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## Education and Networking for Social Change Observations on differences between Latin America and New Zealand

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### **Abstract**

It is an easily made and often implied assumption that volatile reactions of Latin American nations to new government initiatives, somehow result from the locals being different in nature from ourselves, or harbouring ideological influences distinct from our own. As a nation in which most people rely on easy-access television and foreign owned media for information, it is clear that we are padded from a deeper understanding of impacts of “globalisation” and “free market” policies. Activists are using the internet to distribute alternative analysis and information between groups in an increasingly effective way. However, this may not be enough in itself, to radicalize our society to a point where a majority are agitating for change towards a just and sustainable world.

Latin America offers recent examples of successful mass mobilization based on grass roots organizing, and the effective use of other media and ways of communication.

### **Discussion**

New Zealand activists have focused attention on the issues of neo-liberalism and ‘free’ or ‘fair’ trade practices, through conferences, marches and various forms of protest over the past decade. More recently, NGOs have had the opportunity to make submissions to the Select Committee Inquiry into the role of Human Rights and Trade in Foreign Policy, and also on the proposed Singapore Free Trade Agreement. Though a new Government was elected last November on a platform of no new free trade deals or sell off of state assets, Labour’s promotion of the Singapore Free Trade Agreement brings into doubt their sincerity on these issues. It also indicates their belief that the New Zealand public will go along with a further erosion of fair trade principles, through ignorance or a lack of understanding of what is really going on. How can this be?

This paper doesn't pretend to analysis the success or otherwise of the NGO involvement in fair trade issues and social legislation. However, our ability to mobilize trade unions and the public in support of these issues appears to be several orders of magnitude below that of groups in some Latin countries.

Cooperative behaviour and support for local communities may be stronger in some Latin countries, especially where indigenous culture is strong. For example, Quechua (Inca) traditions in the Alti-plano of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador demand regular community work endeavors called 'Mita'. There is a much stronger reliance on word of mouth communication. Weekly football games, church meetings and fiestas are a time to share information and ideas and to discuss implications of latest political developments. Other factors, such as the involvement of the Church in social issues, may also be important.

This type of networking appears to be much weaker in New Zealand, where individuals appear to have become reliant on commercialized, usually foreign owned, news media.

Communication and networking in New Zealand has indeed been enhanced by the use of the internet and sharing of information globally, but as the examples below show, large scale mobilizations have been more successful in some Latin countries, where few have access to telephones let along the internet.

## **BOLIVIA**

Bolivia is a country with a reputation for instability and a large number of military coups.

The stacks have always been high in Bolivia with large amounts of gold, silver and tin extracted for the benefit of the colonialists. And the country is still resource rich with the largest deposits of lithium in the world, the largest area of unexploited rainforests in Latin America, and the best climate for production of the highly valued coca leaf used in the manufacture of cocaine, yet Bolivia remains the poorest country in South America.

Behind the so called political instability, lies an exceptional and coherent record of political struggle. Bolivia is a country where the workers and peasants have constantly tested the determination of the local oligarchy to maintain power. The revolution of 1952, combining miners and peasants, was one of the most radical and successful attempts to break the cycle of capitalist underdevelopment, and resulted in the nationalization of the tin mines and significant land reform. However, it was followed within a few years by the familiar pattern of repression and dictatorship. The 1980s saw the imposition of neo-liberal reforms, and a return to democratic elections along with further 'struggle'.

In September of this year, Bolivia was rocked by a series of civilian protests, including roadblocks throughout the country. Unionists, teachers, peasant coca farmers, and others demanded that the Bolivian and U.S. government stop efforts to eradicate coca growing and the building of three new military bases in the Chapare region. Protesters also demanded that the government increase teachers' salaries, eliminate tariffs on water and electricity, and improve alternative development programs in the coca-growing region.

What began as an isolated struggle waged by a few social groupings like teachers ballooned into a broad nationwide movement demanding that government policy be overhauled. Oscar Olivera, the head of the Coordinator for the Defence of Water and Life said that bringing about modifications of the policies implemented in Bolivia was more important than a simple change of government.

"What we want is not directly a change of government, but a change in the people's economy. We cannot continue to live in the conditions we are bearing," he added. The tension in South America's poorest country began to boil over on Sep 5, when some 3,000 students set out from the southern city of Oruro to march 75 kms to La Paz to demand increased funding for the Siglo XX University.

Once in La Paz, the students held daily street protests and clashed with the police who tried to disperse them with tear gas and rubber bullets. On Sep 13, the federations of urban and rural teachers went on strike indefinitely, demanding a 50 percent wage hike and defending the public education system. On Sep 14, the teachers and the 'Confederación Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia' (central peasants and rural workers union) signed a "Pact of Unity". Small farmers demanded a revision of a law, which they say could be used to take away the small holdings of farmers. The protesters also called for the creation of a university for small farmers, credit, and insurance for rural workers.

The rural protesters swelled the ranks of demonstrators at several points around the country, and on Sep 18 roadblocks began to be mounted. Simultaneously, local residents from the tropical coca-producing region of Chapare in the department of Cochabamba began to mobilise against the presence of the army in their area. The rest of the protesters expressed their solidarity with the people of Chapare. The roadblocks effectively cut off traffic between Bolivia's biggest cities. The government responded by sending out 3,000 army troops and police to clear the highways and roads. But after the army troops broke through with bulldozers, tear gas and firearms, the protesters regrouped and build new barricades.

The result: a deal made in October, mediated by the Roman Catholic Church, in which the government agreed to guarantee use of public irrigation systems, expand access to farming land, to compensate the families of the victims of the protests and complete annulment of the government's water contract with the Aguas del Tunari consortium, headed by Bechtel corporation. The government is to allow the coca farmer organizations to "participate in the administration, evaluation, and control of finances for alternative development programs". However, the forceful eradication of the coca plantations is to continue.

## **PERU**

In recent decades, Peru has seen large migration from rural areas into the urban area of Lima. Strong communities have developed, with highly organized social organizations and demands for local government. This politization led to significant influence in elections such as that of Alberto Fujimori at the beginning of the 90s. Strong distaste for the corruption of the previous government initially reflected in support for Vargas Llosa, the Nobel prize winning author. However, this evaporated when the implication of the neo-liberal reforms that Llosa advocated

become apparent. Fujimori was initially elected with a very strong mandate for political reform and transparency in economic management. The fact that Fujimori betrayed this trust is unfortunate for the people of Peru, but civil organizations are now demanding even more transparency in the political process, and a stronger movement away from the old time caudillo.

## **BRAZIL**

Brazil's indigenous people have also been active -- particularly in denouncing the celebrations of 500 years since the Christian 'discovery' of the country. But they form a much smaller portion of the population than in Ecuador and Peru, and are concentrated in a few of the federal states. But recent years have also seen the emergence of a black conscious movement (there are more Afro-Brazilians than there are Afro-Americans in the USA) based on a reassertion of African cultural heritage, including the massively popular African-influenced religious practices, dance and music.

This renaissance has also challenged Brazil's 'melting pot' myth, and denounced the continued structural inequalities and institutional and social racism that keeps black Brazilians at the bottom of the class system. In their demands for a more African liturgical and pastoral content, Afro-Brazilian activists have breathed new life into the progressive wing of Brazil's catholic church. Vatican conservatism had rolled back the 'liberation theology' movement of the 1960s and '70s, but the pendulum is now swinging back towards more progressive theologians and bishops, particularly in areas where local pastoral-social groups (ecclesiastical base communities) are integrated into the broad left Workers Party (PT). And in a growing number of cities, coalitions including the Workers Party have introduced new forms of municipal government that break with the paternalism and corruption that plague Latin American politics.

The key to this success has been a thorough decentralisation of decision-making power to community assemblies, with the town hall limited to a support and facilitation role. "Participatory budgeting" has been so successful in improving services and reducing corruption that even the World Bank is studying the process. But those towns where direct democracy has been introduced, are also those with the highest level of political awareness of the true impact of World Bank policies and neo-liberalism.

By opening the political structures to the poorest of the poor, Brazil's left is building a coalition that may one day be able to reverse the worst effects of globalisation. Already the PT has forced Brazil's supreme court to suspend all GM food trials. Another increasingly popular campaign seeks to block the All-Americas Free Trade Zone which Bill Clinton wants all countries (except Cuba) to sign at a summit planned for Quebec City in April 2001.

## **ECUADOR**

At about 9.45am on January 21, a thousand protestors from the Ecuadorian highlands burst through a military cordon and then rushed the National Congress building. By mid-morning a large huipala, the rainbow-colored flag of the indigenous movement, could be seen hanging from the roof as defiant protesters stood out in stark silhouette against the bright blue Quito skyline. In the words of one of the leaders "we are here so that the corrupt politicians don't pillage the

country”. The rule of the new Government lasted less than 24 hours, but it led to the resignation of the President, and highlighted the fact that the indigenous movement had declared unequivocally its desire to play a leadership role in national politics.

In a survey, 71% of those polled said they were in favor of the indigenous movement and 64% approved of the takeover on January 21<sup>st</sup>. As a protest action, the uprising struck a chord among most Ecuadorians.

The indigenous movement in Ecuador stands out among similar movements in Latin America due to its impressive mobilizational capacity. The vast majority of the activities have been carried out through CONAIE, founded in 1986 when two regional organizations, one representing indigenous peoples and the other Amazonian Indians, joined forces. CONAIE has combined a strong emphasis on indigenous identity with efforts to address the pressing economic situation of the indigenous population as well as other marginalized groups.

In contrast to the spontaneous indigenous rebellions that occurred in the colonial era, these modern mobilizations are coordinated at the national level and involve the participation of tens of thousands of people throughout the country. Actions include roadblocks, marches and the refusal to bring food to market, and have always been nonviolent and usually involve civil disobedience.

CONAIE program documents propose the construction of a “New Pluralist and Participatory Nation” based on the utopian vision of a nation free from poverty and discrimination and in which the cultural groups would be valued and respected. Candidates of the political Pachakutik party have won seats at all levels of government.

At the national level, three main factors have shaped the movement’s evolution: a relatively non-repressive military, a divided and factionalized political elite, and an economically bankrupt state. In the past ten years the indigenous movement has been able to carry out five uprisings that have shut down roads and markets throughout the country, sometimes for weeks at a time with no massive retaliation of the military. The movement can claim at least partial credit for having blocked the neo-liberal advance in Ecuador even as it has swept across other parts of Latin America. Different governments have attempted to divide the movement and co-opt its leadership, but the lack of resources necessary to mount economic and social programs to draw grassroots allegiance away, has stymied such efforts.

CONAIE sits at the top of a pyramidal organizational network. At the base are local associations and cooperatives, linked together through provincial and regional federations, the last representing the highlands, the Amazonian lowlands and the coast. Member organizations are guaranteed representation and voting rights, and their leadership is consulted and included in all major policy decisions. A practice of “consulting the bases” has developed and popular support appears to have grown.

## **Sources**

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