

# **Imperialism and Resistance in Latin America**

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It is entirely appropriate that the Ibero-American Presidents Summit (IAPS) takes place in Bolivia this year. For just a few weeks earlier, Bolivia was the site of a historic, perhaps epoch-making confrontation between a corrupt neo-liberal elite backed by the US Embassy and the Armed Forces and the peasants, workers, students and urban poor committed to regaining sovereign control over their energy sources and domestic markets. It is no accident that the IAPS takes place in Santa Cruz, the only city in all of Bolivia where the fleeing president sought to provoke an ill-fated business backed coup. The popular uprising of October 2003 has truly heroic dimensions, but it is only the opening wave of a continent-wide struggle that is emerging throughout Latin America. To understand this emerging confrontation it is important to briefly survey the protagonists of the change, the nature of the polarization between empire builders and their vassal regimes on the one hand and the mass socio-political movements on the other hand, placing this in the context of the historical shifts in power over recent decades. This political context is important to delineating the fundamental battleground – and issues over which the present and future struggles will occur. These include the battle over gas, oil and other energy sources; the agrarian question in all of its manifestation, from land distribution, to self-determination of crop cultivation (including coca), to protecting domestic markets and promoting domestic food security; the issue of the mass

army of permanent unemployed urban workers; the centrality of sustainable human rights and issue of social justice and elite impunity.

In the concluding section we will demonstrate why imperialism is the central issue of our time. In each and every major social, political and economic questions of our time, a progressive resolution requires the defeat of the imperial project.

### The Turning Tide

There are significant empirical indicators that the tide is turning against the US backed client regimes in Latin America, though at a high, bloody cost. In Bolivia a class alliance of several million Bolivians toppled the Sanchez de Losada regime in October 2003 and imposed a 90 day limit on incoming President Meza to renationalize gas and energy sources, revoke the coca eradication program and implement other popular demands. The cost was high: 81 Bolivians were killed and 400 seriously wounded. In neighboring Colombia, President Uribe's, US and IMF promoted referendum failed to obtain the minimum 25% of the electorate and was resoundingly defeated – thus blocking Uribe's neo-liberal agenda of austerity and privatization. A “center-left” candidate also defeated Uribe's choice for mayor of Bogata, the second most important political position in the country. Uribe's counter-insurgency program has failed to make any significant gains against the guerrillas, even as paramilitary forces continue to kill and forcible evict thousands of peasants in the contested areas.

In Venezuela, the US sponsored efforts to violently overthrow the democratically elected regime of President Hugo Chavez via local proxies was twice defeated by an alliance of the urban poor and sectors of the constitutionalist military. As a result Chavez has “re-nationalized” the state oil company, reallocating its earnings from overseas

investments to local social projects in health, education, low cost housing for the poor and land reform for the landless peasants – 100,000 beneficiaries in 2003.

In Argentina a mass popular uprising in December 2001 and urban mobilization throughout 2002-2003 has led to the sharp reduction in debt payments, a lowering of the price of electricity, gas and other utilities and the beginning of reform of the corrupt and repressive state leftover from the military dictatorship and the venal civilian neo-liberal regimes of Menem, De La Rúa and Duhalde. In Peru, Ecuador and Brazil, the mass movements are regrouping to re-launch their projects of social transformations, following the right-turn to orthodox neo-liberalism by pseudo-populist presidents, Lucio Gutierrez in Ecuador, Da Silva in Brazil and Toledo in Peru. Toledo's support has plummeted to single digits; Gutierrez has lost the support of the major trade unions and Indian-peasant organizations and has allied himself with the far right Febres Cordero Social Christian Party. In Brazil much to the disappointment of most of his 50 million voters, Da Silva has embraced an extreme version of IMF neo-liberal "adjustment program", slashing social programs, repressing rural activists, cutting public employee pensions and distributing land to less than 5% of the 60,000 landless rural workers he promised to settle in the first year of his term. The MST, the public employees, the auto workers and many other popular sectors are already on strike, preparing massive land occupations and organizing a new political party.

The popular resurgence in the year 2003 represents the 4<sup>th</sup> wave of popular struggle over the past half century. The first wave encompassed the period between 1959-the early 1970's - beginning with the success of the Cuban revolution and ending with the defeat of socialists and populists and the imposition of military dictatorships in the

Southern Cone. The second wave centered in Central America and began with the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 and ended with their defeat in the 1990 election and the consolidation of US client regimes in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador. The third wave, began in the late 1990's and ended in 2002, a mixture of mass popular movements and coalitions with pseudo-populist electoral personalities and parties. The fourth wave, which is rapidly gaining momentum, is increasingly linked to the socio-political movements throughout Latin America. These include mass peasant-indian-urban unemployed-working class coalitions engaged in extra-parliamentary activity.

The unifying issue of this 4<sup>th</sup> wave popular upsurge is their opposition to the re-colonization of Latin America via the US promoted ALCA. The uniqueness of these movements is their independence from electoral party control, their continent wide scope, their powerful international network of solidarity through various social forums and organizations. Most important is their profound roots in local movements and involvement in concrete struggles, based on an analysis derived from the specificities of each country's history, culture, class structure, ethnic and gender features.

#### Historical Context for the Re-colonization of Latin America (ALCA)

The advances and retreats of US backed client regimes and imperial economic interests has been in inverse relation to the strength of the popular movements and socially progressive regimes over the past half century. The first wave of imperial backed client regimes was largely highly repressive anti-communist military dictatorships during the 1950's: Batista in Cuba, Somoza in Nicaragua, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Odría in Peru, Perez Jimenez in Venezuela, Armas in Guatemala. These were the early predecessors of the military and civilian neo-liberal rulers of the later part of the century.

Essentially they served to open the doors to an early invasion of US capital and to provide unconditional support for the US in the Cold War. US empire builders targeted national-popular and socialist regimes that emerged – Peron in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, Allende in Chile, J.J. Torres in Bolivia – and promoted national ownership of energy sources and public enterprise in basic industries.

The US intervened and overthrew the nationalist populist regimes through client military-civilian elite led coups and direct invasion (Dominican Republic 1965). The result was the implantation of the “neo-liberal” or imperial centered model of capital accumulation (ICMCA), in which public enterprises were privatized and sold to US and European MNCs. In addition local markets were invaded by subsidized exports and foreign debts incurred by corrupt rulers were leveraged into undermining any national equitable development strategy.

The 1980’s witnessed the transition from military dictatorship to civilian-electoral authoritarians and the deepening of the “neo-liberal model” and the massive transfer of profits, interest, royalty and illicitly gained funds to the US and European Union. The consolidation of the neo-liberal regimes led to the dismantling of social welfare systems, massive urban unemployment, vast increases in rural migration fleeing absolute misery in the countryside, the increase of poverty levels to over 50% and the growing mass disenchantment with the imperial centered accumulation model.

The period between 1990-2001 witnessed the popular overthrow of two neo-liberal presidents in Ecuador, another in Brazil (Collor), a fourth in Venezuela (Carlos Perez), preludes to the overthrow of corrupt authoritarian electoral politicians in Peru (Fujimori),

De La Rúa (Argentina), Sanchez de Losada (Bolivia) in the first years of the new millennium.

While neo-liberalism provided extraordinary profits for European and US MNCs and local multi-millionaire elites it is not politically or socially sustainable. The decline and decay of neo-liberalism is evident in the negative per capital growth rates, the decapitalization of the economies, the decline of domestic mass consumption, the deepening crises of agriculture (except for the export enclaves), and the exorbitant debt payments that undermine any public investments in the economy and social programs.

#### Neo-Liberalism in Crises: Re-Nationalization or Re-Colonization

ALCA is the proposed US response to the declining fortunes of neo-liberalism and the failed states associated with its implementation. ALCA means the transfer of sovereignty to an ALCA commission dominated by the US. This commission will establish the legal, economic, political framework for the long-term, large-scale implementation of US imperial interests. ALCA will lead to the demise of all Latin American legislative and executive functions and their total subordination to a US controlled ALCA. The immediate economic goal of ALCA will be to privatize the remaining lucrative areas of national ownership: Venezuelan, Mexican, Ecuadorian petroleum and telecommunications and the privatization of public health, education and social services. ALCA will also mean the continued protection of non-competitive US agricultural and manufacturing sectors, the continued subsidy of US exporters – and the monopolization of trade – to privilege US exporters over Asian and European producers.

To defend ALCA as a re-colonization project, US empire builders are militarizing the region via Plan Colombia, building extensive networks of military bases and increasing

personal-political contacts amount military officials via 'joint military exercises'. The increase in social conflict and the mass popular upsurge is not only a response to past and present depredations but to the future project of re-colonization, involving control of energy resources (like Bolivian gas), uprooting and deracination of the rural peasantry and the "final solution" to national self-determination and popular sovereignty.

The crisis of neo-liberalism and the transition to re-colonization however takes place on hotly contested political and social terrain: the emergence of the "fourth wave of social-political movements" and the relative weakness and isolation of the pro-ALCA vassal regimes. Bolivia has led the way, first in overthrowing the corrupt Sanchez de Losada regime and by pointing to an alternative direction: the re-nationalization of the energy sources and the protection and self-determination of its domestic agricultural producers. The Bolivian methods of change and programmatic demands have a profound resonance among the populace of Latin America, increasingly disenchanted with elected political leaders whose electoral campaign and promises are diametrically opposed to what they practice in office.

#### The Agenda for the Fourth Wave Socio-Political Movements

The centerpiece of the emerging socio-political struggles revolves around five sets of issues, each involving head-on clashes between local elites and US empire builders on one side and the peasant-indian, workers, unemployed and youth on the other.

- (1) The cutting edge of the empire versus populace confrontation is the battle for gas, oil and other energy sources. A victory by the imperial powers – namely the privatization or continuation of privatization - will open the door to the complete takeover of the economy and provide a powerful resource to finance imperial

domination and its vassal elites. A victory for the populace – the defeat of imperialism – in taking control of energy would result in providing resources to finance public investment in infrastructure linking domestic markets and providing employment, to fund agrarian reform and social programs and to modernize the health, educational and social services. Equally important, re-nationalization could provide the momentum to reverse other illegal and high cost privatizations and de-nationalizations, increasing the scope and depth of public and popular control over the economy. Gas and oil is not only a source of wealth it is also emblematic of the struggle for autonomous development and the defense of national identity.

- (2) The driving force of the current popular upsurge, the best organized and most conscious social movements are found in the rural areas of Latin America. The pivotal issue is the agrarian question in multiple and complex forms, ranging from demands for agrarian reform in Brazil to the demands of the coca farmers in Bolivia, Peru and Colombia for the right to cultivate and commercialize the coca leaf. The fundamental struggle is between small farmers, landless rural workers and medium size farmers producing food for the local markets against the agro-exporters, commercial importers and subsidized big agro-exporters in Europe and the US. The issues are multiple – over three quarters of credit, technical assistance, water rights subsidies are allocated by the neo-liberal regimes to the agro-export sectors, while the peasants and local small farmers are forced to borrow at usurious rates from local money-lenders, big landowners and traders. In Brazil, Paraguay and Colombia huge estates mostly of uncultivated land so-exists with millions of landless workers and subsistence farmers. In Colombia and Brazil



hundreds of thousands of peasants are dispossessed and hundreds murdered each year by the private armies of the big landowners protected by the corrupt judicial system. The same “class justice” jails thousands of peasant activists seeking to redress the grievances of their supporters. The issue of rural poverty can only be addressed by confronting the issue of the concentration of wealth, land and credit. The agrarian issue is the single most explosive issue likely to detonate large-scale long-term social warfare.

The third area of mass struggle is among the growing mass of urban unemployed concentrated in all the major and provincial cities. Between forty and eighty percent of the labor force in Latin America is unemployed or employed in precarious economic activity which does not sustain a livable income. Large-scale land occupation movements on the periphery of cities by the homeless in Brazil, massive road blockages by organized unemployed workers in Argentina, and the urban uprising in Al Alto, Bolivia are symptomatic of the explosiveness of the urban poor. The key issue affecting employment-unemployment is the de-capitalization of Latin America via onerous debt payments to foreign banks, the repatriation of profits by the MNCs and the collusion of US and EU banks in transferring billions of illegally gained funds by local banks, politicians and local business elites. The second source of unemployment is the lowering of tariff barriers and the inundation of local markets by subsidized products from the US and EU as well as from MNCs exporting from cheap labor platforms in China.

The under-unemployed includes factory workers who have lost their jobs and young people entering the labor market who have never been employed. The recent uprisings

in Bolivia and Argentina, which were successful in overthrowing US vassal regimes, and the popular mobilization that restored President Chavez to power were largely made up of the urban under-unemployed rather than by the factory-based industrial trade unions.

The fourth area of mass struggle is in the sphere of human rights broadly understood. Mass movements against impunity of government officials implicated in massacres, genocide, torture and jailing are underway, especially in Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay and Colombia. Large-scale campaigns to free jailed political and social activists are taking place in Brazil, Colombia and elsewhere. The struggle against impunity of past political assassins is directed at preventing recidivism – the repetition of crimes by the same officials in the present and future. The greatest number of ex-torturers, ex-dictators, ex-militarists from Latin America are found in comfortable exile in the US, particularly in Miami which has the highest per capita concentration of Latin American terrorists in the world.

Since most human rights crimes are the result of rulers protecting the privileges, large property holdings and pillage of national resources by minority elites, the most effective defense of sustainable human rights obligations requires the transformation of state structures and the redistribution of wealth, and property toward majoritarian control – by workers, peasants and professionals. The continuation of human rights violations, the persistence of the criminalization of social movements and the impunity of elites under the newly elected Da Silva, Gutierrez and Toledo regimes suggest that human rights will not be respected by a change of Presidents, if it is not accompanied by structural change.

### US Imperialism: In the Eye of the Storm

Since the fall of Communist regimes, Washington has expanded its influence over most of the former Communist countries – from the Baltic through Eastern Europe to the Balkans and beyond to Central and South Asia through wars, invasions and covert operations. The US empire include almost fifty percent of the 500 largest MNCs and banks, 120 military bases around the world and hundreds of military missions. ALCA forms an integral part of the Bush Doctrine of world dominance. Yet this empire is not omnipotent, world power is not “unipolar”, nor is the empire omnipresent. In Iraq, the colonial-collaborator regime is meeting mass popular resistance with over three dozen armed conflicts daily and scores of wounded and dead US soldiers and civilian collaborators each week. Resistance also is increasing in colonial Afghanistan. In Latin America, US projections of power were defeated in Venezuela, Colombia and Bolivia. Popular resistance defeated two US orchestrated coups in Venezuela, “Plan Colombia” in Colombia and Sanchez de Losada’s sell out of Bolivia’s gas.

The cost of Washington’s empire building is undermining the domestic economy and the regimes political support, as the death toll of soldiers rises along with budget deficits – while social spending and industrial jobs decline. The “empire grows but the republic decline” – that is the major contradiction, along with the contradiction between colonial occupation and anti-colonial resistance in Iraq and Latin America.

### The Centrality of Latin America to the US Empire and the Centrality of the US Empire to Latin American Regression

The policies and practices of the major US political and economic institutions are at the center of the major problems facing Latin America. The notion of the “centrality”

of empire does not deny the negative role of local speculators, corrupt politicians, exploitative landlords and businesspeople and authoritarian military officers. But it does make clear that US officials have elaborated the imperial centered model of accumulation that has been at the center of the regression of Latin American society and the stagnation of its economies.

Latin America's importance to US empire building is found in three general areas: trade, profit margins and control of energy and other strategic resources. The US has a growing and unsustainable trade deficit with Asia and Europe; the only region in which the US has a net surplus account is Latin America. If it were not for the trade and services surpluses in Latin America, the US negative trade balance would put in jeopardy the US dollar and perhaps contribute to hastening a financial crisis. ALCA is seen by the US as a mechanism for sustaining and expanding this surplus in the face of dismal competitive prospects elsewhere. Secondly, US profit margins, particularly in finance and banking but also in sweatshops, energy and commerce are above the average rate of return in the US. Between 1990-2000 over 900 billion dollars (\$900,000,000,000) were transferred to the US in interest payments, royalties, profits and illicit money transfers by local corrupt elites. Latin America, especially Mexico, Venezuela, Ecuador, is the principal source of energy imports needed to sustain the US economy – particularly in times of war and popular resistance in the Middle East and Southern Asia.

Given these strategic concerns – all of which are basic building blocks for the US empire – the US push toward ALCA becomes entirely understandable: it provides the US with direct, colonial control over the Latin American surpluses by shaping trade

policies to its advantage, by ensuring the continued extraction of interest payments and by taking over energy sources via privatizations.

US imperial institutions and policy-makers are at the center of the class struggle in Latin America in three areas of great historical significance.

The US and its auxiliaries in the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) like the FMI, BM, BID are the architects and principal promoters and beneficiaries of the neo-liberal ideology and practices. The struggle against neo-liberalism involves direct confrontation with the local regimes implementing those policies and indirectly but even more significantly attacking the IFIs and their patrons in Washington and Europe.

The US is the primary force pushing for the rapid imposition of ALCA and the most prominent beneficiary of the re-colonization of Latin America. The growing mass opposition to ALCA is 'code language' for opposition to US imperial re-conquest of Latin America, and the ultimate effect, the disenfranchisement of Latin American citizens and the demise of national sovereignty.

The central resource conflicts today and in the past have involved the US take over or attempted seizure of Latin American energy sources. The biggest and bloodiest recent confrontations between the Latin American popular movements and US clients were Bolivia and Venezuela – over control of oil and gas. Violent behavior of US backed clients, a coup in Venezuela and massacres in Bolivia, tells us a great deal about the profoundly authoritarian political basis of ALCA style re-colonization.

In more specific 'sectoral analysis' we find the all-pervasive negative impact of imperialism – particularly in those problem areas discussed earlier in the paper, the agrarian question, unemployment, human rights and energy resources.

### Imperialism and the Agrarian Question

There are five areas where imperial interests have had a negative impact on Latin American farmers, peasants and landless workers:

- (1) Small farmers and peasants have been impoverished and dispossessed by US subsidized food exports and in general by US support for eliminating tariff barriers protecting local producers.
- (2) US police agencies like the DEA have imposed the burden of narcotics trafficking on the coca producing farmers, who do not produce addictive drugs, nor consume it nor received more than 5% of the ultimate price in the streets of US cities. The US drug eradication program has put in danger the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of peasant households and undermined the economies of five times that number of commercial and service industries who depend on the spending of the coca producers, not to mention the losses to public revenues which could finance development and employment.
- (3) The massive uprooting and displacement, the 'forced urbanization' of millions of peasants in Colombia, Central America and elsewhere is the result of the billion dollar US counter-insurgency programs which have terrorized the countryside, destroyed productive households and undermined investor confidence in any capital investments which would create jobs.
- (4) The Pentagon's systematic militarization of Latin American politics particularly in rural areas and the alliance between landlords, lumber barons and the right wing political bosses has led to the growth of a 'food deficit' as most producers of staple

foods for local consumption are small farmers adversely affected by US militarization of the countryside.

- (5) Finally the US and IFIs insistence on prompt and full payments of the debt has depleted the coffers of local governments – funds which might have been used to provide credit, purchase land for agrarian reform or subsidized food production.

Clearly it is no surprise, given the comprehensive and profound adverse involvement of US imperialism in all aspects of agriculture, that the peasants, Indians and landless workers have been on the cutting edge of the social movements opposed to US imperialism in its various reincarnations, as ‘neo-liberalism’, “ALCA” and “debt payments”.

Gas and oil are of strategic importance to the empire and also to the impoverished peoples of Latin America. The issue is clear: the enormous profits and revenues from gas and oil, the use and processing of energy have enormously important implications in sustaining empire or , from the populace’s perspective, in funding productive activity, health, education, employment and related agricultural and industrial activity. The fundamental question is ownership, direction and allocation. The US empire wants its MNC’s to own, profit from and direct oil to service the US economy. The popular movements want national public ownership under democratic control to reinvest the oil earnings in multiplying economic and social growth within their countries and to supply cheap energy and power to their homes, farms and factories.

Unemployment and Imperialism

The imperial centered model of accumulation (ICMA), better known as “neo-liberalism”, is implicated in deepening and extending unemployment in both urban and rural areas. Washington’s subsidized agricultural exports and protection of local uncompetitive growers and manufacturers has bankrupted farmers and closed markets to local producers, increasing the number of unemployed by millions. The ICMA has eliminated protection of local manufacturers leading to widespread firing of workers as industrialists turn to commercial activities such as selling cheap imports. Likewise the privatization process has led to massive firings and increasing charges on energy making local users uncompetitive in local and foreign markets. Finally the demands of the bankers and the IFI’s for full and prompt debt payments deprives the state of resources to finance public services and capital investments which in turn leads to massive firings of public sector employees and undermines the capacity of the state to create new jobs and finance agrarian reforms which could absorb the surplus rural population.

While the corruption and incompetence of local officials and the capital flight of local investors are important contributing factors, the overarching political-economic framework that generates unemployment has been designed and reinforced by US imperial agencies and their auxiliaries in the IFIs.

### Imperialism and Human Rights

The most flagrant and obvious linkage between imperialism and the profound structural problems found in Latin America is in the area of human rights. All the major state and para-state institutions – military, police, intelligence and their auxiliaries in the para-military forces – involved in human rights violations receive



arms, training, indoctrination, financing and powerful political support from their counterpart agencies in the US imperial state. Whether it is Plan Colombia, the US military bases throughout Latin America, or the direct and flagrant intervention of the US Ambassador in promoting coups and repression, the US imperial state is deeply complicit in crimes against humanity, whether it is the promotion of the murder of 300,000 civilians in Central America during the 1980's, the killing of 30,000 peasants in Colombia in the 1990's, or the massacre and wounding of hundreds in Bolivia in 2003.

As the case of ex-president Sanchez de Losada's current residence in Miami indicates, the US provides a haven and sanctuary for fugitives and felons fleeing from judicial processes over human rights abuses and the pillage of the public treasury making the US complicit in their crimes.

### Conclusion

It is entirely appropriate that there are two conferences in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. One, the Ibero-American Presidents Summit, represents the interests of the US and European empire builders and their vassal states, while the alternative conference brings together the popular resistance to the empire – the forces struggling for a profound social transformation. It is clear that the correlation of forces in Latin America and in the world is slowly and inexorable shifting against imperialism: after the triumphal speeches accompanying the invasion and occupation of Iraq we now hear of growing popular anti-colonial resistance, growing US casualties and discontent in the heartland of the empire. In Latin America the rise and fall of imperial vassal “presidents” accelerates: in a matter of months the newly elected, acclaimed by the

mass media as the “new saviors”, quickly succumb to the demands of their imperial patrons and confront increasingly mobilized peasants, unemployed workers, women, young people and indigenous people. Their popular ratings plunge to single digits. Bolivia is emblematic of this accelerated process of change: Sanchez de Losada was ousted in less than 2 years, Carlos Meza, the interim President, following orders from the US Ambassador Greelee, has declared war on the coccaleros and may not last beyond the 90 day mandate given by the popular plebiscite.

While the popular movements advance, with retreats, casualties and conquests, so too does the empire prepare for military coups, massacres and the corruption of popular leaders. Big battles are ahead. We are witnessing a period of massive struggles, violent repression, blatant intervention and monstrous distortions in the mass media, converting victims into executioners, and executioners into victims. But the movements are advancing, painfully, but surely, burying their comrades, tending their wounded, nurturing their survivors and increasing their solidarity. Ultimately, with organization, consciousness and audacity we will win, not only because the cause of liberty and equality is just, but because we dare to struggle.