

LATIN AMERICA LURCHES LEFT



Latin America is currently home to the biggest challenges to the ideology of neo-liberalism and its globalisation project.

“Beginning in the early 1990’s,” writes James Petras,

“extra-parliamentary socio-political movements emerged throughout most of Latin America and were accompanied by large-scale popular uprisings, deposing ten incumbent neo-liberal client ‘Presidents’ installed under the patronage of the US/EU: Three in Ecuador and Argentina, two in Bolivia, one each in Venezuela and Brazil.” The end of the power of these presidents does not necessarily mean the end of neo-liberalism and globalisation. But it does place it under severe pressure and important victories are being won by the working classes in a number of countries.

Latin America before

Up to 10 years ago Latin America was not only the backyard of US imperialism, many of its countries had followed IMF policies to the full and were used by neo-liberals everywhere as examples that South Africa should follow.

A large part of the wealth of these countries was owned by the richest business corporations of the USA. This was arranged through institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), through trade agreements and through

the World Trade Organisation (WTO). US control was enforced through the co-option of local elites, political corruption, economic blockades and military threats.

Most people had no power to decide over important issues although they might have had the right to vote, the rule of law and freedom of expression. Power was concentrated in the hands of the executive branch of the state, specifically the presidency, while important decisions were made by unelected and unaccountable institutions such as central banks. Political life was dominated by the descendants of white Europeans. The descendants of the indigenous people and the black slaves were marginalised. Male supremacy also grew stronger.

Latin American rulers faithfully carried out privatisation and commercialisation, including selling state assets cheaply to capitalists, running public services like private businesses, cutting taxes on corporations, removing restrictions on currency trading and forcing people to pay for public services.

But in the last few years the political landscape has changed dramatically.

Latin America today

Under President Hugo Chavez Venezuela has charted a course independently from US imperialism and instituted a series of important reforms called the Bolivarian Revolution. These include state-funded literacy, health, education and nutrition programmes. The government raised taxes on foreign businesses, strengthened the nationalisation of the oil industry and used the revenues this generated to support its upliftment

programmes. It also supported the take-over of certain factories by workers who instituted joint community-worker management. It made state-owned land available to poor people for subsistence farming. Venezuela initiated trade agreements, first with Cuba, and then with other countries, in clear opposition to the US-dominated treaties such as the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (ALCA) and NAFTA.

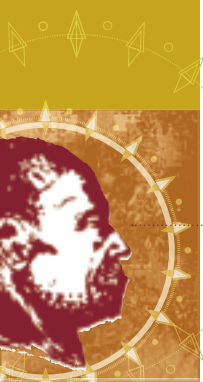
It started to pay women for household labour. And perhaps, most interestingly, it has implemented a programme of ‘participatory democracy’ by giving citizens more voice in the running of the state and by supporting independent community and labour organisations with state resources.

In Bolivia, after big strikes and struggles against neo-liberalism the people of this country elected Evo Morales as president in late 2005. He is the first indigenous president of Bolivia and this marks an important step in the struggle of the indigenous masses. Morales has taken measures to increase state revenues from, and extend control over, private business particularly in the energy and mining sectors. He hopes that this would enable the Bolivian government to implement similar programmes to that of Venezuela.

The capitalists of the USA and the EU have protested against this lowering



Continues page 3...



THE SECURITY WORKERS' STRIKE AND WORKERS' RIGHTS

Security workers belonging to South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU) went on strike in March 2006. They demanded an 11% wage increase while the security bosses refused to move beyond 8.3%. Workers also wanted recognition, provident fund benefits and maternity rights. Through mediation at the CCMA, an agreement was drafted in which the workers could get a 9.5% increase provided they agree to a 3-year wage deal.

Violent incidents during this strike however became a hotly debated issue and led to a range of forces condemning the actions of security guards. In the midst of these condemnations there have been signs that workers' hard won rights have come under attack.

Responses to the violent actions

Condemnations of the striking workers became widespread after a march in Cape Town on 16 May in which streets were trashed, shop windows broken and some stall holders beaten up.

The police fired rubber bullets and used teargas to disperse the march. They arrested 35 protestors including the provincial secretary of COSATU.

In addition the City of Cape Town Council established an office to assist those who have suffered loss or damage to their property and who wished to take action against SATAWU. Citizens of Cape Town were actively encouraged to find ways to sue the union and its members. The next day the City Council withdrew permission for a protest march against job losses and poverty by COSATU that was scheduled for the 18 May. The Mayor was joined by the Western Cape Provincial government in condemning the security workers' action. Police reservists were put on

high alert in case COSATU went ahead with its protest march.

In his address in parliament President Mbeki spoke implicitly about the security workers characterised them as "a tiny minority of individuals that holds the people's democratic victory in contempt".

In addition a number of other incidents have occurred – violence on trains, the breaking up of a Helen Zille meeting in Crossroads, heckling at a June 16 rally addressed by the Western Cape Premier – all of which have been blamed on the striking security workers. Whether true or not, the security workers have become a bogeyman who are everywhere threatening the public and against whom law enforcement agencies must act vigorously.

Threats to human rights

The condemnation of violence has focused the attention on only one side in the struggle of security workers against their employers and this focus threatens human rights won by workers over long years of struggle.

For instance the use of rubber bullets fired into crowds at point-blank range and the lack of non-violent methods of crowd control (which the liberal media used to highlight in the apartheid days) has not been condemned. The national government did not condemn the undermining of the right to assemble and demonstrate by the City of Cape Town Council when it withdrew the COSATU permit to march.

The active mobilisation by the City Council to get citizens to sue the trade union is a long-standing technique condemned internationally as a method to break trade unions everywhere and, if they had been successful, would have limited the right to strike even further than already exists.

And in the light of the violence the courts gave an extremely conservative ruling banning secondary strikes – a right that exist in law but where workers get defeated whenever they actually try and invoke that right. When SATAWU resolved to embark on a secondary strike employers easily won court interdicts. While the union had a right to challenge such interdicts that would only be possible after some days and it would have required the union to have money to brief lawyers.

The demonisation of striking security workers discredits any public display of protest and criticism in this period – which not only shields public authorities from criticism but threatens the right to strike and assembly itself and rallies public opinion behind limiting democratic rights in the interest of "law and order."

SATAWU's strategy to win their demands

When the bosses proved intransigent SATAWU embarked on multi-pronged approach – including appeals to the Minister of Labour and picketing workplaces to put pressure on the bosses.

Mdladlana indicated that he could not support the 11% wage increase demands. Instead he appealed to the bosses to go back on the table. He also declared an agreement signed by the 14 smaller unions, but not the SATAWU majority, invalid. In the absence of movement on the part of the security bosses security workers became more desperate and began to look for other methods of struggle to exert pressure.

Some of the methods included making it difficult for scabs to work. Militants amongst the security workers embarked on these additional methods because the other methods were not leading

LATIN AMERICA LURCHES LEFT continued...



of their profits and threaten to oppose it with all their might. Morales has since radicalised his tactics, showing a willingness to use the military in order to reach his economic goals. He has declared the nationalisation of certain businesses and the expropriation of under-utilised land so as to be made available to poor farmers. The outcome of these measures is still in the balance, but Evo Morales seems committed to use state power to implement the social democratic type of economic changes necessary to carry out the

anti-neoliberal programme on which his government was elected.

The changes in Venezuela and Bolivia have meant that Cuba has found new international partners. This has not yet led to the democratisation of the country or the growth of an independent mass movement there but it has enabled it to be less isolated, and better able to resist US imperialism.

Elsewhere in the Americas

Mexico, Brazil and Argentina are still dominated by neo-liberal governments. But these governments have been able to assert a larger degree of independence from US imperialism because of the changes in Venezuela and Bolivia and because there are strong social movements in their countries. The mass movements have won important victories against neo-liberalism, taking over large territories and crucial aspects of society. Examples include the take-over of many businesses by workers in Argentina, land invasions and participatory budgets in Brazil, as well as community governments and land take-overs by the Zapatistas in Mexico. The growth of the World Social Forum process also counts as a victory.

The victories of the anti-neoliberal movements in Latin America have encouraged the struggles of Latino people inside the USA. Recently we

have seen marches involving up to 2 million people protesting against the oppression of immigrants. This movement is a base of support for the struggle against neo-liberalism both inside the USA and in Latin America.

Conclusion

After almost 30 unbroken years of neo-liberalism in the rest of the world and after 10 years of being told in South Africa that GEAR was non-negotiable, Latin American workers and poor farmers, by electing anti-neoliberal governments and experimenting with new forms of power, are serving as a possible beacon for activists in South Africa. Even as the USA more aggressively imposes its power militarily in the world there are signs that popular power is on the upsurge in imperialism's own back yard.

The changes in Venezuela, in Bolivia, and elsewhere in Latin America 'resonate with the policies undertaken by the European social democratic parties between 1946 and the 1960s,' to use the words of James Petras. These policies have improved many aspects of the lives of those exploited by capitalism. Although some critics say that the Chavez and Morales governments are still seeking to find some kinder face to capitalism, their policies are a clear challenge to neo-liberalism and a victory for the mass movements that led to their elections.

to any results. The purpose of these actions was to exert pressure on the bosses.

However some militants did not combine these methods, focused on the bosses and scabs, with winning broader public support. Criminalising does not assist militants to reflect on their actions: instead it disarms and demoralises them. Workers should be engaged on the importance of

winning other sections of the poor. Such an engagement should raise the importance of the dangers with methods that alienate the potential allies. The engagement of militants must more importantly provide an alternative strategy that takes struggles forward.

The current legal and peaceful means to resolve social conflict are a product of past militant struggles that were condemned by past regimes as criminal.

People in struggle will surely use the limited spaces provided by the law to advance their struggles but will also look at alternative forms of struggle if the spaces in law do not advance their objectives. What is critical for those in struggle for social change is that such alternative forms of struggles should not undermine their overall objective and alienate the support of other sections of the poor and the sections of the middle classes.