going forward, because there is too much money in it."

With equal hypocrisy, conservative leader Stephen Harper is loudly critical of the years of Liberal inaction – while he defers any concrete action to reduce emissions to decades in the future. His favored approach is *intensity-based* regulations – which even in the best case would only control greenhouse gas emissions per unit of production, this allowing substantial increases in *total* emissions.

Denying Science

Knowledgeable scientists agree that climate change is real, and that the main cause is the use of fossil fuels, especially oil, gas, and coal. The earth today is significantly hotter than it was a few decades ago, and the rate of increase is accelerating. By the end of this century the planet will be hotter than it has ever been since humans began walking the earth.

Left unchecked, this will have catastrophic impacts on human, animal, and plant life. Crop yields will drop drastically, leading to famine on a broad scale. Hundreds of millions of people will be displaced by droughts in some areas and by rising ocean levels in others. Malaria and cholera epidemics are likely. The impact will be greatest in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – on the peoples whose lives have already been ravaged by imperialism many times over.

But that hasn't stopped corporations and politicians from claiming that they don't have enough information to decide whether the problem exists, let alone what can to be done about it. Their denials have been supported by a bevy of climate change deniers who are frequently quoted in media reports on the subject.

A recent report from the Union of Concerned Scientists shows that the appar-

ently large network of deniers is in fact a handful of people who make themselves seem more numerous by working through more than 30 front-groups. ExxonMobil, the world's largest publicly traded company, has been financial backer of all these groups – it paid them millions to "manufacture uncertainty" about climate change. By no coincidence, ExxonMobil is the largest single corporate producer of greenhouse gases. If ExxonMobil was a country, it would be the sixth-largest source of emissions.

Meanwhile, other corporate and government agencies have been working hard to divert attention away from corporate polluters and onto individuals. They blame individuals for not cutting back, not driving less, not insulating their homes and not using low-power light bulbs. The Canadian government's "One-Tonne Challenge" campaign, and the imposition of a "Congestion Charge" on automobile commuters in London, England, are cases in point: they both say individuals are to blame and should pay the cost of cleaning up the atmosphere. Obviously conservation is important. But so long as the fossil fuel giants continue business as usual, individual efforts will have very little impact.

The Age of Greenwash

Denying climate change and blaming it on individuals have worked well until now. But such tactics are now losing effectiveness. The scientific evidence for global warming gets more overpowering every day. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which always expresses itself cautiously and conservatively, said in February that "warming of the climate system is unequivocal," and they are 90 to 95 percent certain that most of the temperature is caused by "anthropogenic [human-

caused] greenhouse gas concentrations.” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis, Summary for Policymakers, at www.ipcc.ch)

More generally, despite the confusion and misinformation, public concern about climate change is growing. Voters and customers want action: polls show that the environment has now passed health care as the number one concern of Canadian voters.

That’s why George Bush and Stephen Harper are now demonstratively jumping on the green bandwagon and trying to grab the reins. That’s why Bush felt compelled to mention global warming in his State of the Union message.

Even ExxonMobil is on side: the company says it has stopped funding climate-change-denial front groups, and its executives are meeting with environmental groups to discuss proposals for regulating greenhouse gas emissions.

That’s the way it is in the age of greenwash – lots of talk about climate change, but no action that would interfere with the inalienable right of corporations to make money. Profits always come first, no matter how green the capitalist politicians claim to be.

Pollution Rights for Sale

In fact, there are major efforts under way to convince those who are concerned about climate that the solution is to increase the polluters’ profits. Last year, the British government appointed leading economist Nicholas Stern to study the problem of climate change. His report iden-

tified the source of the problem:

“GHG emissions are an externality; in other words, our emissions affect the lives of others. When people do not pay for the consequences of their actions we have market failure. This is the greatest market failure the world has seen.” (*Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change*. www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews)

“Externality” is a term capitalist economists use when corporations don’t pay for the damage they cause. Pollution is the perfect example – individual corporations pollute, but society as a whole bears the cost. Adam Smith’s invisible hand, which supposedly ensures the best of all possible worlds, doesn’t work on externalities.

A naïve observer might conclude that this means we should stop relying on markets, but not Nicolas Stern, and not most policy makers. Their solution to market failure is – create more markets!

The most widely proposed “market solution” to climate change — the one that is enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol — is to set goals for emission reduction, and then put a monetary value on the right to pollute.

If a corporation decides it is too expensive to cut emissions, it can buy pollution credits from some other company, or it can fund green projects in the Third World. Ontario Hydro, for example, might keep using coal-fired power plants if it plants enough trees in India or Brazil.

George Monbiot has compared this to the medieval practice of selling indulgences. If you were rich and you commit-

ted murder or incest or whatever, the Church would sell you forgiveness for a fixed price per sin. You didn’t have to stop sinning – so long as you paid the price, the Church would guarantee your admission to heaven. (George Monbiot: *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning*, 2006.)

The emissions trading schemes are actually worse than that. It’s as though the Church just gave every sinner a →



stack of Get Out Of Hell Free cards – and those who don't sin enough to use them all could then sell them to others who want to sin more.

Carbon Trading, a report published by Sweden's Dag Hammerskold Foundation, shows not only that emissions trading doesn't work, but that it actually makes things worse, by delaying practical action to reduce emissions by the biggest corporate offenders. What's more, since there is no practical method of measuring the results of emissions trading, the entire process is subject to massive fraud. Emissions trading has produced huge windfalls for the polluters – it instantly increases their assets, and does little to reduce emissions. (Dag Hammerskold Foundation: *Carbon Trading: A Critical Conversation on Climate Change, Privatisation and Power*, October 2006).

Another “market-driven” approach proposes levying taxes levied on corporate greenhouse gas emissions. But if the “carbon taxes” are too low, they won't stop emissions – and if they are high enough, corporations will shift their operations to countries that don't interfere with business-as-usual. In any event, it is very unlikely that capitalist politicians will actually impose taxes that would force their corporate backers to make real changes.

As Australian writer Dick Nichols has pointed out, anyone who argues that markets change overcome climate change has to answer difficult questions:

“Embracing capitalism – no matter how green the vision put forward – saddles pro-market environmentalists with a difficult case for the defence. They have to explain exactly how a system that has consumed more resources and energy in the last 50 years than all previous human civilization can be made to stabilize and then reduce its rate of resource depletion and pollution emission. How can this monstrously wasteful, poisonous, and unequal economic system actually be made to introduce the technologies, consumption patterns and radical income redistribution, without which all talk of sustainability is a sick joke?” (Dick Nichols, “Can Green Taxes Save

the Environment?” *Environment, Capitalism and Socialism*, at <http://www.dsp.org.au/site/?q=node/85>)

No Capitalist Solution

Any reasonable person must eventually ask why capitalists and their governments seek to avoid effective action on climate change. Everyone, including capitalists and politicians, will be affected. Nicholas Stern estimates that the world economy will shrink by 20% if we don't act. So why don't the people in power do something?

The answer is that the problem is rooted in the very nature of capitalist society, which is made up of thousands of corporations, all competing for investment and for profits. There is no “social interest” in capitalism – only thousands of separate interests that compete with each other.

If a company decides to invest heavily in cutting emissions, its profits will go down. Investors will move their capital into more profitable investments. Eventually the green company will go out of business. The fundamental law of capitalism is “Grow or Die.” Anarchic, unplanned growth isn't an accident, or an externality, or a market failure. It is the nature of the beast.

Experts believe that stabilizing climate change will require a 70% or greater reduction in CO2 emissions in the next 20 to 30 years – and that will require a radical reduction in the use of fossil fuels. At least three major barriers militate against capitalism achieving that goal.

- *Changing from fossil fuels to other energy sources will require massive spending.* In the near-term this will be non-profitable investment, in an economy that cannot function without profit.
- *The CO2 reductions must be global.* Air and water don't stop at borders. So long as capitalism remains the world's dominant economic system, positive changes in individual countries will be undermined by countermoves in other countries seeking competitive advantage.
- *The change must be all-encompassing.* Unlike previous anti-pollution campaigns that focused on single

industries, or specific chemicals such as DDT, stopping greenhouse gases will require wrenching change to every part of the economy. Restructuring on such an enormous scale is almost certainly impossible in a capitalist framework – and any attempt to make it happen will meet intense resistance.

Only an economy that is organized for human needs, not profit, has any chance of slowing climate change and reversing the damage that's already been done. Only democratic socialist planning can overcome the problems caused by capitalist anarchy.

Fighting for Change

But that doesn't mean we should wait for socialism to challenge the polluters. On the contrary, we can and must fight for change today – it's possible to win important gains, and building a movement to stop climate change can be an important part of building a movement for socialism.

A radical movement against climate change can be built around demands such as these:

- Establish and enforce rapid mandatory reductions in CO2 emissions: real reductions, not phony trading plans.
- Make the corporations that produce greenhouse gases pay the full cost of cutting emissions.
- End all subsidies to fossil fuel producers.
- Redirect the billions now being spent on wars and debt into public transit, into retrofitting homes and offices for energy efficiency, and into renewable energy projects.

Corporations and conservative union leaders (including one-time radical Buzz Hargrove of the Canadian Auto Workers union) play on the fear of job losses to convince workers to oppose action to protect the environment. All calls for restructuring industry must be coupled with opposition to layoffs. Workers must have access to retraining and relocation at the corporation's expense, at full union pay.

The movement must pay particular at-

tention on the needs of the Third World. As ecology activist Tom Athanasiou has written, we must “spare the South from any compulsion to make an impossible choice between climate protection on the one hand and ‘development’ on the other.” (Tom Athanasiou, *The Inconvenient Truth*, at www.ecoquity.org/docs/InconvenientTruth2.pdf) The people of the Third World have suffered centuries of poverty while their countries were plundered to enrich the imperialist powers. Now they are the hardest hit victims of climate change. They are angered, and rightly so, by any suggestion that they should now be forced to forego economic growth in order to solve a problem that was created by their exploiters in the North.

An effective climate change program will support the battles in the Third World against imperialist domination and distortion of their economies. It will oppose the export of polluting industries to the global south, support campaigns for land reform and to redirect agriculture to meet local needs, not export to the north. We must demand that our governments offer every possible form of practical assistance to assist Third World countries to find and implement developmental programs that are consistent with world environmental requirements.

The example of Cuba, a poor country with limited resources, shows what can be done. The World Wildlife Fund recently identified Cuba as the only country in the world that meets the requirements of sustainable development. Cuba achieved that while its economy was growing more than twice as fast as the Latin American average, so the problem isn’t growth – it is capitalist growth.

Humanity’s Choice

In 1918, in the midst of the most horrible war that the world had ever seen, the great German socialist leader Rosa Luxemburg wrote that the choice facing the world was “Socialism or Barbarism.” As we know, socialism did not triumph in the 20th Century. Instead we had a century of wars and genocide – the very barbarism that Rosa Luxemburg feared.

Today we face that choice in a new and

even more horrible form. Prominent U.S. environmentalist Ross Gelbspan poses the issue in stark terms:

“A major discontinuity is inevitable. The collective life we have lived as a species for thousands of years will not continue long into the future. We will either see the fabric of civilization unravel under the onslaught of an increasingly unstable climate – or else we will use the construction of a new global energy infrastructure to begin to forge a new set of global relationships.” (Ross Gelbspan, *Boiling Point*, 2005, p. 17)

Gelbspan, like many environmentalists, pins his hopes on persuading capitalism’s decision makers that ending climate change is a “moral imperative.” Past experience, and an understanding of the imperatives of capitalism, show that to be a vain hope. Instead, echoing Marx and Engels and Luxemburg, we must say that humanity’s choice in the 21st Century is EcoSocialism or Barbarism. There is no third way. **R**



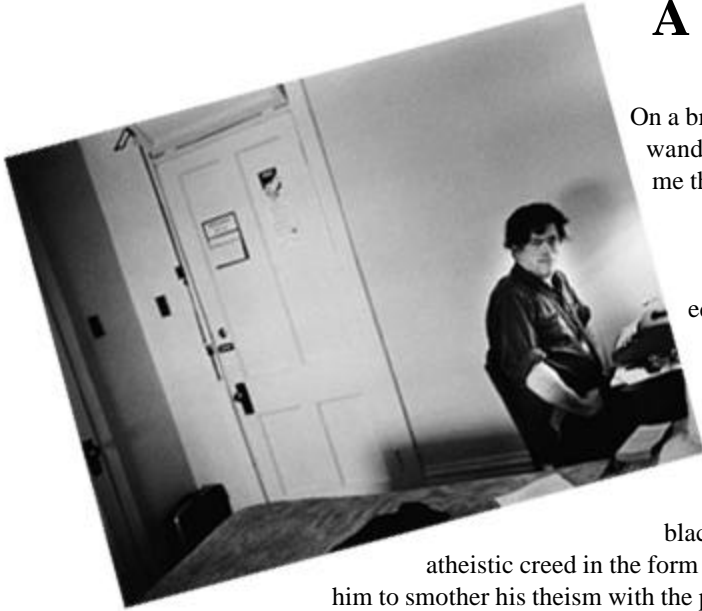
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Prose Poems by Joe Rosenblatt

A Mystic Half Out Of The Closet



On a bright July afternoon in 1966, only a few years after his brief marriage wandered off to its elephant graveyard, Milton Acorn gustily declared to me that the captive killer whale we had seen at Vancouver's Stanley Park aquarium, was a crypto-communist! This incarcerated creature, he reasoned, had subtly waved a dorsal fin at him, recognizing him as a kindred spirit. His cetacean friend had directed the marine equivalent of a clenched fist at him in recognition of a land comrade, and I wasn't about to challenge his assumption. Acorn was adamant on plebe authenticity, whether on the land or on water: whales, elephants, Organized Labour. There were some exceptions: he had a particular aversion for poets associated with the university, referring to one leftist academic poet celebrating the exploits of Che Guevara, as "a bourgeois poet in proletarian blackface." Yet despite his praise for Marxist social engineering and its

atheistic creed in the form of dialectical materialism, there was too much of the supernatural in him to smother his theism with the pillow of Stalinism. Milton Acorn, known respectfully as Mr. Acorn to strangers, Milton to strong acquaintances, and "Miltie," to close friends, had a protective *veritatis splendor* that provided him with a spiritual prophylaxis, which protected him from thoroughly contaminating the best of his lyric poetry with surface *agit prop*. He was a mystic half out of the closet. Whether it was an adoration for chained elephants slaving away on some plantation, or muscle-bound wage slaves swinging flanks of meat in a packing house, his muse wouldn't let him get away with mere message poetry. She in the guise of a bullish elephant god, had managed to push him partly out of the closet, and in the bargain, provided him with a masterpiece. One could wager that his prize *beast* was none other than the "living thoughts" of the martyred bard himself, carrying the burden of Love, just as that other boss carpenter, carried his cross. "Nothing human is alien to me," spouted Marx, but the voice angrily reverberating in the poet was light years ahead of any carbuncle-plagued labour economist, precisely because that voice was alien, and not of this earth.

Going for the Ivory

I envision a meticulous predator sifting through a stellar author's archive to find compromising letters, salacious notes, confidential diaries, and other bewildering minutiae, copious marginalia . . . and all for the purpose of bringing the *beast* down to the diminutive height of a dormouse. The biographical terrorist's intention is to set into motion a process of demonization of his, or her target of opportunity via "sexual McCarthyism," (a term now in vogue all because of a sex-addict of a Yankee president who, too, fell from a great height.) and in the bargain, titillate the savage reader hot to sniff the psychic underwear of a fallen cultural icon.

Who knows what sore eyes are presently pouring over a sensitive file whose embargo date has long expired in some university archive? In some instances, it could be said that a poet's egoism is to blame for his or her reductive misfortune. Poetry by its very nature invites the sanguinary elephant-hunter sniffing for blood, since the poet by freeing the powers of the imagination, and by producing a benign mythomania is subject to a deconstructionist and revisionist exercise. It would seem that not even the shelter of the grave can stop a lurking predator who is always out there. Terrorism can take the shape of a literary biographer sniffing for salacious materials at a special collection room of a university library, and ready to plunge at a target psyche like an eating machine of a Moray eel stalking a silvery school of bait fish beneath the ocean's funereal depths. Poets by continually reinventing themselves, each time they write a poem, offer themselves up as quarry, and serve as an object to be ridiculed and diminished by their imaginative white lies. They are little different than anglers who exaggerate the size of *the one that got away*. A four pound salmon suddenly becomes a fifteen pound muscle-bound beauty jetting away to freedom.

The elephant hunter incarnated as an ambitious biographer salivates at the thought of acquiring the precious tusks of a notable author's reputation, living or dead, but preferably dead for a dead writer can't fight back.

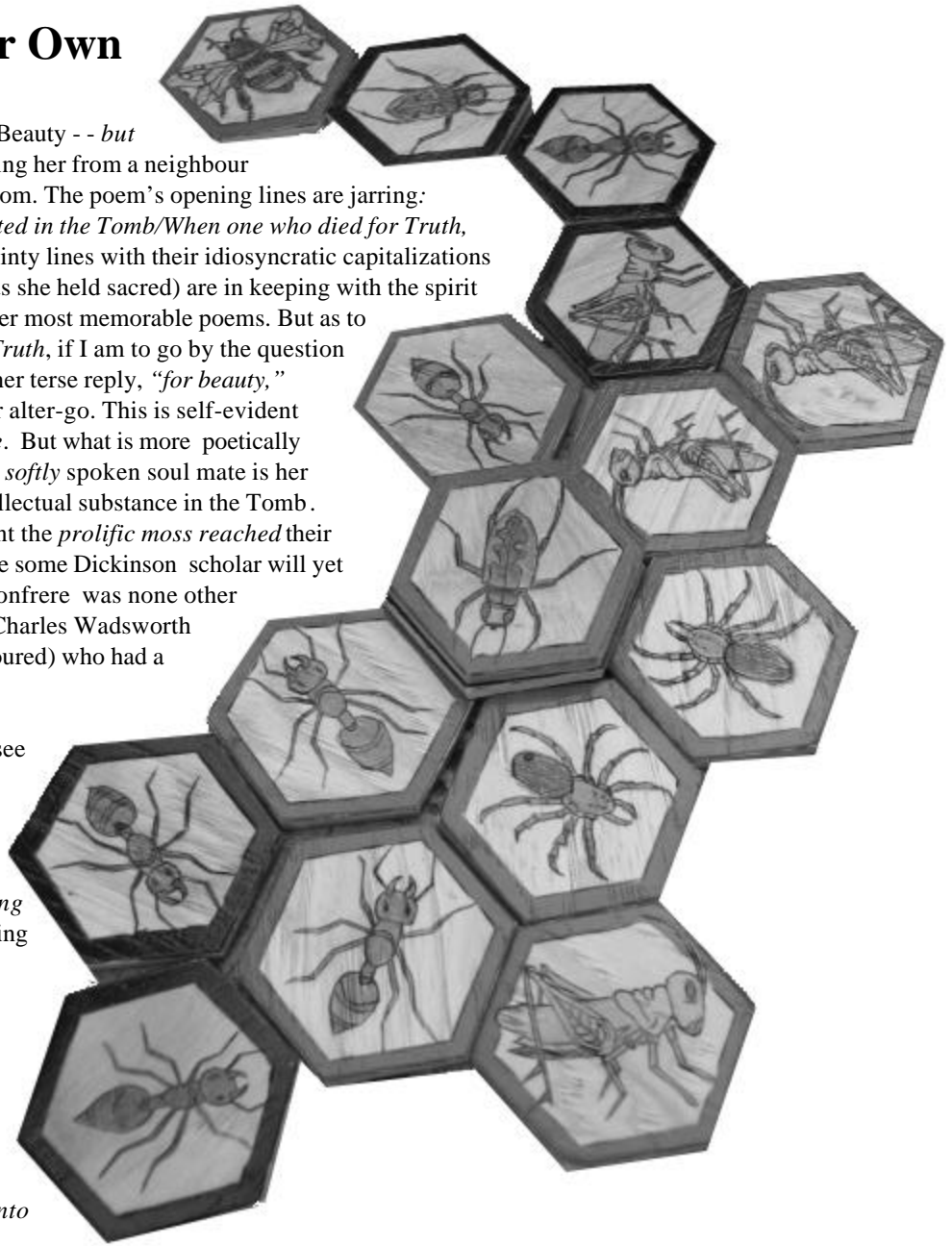
Sharing a Hive of their Own

In Emily Dickinson's poem *I died For Beauty - - but was scarce*, a wall exists in a *Tomb* separating her from a neighbour who has just been laid to rest in the next room. The poem's opening lines are jarring: *I died for beauty - - but was scarce/ Adjusted in the Tomb/When one who died for Truth, was lain/In an adjoining Room*. Those pointy lines with their idiosyncratic capitalizations (her style of displaying reverence for words she held sacred) are in keeping with the spirit of an internalized black comedy found in her most memorable poems. But as to the identity of that stranger who *died for Truth*, if I am to go by the question he poses to her as to why she *failed*, and her terse reply, "*for beauty*," I would speculate that he functioned as her alter-go. This is self-evident in his belief that truth and beauty are *One*. But what is more poetically relevant than arriving at the identity of her *softly* spoken soul mate is her wonderful dialogue with somebody of intellectual substance in the *Tomb*. They were *Kinsmen* right up to the moment the *prolific moss* reached their *lips to cover up both their names*. I am sure some Dickinson scholar will yet put forward the theory that her spiritual confrere was none other than her friend and mentor, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth (a married man with whom she was enamoured) who had a considerable influence on her creative life.

Dickinson didn't have to travel far to see what was readily available in assisting the soul's rapid transit into the next world. She had only to peer into her garden in Amherst, Massachusetts to see her *buccaneers of buzz* and *tippler bees leaning against the sun*. Haunted by Emily's buzzing messengers, my own images of droning honeybees and bumblebees, while no *buccaneers*, nevertheless metamorphosed into aggressive burglars dressed in garish football jerseys while bullishly charging into pollen-rich corollas. Sometimes my bees took on the appearances of manic shoppers dashing off to their respective time-hives with *pollen groceries packed into the cavities of their rear legs*.

In the early sixties my urban muse stumbled on some hot and heavy pollen-dusting cross-pollination activity by bees fervidly going about their sacred labour inside the Victorian greenhouse at Toronto's Allan Gardens. It wasn't until years after my suite of macho bee poems was published that I realized *Mother Nature's Proletarians* were sterile females. The few pathetic male drones in the hive were only there to provide stud service to the Queen Bee and thus propagate the race. I also mistakenly blended my collective honeybees in with solitary bumblebees often confusing the two races. In hindsight I see now that the *bright ones* who Gwendolyn MacEwen often spoke about in her poems appeared in the guises of solar-hued social insects to nourish my own muse. Influenced by the metaphysical poetry of Emily Dickinson, I was inspired to write my first soul transport poem, *I Want To Hijack A Bumblebee*.

In this 1964 poem I envisioned my soul taking over controls of a bumblebee and flying over a field of marigold into the Hereafter. Like honey – producing bees, poets, too, need to share a hive of their own to complete their life-cycle of sacred labour in creating poetry.



The Mythopoetic Victim



For some reason my twisted psyche envisioned trout as the pristine female principle in the Little Qualicum River, a body of water on Vancouver Island world-renowned for its winter steelhead, or salmon trout. I had published a slim volume of poetry on fly fishing with that aesthetic gem glimmering in my mind. I was now about to pay the price for my mythopoetic indulgences in a college classroom run by a cool Indo-Canadian feminist professor, who was amused by my discomfort as a female student aimed a well-directed question at me. I had just finished reading passages from that piscatorial volume, *The Brides of the Stream*.

My piqued critic stubbornly waited for my answer, and so I countered that I wasn't comparing women to just any fish but to trout. I had no intention of following the traditional seventeenth-century classical male English poets in comparing beautiful women to decorative flowers – a rose, perchance? A fashion-conscious rainbow trout, complete with iridescence, silver, speckled red, and other mottled colours on its sleek raiment was my symbol of the quintessential spirit of feminine pulchritude. I was celebrating the muse, dressing her up in an haute couture masterpiece. My brides, I elaborated, were quite sexy, unlike some bottom-feeding, sluggish catfish stirring up the sediment with its barbels.

My piscatorial explanation that afternoon to a humourless student at Toronto's Scarborough College proved an exercise in futility. My answer went over like a lead-lined prairie buffalo fish. The sublime could no more prosper in that classroom environment than an oxygen-starved pond could support marine life.

Some years after that ghastly trout affair, I was accused of using pornographic images in my bee poems, following a reading I gave at Hamilton College in New York State. Ironically, they were poems I had previously performed at a benefit reading for a Toronto feminist magazine, *Fireweed*, without even as much as a hint of protest from the audience. Now I was defending my bee poems against charges of pornography. Following my reading a group of young women formed a hostile semi-circle around me. The ring leader wanted to know why I exploited women, to which I informed her that my poems were not some sexually exploitative centrefold, such as you would find in *Playboy* magazine. I couldn't deny that my bees were engaging in a form of sexual congress with plant life; pollination was, after all, a form of consensual sex. That declaration, too, went down like the Titanic. Later, I concluded that perhaps those poems had triggered a subliminal response in my audience who twigged to an element of pornography in my dusty bumblebees of which I wasn't aware.



At least my reading wasn't interrupted as it was by the perennially mature student who looked like a hybrid between Rip Van Winkle and Charles Manson, a geriatric pet of sorts, whom the faculty and student body alike at Malaspina College on Vancouver Island had adopted. He sat in the front row of the classroom glaring at me and, when I was well into my performance, he suddenly extended a rusty bent nail, offering it to me as a token of friendship. I rudely ignored his offer. I made a caustic comment at his expense and continued reading my poems. He wasn't going to be discouraged. From out of the corner of my eye, just as I was about to persevere with what I thought was a tame poem, I saw him pour some wine from a bottle, which he took out of a brown paper bag. I sensed what was going to follow as he poured that wretched wine into a clear plastic cup. Wearing a sickly smile, he stood up, faced the audience and then, turning in my direction, not only offered me that cup of wine, raising it over his unkempt mop of hair, urging me to "have a fucking drink" but, for good measure, and much to the amusement of the audience, proceeded to pluck out his glass eye. I was aghast, not knowing which was worse, that prosthetic eyeball or the wrinkled cavity from which it had come.

Man in God's Image Versus the Zoo Muse

The mythopoetic wasn't inviting punishment only from political ideologues and the mentally challenged. The sane of the academy were flashing their pointy piranha teeth of deductive reasoning at me, also. My zoo was stirring responses from pedagogues. It wasn't the feedback I wanted. In some ways, it was worse than the glass eye of the insane.

More guilt bubbles and anxieties lay in store for me, this time from a close confidant, a friend, who devoured tomes of English literature as naturally as a leaf-cutting ant harvests fallen jungle leaves. My friend was a creative educator to primary students. Seeking to enrich their intellectual lives, he enjoyed motivating them to read the poetry of the Immortals.

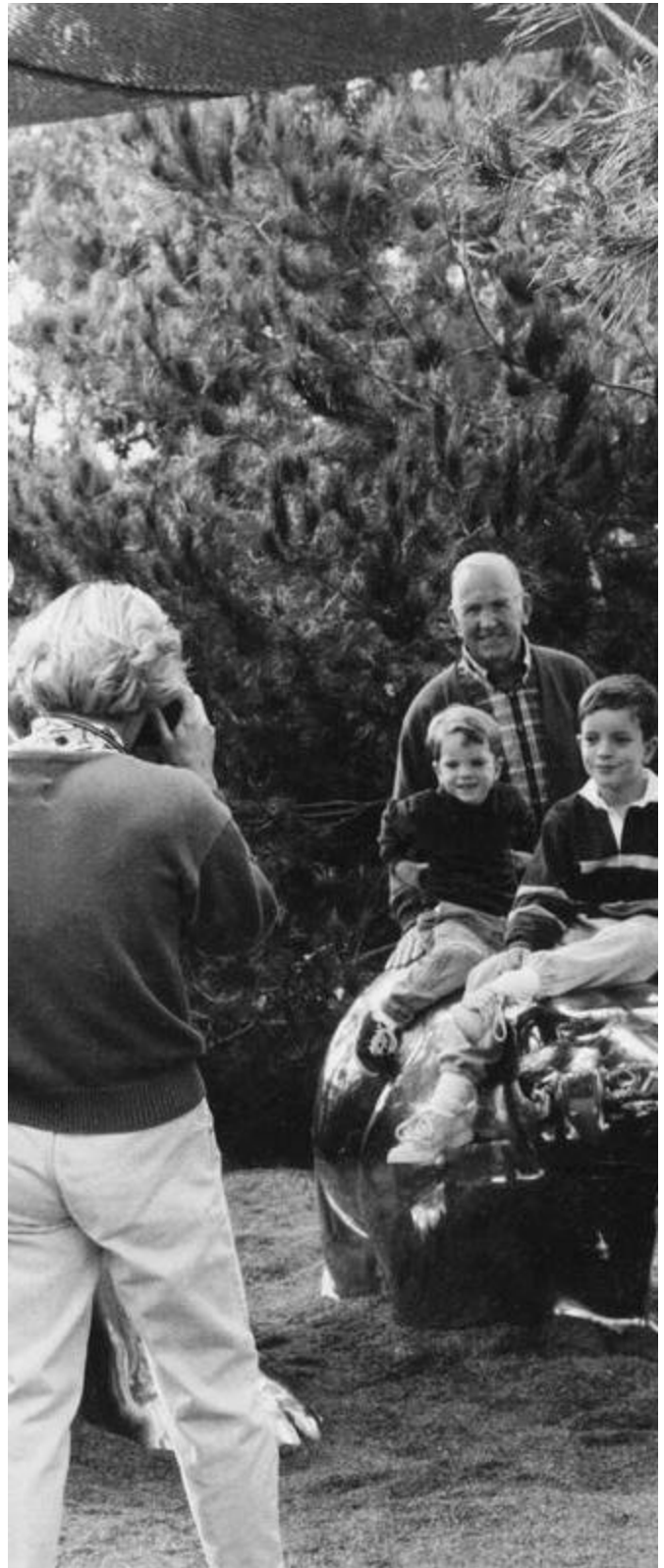
In his leisure hours, when he wasn't marking student assignments, he immersed himself in Yiddish literature, translating into English difficult, long forgotten metaphysical poems.

Fixing me with a gaze that he might apply to a student with a serious learning disorder, he gently critiqued my zoo muse in the hopes of unfettering the excessive mythic kingdom in me, and therefore, by degrees and patience, he hoped to draw me into the pores of normal society. Unbeknownst to me, my poems on the natural world seemed gratuitously imbued with a high octane of gastric activity; this, he deduced, fuelled my poetic landscape. He further deduced that there were cannibalistic tendencies in some of my fish sonnets. Alarmed, I sought to assure him that I was talking only about the gastronomic bent of fish who ate other fish and were by nature cannibals in heat.

Wearing a sepulchral face, he began discussing my poems in a slow, deliberative voice. Soon he embarked on a discourse outlining where the tributaries of conventional civility and social norms met in the main artery of classical English poetry. I quickly got the drift that I was an urchin with abnormal alpha rhythms.

Unlike the muses of other poets who dealt with the human condition, such as unrequited love, the death of a loved one, the horrors of war, love of God and country, and genocide, my muse was out of alignment. It refused to confront acute concerns constituting the fabric of hyper reality, and, worse, it kept wearing surreal masks in a refusal to show its real face.]

"Can't you build a decorative zoo for beautiful women?" he asked. If Leonard Cohen and Irving Layton could put a spin on Eros, why couldn't I? He then proceeded to list other illustrious poets who had made good career moves advancing modern romantic poetry. As his list grew, a sense of inadequacy came over me. I wanted to dive into that creative bouillabaisse, and be reborn as a normal bard.



These prose poems first appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of *Prairiefire*. Please visit www.prairiefire.ca for subscription information.

PAN'S LABYRINTH



ofelia in fascistland

Reviewed by Sam Gindin
and Schuster Gindin

The brilliantly creative *Pan's Labyrinth*, directed by Mexican director Guillermo del Toro, brings us images that will stay with us forever and become enshrined in collections of film's greatest-ever scenes. Yet while both of us walked out of the theatre intellectually stimulated and visually enchanted, we also felt – for reasons we still don't quite understand – emotionally unengaged. The contrast to our response to two other movies now showing, also by Mexican directors, was striking (the other films were Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*; all three films, coincidentally, include plots that centrally revolve around 'the child').

Pan's Labyrinth has generally been interpreted as contrasting the cold, brutally oppressive and ordered reality of fascism with the made-up fairy-tale world of a child. But the imaginary world so sumptuously created here is much more than either a foil to highlight how ugly Spanish fascism was (hardly a controversial sentiment today), or an escape from the harsh adult world (hardly an innovative theme). *Pan's Laby-*

rinth is ultimately less a movie about fascism than on the role of imagination in sustaining resistance and nourishing hope.

The movie begins with the camera flowing over the outstretched body of a young girl injured or dying; the film will unravel the circumstances that led to this end. That story starts with two passengers traveling through Spain's rough countryside: a very pregnant mother and her young daughter (Ofelia) with her favorite book in her lap. The baby's father, a fascist captain (Vidal) has summoned his mistress to come to the isolated outpost he commands so she can give birth to the son that will continue his family's legacy. The mother's own well being is irrelevant, other than as a vessel for the child. The same disdain is visited on Ofelia; upon 'welcoming' Ofelia to the place her brother will be born, Vidal contemptuously observes that she does not even know which hand to offer in meeting her father and captain of the outpost (presumably a skill that will later be natural to her new brother). The fairy-tale is introduced not by the animation that soon follows, but by this stan-

dard of the genre – Vidal is the familiar evil stepfather of fairy-tale lore: austere, authoritarian and self-disciplined, dangerous.

It is 1944 – well after most of us understood the Spanish Civil War to be over – but pockets of resistance remain. Captain Vidal has been stationed in this remote part of rural Spain to mop up what's left of the republican forces. Those still carrying on the anti-fascist fight are courageous and resourceful, but their defeat (as we know) is just a matter of time. If hope remains, it will have to be found outside the remaining band of men in the forest and their underground supporters within the military compound. As the story unfolds, the symbol of that hope revolves around the child about to be born. For Vidal, it symbolizes the extension of his personal (and that of his father's) mortality as well as the continuity of the fascist cause. For the resistance, the child – not especially relevant at first – emerges as a sign of hope. Ofelia's guardian angel (Mercedes), the house servant of Vidal who smuggles food, medical supplies and information to the underground, takes the boy and declares that he will never know who his father is. The child will be saved from becoming what his father was and, it is hoped, represent a rupture in the link between fascism's present and its future.

This small sign of hope is given greater significance by the fact that it was Ofelia that played so crucial a role in keeping her brother from Vidal. In doing so, it was not in spite of living in the fairy-tale world, but *because* of it. The world of fairy-tales – the world of imagination – is revealed as being as authentic in its impact as anything in the 'real' world. This imagined world is as out-of-control, nightmarish, and demanding – in short as scary – as the real world, if in different ways. Rather than a retreat to child-like safety, the fairy-tale in *Pan's Labyrinth* involves the coming of age of a young girl through the interaction of both imagination *and* the outside world. Her fairy-tale is where Ofelia is warned of dangers to come and given challenges that are not simply an allegorical reference to the real world, but include tests and concrete actions that are part of her preparation for, and *actions* in, that real world. Though Ofelia is, from the very beginning

of the film, apparently in a world of her own, through trying to take her brother away from Vidal she comes to play a heroic and crucial role in the subversion of fascist continuity.

In the final scene, it seems that we are back to the whimsical role of fairy-tales as wish fulfillment. Ofelia has passed her test, taken her position as princess of the underground, been reunited with her long-lost father. The guarantee that good will triumph over evil seems reasserted as the eternal essence of fairy-tales. But there is something else, something much more interesting, suggested here by del Toro. It is all too clear, from the movie's opening scene to the just-seen shocking end of

Ofelia's life that the princess-fantasy cannot in fact reverse the fact that she has *not* won. What is rather emphasized in that final fairy-tale scene set alongside Ofelia's tragic death is the collective hope, through the fairy-tale-as-imagination, of future victory. The film opposes fascism not to morality (though that of course is a constant) but to action and hope. Imagination, as a spur to taking responsibility and in sustaining hope in spite of immediate horrors, is in this sense as material a force – and in some circumstances a more powerful one – than anything in real life. It is ultimately fascism, not the fairy-tale, that becomes the background in this film as the liberating role of imagination in social change takes over.

Why then the hesitancy we declared in the introduction to this review? How is it that this wonderfully crafted film with stunningly memorable scenes and optimistic though sober politics still felt distant to us? Was it that the Spanish Civil War as depicted here had less immediacy than the allegedly futuristic fascism in *Children of Men*? Was it that that our identification with Ofelia was never as strong as the emotions brought out by the children of radically different but overlapping cultures in *Babel*? Or was it just us? Insights to this anomaly in our reaction are welcome. **R**

Sam and Schuster Gindin are Toronto-based activists.

Student Movement Stalled... Continued from page 5

2002 – each with specific messages, but all against tuition fee increases.

Duff points to the protests of 2000 as the most recent success stories of the students' movement.

"Access 2000 was significant across the country. BC tuition fees were reduced by five per cent after the day of action," he says, noting that Manitoba's tuition was frozen that year and Newfoundland was given a 25 per cent decrease in fees over three years.

Despite these successes, student protests since 1995 have never reached the numbers they once did.

A.K. Thompson was part of the protests against tuition fees in the late '90s and is one of the editors of the book *When Campus Resists* about student occupations of presidential offices in 1997. He is also an editor of *Upping the Anti: a Journal of Theory and Action* and a PhD candidate at York University in sociology.

Thompson says CFS lost its relevance to many students since 1995, due to internal mismanagement, an overly narrow focus on tuition fees, and resistance to varying tactics and viewpoints from within the student movement.

"I don't think CFS has been particularly smart in organizing campuses," he says.

"In 1995 students at Canadian universities came to grips with what neo-liberalism meant. CFS created the conditions (for

the protests) and used the tuition question as an organizing device ... (but) fighting solely around tuition is not sufficient."

Thompson points to the 1997 day of action in Toronto where a group of students broke away from the march to occupy the CIBC building to draw attention to its holdings of student debt.

"CFS organizers were quite horrified by this, but for many people that was an inspiring moment," he says.

"People resist being a number in a stage-managed demonstration. If there isn't an active planning process for participants, they remain indifferent or hostile," he says.

Jesse Greener, chairperson for CFS Ontario, sees things differently.

"All the federation can hope to do is be a mobilizing force and help to inspire individuals and spin-off initiatives by other students," he says. The staged nature of the demonstrations is only to help the local organizers by freeing up their time to get students interested, rather than making their own materials.

"Ideally, every student would be at every annual general meeting; every student would be plugged in."

Greener disagrees with Thompson's view that the issue of tuition can't mobilize students as a core issue. "It's the most broad issue – it touches every student. I think tuition fees help unify people ..."

Despite his critiques, Thompson is hopeful the day of action will go well. "My greatest hope is that every demonstration is enormous. We're all going through periods of demobilization. People don't know what's going on."

But, he says, "Even if (the day of action) is bigger than '95, the fundamental questions will remain the same.

"The question to pose to ourselves is not 'how can we make the student movement the beacon for the left,' but 'given the imperialist aggression in Iraq, Haiti, Palestine and Afghanistan, what is preventing us from staging another Quebec,'" he says, referencing the massive anti-globalization protests in Quebec City in 2001.

Back at the day of action planning meeting, none of these questions surface. The organizers are far more occupied with coordinating events, handing out literature, making videos and buying megaphones.

After this year's day of action, the plan is to have student assemblies and get direction from the members on what to do next. In October, Ontario will have general elections and CFS wants to keep the pressure up and make tuition a campaign issue. **R**

Jenn Watt is a senior intern at rabble.ca, where this article first appeared. She is the managing editor of *Blackfly Magazine*.

Youth Activists at the 2007 World Social Forum

Rachel Brewer and Ewa Cerda

For the first time in its seven-year history, the World Social Forum was held in Africa. Activists, social movements, networks, coalitions and other progressive forces from Asia-Pacific, Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, Europe and all corners of the African continent converged in Nairobi, Kenya from January 20th to the 25th. Workshops, panels, films, and art vigorously critiqued the destructive forces of neoliberalism, with cultural events and song serving as a celebration of the growing strength of social movements and civil society. As young activists we bring a unique perspective to the Forum, an event that since its inception has tried to initiate a political space for young people to creatively express their struggles and propose alternatives.

Youth Involvement

At the last global-level WSF in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the youth camp had over 30,000 delegates. In Nairobi, there were only 250 participants in the youth camp set up south-west of the Moi Stadium venue. Unfortunately, this fits in with past criticisms that year after year the WSF manages to somewhat neglect its future generation. Although this year's theme was "People's Struggles, People's Alternatives", the struggles that young people face around the world were severely underrepresented - and were too often articulated by those other than youth.

Although in past years youth may have been well represented at the WSF, in Nairobi this was not exactly the case. There was a separate zone established for youth events - but it was on the outskirts of the venue grounds, and thus felt somewhat detached from the rest of the proceedings. Could the youth zone not have been more centrally located so as to make it seem part of the rest of the Forum's activities? The importance of establishing a designated area for youth at the WSF cannot be de-



nied - but in this case, it created a feeling of disengagement and separation from the rest of the events.

Younger activists also seemed to be in short supply at the WSF in general - a fact that was noticeable when walking around the Forum grounds. There also did not seem to be a high number of youth from Kenya - which is unusual for a country where 60% of the population is between 18 and 30 years old. The reasons for the under-representation of Kenyan youth are many. Perhaps it points to the inability of

the national Organizing Committee to make the inclusion of this important group a priority. Reports of participants from Nairobi's poorest communities being charged exorbitant entrance fees to the Forum grounds may explain the low levels of youth in attendance. Although the organizing committee dropped the fees after a few days, and Kenyan residents were allowed in free of charge - it should be noted that the event was already well under way at this point.

There were a number of youth-focused

events on offer in the program as well – although many of these were cancelled at the last minute. Many of the youth seminars and workshops we attended were dominated by large NGOs, both local and international, where young activists seemed to be ‘spoken for’ rather than given a visibly prominent place on panels. Admittedly, the activities at the Forum are self-organized, so there is the potential for youth-run groups to design their own events, but the costs involved in holding a workshop created an extra barrier for young participants. For us, this sometimes created a feeling that we were there as observers rather than as full participants in the WSF process. However, there were some excellent youth-focused events – one particularly significant experience we had was a guided tour of several community projects in the Korogocho slum settlement near the WSF grounds, organized and facilitated by a local youth group (in spite of strong government opposition to visitors being allowed to see these communities). On the whole, it would be fair to say that

youth issues and concerns did not seem to be adequately represented at this particular Forum – this is alarming for an event that has historically seen high levels of youth participation.

Moreover, the lack of resolute and ongoing inter-generational dialogue is what may prevent the strengthening of the WSF process and global movements in the future. To prevent this from occurring, perhaps the Organizing Committee should explore ways to facilitate more inter-generational exchange in many of the central sessions.

Youth and Social Justice

The political importance of young people’s involvement in the WSF process can not be emphasized enough. Because it is a space where we are able to re-think and re-imagine the system we live in, young people must be a part of the process and mechanisms that are envisioning our future. There must be a conscious effort on

behalf of established activists to share their experiences and help build a future generation that will continue their work. One of the issues continually touched on throughout the Forum is that of sustainable development. But what about the sustainability of our movements?

Although the Forum is far from perfect, it is nonetheless rejuvenating to be a participant in such a dynamic event as it grows and changes. Seeing the process quench even part of the thirst movements and civil society express for democratic and inclusive space is inspiring. It is an example of an overall success: a political space that is serving a global purpose that has been created and propelled by the sector it was originally designed to serve. It only reaffirms our belief that the World Social Forum is desperately needed as a worldwide platform to serve a dissenting majority. **R**

Rachel Brewer and Ewa Cerda work for Students for Social Justice at the Centre for Social Justice in Toronto.

Yes, Another World is Possible!

The Long Journey of the World Social Forum

Carlos Torres

On January 20, 2007 tens of thousands of people converged in Nairobi with a common goal – the search for a better world. More than 60,000 people gathered in the Kasarani Sport complex, the biggest stadium in Kenya, located on the outskirts of the city. The women and men meeting in the capital city were enthusiastic; the WSF had finally arrived in the African continent, perhaps the region of the world that more than any other needs a call for another world. Fatima Aloo, member of the organizing committee from Tanzania, declared, “This is the first time I recall men and women from everywhere in Africa coming together, from remotes villages. The most in need are the ones that can really make the necessary transformation possible.”

The streets of Nairobi correspond to a spatial logic inherited from the British colonizers with all paths veering toward the right. Stairs and walkways behave the same way. Early in the morning, almost at dawn, you can distinguish human silhouettes walking along the highways. They carry dreams and hopes on their shoulders as their feet take them to work. Some of them walk for hours, flocking towards badly paid jobs. They are all black people who do not earn enough in wages to pay for the expensive private transportation system and consequently rely on their long, skinny,

boney legs to transport themselves. Their silhouettes are contrasted against the sunrise that falls on shoulders still bearing the wounds of human kind. The sun rises very early in the African mornings. Che Guevara might have noticed it too when he traveled to the Congo in the 1960s to get involved in its liberation struggle. At twilight the same mass, enraged and in pain, endures the rays of the setting sun on its back. Contamination makes breathing difficult and gives the sun a lifeless appearance, but hunger haunts them at the end of a long journey.

The Ruthless Colonial Heritage

The soil is red in Nairobi, a reddish copper like the land surrounding abandoned mine sites, but red also like spilled ancestral blood. Nevertheless, from the dirt radiates colourful, vibrant green paradises of foliage, a different coloured gloom. The extreme and overwhelming poverty of the slums and the opulence of the ruling elites coexist in time and space, heaven and hell. The distance between one and the other is visible, although without major tensions, separated by an unvoiced apartheid; the harm produced by the Anglo-Saxon empire is evident in the abysmal disparity →

gap and there are no signs of amelioration in the short term.

The people of Nairobi are humble and kind. Materially they are certainly poor beyond poverty, and there are no words to describe the pain contained within their souls and reflected in their gaze. They represent the starting point of humankind, the nest of human civilization. It is possible, therefore, that a path of liberation and emancipation could emerge here for humankind in danger of extinction. Another World is Possible only if Africa is actively involved in a new world!

Truncated Gathering

The Forum was flooded by colour and diversity from all across the African continent, the colonial inheritance reflected in the prevalence of Portuguese, French, English and Spanish, as well as ancestral languages and dialects. Strangely, many people used the language of the colonizers to communicate among themselves. The colonial legacy was also detectable in the organizing patterns and the political and social conceptualization of Forum themes. The “Black Man’s Burden” led to a reflection by Joseph Ki-Zerbo and many others who asserted that the “uncritical adoption of the European Paradigm of the nation state; the destruction of social and cultural cohesion; the growing bias towards the national ‘center’ and the mass exodus from rural areas to cities which are disintegrating under the strain of unregulated growth is a dangerous path on which to embark.”

Regardless of their colonial inheritance, people from different regions of the world gathered to discuss similar issues. It appears that colonial and neoliberal ideologies have forced this type of meeting and the slow and intricate organizing process of the 7th WSF took place in Nairobi in spite of the odds it faced.

Arriving in caravans by bus, air, and on foot – walking like their ancestors in search of land to grow crops or an oasis to ease their thirst – they made their way from every corner of Africa to meet their brothers and sisters of the Dark Continent. Walking across mountains and borders, fording rivers and rough terrains, they brought their banners, placards, colorful garments and their dark skin blazed by the fiery sun. Toufik Ben Abdallah of the Forum Organizing Committee contends that this forum is, “the most important event in Africa’s recent history. For the first time the conditions were created to encourage a social convergence in the region,” adding that, “this is the first time necessity and hope meet in the same place at the same time.”

In spite of the energy and enthusiasm the most anticipated political and cultural exchange happened, but in a deficient way – we always need to expand the debate. Europeans and Latin Americans enjoy talking about paradigms, alternatives to neoliberalism and big ideas, but the African people have immediate and pressing issues to deal with – famine, unemployment, environmental contamination, AIDS and leprosy pandemics, domestic violence and orphans. And, although in the WSF there is room for everything, it was difficult to bring cohesion to both discussions. Certainly the debate did not end there. Jammed between the frustrations of the limited deliberation and reality, the people of Africa acknowledge once again that to change the world is not an easy or short-term task. This event can in fact contribute to strengthening and enacting new processes and innovative political events – the ultimate goal of the Forum – a possible result of

the Nairobi gathering. Aminata Traore stated that, many Africans met each other for the first time, as individuals and organizations, and this will help to strengthen the movement but it cannot replace the autonomous organizing, it is a process; “we as Africans were exposed to our strengths but also to our weakness and limitations. We are proud of this WSF in Africa because we are more than a country or a region, and we are proud of you, we now know that we are not alone anymore.”

Towards the ‘Worldization’ of the WSF

We hope the WSF process in Africa will become both a meeting place and a place of convergence, a common site for the people and countries of this region; otherwise the Forum will have been another mirage under the heat of the sun. Thousands of Foristas converged in Nairobi to exchange experiences, learn and impart knowledge; the African communities know about resistance, survival and struggle. They have managed to survive slavery, the previous wave of capitalist dominance and neoliberalism, which by excluding them from the ‘merit’ of the market contributes to strengthening their resilience. From abandonment and exclusion new ideas and paths to liberation might emerge. The social organizations and movements of Africa can contribute to galvanizing the WSF process, expanding the existing proposal and creating new tools to further the improvement of the Forum worldwide.

Africa lays claim to brilliant examples of struggle and resistance in its history. It was not long ago that the legendary Ahmed Ben Bella led the struggle against French dominance, or that Amilcar Cabral fought the Portuguese as did Samora Machel in Mozambique or Patrice Lumumba in Congo. Women who struggled like Winnie Madikizela (Mandela), Aminata Traore, Wanagari Maathai, Graça Machel and many others are still around. Nobel peace prize winners such as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela and intellectuals like Frantz Fanon, Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Samir Amin add to a long list of lucid and engaged Africans. These people, however, represent only a fraction of the African people symbolizing the history of a giant continent that never slept and now re-emerges to cast off old and new colonial chains.

Country Fair, Folklore and Moving Onward

For the social movements this Forum represents another step forward in the worldization of the WSF. During the four days in Nairobi the African Forum aimed to create a new space for the movements and organizations to meet, to further converge, to exchange, develop campaigns, create new networks, and coordinate projects. The South-South Dialogue reinforced and expanded its links, as did the Campaign Against the Debt, and the Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus also furthered its connections and debates at the global level. The LGBT network diversified even more its own network and exchanges. The Via Campesina, the Landless Movement, the World Women’s March and the Hemispheric Social Alliance also drew on the event to reach out to new networks and build new alliances. Demonstrations against the war took place in Nairobi and the Free the Cuban Five Campaign (regarding Cuban prisoners held in the USA) created



more awareness about their crusade. Themes of the common good and the struggle for water as key issues were remarkably welcomed. However, the innovation of the four days needed more thought and participation, and for the time being represents another step ahead as a kind of a “tool box” available for the movement.

The meeting between Africa and the West still fell short of the mark in terms of desired outcome and interest in mutual learning. Exchanges were restricted and disappointing. We lacked the creativity to construct common venues where the convergence between the urgent struggles of Africa and the western search for alternatives could have joined. Perhaps we are not there yet.

As in Latin America, peoples in resistance have used their traditional ways to organize and formulate their struggle, such as their folkloric music, arts, dances, and painting, which enable them to resist oppression and endure life, making possible the survival and re-emergence of struggles based on their traditions. In the same way traditional knowledge and understanding from Africa can be shared with communities in other regions that have resisted and are making a comeback in spite of exclusion and repression. We must not forget that in pre-colonial times the communities and their peoples used to gather in community markets and country fairs for bartering as well as for festivities and reunions of different kinds. Today the WSF has become an instrumental space of similar characteristic for people in diverse regions of the world. The participation in the Forum of more than a million people so far shows just the tip of the iceberg; even its sharpest critics would like to see “something else steaming from the Forum.”

After seven years on the political scene since Porto Alegre in 2001, the WSF’s long journey around the world has produced a remarkable political breakthrough that has no comparison in recent history, but still needs to overcome a number of endemic obstacles. It still needs to deal with some intricate structures, format, some spectacle-type panels, and tendencies toward academic-centrism. In the same way, issues related to ethically questionable funding and the presence of corporate interests are financial issues that must be addressed. Also, the participation of the more impoverished sectors in the communities where the Forum is held must be a main concern and priority. Overcoming these concerns and issues will lead to a more comprehensive adoption and implementation of the ideas and principles of the Forum. The Forum, further nourished and developed by the impacted communities, will make another world more tangible. In that regard it seems that

the Mumbai experience did attempt to address some of these challenges by endeavoring to create both spaces and alternative practices; a sort of a preamble to the society we are aiming to build. Samir Amin stressed that, “this worldwide gathering will have a great political impact; that this is not just another event or even just another Forum, this was the African WSF. There were of course issues, he warns, the strong presence of the Church had an impact. There were the conventional churches with the good and the bad influences they bring, but there were also the ones who criminalized abortion and women rights. But also Muslims were not present with the same strength! We need to be careful with that because there are some imperialistic cultures behind that reality too.”

Expectations and Historical Complexities

The World Social Forum took place in a region harshly punished by slavery, ethnic wars, war crimes and military interventions (in places like Somalia, Sudan and Congo, to name a few). There are also famines, droughts, and the looting of the continent’s natural resources, which continues to nourish western gluttony.

The Rwandan massacre in 1994 and the Darfur massacre today still haunt many in Africa but in spite of all of that, social organizations and movements, unions, NGOs and faith organizations organized and attended the WSF. This event could become the initial stage of an African social convergence seeking the crucial and imminent transformation of the region; as a banner hanging from a building strongly declared, “Empowering Africa to Transform the World.”

The alterglobalist meeting was attended by thousands from beyond Africa including people like, Vandana Shiva, Danny Glover, Maude Barlow, Danielle Mitterrand, Chico Whitaker, Jose Bove and Martin Khor, among others. Kenneth Kaunda, the old Zambian fighter, stated succinctly and with precision, “it is very moving being here today after long years of struggle against colonial powers and slavery but we must still continue, this gathering will allow us to close ranks and to continue to struggle against all pandemics and for full liberation.” In Gandhi’s words, Kaunda further affirmed, “it is the talent; the leader must follow the people.” That seems to be the case with the political resistance against the empire and neoliberalism taking place in Latin America.

The energy and motivation of the participants in the Forum tell us that there is a strong worldwide movement opposed to neoliberal globalization. The strength and vitality are represented by the permanent and creative struggle we are witnessing in many places around the global south. Along these lines a multiplicity of processes and searches for diverse alternatives continue to develop among people and communities. These explorations have created this instrumental space that is the World Social Forum, in which every struggle has a place.

The WSF in its long expedition really can become a much-needed oasis, but it can also become another hallucination or intangible mirage for the marginalized African communities. For the time being the WSF is still the best path chosen in search of a better world by the people in the south. **R**

Carlos Torres, a Toronto-based activist, reports from Nairobi, January 2007.

South African Democracy and the Zuma Affair

Carolyn Bassett and Marlea Clarke

A curious political drama began to unfold in South Africa in 2005. Deputy President Jacob Zuma, who was expected to succeed Thabo Mbeki as President of the African National Congress (ANC) in 2007 (and thus of the country in the 2009 elections), was implicated in charges of corruption during the trial of his financial advisor, Schabir Shaik. He was suspended from his position in the party, removed from his post as Deputy President of the country, pushed to resign from Parliament, eventually formally charged with corruption, and then also charged with rape. Zuma's strong supporters in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), as well as the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the ANC Youth League, vociferously defended Zuma, insisting he be tried in court before being removed from his political positions. Some denied the validity of the charges for months, forcing the party to overturn his suspension as ANC Deputy President. Even as evidence mounted against Zuma and formal corruption charges being laid, Zuma's supporters reaffirmed their certainty that he was the best man to succeed Mbeki. The rape trial softened the allegiance to Zuma somewhat, but after his acquittal on those charges in May 2006, most of his trade union support remained.

Some political observers felt that COSATU latched onto Zuma because he was ambitious, had maintained a more open door policy with the union federation as ANC Deputy President, and appeared to be open to adopting a more progressive economic agenda in exchange for support from unions. South Africa's non-racial trade unions, especially COSATU, had been at the forefront of the struggle for non-racial democracy in South Africa, with many workers sacrificing their jobs and safety for their principles. For many, the country's democratization processes included a vision of transformation that hinged upon gender equality, a progressive developmental strategy, and a democratized state geared towards servicing the needs of all citizens, especially working class and marginalized South Africans. So why did these same trade unionists apparently violate those principles by backing a political candidate badly tainted by corruption, whose 'left' credentials had yet to be proven, and whose views on society appear to uphold male privilege and dominance in all spheres of life?

The explanation for the trade union federation's curious behaviour (which was mirrored by other ANC-aligned political actors on the left) was to be found in the politics emerging in democratic South Africa, specifically, the political and economic direction of the post-liberation project, and the elite-centred nature of the policy process that systematically disempowered COSATU and other 'popular' elements among the ANC's constituency since

the mid-1990s. In this context, the stakes associated with placing a sympathetic candidate in line for the Presidency were desperately high for COSATU, and Zuma's fall from grace seemed as much a blow to the labour federation as to the man himself.

The Zuma affair came to represent more than the candidacy of the man himself: his prosecution led critical questions to be asked publicly of Mbeki, who was accused of engaging in dirty, secretive politics and using 'arms length' institutions of the state, including the Scorpions special investigations unit and the courts system, to keep his political and ideological opponents at bay. Indeed, the trials became a conduit for criticisms of the nature of democracy that had emerged under Mbeki, and specifically, the exclusion of COSATU and others on the left from any real influence over the policies of the ANC government. The affair opened the way to a debate about the form democratic consultation and policy-making has taken in post-apartheid South Africa, with consequences potentially much more significant than the fate of the man himself. Sadly, this debate appears to have been short-lived, with COSATU largely retreating back to its focus on electoral politics and alliance structures.

Alliance Politics and Neoliberal Restructuring

For more than a decade, COSATU, South Africa's largest trade union federation, has been grappling with what might be termed its 'ANC problem'. COSATU had expected its close ties with the ANC during the anti-apartheid struggle would culminate in a commonly agreed socio-economic reform program for the new government. This has not materialized. Instead, the government has generally used its close ties with COSATU to restrain the latter's push for extensive socio-economic restructuring and redistribution while proceeding with a program to liberalize the economy. Indeed, despite COSATU's opposition to a growing number of policy initiatives – rapid tariff reduction, privatization, restrictive fiscal and monetary policies, and market-led industrial policies – the ANC has adopted these policies. Increased global competition, the implementation of neoliberal economic policies, and poor progress towards re-regulating the labour market have contributed to the 'jobs-crisis' in the country, and have put downward pressure on wages and working conditions for a growing number of workers. Despite progress in some areas of social and labour market policy, the policy direction taken by the government has contributed to widespread poverty and socio-economic inequalities.

In spite of these policy developments and COSATU's grow-

ing marginalization within alliance structures and tripartite institutions, COSATU has maintained its support for the ANC and the Alliance (the name given to the linkages between the ANC, COSATU, and the SACP that hold the government together). However, the federation did not entirely let the ANC off the hook for its responsibilities to its main voting constituency. For the most part, COSATU continued to use alliance structures and bilateral meetings to try to influence the policy and political direction of the ANC. The federation also tried to open up new channels for influencing the ANC, but was frustrated at every turn. Although there is little evidence that Zuma supported policies that might be an alternative to the developmental model of Mbeki's government, key members of the federation believed that the best way to challenge the government's economic policies and style of politics was to ensure that a leader more sympathetic to their interests succeeded Mbeki. And they felt that Jacob Zuma was just such a man.

The Zuma Affair and Insider Politics

Jacob Zuma seemed an unlikely choice as saviour of South Africa's left. He did not have a trade union, Communist party, or social movement background. His background was the politics of the armed struggle (he was a commander in Umkhonto we Sizwe, or MK, the ANC's military arm), and more recently, KwaZulu Natal politics, as well as serving in the post-apartheid government. Many have described him as a 'traditionalist' – he has several wives and no formal education. Mbeki evidently had expected Zuma to be a safe choice for Deputy President who would not upstage or challenge the President. Zuma soon made his political ambitions to succeed Mbeki known, however, and these ambitions were fostered by the strong support of the ANC's 'left wing,' including many in COSATU. Given his background and the lack of evidence that Zuma would break from the policies of the ANC under Mbeki, why Zuma?

At first, COSATU's response to the leadership debate seemed to confirm the triumph of insider politics. By supporting a political leader who would pull the ANC's policy program in a more pro-worker direction, COSATU seemed to be showing that they had accepted the policy process developed under Mbeki – the ANC would be a leader-centred political party that would lead an insider-driven government. In short, COSATU's strategy seemed to focus on ensuring that "their man" would replace Mbeki as ANC President in 2007, rather than pressing for a new vision of



President Thabo Mbeki

politics and policies. Zuma's indictment may have made that political strategy less viable for labour. The federation did not even have an alternative 'left' candidate who would be able to step into Zuma's shoes. Names that were put forward, such as Kgalema Motlanthe, former General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers and currently General Secretary of the ANC, did not seem to have much traction with the federation. The question of Mbeki's successor has remained a focus of COSATU's politics, even as support for Zuma has been linked to controversy within and outside the federation.

Such a focus would confirm that COSATU accepts the narrowing of ANC politics to cycles of winner-take-all contests every ten years, which has proven to be a risky terrain for organized labour to exercise much political influence. With Zuma there was little evidence to suggest that he would prove to be the champion of labour or the left. He could equally emerge as an ambitious politician willing to draw on the support of the trade unions, the youth movement, and other 'left groups' in order to secure the presidency of the ANC and win the 2009 election. But, much like the Mbeki ANC government, offer little to South African workers after the election.

COSATU's response when rape charges were brought against Zuma from a 31-year-old HIV-positive 'family friend' was little better. Although COSATU initially defended Zuma and suggested that the rape charges bore the hallmarks of character assassination, the federation later stated that it would qualify its support for Zuma pending the outcome of the rape charges. Throughout the rape trial the federation approached the corruption charges and the rape allegations as separate issues, and stood by its decision to support Zuma against the corruption charges. Much to the disappointment of women's groups and the COSATU women's wing, the federation's response to the rape charges and to Zuma's testimony seemed to reveal, once again, its resistance to taking a stronger stand on women's rights and sexual violence.

There were certainly plenty of opportunities during the trial to challenge the prevalence of sexism and high levels of →

violence against women in post-apartheid South Africa. Zuma's testimony itself revealed his sexist attitudes towards women and sexual violence. He argued that her knee-length skirt proved his innocence, and throughout the trial he referred to the vagina as *isibhaya sika bab' wakhe* (her father's kraal). Also disturbing was Zuma's defence of unprotected sex with the woman, especially given the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the country and Zuma's appointment as head of the Moral Regeneration Movement and National AIDS Council in 1999. COSATU's silence on gender issues, AIDS, and sexual violence throughout the trial and failure to use the trial to help challenge sexist attitudes in the country were disturbing and disappointing.

During much of 2005 and early 2006, even through the rape trial, a sizeable portion of COSATU's rank and file membership pushed for the corruption charges to be dropped, while others publicly expressed their hope that Zuma would be vindicated in a speedy trial. He would then be available to stand as the ANC's presidential candidate in the next election. This response seemed to prevent the federation from insisting on a break from the elite-centred politics of the past decade. However, even while the federation defended Zuma against the corruption charges and publicly supported him in the succession war with Mbeki, key leaders within the federation privately acknowledged that Zuma would not be a good choice for president, regardless of the trial outcome.

COSATU and South African Democracy

Why, then, the strong support for Zuma? Two can be noted: the pervasiveness of corruption within the government, and the rejection of Mbeki's authoritarian style and construction of what Roger Southall has called a "commandist state." The corruption in the ANC government has become systemic. Considerable evidence has surfaced publicly, from reports accusing members of Parliament of misusing their official travel funds to confirmation that official corruption in arms trading, amongst other instances, went far deeper than the government was prepared to admit. While the COSATU leadership may not be convinced that Zuma is innocent of the corruption charges, their defense of him seemed to be that corruption was pervasive and many other government officials were guilty of far worse. They concluded that the charges against Zuma were politically motivated, rather than inspired by any real attempt to tackle corruption.

The concentration of power and growing intolerance for political dissent had also become a public issue for COSATU. As early as his ferocious attack on the SACP and COSATU at the 10th Congress of the SACP in July 1998, Mbeki made it clear that public opposition to policies and governing structures was not welcome. More recently, Mbeki has been accused of using intelligence services, including the Scorpions special investigations unit, to keep his political and ideological opponents at bay. This has included apparent gathering of personal information on COSATU leaders. But, by mid-2006, the uproar over the Zuma affair and COSATU's stance offered an opening. It was possible, for the first time, for COSATU to openly criticize the style of gov-

ernment under Mbeki. In May 2006, COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi openly told reporters of fears that South Africa was drifting towards a dictatorship, run by cabinet ministers and business people. Similar concerns were raised by the SACP. For the first time, the SACP suggested that it might contest the 2009 elections on its own, rather than on the common ticket with the ANC (See Matuma Letsoalo and Vicki Robinson. "COSATU Warns Against Mbeki Dictatorship," *Mail and Guardian*, May 25, 2006 at www.mg.co.za).

But despite COSATU being pressed by the Zuma affair to debate democracy under the ANC, the federation retreated back to Alliance and electoral politics by the end of 2006. Indeed, the federation often simply hurled personal accusations at Mbeki of interference in the Zuma case and employing dirty tactics to keep the left out of politics. Such accusations may have met considerable sympathy within left-wing ANC circles. But they are not linked to a principled case for changing the basis for South African politics. If Zuma is being defended simply because he is labour's (corrupt) candidate, on the grounds that he is no more corrupt than other corrupt candidates, how can that possibly lead to a more principled approach to politics and policy?

The limited political space for dissent seemed to contribute to COSATU's and the SACP's continued support for Zuma. Rather than directly challenge the democratic basis of the government, the events of the Zuma affair have been mainly used to intensify opposition to Mbeki as a person. COSATU has stopped short of forming a democratic and popular critique of ANC governance, opting for the same politics of expediency as Mbeki.

COSATU's Dilemma

With South Africa looking to the set of 2007 political meetings that will culminate in the ANC Conference in December setting the agenda for the 2009 elections, it is not clear whether COSATU will stick with their man or promote the principles of democratic trade unionism. Under a best-case scenario, the federation would take the opportunity to press for a redesign of post-apartheid democracy. Some unionists and community-activists have proposed that a coalition come together to back a stronger challenge to the state, and to reorient the government's policies towards the poor and working classes. COSATU has tended to pull back from opportunities to cement such a relationship in the past, in the hopes that a post-Mbeki government will restore a progressive agenda for the poor and workers to the Alliance. But ANC election promises are likely to go unmet. COSATU's dilemma is whether to continue with ANC elite-centred politics, or begin to build toward a mobilized society and a new democratic politics in South Africa. **R**

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Where is Cuba Going?

Harold Lavender

As the Fidel era in Cuba draws to a close, this article will examine some possibilities and potential dangers from a critical anti-imperialist perspective.

The Cuban government has prepared an orderly process of succession. But Washington is working hard to do everything short of an outright military invasion (and even that cannot be excluded if favourable circumstances arise) to impose a neoliberal capitalist market economy subordinated to imperialism. The U.S.-aided opposition masquerades under the banner of “human rights,” but all they offer is a truncated form of liberal democracy, increased exploitation and oppression.

The current context does not favour direct U.S. military aggression. The U.S. neo-conservative war drive is dying in the sands of Iraq. Nonetheless, they hope that the death of Fidel will afford new opportunities. And counter-revolutionary sections of the Cuban exiles in Miami are still determined to take Cuba back. But while the left generally opposes the U.S. embargo and imperialist interference in Cuban affairs, there is great diversity about the strengths and shortcomings of the Cuban model and its future prospects.

The New Socialist Group (NSG) opposes imperialist intervention in Cuba. However within the NSG there is also a wide range of opinion about Cuban society, ranging from the individual views expressed by this author to the view that the Cuba state bureaucracy constitutes a ruling class. Some currents shy away from criticism – especially of a regime that is clearly an ally in the fight against imperialism and neoliberalism. In the NSG, solidarity and support for revolutionary transformation does not mean uncritically parroting the line of regimes. For example, history judges harshly those who sought to whitewash the crimes of Stalinism. The relentless pressure of imperialism on Stalinist regimes did push their downfall, but they primarily fell because they were thoroughly anti-democratic and repressive and lost the support of the people.

Can the Cuban revolution survive and move forward in a socialist direction? Or is it in danger of going the way of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe?

Cuba faced a very difficult decade in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Cuba was isolated and under intense economic pressure, which led to a decline in living standards. But the Cuban revolution has survived.

Cuba’s prestige in the world is high for having stood up to

imperialism, told the truth about the cancer of neoliberalism and offered concrete aid such as sending doctors abroad. The government also maintains a strong base of domestic popular support, although this is difficult to measure precisely and it is unclear whether the Cuban Communist Party commands the same respect and support as Fidel.

Will the Cuban government be able to maintain the support of the majority? To assess this, we need to understand history and to project forward.

A Revolutionary History

The Cuban Revolution was made by a guerrilla army in the name of the politically heterogeneous July 26 Movement. Afterwards, Fidel and Che won a power struggle and took control of the revolution. U.S. imperialism began its opposition with economic reprisals and from 1959 onward actively planned to overthrow the revolution. The Cuban leadership responded by carrying through a socialist revolution that destroyed the economic and state power of the dependent Cuban oligarchy and imperialism.

In order to consolidate power, they made an alliance with the Soviet Union. The July 26 Movement merged with pro-Moscow communists to create the current Cuban Communist Party.

The Soviet Union, for its own purposes, aided Cuba at a time when other states were unwilling or unable to defy Washington. But this relationship did have negative consequences in forming the particular statist model of economic development, and in its neo-Stalinist ideological influences.

Nonetheless, between 1959 and 1985, Cuba achieved substantial economic growth. There was material improvement in the lives of the most exploited and oppressed, and advances in social and racial justice and the status of women. The greatest advances have occurred in health and education (funding remained a priority throughout the difficult decade of the 1990s). Today Cuba has a life expectancy of about 77 years (placing it among the top 25 countries in the world and almost to equal the USA).

Many Cubans continue to support the revolution because of socialist ideals and material gains from the revolution. Nationalist sentiment against being re-subjugated to U.S. imperialism also plays a role. However, Cuba is not a model of socialist democracy and there are limits on political freedom. This is not →

surprising given the near pressure of U.S. imperialism. Cuba is a one-party state in which the Communist Party and bureaucratic officials control the commanding heights of power. There is a National Assembly of People's Power and people can participate as individuals. But no organized opposition is permitted, even within the framework of the revolution.

Cuba has mass organizations and unions, but they do not act autonomously of the Cuban Communist Party and state. There is not a political culture of unfettered public debate. And there are no independent (i.e. community-controlled) media. Cuba has a state-owned economy, rather than an a socialized economy of freely associated producers under workers control governed by workers and community councils.

Cuba is respected, in Latin America for its achievements. But today, people do not see one-party communist states as models. Instead people in Latin are inspired by a wide variety of other experiences ranging from the Zapatistas, to the militant self-organized indigenous and popular movements in Bolivia, to the recovered factories movement in Argentina, to the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, and especially the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, which may move towards socialism within a democratic framework.

But it is clearly up to Cuban people to determine their own destiny, including maintaining or modifying the existing system.

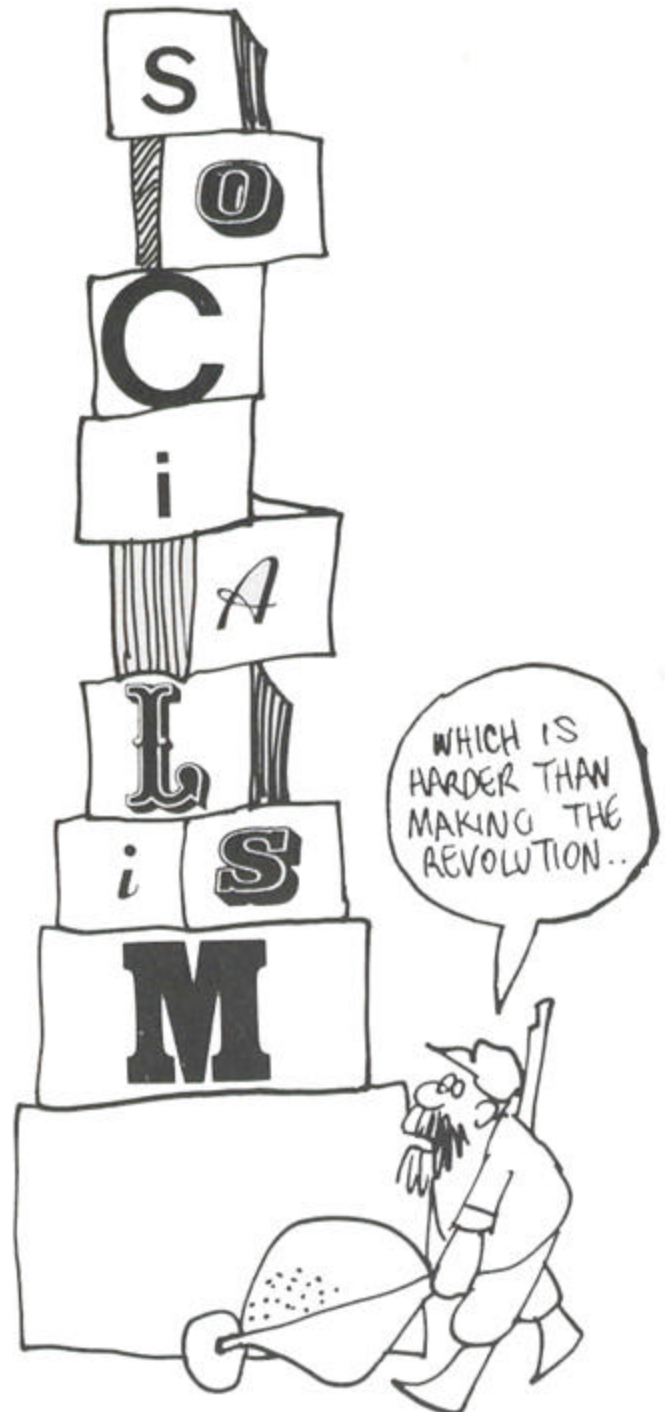
Major Questions

The future of Cuba is not pre-determined. A number of factors will influence the outcome, including the international relationship of forces, the prospects for the Cuban economy, the choices of the post-Fidel leadership of the Cuban Communist Party and the consciousness and activity of the Cuban people.

Cuba will not succeed in the transition to socialism if it stands isolated in a global capitalist economy. The Cuban leadership has been staunchly internationalist in outlook, especially in regard to third world liberation struggles. In the 1960s and '70s, prospects for fundamental change in Latin America were drowned in blood by murderous US-backed dictatorships, with both armed revolutionary and peaceful strategies failing. Today the failure of neoliberalism is opening up new possibilities for the left.

However, the election of "left governments" does not guarantee success. Cuba cultivates an alliance with Lula in Brazil. But the Lula government has nothing to do with socialism and plays by the rules of international financial institutions. By contrast, the formation of ALBA (an economic alliance with Venezuela and Bolivia) does challenge neoliberal economic policies, as does the exchange of Cuban doctors for Venezuelan oil. In Venezuela, Chavez is talking increasingly about socialism, raising hope for fundamental change. However, Venezuela has not yet made a break with capitalism.

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Cuba's economic horizons are confined by the U.S. embargo of almost 50 years' duration. If the neo-cons continue to suffer reverses, some sections of U.S. capital (who are certainly not friends of the revolution) may press for an easing or eventual lifting of the embargo. But they will undoubtedly seek major concessions in return.

The Cuban Revolution won support by improving people's lives. In the 1990s, it pragmatically staved off collapse by increasingly adapting to the market. And the economy is now growing again. Some measures have worked, like the introduction of agricultural producers markets and family-owned business in services. Strict controls have blocked the formation of a new private capitalist class. Energy shortages promoted Cuba to adopt more ecological policies in agriculture and other areas.

The operation of a dollar economy has proved more problematic. It has led to the development of a parasitic class of tens of thousands who earn vastly more than Cuban teachers and waged workers. In the 1990s, the state sector shrank considerably and now employs less 75 per cent of the population. An increasing number of Cubans are hustling to make a living.

The Cuban government has emphasized promotion of socialist values. But this is not always effective, especially as the market promotes uneven economic development, increased inequality and economic individualism. The Cuban state (including the army) is increasingly entering into joint economic ventures with foreign firms and states. In some cases, this may increase possibilities for independent development. Cuba is now partnering with Venezuela and China to promote development of offshore oil and ethanol.

There are strong currents within Cuba that favour an increasing turn to the market. However, this entails the risk of greater

inequality, fewer resources for welfare and public services, and an undermining of the socialist project.

The government faces difficult choices. The Cuban Communist Party under the pressure of the U.S. has opted to keep a united but closed face to the world. As a result there are no publicly identifiable political tendencies in Cuba. But in the future there could be major divisions within the CP over issues such as how far to turn to the market and whether to opt for political reforms.

The Cuban government is pursuing an alliance with China and cheap Chinese consumer goods are beginning to be widely available. However, a tilting towards the Chinese model of a one-party state, widespread repression, the use of purely capitalist methods to attain increased economic growth, and the growth of large-scale inequality would be very worrisome. Other currents favouring market reforms might prefer to do this within a more Latin American and even social democratic framework. This might entail some level of political reform.

Large numbers of Cubans, including supporters of the revolution, may demand some expansion of liberties. The Cuban people need to have an active say in shaping these decisions. Current disengagement from politics, especially among younger Cubans, could favour the consolidation of a bureaucratic and technocratic layer and would not advance the Cuban revolution towards socialism.

Cuba needs to maintain a revolutionary internationalist orientation and work to build itself from below. **R**

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Latin America Solidarity Committee-Toronto: Moving Forward

LASC Toronto

LASC-Toronto is a group of committed activists and educators that formed in May 2006. Since the Mexican elections popular education event in September 2006, LASC-Toronto has been quite busy. Solidarity with the teachers and APPO of Oaxaca, Mexico has been a central focus. Two protests were staged in fall 2006, petitions to the Mexican and Canadian Governments sent, information sheets written, and a recent educational event was held in January to update people on recent events. LASC also hosted a talk with labor leaders from Bolivia in fall 2006 and organized an educational event on Bolivia this past February. Two further events have been co-sponsored on Venezuela: one, a celebration of Chavez's victory in December and a discussion on 21st Century Socialism to be held on February 28th. If this did not keep LASC busy enough, we met with FMLN parliamentarians to strategize for the 2009 general election in El Salvador and recently penned a widely endorsed letter to PM Harper and the Guatemalan Government demanding an inquiry into Canadian mining companies repressing Guatemalans.

Moving forward, we will continue our strategic focus on Mexico, Bolivia, and Venezuela while building towards the EZLN Intergalactic Encounter in Chiapas this July and a major fall 2007 conference to bring Latin American groups and activists together in Toronto. All LASC activities are the result of collective and creative efforts, which we must build. We invite you to participate in solidarity with LASC-Toronto! Please contact lasctoronto@gmail.com for meeting and event times. **R**

Continental Struggle for Decent Wages

Richard Roman and Edur Velasco

A coalition of progressive Mexican unions, democratic currents in other unions and popular movements, such as the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (PPO), have made a bold proposal for a continental workers' struggle to raise the minimum wage in all three countries, limit the work day to eight hours, and enforce a ban on child labour. In Mexico, it is a response to the dramatic fall of real wages and the beginning of a fightback against the deepening neoliberal assault promised by the new, fraudulently elected President Calderon. The coalition campaign as the *Jornada Nacional y Internacional Por la Restitución del Salario y Empleo* (National and International Campaign for the Restoration of Wages and Jobs). It believes that the battle can only be won and consolidated on a continental scale. If the minimum salary and wages are raised in one country, those companies that can simply relocate to those areas where wages remain lower will do so. The floor has to be raised in all three countries.

The coalition is aware that a minimum wage increase in the US, without an increase in Mexico, will simply increase the incentive for companies to move to Mexico. They want jobs in Mexico but not at the expense of job loss in other countries and starvation wages in Mexico. They feel that these three minimum demands create the basis for a common struggle in all three countries. And while they feel the struggle should start in the three NAFTA countries, they want to spread it later to include all of Latin America and become a global campaign.

Beyond Borders: A Call for Solidarity

This proposal is a call from workers in the South to workers in the North to engage in a joint struggle against the corporations and governments that seek to play them off against each other in order to continue the downward slide of wages and living and working standards everywhere. NAFTA is part of the neoliberal assault on workers in Canada, Mexico and the United States. This assault on workers is the major part of the reason that over ten million Mexicans have been forced to leave their homes and families to work in the U.S. as the only means to survive. The proposal seeks to unite workers—Mexican, U.S., Canadian, Quebecois; white, Latino, and Black; those with stable and those with precarious employment, those with unions and those without, those with legal rights and those without—in a common struggle that will unite workers in all three countries. Success will bring real and desperately needed gains in the short run while building the bases for an international workers movement in the longer run. The campaign entailed by such a proposal seeks to move beyond solidarity as support for other peoples' struggles and toward solidarity as a common struggle.

The minimum wage in Mexico has fallen in real purchasing

power by 75% in the last thirty years. During the presidency of Vicente Fox alone from 2000-2006, it fell by 22%. Ten million workers, 24% of the economically active population, make the minimum wage or less. Fifty million Mexicans live below the poverty line. Of these, 30 million live on 30 pesos per day (\$3 US), 10 million live on 22 pesos daily, another 10 million on less than 10 pesos daily. In order to buy what is officially defined as a basic household basket, a worker would have to work 48 hours daily. As well, the minimum wage affects vast layers of workers receiving more than the minimum wage as many collective agreements and labour contracts are formally or informally tied to changes in the official minimum wage.

But not all is bleak. In the same period, Mexico rose to the 4th top position in the world in the number of millionaires. And it boasts the third richest man in the world, Carlos Slim, who did very well indeed through privatizations. The top 20% in Mexico control 52.7% of Mexico's wealth while 30% of Mexicans subsist on less than one minimum salary per family per day. At the same time that the countryside has lost great numbers of people to the urban labour markets, Mexico's 40 million workers have become increasingly exploited receiving a declining portion of national income

The New Presidential Regime

The face of the new Presidency of Felipe Calderón is that of the IMF underwritten by fierce repression. The former Governor of the state of Jalisco, Francisco Ramírez Acuña, has been appointed Secretary of the Interior (Secretario de Gobernación). He took great pride in his tough handling of the anti-corporate globalization protests in Guadalajara on May 28, 2004, a 'handling' it should be noted which was widely condemned by human rights groups for their brutality, arbitrary detentions and the use of torture. His appointment has been praised by business leaders who have said that disorder and protests in Mexico need to be handled with a "firm hand." Certainly, it was Ramírez Acuña and President, Calderón that decided (a few days before the official swearing in) to use extreme force, arbitrary arrests and torture in their attempt to smash the Oaxacan popular movement.

The economic ministries went to extreme neoliberals. Agustín Carstens, (a "Chicago boy") resigned a top position at the IMF to become Secretary of the Treasury. Luis Téllez, former Secretary of Energy (1997-2000) and a directing manager of the Carlyle group since December 2003 (whose job was to "co-lead Carlyle's first ever buyout investment activities in Mexico", Carlyle News, December 15, 2003), has been appointed Secretary of Telecommunications. And Georgina Kessel, the technocrat who has been one of the key people in carrying out privatizations in previous administrations and was one of the key designers of Plan Puebla

Panama, a neoliberal plan to integrate southern Mexico and Central America into North American capitalism, has been appointed Secretary of Energy. The members of the cabinet in charge of social issues come from the far Catholic right. This is a regime that has announced by words, cabinet appointments and actions its intention to deepen neoliberal reforms, which would include changing labour law and privatizing oil and power.

The new government, however, faces three major obstacles: (1) its lack of legitimacy to a major part of the population who view its victory as a result of massive fraud; (2) the anger of much of the population at the decades of neoliberal attack on living standards, decent jobs and social rights now intensified with runaway price increases in basic foods in the brief period of the new Presidency; and (3) the lack of solid control of the President over the new Congress, whose party does not control either house.

Mexican Unions in the Crisis

The role of unions in Mexico's political crisis has been as heterogeneous as the character of unions in Mexico is at present. And the character of these unions has become more heterogeneous than in the past. Mexico's transition from a strongly state-dominated form of capitalist development to a neoliberal, "open" economy as well as the change from a one-party to a multi-party regime has undermined some of the mechanisms of control the old statist union oligarchy could rely upon. This union oligarchy, derisively called "charros" in Mexico, has been scrambling to protect its considerable power and wealth in this period of change. These changes in political regime and economic strategy have led the *charros* to try to adapt in various ways. The vast majority of unions remain thoroughly authoritarian but the already existing plurality of unions and union federations has widened as the *charros* maneuver to adapt to a more fluid and complex political-economic situation with weakened mechanisms of control.

Both the government and big business have been pushing to revise labour law to weaken unions and legislate workers' rights. And some aspects of Mexican labour law, although not always enforced, are very progressive. Workers' rights and union power are viewed as impediments to "progress." While unions have been severely weakened by privatization and relocation within Mexico, the attempts at labour law reform have so far been stalemated by popular resistance and legislative stalemate. The new government is determined to break this stalemate.

The existence of any union is viewed as a potential obstacle to the power of capital. Even the authoritarian, corrupt and government-linked unions often made significant gains for their members, sometimes in wages or benefits (health care and housing especially), or jobs in unionized workplaces for family members. While the margins for these gains have been sharply reduced by neoliberal restructuring, they are still important in many cases. It is these real gains for important sectors of unionized workers that have helped sustain the power of the authoritarian and corrupt union officialdom. But when these mechanisms of control fail, union officials have resorted to killings, beatings, or exclusion from union membership and consequent loss not only of jobs but of the various benefits (health, housing, jobs for family members) to

maintain their power and privilege.

This weakness of democratic unionism in Mexico has been a key factor in constraining working class resistance to state authoritarianism and neoliberalism. While workers have been the mass base of the *Obradorista* movement against electoral fraud, working class organizations have not played a leading role in popular struggles, with the important exception of Oaxaca. The absence of a strong independent union movement or a workers' party has led to a situation in which workers have, in the main, been the base of other movements rather than having their own movement.

The weakness of working class resistance is strongly connected to the scarcity of real unions. The old system of labour control had been based on five key, inter-related pillars: (1) labour law that gave the state control over union recognition and the right to strike; (2) integration of the officially recognized unions into the ruling party and state apparatus; (3) authoritarian control over the unions by the union officialdom on the basis of state laws and links as well as the usual control mechanisms of an organizational oligarchy; (4) repression by the state and by thugs commanded by the *charro* officials; and, for some periods, (5) a social pact that allowed gains for limited sectors of the working class, especially in the realm of the social wage (most notably in the postwar expansion). Official unions have been part of the ruling party and union officials have either held union, party and government positions simultaneously or sequentially. Official unions have been state instruments in the working class and their leaders power brokers within the existing regime. Mobilization by these unions – or more often than not, the threat of mobilization – has had little to do with union or class struggle. Rather it has been either a card to play in intra-regime struggles or a way of cooling out rank and file pressure for real actions.

Mexican unions combine features of a state institution, a party machine, and an employment service with those of a union. In general, they historically have been run in a thoroughly corrupt and authoritarian manner. They controlled labour market access, disciplined the work force, extorted money from workers and capital, and used their labor-managing role (both workplace and political) as part of their base for negotiating their interests with management, for their influence within the power bloc/PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), which governed Mexico for 70 years until its defeat in 2000. Mexican union officials could and did become capitalists either through setting up companies themselves (or in the name of family members) or by extracting surplus from control of union institutions that could then be used for investments. But the role of this "labour" elite as political actors and capitalist entrepreneurs required their ongoing control of unions and their related institutions. Union leaders moved back and forth between political party, governmental, and managerial positions in the public sector. They were not simply union bureaucrats but members of a hybrid elite sitting on top of hybrid institutions in which "unions" were encased.

The New Terrain of Mexican Trade Unions

Pluralism among Mexican unions and labour federations is not new. The old one-party PRI government, at times, fostered pluralism and competition among unions and federations →

within the limits of loyalty to the PRI and its project of capitalist development. The government applied its divide and rule strategy to labour officialdom as well as to the rank and file of the working class. Union strategies have ranged from total submission to the neoliberal project to various degrees of resistance. There are also different perspectives, programs and strategies for what a new industrial relations regime should look like. But, with few exceptions, this has not led to significant change in the authoritarian internal character of most unions. Only a small number of unions have sought to confront the neoliberal project as a whole, though many do so rhetorically.

There are presently four significant union blocs: (1) La Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), (2) El Frente Sindical Mexicano (FSM), (3) Congreso del Trabajo (CT) (which has had many defections in recent years), and (4) the Federación Democrática de Sindicatos de Servidores Públicos, FEDESSP (the nucleus and main contingent of the FEDESSP, is the teachers union (SNTE) of Elba Esther Gordillo. It is very hard to estimate the real number of union members as there are so many protection contracts and company unions. However, it's clear that the real rate of unionization is the lowest of the three NAFTA countries. The most militant of the union blocs are the least numerous. The FSM has about 5% of the total union membership, the UNT 10% whereas the CT and FEDESSP control about 85% of organized workers.

The national teachers union, the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación* (SNTE), has been a key element in the PRI, the PRI-PAN alliance, and recently in executing an important part of the electoral fraud for Calderón. As a reward, they have been given great control over the federal department of education. Section 22 of the SNTE, the section of the state of Oaxaca, which carved out great autonomy in decades of struggle against the national leadership, has played the leading role in the Oaxaca revolt. The most gangsterist of the old guard *charro* unions continue to support the PRI and the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional - conservative Catholic party), whichever of them governs that particular jurisdiction. And they are rewarded, as was the national leadership of the teachers union with state back-up for maintain-

ing their authoritarian control over their members.

The moderate and authoritarian dissident unions (telephone and social security/public health) continue to play an ambiguous role, fighting to "modernize" labour relations, which in the case of the telefonistas means allying with their boss, Carlos Slim, in exchange for protection of their jobs and the social security union has collaborated with massive cut-backs of employment and public services, though, at times, being forced by their rank and file to mobilize protests. These unions, which along with STUNAM, dominate the UNT, the new dissident federation, founded in 1997. They supported López Obrador in the election campaign but have now "critically accepted" the election of

Felipe Calderón. They have made a pact with the congressional alliance that supports López Obrador but have distanced themselves from any extra-institutional challenges to the government. They do not participate in the Convención Nacional Democrática (CND) – the movement against the electoral fraud and in support of the "defeated" presidential candidate, López Obrador. Nor have they issued any statement about the popular movement in Oaxaca, APPO. They seek to be a loyal opposition to the illegitimate President and to try to negotiate a new, modernizing social contract with themselves as the intermediaries.



The Mexican Coalition for Continental Living Wages

There are several main organizations involved in *la Jornada Nacional e Internacional Por la Restitución del Salario y Empleo*. The committee is broader than the Frente Sindical Mexicana (FSM) which includes some of the organizations below but also others not affiliated with the FSM, which is not a federation but an alliance. There is some fluidity and overlap in various coalitions, some being more ad hoc and temporary, others more long-term. Some unions belong to several alliances and also to a federation while other unions do not belong to any federation. The following is a list of sponsoring organizations.

The SME (*Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas*) is the power workers union with about 60,000 members employed by Mexican Light and Power (a Canadian company until it was nationalized in 1960). The union celebrated its 92nd anniversary this past December and is well known for its long history of internal democracy with competitive elections and changes of leadership. It is also a very nationalist union and has often been the key organization in forming broad alliances and struggles over workers' rights and the protection of national patrimony. It has been the main driving force in the FSM and is held in high esteem by democratic unionists in Mexico.

SNTMM (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana*) is the miners

and steelworkers union and has around 70,000 members. The previous government of President Vicente Fox deposed its leader who is now in informal exile in Vancouver, supported by the United Steelworkers of America (USWA). The government deposed him and installed a stooge after the union sharply criticized the government and the company involved for a big, deadly mining disaster in Pasta de Canchos, Coahuila on February 19, 2006 in which 65 miners were killed. It is not a very democratic union and has a very top-down and centralized leadership but has shown growing militancy in recent years. The base is very combative and the vast majority of members and locals support the deposed leadership. There have been big strikes and battles with the police over union autonomy and workers' demands. It is a member of three groupings: CT (the official federation of federations and unions), the UNT and the FSM. The battle of the SNTMM with the government over union autonomy continues.

STUNAM (*Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*) is a 30,000-member union of the largest university in Latin America, with some 300,000 students. It developed out of the student struggles of the early 1970s. It is a union that works closely and collaboratively with the administration of the university. It is affiliated both to the FSM and UNT.

SITUAM (*Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la*

There were many who hoped that the UNT, in spite of its authoritarian and cautious leadership (its leader, Francisco Hernández Juárez, after all, was a favorite unionist of the neoliberal President Salinas, 1988-1994), would set in motion a democratizing dynamic and start to organize workers. But they have failed to make any serious efforts in that direction. Their strategy has been moderate mobilization to pressure for negotiations with the government. They are completely averse to any challenges to the regime that would threaten them either by state repression or rank and file revolt.

The Emerging Resistance

The more militant and left unions and democratic currents of other unions tend to be part of the FSM (Frente Sindical Mexicano). Two of the key unions there are the *Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas* (SME) and the *Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana* (SITUAM).

While the working class continues to be the mass base of the major revolts (Obradorista and Oaxaqueno), only a small number of unions play an important role in these revolts. But those that are involved in popular struggles do so alongside other forms of working class organizations, such as neighborhood associations and democratic currents in non-democratic unions. The working class as a class has not yet found its own voice and organizational forms of struggle in Mexico's national crisis with the exception of the APPO. This is the key missing ingredient in the possibility of a successful national struggle to defeat the authoritarian, neoliberal government.

The new presidency started with two big bangs. The first was the massive repression of the popular movement of Oaxaca. Though its most brutal and decisive act took place a week before Calderón took office officially, it can be seen as the first major act of the new presidency. The second was the combination of a miserly increase in the official minimum wage with runaway inflation in the costs of basic food commodities (especially tortillas).

The first protest after the assumption of the Presidency by

Calderón was called by the coalition for the *Jornada Nacional e Internacional por la Restitución del Salario y el Empleo* on December 7 which mobilized 20,000 people. While not a very large demonstration by Mexican standards, it was the beginning of a labour led campaign to put the wage issue on the agenda. A broader coalition, including *la Jornada Nacional e Internacional Por la Restitución del Salario y Empleo*, the UNT, some CT officialist unions, peasant groups and others held a second protest on January 31, 2007 in which over 100,000 people participated. There were smaller marches and rallies in a number of other cities. The government's response to date has been to call for voluntary constraints on food price increases.

Growing working class anger has been contained by the gangsterist unions as well as union structures that have only mobilized to protect the interests of their own oligarchic leaders or, less frequently, their own members. As most of the working class lacks unions, they have been with limited organized expression in defence of their own interests. For that reason it has expressed itself more in the form of support for other movements (Obradorism) or as local movements without national articulation. The very limited existence of genuine unions has been a major obstacle to the working class playing a significant mobilizing role in this extremely proletarianized and increasingly pauperized nation. The goal of the *la Jornada Nacional e Internacioal Por la Restitución del Salario y Empleo* is to put working class demands at the center of the struggle in Mexico and to do so in a manner that is national and international at the same time. **R**

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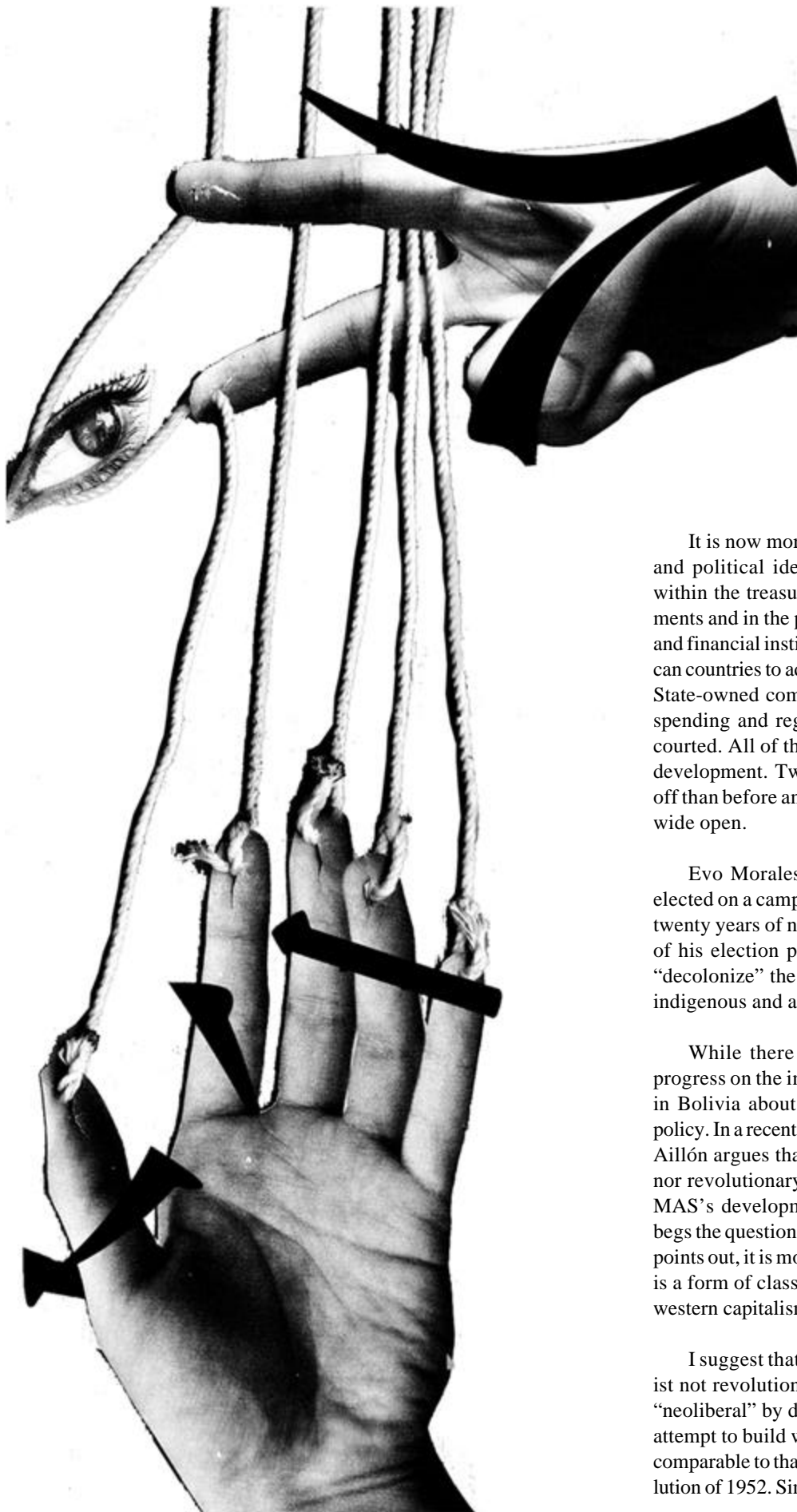
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana) is the union of UAM with 5000 members (blue-collar, white-collar, and academic). It is known as an extremely democratic and combative union. As with the SME, there are tight restrictions on reelection. A member can only serve in a particular office for one term and can only serve as a union official for a total of two terms in a lifetime for a total of four years. It is a key actor in the FSM. Its political role is much more important than its size would indicate. It recently hosted the founding convention of the APPM (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Mexico), an attempt to make national and transnational the model of struggle and organization of APPO (see below). It also was the moving force in starting the *Coordinadora Intersindical Primero de Mayo* (Inter-union Coordinating Committee May First) in 1995, which grouped militant unions, dissident union currents and popular movements in a common front. Inter-Sindical May 1 had a brief role in linking left unions and popular forces but later died a quiet death.

APPO (*Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca*) is the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca. It is a coalition of teachers and popular organizations. It carried out a generally peaceful but militant urban insurrection against repression, authoritarianism and neoliberalism. APPO controlled and ran Oaxaca City for over 5 months until the massive state repression on November 25, 2006. The core of the movement, initially, was the Oaxaca state section of the teachers union (sec-

tion 22), which is part of a national dissident organization within the teachers union, the *Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación (CNTE)* (see below). The APPO was a popular assembly, a coalition of Section 22 and a great variety of popular forces. It exemplifies a model of popular, democratic insurrection and governance. Though brutally suppressed, it survives and there are ongoing attempts to form a national APPO.

CNTE (*Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación*) is an organized national alliance of dissident teachers' groups in the SNTE (the national teachers union). The CNTE has existed for over 30 years within the SNTE despite assassinations, disappearances and firings carried out by the SNTE. The SNTE is a gangster-charro union with over a million members. The CNTE is anti-dual unionist but does carry out its own campaigns. It consists of a few state sections, some locals and dissidents in other sections. The CNTE is very militant and often has deep community roots and engagement in broad, popular struggles, as in the case of Oaxaca.

FAT (Frente Autentico de Trabajo) was founded in 1960 as a Catholic reformist organization with the intent of developing independent unionism and cooperatives. It became secular over the years and has played a central role in promoting democratic and autonomous unionism and labour law reform. It is composed of unions, cooperatives and both producers and neighborhood associations (estimated 30-40,000 members).



A Movement Towards or Beyond 'Statism'? Bolivia in 2006

Susan Spronk

It is now more than three decades since neoliberal economic and political ideas began to supplant Keynesian orthodoxies within the treasuries and finance ministries of Western governments and in the policy-making centers of development agencies and financial institutions. Bolivia was one of the first Latin American countries to adopt a neoliberal approach back in the mid-1980s. State-owned companies were sold off for peanuts. Government spending and regulation was scaled back. Foreign capital was courted. All of this was done with the promise of a new dawn of development. Twenty years later the average Bolivian is worse off than before and the gap between the rich and poor has yawned wide open.

Evo Morales's MAS (Movement Toward Socialism) was elected on a campaign promise to reverse the damage wrought by twenty years of neoliberalism. He has followed through on many of his election promises foremost among them the promise to "decolonize" the state. Many of the ministers are self-identified indigenous and activists from social movements.

While there is broad agreement that the MAS has made progress on the indigenous front, there is more debate on the left in Bolivia about how to characterize the MAS's development policy. In a recent assessment, Bolivian sociologist Lorgio Orellana Aillón argues that, at this point, the MAS is "neither nationalist nor revolutionary." But Orellana goes further to accuse that the MAS's development plan is also "neoliberal." This contention begs the question, however, what is "neoliberalism"? As Orellana points out, it is more than a set of economic policies. Neoliberalism is a form of class rule that emerged as a response to the crisis in western capitalism in the 1970s.

I suggest that while at this point the MAS is neither nationalist nor revolutionary, at least not yet, it does not mean that it is "neoliberal" by default. To the contrary, I argue that the MAS is attempt to build what Bolivianists have called "state capitalism," comparable to that which prevailed after the national-popular revolution of 1952. Similar to the period from 1952-1964, the course the

MAS takes depends on the regional balance of power and the ability of social movements to push the MAS beyond the limits of statism and prevent the project from being crushed by the right in Bolivia.

The Social Movements' Demands

It deserves recalling that the MAS are responding to social movements' calls for "nationalization" and "social control." These demands have been voiced loudly in a series of conflicts and protests over land, water, and natural gas since 2000. The social movement leaders making these calls have learned from past successes and failures in their search for new models. The demand for "social control" in the water and energy sectors, for example, draw from the 1950s experiment with "worker control" in the state-owned mines, that were nationalized following the national-popular revolution of 1952.

Worker control was a power-sharing arrangement between social movements and the state that was institutionalized during a brief period between 1952 and 1956. Under this arrangement, known as "co-government," the revolutionary Bolivian Worker Central (the COB) was allowed to appoint representatives to key ministries such as petroleum and mining, transportation, and labour. Rank-and-file workers in each state-owned mine elected a controller who had "voice and vote" on the management board, which made decisions on the day-to-day aspects of life in the mining community. The arrangement was abandoned by the workers' movement when the reformist ruling party, the National Revolutionary Movement (the MNR), accepted the terms of an IMF stabilization package in 1956. It took until 1961, when the second structural adjustment package was imposed for the COB's leadership to follow and sever ties with the government.

While there were many problems with co-government, one of its more serious limitations was the fact that workers did not have enough power within a non-worker state to make decisions about investment. Over the years, the MNR used profits from the state mining company COMIBOL to fund exploration for petroleum deposits. This eventually de-capitalized the mines. The demands today for re-nationalization of oil and gas companies draw on popular memory of the sacrifices made by the miners and express a desire for "social control" over what is widely regarded as Bolivia's patrimony.

Contemporary social movements have learned from these experiments. They are trying to find ways not to repeat the mistakes of the past. In his wonderful book on Cochabamba's water war, trade union militant Oscar Olivera reflects on the lessons learned from past episodes of nationalization. He argues that in their search for alternatives, social movements must find a way to counter "both forms of privatization – the private property of the transnationals and the private property of the state – with forms of social, economic, and political organization. It is a question of organizing working people, ordinary people, and people who do not live off the labor of others and having them take into their own hands the control, use, and ownership of collective and communal wealth."

Olivera's statements reflect the radical current within Bolivian social movements that aims to create a "different kind of state" based upon ideas of collective property and popular empowerment. These elements of Bolivia's left, which include the COB and the Coordinadora, are fiercely critical of the MAS. In this view, the MAS is pursuing a project that more closely resembles the MNR's statist development rather than a socialist project "from below."

Hydrocarbons: "Nationalization without Expropriation"

In a highly theatrical display, Evo Morales announced that that government would "nationalize" hydrocarbons resources on May 1. As expected, nationalization did not mean "expropriation without compensation" but instead the re-negotiation and authorisation of contracts for foreign oil corporations. The critics in the corporate-controlled media squawked that the decision would be "bad for development" and predicted capital flight. In fact, however, the "nationalization" policy is not particularly radical in comparison to the demands made by states such as Norway, where social democracy has been built on a stack of oil revenues. Norway demands 90% of well-head royalties, while Bolivia has demanded a more modest 82%.

Since Bolivia is believed to have the second largest natural gas reserves on the continent, none of the companies are particularly eager to leave. The smaller companies "regularized" their contracts shortly before the expiry date of November 1, but some negotiations have yet to be completed with the Bolivian-controlled Petrobas, which controls the largest natural gas deposits in Bolivia. With the proceeds, the MAS is slowly recapitalizing the state-owned company, Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB), which was stripped down to a regulatory agency following the neoliberal reforms of the mid-1990s, although there is a lot of work to be done. For example, as the former hydrocarbons minister, Andres Soliz Rada (who was forced to resign by the government in September because he thought the government's strategy did not go far enough) points out, the multinational "partners" still count the full estimated value of Bolivia's gas reserves as their assets on the stock exchange, when it should be listed as the property of the YPFB.

The increase to oil and gas taxes has been an important boost to the government's revenue. The May 1st decree also raised the price of gas shipped to Argentina by 48%, which helped off-set some of the losses that these companies would experience as a result of the higher taxes that have accompanied "nationalization." A recent report prepared by Mark Weisbrot of the Centre for Economic and Policy Research notes that according to IMF data, the amount of government revenue from the hydrocarbons sector increased by 6.7% of GDP over the past two years. The oil revenue the state receives will surpass the \$282 million a year received from 1998-2002, to a total sum of \$1.3 billion a year. The government is expecting these revenues to triple over the next four years. Unlike the neoliberal administrations before it, the MAS government ran a surplus budget. Morales →

rumours of a right-wing sponsored coup swirl

announced that this money will be used to fund health, education and social programs. Upon signing the decree, public schools teachers received a 10% pay raise and the government has increased pension payments.

Mines: More of the Same

The Bolivian government is also preparing a mining code which it hopes will accomplish similar results, that is, more national control with investment by multinationals to increase tax revenue. The first opportunity for recuperating the mines has already been lost. The Mutún mine, estimated to contain over 40 billion tons of iron ore reserves, was granted a concession to an Indian-based multinational in June. Reform of the mining sector is long overdue as indicated by the rising tensions among different workers, which produced the bloodiest conflict of 2006. From 1985 until the late 1990s, many of the formerly state-owned mines temporarily shut their doors when COMIBOL dismissed over three-quarters of its workforce in the first round of neoliberal 'reform' in the mid-1980s. Some of the miners who remained formed small cooperatives. They continued to mine under worse conditions, paying a small fee to COMIBOL for every tonne of mineral extracted.

The creation of cooperatives might sound like a creative solution to the problem of unemployment similar to the experiments in the recuperated factories in Argentina. But the cooperativists function like private businesses in which a privileged sector contracts other workers to do the dirty work under extremely exploitative conditions. While the privileged cooperativists are organized into a powerful association, FENCOMIN, several cooperativist workers working on contract have been fired for attempting to organize unions. According to one report, there are now estimated to be 63,000 cooperativist miners, while before October COMIBOL employed only a few thousand miners.

As commodity prices started to pick up in the 1990s, many of these mines were sold in concession to multinational companies as part of President Sánchez de Lozada's privatization program. The mining sector is now a confusing mish mash of state-owned and privately-owned mines, worked by a mix of employees of multinational companies, cooperativists, and state-employees. The same mine may be worked by different groups at various levels thus exacerbating conflict among workers facing very unequal conditions of employment.

Such is the case in the Huanuni mining complex located 280 km south of La Paz. The Pokosoni deposit was granted to a British-controlled consortium in the late 1990s. But it was returned back to COMIBOL when the company declared bankruptcy in 2000. This started a scuffle between the cooperativists and the state-employees over the future of the mine. The cooperativists

want the state to increase the number of "shared risk" contracts between the cooperativists and multinational companies. Both the waged and cooperativist miners backed the MAS in the December 2005 elections. Given the MAS's penchant for statist development with the participation of foreign capital, it chose to appoint a cooperativist miner, Walter Villarroel, as the Minister of the Mines. This inspired the cooperativists to deepen their demands. In September 2006, the 1500 state-employees who work the Huanuni deposits affiliated with the militant state-employed miners' union, the FSTMB, erected a road blockade demanding more jobs in the mine. In retaliation, the cooperativists attacked the state-employees in early October 2006. The situation exploded, leaving 17 miners dead and many more wounded.

The government has been heavily criticized for failing to intervene in the conflict to prevent these needless deaths and for favouring the cooperativist sector in place of the militant state-employed, organized miners. As Mario Ronald Duran Chuquimia of *Argenpress* put it, the problem confronting the MAS is a classic problem created by state-sponsored corporatism, "the central problem of the Evo Morales management is that the leadership of the social movements, converted into the heads of ministries, offer preferences to satisfy the demands of their sector before giving solutions to the problems faced by society as a whole." A resolution of such conflicts will require more than a new mining code. It will require that all miners be given the right to organize trade unions. Following the conflict, the government made a move in the right direction by absorbing 5,000 cooperativist workers into COMIBOL. Responding to social movement demands, Villarroel was sacked and replaced with Guillermo Dalence Salinas, a former leader of the FSTMB.

The Santa Cruz Oligarchy

The most serious threat to the MAS's statist project is the Santa Cruz oligarchy of Bolivia's eastern region. This is where the country's most fertile land and natural gas and oil deposits are located. Santa Cruz's bandits and corporate oligarchs are not at all thrilled about the change in direction in state policy. In the 1970s, the oligarchy gained control over the state apparatus under dictator Hugo Banzer (1971-1978). He channelled public money and international loans towards the region in his own state-build-

ing project. The Santa Cruz oligarchs weathered the storm of neoliberalism because their main economic activities are in agro-export, drug trafficking, and contraband, which flourished under corrupt neoliberal administrations. Their greatest productive asset is land, a great deal of which was acquired through fraud. So far, the MAS has appeased their worst fears by not threatening to expropriate productive land in their first wave of agrarian reform hammered through Congress in November.

The decision not to expropriate the Santa Cruz oligarch's land is a calculated move. First, the regional agro-capitalists produce soy, one of Bolivia's more valuable exports. Second, the oligarchs have something to gain from the re-alignment of the Bolivian state toward the Bolivarian axis. The agro-exporters face fierce competition from American-grown soy, especially in its largest market, Colombia, which just signed a "free trade agreement" with the USA. But Venezuela and Cuba have both agreed to accept Bolivia's soy to compensate for this loss of market. Venezuela also provides much-needed finance and advice in many areas of policy, including defence. Rumours of a right-wing sponsored coup swirl, and recall the U.S.-sponsored coup that attempted to derail Chavez's state-building project in 2002.

The Constituent Assembly

The national Constituent Assembly (CA) has served as an open stage for this regional showdown. The oligarchy drew their guns when the MAS proposed late this fall that all articles written for the new constitution being designed by the assembly be approved by simple majority instead of a two-thirds vote. Before the election of delegates on July 2, the MAS made a concession to the right by designing the voting rules so that no political party or faction could achieve the two thirds needed to approve articles before they go to national referendum. The MAS won the maximum number of seats allowed – 54 percent – the rest going to traditional political parties, including those of the Santa Cruz oligarchs. But the process by which articles would be approved has been left vaguely defined.

Predictably, the CA entered a deadlock, and tensions spilled out onto the streets in December. In the first wave of protests in early December, the Santa Cruz oligarchs claims that there were one million people on the streets waving banners in support of "2/3," "democracy" and "autonomy" in retaliation against the "authoritarian" nature of the MAS government. Clashes between the oligarchs and poor peasants in a town near Santa Cruz left several dead.

Similar tensions flared up again a month later in Cochabamba, where the militant pro-MAS organizations of small farmers who were instrumental in the 2000 water war surrounded the office of

the pro-autonomy governor, demanding his resignation. This time, clashes in the streets resulted in one casualty for each side. The MAS government defended the Mayor, arguing that popular social movements and their leaders have to learn to respect democracy, and conceded to the two third rule, so the painful process of re-writing the constitution can begin.

At one point, social movements pinned their hopes that the CA would re-found the nation. Now it will be difficult to make radical changes to the constitution with the balance of power tipping towards the right. While the form of the CA appears to be the MAS's largest blunder so far, it is not certain how much it really matters. After all, post-apartheid South Africa adopted one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, but it is far from being the world's most equal society. As Marx famously put it, "between two equal rights, force decides." Real political power in Bolivia, as elsewhere, lies largely outside of parliamentary bodies. As is, the CA certainly distracts the right, and prevents it from investing all of its energy in other counter-reform initiatives that are potentially much more dangerous.

Beyond Statism?

The MAS's state-building project is not immune from criticism. But the label "neoliberal" does not apply in this case. The MAS government has clearly changed course from the kinds of economic policies imposed by the IMF that dominated economic-policy making in the region for more than two decades. Indeed, the Morales government let the IMF agreement expire in March 2006, giving it more freedom over economic-policy making than has been possible in the past twenty years. We may not have yet entered a "post-neoliberal" age. But if every government on the continent including the MAS is labelled "neoliberal" we risk diluting its meaning entirely. A more realistic assessment suggests that the MAS is pursuing a statist project thus far. This project will create new kinds of contradictions and provide the basis for new political divisions and new alliances.

Diverse groups within the working classes of Bolivia were able to build a successful common front against neoliberalism between 2000 and 2005. Now they may find themselves increasingly in competition with each other as MAS policies creates space for some groups and not others. This has further politicized the state and politics. It remains an open question whether the social movements and the dynamics of class struggle – both in Bolivia and the region – will push MAS beyond the limits of statism. We on the left would be wise to try to understand these new contradictions and the forms of struggle to which they will give rise. **R**

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Corn Crisis and Market Discipline: **The Limits of Democracy in Mexico**

Hepzibah Muñoz Martínez

The policies that affect wages in Mexico remain unaltered by the outcome of elections and partisan politics. These policies show the limits of the so-called 'transition to democracy' in Mexico, which is often associated with the triumph of the Action National Party (PAN) in the presidential elections of 2000. The meaning of democracy has been confined to the citizen's right to vote and the liberalisation of the electoral process, while people's political, economic and social rights continue to deteriorate. This has been expressed in the first two months of the new president Felipe Calderón's administration when corn and tortilla prices increased more than 50 per cent. In response, Calderón has reinforced the policies that he inherited from his predecessors, which places the burden of the negative outcomes of market mechanisms on Mexico's poorest.

The Tortilla Crisis

In the early days of January 2007, corn tortilla prices in Mexico increased more than 50 per cent, pushing inflation up, while minimum wages remained almost the same. The rising price of corn and tortilla has had a significant impact on Mexico's economy since this product represents half of the calories consumed by low-income families. As a result, the difference between the price of this commodity and relatively stagnant salaries has affected 50 million poor people. Among them, 20 million live with less than two dollars per day. Last year, a person earning the minimum wage spent from 10 to 14 per cent of her daily salary on tortillas. Today, this same person has to spend about 30 per cent of her wage on this same product.

Indeed, the high prices of corn in international markets resulting from rising demand of ethanol have influenced the price of agricultural commodities in differ-

ent countries. The price of corn in the futures market has recently reached its highest price since July of 1996 at 3.965 dollars per bushel. Still, the ways in which international markets of corn have affected Mexico is greatly influenced and mediated by the market-oriented policies implemented by the Mexican state in the past twenty-five years.

This is evident in the increasing power of agri-business and the price of Mexican corn, which was 100 per cent higher than in the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), the most influential futures market for agricultural commodities. The difference between Mexican corn prices and the CBOT is the outcome of the privatisation of communal lands and the removal of social programs aimed at the distribution of grains such as corn and beans. On the one hand, the privatisation of communal lands – *ejidos* – and the removal of agricultural subsidies for peasant communities led to the concentration of agricultural production in a few hands, and therefore a decline in subsistence agriculture. This in turn has made the population more reliant on commercial markets for corn and has given more power to large-scale producers to influence the price of this commodity.

The elimination of the government agency CONASUPO in 1999, on the other hand, also strengthened the control of several national and international corporations' over the national corn market. CONASUPO, *Compania Nacional de Subsistencias Populares*, distributed and guaranteed the price of basic grains in the Mexican market through subsidies and price controls. Since the removal of CONASUPO, the American Corporation Cargill-Monsanto, and the Mexican firms MASECA and MINSA have had the control over the commercialisation and distribution of corn in Mexico. This situation has made these companies central in setting the

price of corn and tortilla in the country. The increasing power of these corporations and other agro-businesses has allowed them to hoard supplies to drive corn prices up even more.

Calderón and Free Market Policies

The government response to this situation reveals Calderón's commitment to free markets. When corn prices escalated, the government rejected any policy shift towards the implementation of price controls, subsidies and wage increases. Instead, the government has sought after an agreement with the private sector. Producers and distributors of corn and tortilla have consented to settle the price of tortilla. They have consented to maintain tortilla prices at 8.50 pesos per kilo (83 cents) as opposed to previous prices of 10 and 15 pesos (one dollar and one dollar and a half). In return, the Mexican government has agreed to guarantee the supply of corn by extending the quota of American corn. The corn quota was increased to 750 thousand tons for human consumption and 2 850 thousand of tons for the cattle and poultry industry in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Calderón's decision to increase quotas of U.S. corn to guarantee low prices for Cargill, MASECA and MINSA shows the President's determination to implement market mechanisms to solve social problems. Freer trade is seen as a solution to the 'corn crisis,' which only favours American corn producers and private firms that operate within Mexico. Market mechanisms have replaced long-term policies that foster domestic production in peasant and small land holdings. This agreement shows the Executive's willingness to consult and negotiate with the private sector, excluding the rest of society from these accords. The political parties in the Mexican Con-

gress are only debating Calderón's measures and manipulating the situation for electoral purposes without presenting inclusive and democratic proposals to solve the corn crisis.

Most importantly, the case of corn illustrates the continuation of the Mexican state's anti-inflationary policies at the expense of people's wages. Changes in the price of corn have resulted in a higher inflation rate. At the same time, salaries have remained behind price increases and 256,000 people have been laid-off in the first 45 days of Calderón's administration. In contrast, the Mexican stock market and corporations such as MASECA have benefited from sustained growth in profits resulting from rising prices and low wages. In this context, Calderón has refused to increase salaries in order to prevent inflation and has confirmed his administration's

intention to favour corporate interests.

While these policies correspond to a specific sector of the economy, the governmental response to rising corn prices suggests the overall orientation of Calderón's economic policy. The prevalence of these policies has been ensured by Calderón's economic cabinet, where he appointed Agustín Carstens as Finance Minister and has supported the permanence of Guillermo Ortiz Martínez as the Governor of the Central Bank. Carstens is the former Deputy Manager of the International Monetary Fund and has worked in close relationship in several projects with Francisco Gil Díaz, the Minister of Finance during Vicente's Fox administration. Ortiz Martínez has remained the Governor of the Central Bank since 1998, who has been implementing anti-inflationary mechanisms based on declining wages and relatively stable, yet attractive, interest rates. These appointments guarantee the continuity of market-oriented policies.

While Calderón's government has rejected the implementation of policies that effectively defend people's rights to food, he has confirmed his administration's support for market-oriented policies to international investors. For instance, at the 2007 World Economic Forum at Davos, Calderón

expressed that Mexico, unlike other Latin American countries that returned to 'old-fashioned' central planning and expropriations, offers a favourable business climate. In this forum, Calderón mentioned that his administration guarantees and protects private firms' profits and offers economic stability. Such a statement refers to the prevalence of previous economic strategies that maintain economic stability and guarantees corporate profitability based on price increases, the stagnation of wages and the flexibilisation of labour conditions.

Movements for Democratisation

Mexico's corn crisis stresses the need for inclusive mechanisms of social participation that go beyond electoral politics to protect citizens' substantial rights. These claims were expressed at the end of →



January 2007 in a large public demonstration in Mexico City. This protest gathered about 45,000 people from unions and different political organisations. In this protest march, people defended the right to food, a living wage and employment security. Unions and peasant organisations signed the *Zocalo* declaration, in which they criticised the government's economic model, arguing that the current economic policies only generate more unemployment, lower wages and the loss of food self-sufficiency. In this declaration, these organisations also condemned Calderón's repression against any public expression of dissent. Most significantly, the declaration calls for the 'democratisation of the economy,' that is the inclusion of citizens

in economic decision-making. Still, there are challenges to local mobilisation and the construction of national resistance against the market-oriented policies of Calderón's administration. These difficulties are increasing poverty and economic insecurity, escalating violence related to drug cartels, political repression at the federal and state level and leadership corruption in some labour organisations such as the Mexican teacher's unions. Such a scenario makes it more complicated to create a national movement that incorporates all social groups to oppose Calderón's initiatives.

Yet, the social discontent expressed in public demonstrations in Mexico city, the lack of legitimacy of the 2006 presidential

elections, the Executive's recent policies favouring the private sector, and the futility of political parties in presenting initiatives for social change raise questions regarding the social outreach of 'Mexico's democratic transition.' The widespread questioning of Mexico's democratisation, amidst the generalised negative effects of market-discipline over middle and low income sectors, is a step forward towards the construction of a larger movement that may yet support a real democratisation of Mexico's politics and economy. **R**

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The Costs of Rising Tortilla Prices in Mexico

Enrique C. Ochoa

Spurred by the increasing use of corn for ethanol, tortilla prices in Mexico have skyrocketed by more than 50 percent in many regions over the past several months. Popular anger and protests against these increases forced the government of Felipe Calderón to publicly promise to punish speculators and to call for increased corn imports. Calderón also negotiated a pact with the largest tortilla producers to cap the price of tortillas at 8.5 pesos per kilogram – a 41.67 percent price increase since April 2006. However few consumers will benefit from these efforts. Instead, Walmart, the large corporations that dominate the industry, and the U.S. transnational companies that supply Mexico with corn are likely to be the beneficiaries.

The tortilla price hikes and the government's responses will be shouldered by Mexico's poorest consumers and producers. Tortilla prices have increased by more than 10 times the recent increase in the minimum wage. In some states a kilogram of tortillas accounts for as much as one-third of the daily minimum wage. Increasing imports is likely to further devastate Mexican corn producers, who have been especially hard hit since the 1994 implementation of NAFTA.

The Mexican government has not always been willing to sacrifice the poor for giant corporations. In the Mexican Revolution in the early 20th century, Mexico's working classes demanded social justice. Successive Mexican administrations responded by granting land to the landless and subsidizing the production of tortillas. As Mexican governments sought to transform the economy through industrialization and large scale agriculture, peasant and worker resistance led to the creation of a govern-

ment agency with a chain of stores to keep basic food prices within the reach of consumers. This agency established a minimum producer price and purchased staple grains directly from small producers. While the goal was not to eradicate poverty or challenge the market system, this authoritarian responsiveness provided a basic security net for millions of Mexicans.

These social policies were greatly weakened by Mexico's economic crisis of the 1980s and the U.S.-inspired response. Social programs were slashed and food subsidies eliminated as private businesses were hailed as the solution to Mexico's economic ills. This has led to a virtual abandonment of the countryside. Mexico's farm employment has been reduced by 30 percent since the implementation of NAFTA. According to a study by the Americas Program of the International Relations Center, between 1999 and 2004 the price paid Mexican corn farmers fell by about half as U.S. imports flooded Mexican markets. While for centuries Mexico's campesinos have produced maize and other basic staples, their lands are increasingly privatized or abandoned and are forced to migrate in search of better opportunities.

Among the major beneficiaries of the government policies in the 1980s and 1990s, and of recent price hikes, is the Mexican tortilla giant Grupo MASECA (GRUMA). Founded in 1949, GRUMA pioneered an industrial process of making corn flour and tortillas. When subsidies to maize and tortillas plummeted, GRUMA thrived as Mexican President Carlos Salinas diverted state corn stocks away from smaller subsidized tortilla factories and to the ready-mix tortilla industry, such as GRUMA, openly favoring them as more efficient producers.



GRUMA's dominance of the Mexican market stimulated its international expansion. GRUMA controls approximately 65 percent of the Central American corn flour market. In the U.S., with Mission and Guerrero as their key brands, GRUMA controls about 70% of the tortilla market in Southern California. It operates 13 industrial plants in the U.S. including the largest tortilla factory in the world in Rancho Cucamonga, California. GRUMA has benefited from its strategic alliance with Archer Daniels Midland, one of the world's largest agribusinesses and a key recipient of U.S. corn subsidies.

Wal-Mart, Mexico's number one private employer and leading retailer, also stands to gain from the price hikes. In its nearly 800 stores, Wal-Mart has not raised the price of tortillas as much as other retailers. Its dominance of the market allows it to undersell smaller stores and thereby attract more customers. Smaller and national retailers are likely to be the casualties, enabling Wal-Mart to consolidate its monopolistic hold over the Mexican market.

The current crisis provides an opportunity for agribusiness to strengthen its dominance of the Mexican countryside. Several large producer organizations and biotech firms have called on the government to authorize the planting of genetically modified corn to increase yield in Mexico. In the search for a quick fix, however, such a policy would deepen Mexico's food dependence.

The lack of food sovereignty has had disastrous consequences for Mexicans. Before this latest increase, tortilla prices

had already risen by over 200 percent between 2000 and 2006. According to Laura Carlsen of the International Relations Center, the Mexican government recently reported that 12.7% of children under age five are chronically malnourished. In the countryside, the percentage is nearly double. The increase in the price of tortillas heightens the risk of malnutrition. Hector Bourges Rodriguez, the director of Nutrition of the National Institute of Medical Sciences and Nutrition, reports that tortillas are the one food item in the Mexican diet that deliver the greatest amount of nutritional components. Increasing the price could lead to the further deterioration of the Mexican diet.

The recent price increases of tortillas in Mexico, therefore, are not mere market adjustments. They have profound implications for who controls Mexico's basic food staple. Long-term solutions to price increases must be rooted in policies that increase Mexico's food sovereignty and give more control to local campesino producers and consumers. Short-term panaceas that benefit Wal-Mart, GRUMA, and U.S. agribusiness will not improve the standard of living of the average Mexican; instead, they may lead to greater malnutrition and instability. **R**

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TROOPS OUT



of Iraq and Afghanistan

PAN-CANADIAN DAY OF ACTION

Saturday, March 17

Montreal: 1pm, Dorchester Square (Peel & René-Lévesque)

Ottawa: 1pm, National Art Gallery (Sussex & St. Patrick)

Toronto: 1pm, United States Consulate (360 University)

Vancouver: 2pm, Vancouver Art Gallery (Georgia & Howe)