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Socialist Voice #420, April 5, 2010

Climate Change: From Copenhagen to Cochabamba

by Franz Chávez

A different way of fighting global warming will be tried out in the central Bolivian city of Cochabamba when government representatives and thousands of activists gather for the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.

The social organizations sponsoring the Apr. 19-22 conference have announced an alternative platform to the efforts of the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP-15), which ended in failure in icy Copenhagen in December 2009.

The defence of Mother Earth, championed by Bolivian President Evo Morales, has the support of more than 240 grassroots and indigenous movements, non-governmental organisations, activists and intellectuals who are calling for a charter of rights for the planet.

The main aims of the conference are to organise a world people's referendum on global warming, draw up an action plan to create an international climate justice tribunal, and agree new commitments to be negotiated within United Nations scenarios.

The agenda priorities are: climate debt, climate change migrants and refugees, greenhouse gas emission cuts, adaptation, technology transfer, financing, forests and climate change, shared visions and indigenous peoples.

“We, as activists from different social movements, define the present time by the arrogance of the United States, European Union and transnational corporations, which was expressed at Copenhagen where a very few countries attempted to impose an outcome — that was not agreed at COP 15 — to do nothing to stop rising global temperatures and climate damage,” said the event announcement by leading social organisations.

These organisations include the Hemispheric Social Alliance (ASC-HSA), Friends of the Earth Latin America, the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA-CSA), the World March of Women, Campaign 350.org and Via Campesina.

Morales will formally open the conference on Apr. 20.

The organisations identify a “crisis of civilisation” that they attribute to capitalism and the “logic of exploitation, racism and patriarchy,” which they see in “increased military presence and military bases in various parts of the world, and ‘humanitarian’ invasions and occupations” which are actually war, they say.

War, the occupation of markets and territories, and militarisation to control energy resources, water and biodiversity, are pointed out as capitalism's methods for solving its own crisis.

The World People's Conference on Climate Change will advocate the right to “live well,” as opposed to the economic principle of uninterrupted growth. In contrast to Copenhagen, where industrialised countries sought a formula for greenhouse gas emissions reductions that would not imply binding commitments, at Cochabamba it will be the popular sectors that take the lead.

“For a long time, the voices of indigenous peoples and social organisations have not been heard. Their movement has been growing underground, in rural areas and the outlying suburbs of cities,” environmentalist Carmen Capriles, of the Bolivian chapter of Campaign 350.org, told IPS. Their knowledge, as farmers or livestock raisers, means they can promptly identify the climate phenomena that their way of life and economic wellbeing depend on, she said.

Campaign 350.org is named for the 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that scientists regard as the “maximum safe limit” for the concentration of this gas, without triggering climate catastrophe.

The conference is distinguished by being “for and with indigenous peoples, unlike any other world conference held to date,” Bolivian economist and environment expert Stanislaw Czaplicki told IPS.

Czaplicki was at Copenhagen as a civil society representative, and coordinated networks of young Latin American environmental activists. “Indigenous peoples and social organisations

have already formed a worldwide movement in defence of the planet, and civil society has a major role in the development of public policies,” he said. However, “women and young people are under-represented,” he added.

In Capriles’ view, new movements capable of generating alternative proposals are needed, and she called for political will on the part of developed countries to make structural changes in their economies.

Czaplicki said there are political movements in Europe that are against models of development that harm the environment, but they do not express anti-capitalist thinking, and neither do they distance themselves from the international financial institutions.

These movements arise in countries that achieved development by environmentally harmful means, not in countries that can still choose their model of economic growth, he said.

In the case of Bolivia, policies opposed to capitalism and polluting industrialisation have not yet changed the model of extracting commodities like minerals and gas, Czaplicki said. As a result, 300,000 hectares are deforested every year, he said.

Theory and practice must come together, he said.

[From Inter Press Service, March 30, 2010]

Socialist Voice #421, April 5, 2010

Why the Parti Québécois Expelled SPQ Libre

By Richard Fidler

A five-year long attempt to reform the Parti Québécois as an independentist and “social-democratic” party ended abruptly on March 13 when the PQ’s national executive decided not to renew recognition of its left-wing “political club” as an authorized grouping with the party.

The decision, which effectively expelled Syndicalistes et Progressistes pour un Québec Libre (SPQ Libre)[1] from the party, was promptly approved by the PQ’s conference of constituency presidents.

The PQ leadership’s move coincided with a weekend symposium sponsored by the party on the theme of reorienting Québécois toward individual enrichment in place of collective enrichment — part of an ongoing campaign to win the hearts and votes of disaffected followers of Action Démocratique du Québec. The far-right ADQ, which the PQ replaced as Official Opposition in the December 2008 general election, has since slipped catastrophically in opinion polls and now ranks just below the left-wing party, Québec solidaire.

In 2005 the PQ had amended its statutes to allow SPQ Libre to join the party as an officially recognized “club”. Party leaders, including former Premier Bernard Landry, hoped to use SPQ Libre to forestall support for Québec solidaire, which was then being formed through a fusion of left-wing organizations. SPQ Libre member Monique Richard, former president of the CSQ, was elected President of the Parti Québécois and later elected as a PQ candidate to the National Assembly. Other prominent SPQ Libre members included Vivian Barbot, former president of the Quebec Women’s Federation (FFQ) and later a Bloc Québécois MP; former PQ minister Robert Dean; and Marc Laviolette, former president of the CSN (and current SPQ Libre president).

The PQ leadership’s surprise decision to expel SPQ Libre may have been provoked by the latter’s publication on the eve of the party symposium of a major document entitled (in translation) “To grow rich sustainably is to grow rich collectively”. It argued that Quebec’s enormous achievements toward overcoming its historic development lag within Canada had been achieved since the 1960s through state action in the interests of the Quebec nation collectively, and that this — not individual profit-seeking — should continue to be the trajectory and hallmark of a sovereign Quebec. The document said the only other option, which it described as “the federalist approach” — but was clearly the direction being mapped by PQ leader Pauline Marois and her executive — was to “lighten the tax burden of the better-off while crossing our fingers [in the hope] that the monies released would not go the path of tax havens but be reinvested in Quebec.”

The group’s expulsion sent a clear signal to the media, the ADQ, and the PQ membership and potential funding sources that such talk was no longer acceptable within the party.

Québec solidaire a lifeline?

But it also raised a new question as to where the now-homeless SPQ-Libre and its supporters might find a lodging. Québec solidaire was quick to respond with a statement issued March 14 by QS leaders Amir Khadir and Françoise David. They linked the expulsion of SPQ-Libre to the pressure on the PQ of the looming confrontation between the government and the Common Front of public-sector unions, whose contracts expire at the end of March. David noted that PQ leader Marois had recently criticized the Common Front wage demands as “somewhat high”. The PQ, said David, equated wealth creation with the abandonment of social justice, “the necessary ingredient of collective prosperity”.

“To defend the public sector union members, to press for recognition of the work done by health-care personnel and an end to their impoverishment, would displease our economic élite,” said Khadir. “The PQ desperately lacks the necessary political courage to stand up to these powerful interests.”

Journalist Paul Cliche, a QS member and long-time left activist – he led the Front d’Action Populaire, or FRAP, a municipal party that challenged the electoral machine of Montréal Mayor Jean Drapeau in the early 1970s — issued his own statement: SPQ Libre members could “console themselves, for there is another sovereigntist party, one resolutely progressive and turned toward the future, which is ready to welcome them – Welcome to Québec solidaire, comrades....” And indeed, the existence of SPQ Libre, with its orientation to working within the PQ, has been an ever-present reminder of the incomplete nature of the left regroupment process that gave birth to Québec solidaire.

SPQ Libre clings to PQ

However, a QS-SPQ Libre fusion, while it would help give Québec solidaire a stronger presence and influence within the labour movement, is not on the immediate agenda. In a statement issued March 18, SPQ Libre leaders declared their intention to continue working as individual members within the PQ and urged their supporters to get elected to PQ constituency executives and become delegates to the party’s next convention, in 2011. The statement holds out the hope that the party membership will somehow challenge and reverse the leadership’s rightward turn.

A parallel statement issued on the same date by SPQ Libre said that as an independent organization its “mandate” would expand, action within the PQ now being only one component. And in an act of pure hubris, it appealed “to independentists, progressives and trade unionists, whether members of the PQ or Québec solidaire or without a party” ... “to join our ranks”!

These statements, notwithstanding their defiant tone, confirm the hopelessness of the SPQ Libre strategy. As they relate, the group had complied with the PQ registration and filing requirements; its members had been “good soldiers”, running as PQ candidates in elections, publicly voting in favour of the party’s election platforms, loyally attempting to advance their positions within the party structures. Where they spoke out independently, as in newspaper articles published in their name, it had been to support strikes, oppose the war in Afghanistan, criticize cutbacks in healthcare, etc. — “current matters that are not contentious within the PQ, at least we hope so”.

In party debates, they had achieved “more victories than defeats” — winning party support for a resolution on nationalization of wind-power generation (soon disavowed by the party leader), another resolution to make French the sole language of instruction in the publicly funded junior colleges, proposals in favour of electrification of urban and inter-urban transportation, etc., while suffering defeat on such issues as ending government subsidies to private schools, or a proposal to allow a referendum on popular initiative, independently of government policy.[2]

But they had been accused of not conducting their debates publicly instead of confining them to the party’s institutions. Fair enough, said SPQ Libre, but “it is hard to develop coherent thinking in two-minute interventions in the Constituency Presidents Council or the National Council, which meet only twice a year and where we had only one and two delegates, respectively.” And SPQ Libre was seldom invited to participate in party consultations. Furthermore, there was no attempt to use the new technologies to facilitate internal debate. “By new technologies, we don’t mean Twitter [which is offered on the PQ website]. Sorry, we’re willing to be concise, but 140 characters, that’s not enough for us!”

And now, despite all the efforts of SPQ Libre, the PQ seemed determined to “appease Capital”. Why was Pauline Marois questioning the wage demands of the Common Front? “We deplore the absence of any reference to the union movement in the new PQ discourse.... Any use of the words “ouvrier”, “travailleur” or “populaire” seems to be banished. Understandably, the existence of a political club including the word “syndicalistes” in its title could grate on some ears.”

More hope in the Bloc?

In short (although SPQ Libre does not say so), the Parti Québécois is what its left critics have long maintained: a bourgeois party, wholly committed to upholding capitalism, incapable of envisaging any reforms that might offer a perspective beyond the narrow horizon of neoliberalism. The PQ’s fundamental *raison d’être* is to use the resources of a “sovereign” state to enhance the standing and wealth of a narrow class of homespun Quebec capitalists who themselves are inextricably tied through investments and outlook to the economic and social system that oppresses the majority of Québécois. This party cannot be the vehicle for a truly independent and progressive Quebec.

It may be that many of SPQ Libre’s original members had already drawn that lesson. Although it boasted an initial membership of about 800, the group was down to some 400 or so by this year, and had just filed a list of 313 party members’ names with the PQ while promising a dozen more to follow. Québec solidaire already includes some former SPQ Libre members, and can hope for more in the future. Other members have simply been absorbed by the Parti Québécois; for example, Monique Richard, the former president of SPQ Libre and now a PQ MNA, did not oppose the club’s expulsion.

While continuing to hold individual memberships in the PQ, the SPQ Libre leadership seems to hold out greater hope for the federal Bloc Québécois, judging by a major article in the March issue of the monthly journal *L’aut’journal*. Pierre Dubuc, who doubles as the journal’s editor and SPQ Libre secretary, used the occasion of the Bloc’s 20th anniversary since its founding to score

some points against the PQ leadership and to outline an optimistic perspective of a new rise in the Quebec independence movement in response to trends within the Canadian federal state. Dubuc praised the Bloc as a party more conscious of the federalist threat to Quebec than its sister party in Quebec City, the PQ, attributing this firmness in part to the presence of leading trade union figures in its parliamentary deputation. Dubuc is a talented journalist and a perceptive observer of Quebec and Canadian politics with a remarkable facility to articulate the historical perspective that informs the Quebec independence project, and his article, which I have translated below, merits careful reading.

There is one notable omission, however, in Dubuc's comparison of the Bloc with the PQ. As I explained in a previous post, while the PQ is waging an Islamophobic campaign for a complete ban on public service employment and provision of government-funded services to anyone wearing conspicuous symbols of their religious faith (such as the hijab or Muslim headscarf), the Bloc supports what it terms "open secularism" and is more receptive to accommodation of public displays of the beliefs of religious and ethnic minorities. Dubuc's *L'aut* journal, however, has itself been conducting a retrograde Islamophobic campaign of its own. Louise Mailloux, a regular columnist in the journal, has written many articles not only attacking "reasonable accommodation" of minority religious beliefs, and in particular Muslims, but viciously attacking Québec solidaire leader Françoise David for her party's support of "open secularism".

Differences of this nature, on an important question of principle, could prove a major if not insuperable obstacle — at least in the short run — to a fusion between SPQ Libre and Québec solidaire.

Notes

[1] The name translates freely as Trade-unionists and progressives for a Free Québec.

[2] An op-ed article in *Le Devoir* by Jean Baribeau, the SPQ Libre treasurer, however, presented a different balance sheet. The group, he said, had "sparked many debates, had some successes and suffered many defeats".

*[This article first appeared in Richard Fidler's blog, *Life on the Left*.]*

Socialist Voice #422, April 5, 2010

UN Conference to Consummate U.S. Takeover of Haiti

by **Kim Ives**, Editor, *Haiti Liberte*

When this article appears on the morning of March 31, the much ballyhooed “International Donors Conference Towards a New Future for Haiti” will be getting underway at UN Headquarters in Manhattan.

While demonstrators in the street outside protest the continuing US and UN military occupation of Haiti, now over six years old, and the Haitian people’s exclusion from deliberations on the country’s reconstruction, dignitaries inside like UN Special Envoy to Haiti Bill Clinton, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and Haitian President René Préval will unveil a plan with lots of pomp and ceremony but which boils down to just one thing: Washington’s take-over of the “new” Haiti.

Hyperbole? Unfortunately, no. The lead editorial in Sunday’s New York Times, which generally articulates the thinking of the US power elite, lays it out clearly: “The plan envisions a multidonor trust fund *managed by the World Bank* that pools money for big projects and avoids wasteful redundancy. The Haitian Development Authority would *approve* the projects; outside auditors would *oversee* the spending.” (Our emphasis added.)

Translation: the World Bank, not Haiti, will run the show, a council of foreigners (with a sprinkling of token Haitians) will rubberstamp directives, and other foreign overseers will supervise the Haitians carrying out the directives.

Although lots of international “friends of Haiti” will be involved in this circus, Washington is the ringleader, using handmaidens like Canada and the Dominican Republic. The meetings to prepare the ground for Mar. 31 were held in Montreal on Jan.25 and Santo Domingo on Mar. 15-17.

Préval has generally implemented Washington’s austerity and privatization dictates, making him a US darling and the Haitian people’s bogeyman. However, after the quake, he and his prime-minister made some imprudent complaints about being sidelined while the US and NGOs ham-fistedly directed relief and reconstruction efforts. Washington put him back in his place by calling him corrupt, a charge Préval called “arrogant.” Despite such outbursts, Préval appears to be behaving again but still promoting the fiction that he’s deciding things.

“Haiti is an independent government, an independent country and the government must say what must be done,” he told Al Jazeera in a Mar. 29 interview when asked who was in charge in Haiti. “But the government doesn’t have the financial means to do it. So we will have to speak to the donors so that they make available the funds for the government to do what it desires to do.” As for the foreign experts which will dominate in the Haitian Development Authority, he explains that “a lot of our professionals are dead” and “we are leaning on the NGOs to help us to do what we need to do right now.”

The centerpieces of the US, UN, and World Bank plan for Haiti are sweatshops and tourism. Of course there is lip-service paid to the concerns raised by Haitians about revitalizing agriculture and making the country self-sufficient in food again after 25 years of neo-liberal deconstruction. “Decentralization” is another key theme, but, done a certain way, this can also weaken and circumvent Haiti’s central government, which Washington has sought to do since the Haitian people elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1990.

“Raising money for Haiti is all well and good. But which Haiti is getting the money?” asked Vijay Prashad, Director of International Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. “Is the Haiti of structural adjustment, the raft on the Caribbean, fated to being reduced to a factory and a port for Royal Caribbean’s cruise ships? All the efforts thus far seem to suggest that this is the Haiti that is being promised.”

In articles, radio shows, conferences, demonstrations and graffiti, the Haitian people have made their opposition to this plan known but “Haitian civil society has been completely bypassed in decision-making regarding the post-earthquake reconstruction process,” wrote Bev Bell of the economic justice group Other Worlds earlier this month. “The Haiti government’s Post-Disaster Needs Assessment, launched February 18, granted one week, March 14-20, for ‘consultation with civil society and the private sector,’ according to the terms of reference. However, the government [had] to approve the draft plan on March 15. Furthermore, the government has failed to invoke even the token discussions, not consulting civil society in any way except informally with some businesspeople and several non-governmental organizations who do not speak for citizens.”

Therefore the “new” Haiti being drawn up at the conference will look very much like the old. “Expect more of the same when the Haitian elites and their lobbyists get their reconstruction plans approved,” wrote Olofson hotelier and musician Richard Morse in the Huffington Post. “Bill Clinton isn’t bringing hope to Haiti. Bill Clinton isn’t bringing change to Haiti. Bill Clinton, along with USAID, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the United Nations are bringing more of the same to Haiti: more for the few and less for the many.”

There are more than strings attached to Clinton’s plan for Haiti. There are chains. Haiti would be yoked to an already sinking U.S. economy by dependency on assembling imported U.S. clothing and electronics for pennies an hour, or scrambling against neighbors to attract U.S. tourists.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Two South American alliances have offered Haiti substantial aid based on solidarity and common interests, not chains of debt and dependency.

ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, is an alliance of eight Latin American and Caribbean nations comprising Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Dominica, St. Vincent and Grenadines, and Antigua and Barbuda. On Jan. 25, when the U.S.-led coalition held its Montreal meeting to just plan another meeting, ALBA held an extraordinary session which came with concrete, immediate aid of food, fuel, electricity, medicine and a \$120 million Humanitarian Fund. ALBA expressed “concern over the excessive presence of foreign military forces in Haiti, with no justifying reasons and without precision about their authority, purposes, responsibilities, and length of stay, which threatens to further complicate the

conditions on the ground and the realization of international cooperation.” The ALBA nations also recognized that “efforts to rebuild Haiti must have the people and government of that country as the principal protagonists.”

There is also the Union of South American Nations or UNASUR, which includes all the nations of the South American continent except French Guiana. In February, it offered Haiti \$300 million in cash and money it would borrow on Haiti’s behalf.

One might respond that no South-South cooperation can come up with the \$34.4 billion some estimate Haiti needs to rebuild over the next 10 years. But how are such staggering figures arrived at? These estimates assume the costs to be charged by Halliburton, Dyncorp, or one of the Haitian elite’s construction companies. But we have seen tens of thousands of ordinary Haitians digging themselves out and rebuilding their homes, motivated not by profit but by compassion, solidarity and common interest. This giant army could be harnessed and supported with solidarity from Cuba, Venezuela and ALBA, which are already helping with giant contributions of doctors and fuel.

Progressive Haitian and Dominican groups meeting in Santo Domingo on Mar. 17 concluded that a definitive “break” with the current international system is necessary for Haiti to recover. “We must break with economic dependency,” they wrote in a declaration. “We need to build an economic model that encourages national production by focusing on agriculture, livestock, and agro-industry aimed at meeting our own food needs (cereals, tubers, milk, fruit, fish, meats, etc.).”

An anecdote captures the flavor and the essence of the UN Donors Conference. On March 30, the night before the big day, there was an invitation-only special event for about 200 US and UN officials, bankers, CEOs and NGO bigwigs at the United Nations Library. The sponsors of the event: the UN, the Haitian Government, the Inter-American Development Bank, and... Coca-Cola. The name of the event was “Haiti Hope Project.” If you like the ring of that name, don’t get any thoughts about borrowing it. Coca-Cola is seeking trademark protection for the slogan, which it plans to put on “ready to eat food bars made primarily of oats.”

[From Haiti Liberté , published in Port au Prince and Brooklyn]

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Venezuela: New Moves to Build Workers' Power

by **Federico Fuentes**, *Green Left Weekly*, March 24, 2010

(Caracas) The free, sovereign and independent homeland of our dreams will only come true if we radicalise the process and speed up the transition to socialism”, Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez wrote in his March 14 weekly column “Chavez Lines”.

The Venezuelan government has launched a number of initiatives in recent weeks aimed to tackle threats to the revolutionary process—including from elements within the pro-Chavez camp that seek to undermine plans to deepen the revolution.

Central to this are new measures aimed at speeding up the transfer of power to organized communities.

Chavez wrote in his February 21 column: “The time has come for communities to assume the powers of state, which will lead administratively to the total transformation of the Venezuelan state and socially to the real exercise of sovereignty by society through communal powers.”

Participatory democracy

The previous day, Chavez announced the creation of the federal government council in front of thousands of armed peasants that are part of the newly created peasant battalions in the Bolivarian militia.

As well as the vice president, government ministers, state governors and mayors, the council includes representatives of communal councils, communes and other representatives directly elected by the people.

The communal councils are grassroots bodies that bring together existing community organizations that have sprung up in Venezuela’s poor neighbourhood around issues such as access to health, education, water and electricity.

The councils encompass 200-400 families in urban areas and 20-50 families in rural areas. Decisions on which problems to prioritize and how to tackle them are made in citizen assemblies open to the entire community.

Funding for the councils comes from the government, but a strong emphasis is placed on relying on local cooperatives, volunteer labour and local expertise to bypass private contractors and empower the community.

Communes bring together various local communal councils and other social organizations in order to tackle problems on a larger scale. There are 187 communes are in the process of being created nationally.

Communes are being encouraged to play a direct economic role, such as creating cooperatives, taking over idle factories to be reopened under worker-community control, and setting up communal markets to sell produces from other communes.

The federal government council brings together representatives of the old state structures with the new, emerging communal state. The council aims to help transfer various powers now held by the national government, state governorships and mayoralities to these emerging organs of peoples' power. Such organs include workers' and peasants' councils, which will also be represented on the council.

Workers' control

There are also indications the government is moving to transfer control over the running of important state industries to their workers.

One example is Plan Socialist Guayana, which involves tens of thousands of workers in the industrial complex in Bolivar state.

Workers, backed by Chavez, have been discussing, and in some cases implementing, a radical transformation in the running of local aluminum, iron ore, steel and mining companies.

There are also important moves in the electrical sector, which has been plagued with problems. Hydroelectric dams that are at critically low levels due to ongoing droughts generate some 70% of Venezuela's electricity. The sector also suffers from years of under-investment by pre-Chavez governments that were preparing to privatize the state-owned industry.

Declaring a state of emergency in the electrical sector, Chavez has called on the workers to actively participate in management.

This has long been a demand of the workers themselves, who finally won this year an important 15-month-long battle against state management for a new collective contract.

The new contract not only equalizes pay and conditions across the electricity sector (as part of integrating newly nationalized companies with the pre-existing state industry), it also enshrines worker and community participation in management.

Since then, the Federation of Electrical Workers (Fetraelec) and new electricity minister Ali Araque Rodriguez have been removing managers who have operated against the interests of the workers and sabotaged the industry.

In some places, workers have begun to take control over local affiliates of Corpoelec, the national state-owned power company.

Chavez also named Raul Arocha as president of CADAPE, a key component of Corpoelec. Arocha is an engineer who was elected by workers as manager of the Merida zone of CADAPE and helped develop workers' participation there.

Fetraelec proposed Arocha's appointment due to his proven commitment to promoting worker participation. Fetraelec is organizing nation-wide workers' assemblies to develop a plan for how workers can run the sector. The assemblies will culminate with a mass meeting with Chavez where workers will present their proposals to restructure Corpoelec.

In a March 18 press conference with Fetraelec leaders, Jaua said: “Chavez wants the workers to convert themselves in protagonist subject ... via the creation of socialist companies, with the decisive and active participation of the workers.”

In response to allegations by the right-wing opposition that Chavez is seeking to concentrate power in his own hands, Vice-President Elias Juau told the February 20 gathering of armed peasants: “We did not come here to concentrate power but rather to dismantle the national oligarchy.

“For us, the only way to avoid the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the oligarchy is to return power to the people.”

This encroachment on the economic and political power of local and Western capitalist interests has provoked a violent reaction.

One example is the response of large landowners to the government’s land reform program, in which 2.5 million hectares have been redistributed to poor peasants since 2001. In that time, more than 250 peasant leaders have been killed at the hands of paramilitaries hired by large landowners.

In response to this violence, and as part of preparing for a potential foreign military attack, peasant battalions of the Bolivarian militia have been formed this year.

Chavez has also argued for the creation of worker battalions organized in factories. He said: “The Bolivarian Militia, as well as community councils, are expressions of the new communal state, an integral part of the new structure of the communal power we are building.”

A new state

Chavez said creating a new state was needed “to demolish the old perverse vestiges and new threats of bureaucracy”. He said, “the best and most radically democratic of the options for defeating bureaucracy and corruption is the construction of a communal state”.

A recent example of government moves to tackle corruption was the arrest of a number of bankers. Many of the arrested claimed to support the revolutionary process. But via deals signed with government ministries and other state institutions, they had created a network of corruption with state funds. More than 30 bankers face charges. The state intervened into eight banks (of which six are now run by the state) and several dozen companies owned by the bankers were nationalized.

Reformist and corrupt practices within state companies and the government have set back past attempts to move towards workers’ control.

The push by electricity workers between 2004 and 2006 for workers’ participation in management was rolled back by reformist sectors within the company and the government. The workers are confronting some of these same forces in the renewed battle for workers’ control.

In Guayana, aluminum workers have denounced a number of attempts by management, and national and state officials, to sabotage workers’ participation—which has increased discontent and disillusionment among workers toward the government.

One recent example is a contract signed by management to sell semi-finished materials to the multinational Glencore for the next six years, with no consultation with the workers.

Such corrupt deals with multinationals remove the possibility of workers deciding where production should be geared.

Venezuela is an underdeveloped nation heavily reliant on its oil industry. One of the key aims of the revolution is to overcome this through national development. Production for foreign markets on behalf of multinationals undermines this goal.

It contradicts Chavez's January 24 announcement that all state firms should hand their products to a state entity to distribute them according to the needs of the people at cheaper prices.

The aluminum workers are demanding such contracts be rescinded.

Revolution, not reform

On February 20, Chavez again called on the people to continue to "prepare themselves for the transference and redistribution of political, economic, social and military power".

Chavez said on March 5: "We are not here to carry out a reform, no! This is a revolution, and if we are not clear about what we are dealing with, we could end up carrying out a simple reform so that nothing changes in the end."

Chavez quoted Polish-born revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg's famous 1900 pamphlet *Reform or Revolution*: "Only when the great mass of workers take the keen and dependable weapons of scientific socialism in their own hands, will all the petty-bourgeois inclinations, all the opportunistic currents, come to naught."

Chavez argued that ideological weakness and ties to business interests were behind the defection in February by Lara governor Henri Falcon, who left the Chavez-led United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) to join the Homeland For All (PPT) party.

On March 13, Chavez said: "He couldn't take it any more because he is not a real revolutionary ... A special fibre is required in order to confront the oligarchy."

He said the "regional bourgeoisie" surrounded Falcon. Chavez urged the pre-candidates in the internal PSUV elections to determine the candidates for September national elections to strengthen themselves ideologically by reading Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Che Guevara. "We have a clear target for the next elections: an overwhelming triumph so that the National Assembly continues being a space to strengthen and deepen the socialist dynamic."

Rather than simply being a question of the number of PSUV candidates elected, Chavez said, "what we are dealing with is a qualitative revolutionary challenge". "If we want that the parliament to dismantle the old capitalist state and open the doors to the socialist state, we have to increase our revolutionary conscience and our real socialist praxis [practice]."

Chavez said the aim was moving beyond simple representation to a situation where the people themselves will govern. "This is about legislating in accordance with the socialist praxis and obeying the people. Those who do not understand it must choose another path."

Socialist Voice #424, April 11, 2010

Appeal to Margaret Atwood: Reject Prize from Apartheid Israel

Statements issued by the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott Initiative (PACBI) and by the Palestinian Students Campaign for the Academic Boycott of Israel (PSCABI) in besieged Gaza

AN OPEN LETTER TO MARGARET ATWOOD FROM GAZA: DON'T STAND ON THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY

by Palestinian Students Campaign for the Academic Boycott of Israel (PSCABI)

endorsed by The University Teachers' Association in Palestine

Dear Ms. Atwood,

We are students from Gaza representing more than 10 academic institutions therein. Our grandparents are refugees who were expelled from their homes in the 1948 Nakba. They still have their keys locked up in their closets and will pass them on to their children, our parents. Many of us have lost our fathers, some of us have lost our mothers, and some of us lost both in the last Israeli aggression against civilians in Gaza. Others still lost a body part from the flesh-burning white phosphorous that Israel used, and are now permanently physically challenged. Most of us lost our homes, and are now living in tents, as Israel refuses to allow basic construction materials into Gaza. And most of all, we are all still living in what has come to be a festering sore on humanity's conscience — the brutal, hermetic, medieval siege that Israel is perpetrating against us, the 1.5 million Palestinians of the Gaza Strip.

Many of us have encountered your writing during our university studies. Although your books are not available in Gaza — because Israel does not allow books, paper, and other stationary in — we are familiar with your leftist, feminist, overtly political writing. And most of all, we are aware of your strong stance against apartheid. You admirably supported sanctions against apartheid South Africa and called for resistance against all forms of oppression.

Now, we have heard that you are to receive a prize this spring at Tel Aviv University (TAU). We, the students of besieged Gaza, urge you not to go. As our professors, teachers and anti-apartheid comrades used to tell us, there was no negotiation with the brutal racist regime of South Africa. Nor was there much communication. Just one word: BOYCOTT. You must be aware that Israel was a sister state to the apartheid regime before 1994. Many South African anti-apartheid heroes, including Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, have described Israel's oppression as apartheid. Some describe Israeli settler-colonialism and occupation as surpassing apartheid's evil. F-16s, F-15s, F-35s, Apache helicopters, Merkava tanks, and white phosphorous were not used against black townships.

Ms. Atwood, in the Gaza concentration camp, students who have been awarded scholarships to universities abroad are prevented, every year, from pursuing their hard-earned opportunity for academic achievement. Within the Gaza Strip, those seeking an education are limited by increasing poverty rates and a scarcity of fuel for transportation, both of which are direct results of Israel's medieval siege. What is TAU's position vis-à-vis this form of illegal collective punishment, described by Richard Falk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Palestinian Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, as a "prelude to genocide?" Not a single word of condemnation has been heard from any Israeli academic institution!

Participating in normal relations with Tel Aviv University is giving tacit approval to its racially exclusive policy toward Palestinian citizens of Israel. We are certain you would hate to support an institution that upholds so faithfully the apartheid system of its state. Tel Aviv University has a long and well-documented history of collaboration with the Israeli military and intelligence services. This is particularly shameful after Israel's bloody military assault against the occupied Gaza Strip, which, according to leading international and local human rights organizations, left over 1,440 Palestinians dead and 5380 injured. We are certain you would hate to support an institution that supports a military apparatus that murdered over 430 children.

By accepting the prize at Tel Aviv University, you will be indirectly giving a slight and inadvertent nod to Israel's policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide. This university has refused to commemorate the destroyed Palestinian village on which it was built. That village is called Sheikh Muwanis, and it no longer exists as a result of Israel's confiscation. Its people have been expelled.

Let us remember the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "if you choose to be neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." As such, we call upon you to say no to neutrality, no to being on the fence, no to normalization with apartheid Israel, not after the blood of more than 400 children has been spilt! No to occupation, repression, settler colonialism, settlement expansion, home demolition, land expropriation and the system of discrimination against the indigenous population of Palestine, and no to the formation of Bantustans in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip!

Just as every citizen knew that s/he had a moral responsibility to boycott apartheid in South Africa after the Sharpeville massacre, Gaza 2009 was the world's wake-up call. All of Israel's academic institutions are state-run and state-funded. To partake of any of their prizes or to accept any of their blandishments is to uphold their heinous political actions. Israel has continually violated international law in defiance of the world. It is illegally occupying Palestinian land. It continues its aggression against the Palestinian people. Israel denies Palestinians all of the democratic liberties it so proudly, fictitiously flaunts. Israel is an apartheid regime that denies Palestinian refugees their right of return as sanctioned by UN resolution 194.

Attending the symposium would violate the unanimously endorsed Palestinian civil society call for Boycotts, Divestments, and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel. This call is also directed toward international activists, artists, and academics of conscience, such as you. We are certain that you would love to be a part of the noble struggle against the apartheid, colonization and occupation

that the Palestinian people have been subjected to for the past 61 years, a struggle that is ongoing.

Ms. Atwood, we consider you to be what the late Edward Said called an “oppositional intellectual.” As such, and given our veneration of your work, we would be both emotionally and psychologically wounded to see you attend the symposium. You are a great woman of words, of that we have no doubt. But we think you would agree, too, that actions speak louder than words. We all await your decision.

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ATWOOD — DO NOT ACCEPT PRIZES FROM APARTHEID ISRAEL

by Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott Initiative (PACBI)

The Palestinian community of writers and intellectuals is highly disappointed by your decision to accept the Dan David prize, which is based at Tel Aviv University (TAU). Your writings exhibit a sophisticated understanding of colonialism, structures of political power and oppression, yet your visit to Israel comes just over one year after its bloody assault on the occupied Gaza Strip during which it killed and injured thousands of Palestinian civilians and caused massive destruction to homes, schools, mosques, hospitals, factories, UN buildings, agricultural fields and infrastructure. In this light, your acceptance of a prize administered by Tel Aviv University and awarded in the presence of the Israeli President Shimon Peres can only be interpreted by Palestinian civil society as complicity in whitewashing Israel’s crimes, colonization and system of apartheid. Your vast literary portfolio will forever be attached to the draconian machine of Israeli colonial and racist policy.

Last summer, following the assault on Gaza, the Israeli government announced a new effort to ‘rebrand’ Israel in the eyes of the world as a liberal nation enjoying membership in the Western club of democracies. In addition to the various forms of cultural outreach designed to highlight Israel’s achievements, this effort included inviting more writers and artists to Israel in order to show the ‘civilised’ side of Israel and help cover up the reality of occupation and the brutal treatment of the Palestinians.

Your appearance in Israel would lend itself to this well-oiled campaign to whitewash Israel’s grave violations of international law and basic human rights. Above everything else, it would serve to deflect attention away from Israel’s three forms of oppression against the Palestinian people: the legalized and institutionalized system of racial discrimination against the Palestinian citizens of Israel; the military occupation of the West Bank, including East-Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip; and the continuous denial of the Palestinian refugees’ UN-sanctioned right to return to their homes and to receive just reparations.

These efforts cannot disguise the dark side of the story, the 43 years of an increasingly brutal military occupation, during which Israel systematically colonized Palestinian land with the goal of gradually emptying it of its original inhabitants in order to use it for the benefit of Jewish settlers. Despite the “peace process” which began years ago, Israel routinely violates the Palestinians’ most fundamental human rights with impunity, as documented by local and

international human rights organisations. Israel extra-judicially kills Palestinian leaders and activists; keeps over 9,000 Palestinians imprisoned, including numerous members of parliament; subjects all Palestinians under occupation to daily humiliation, intimidation and military violence; and continues to construct and expand its colonial Wall, declared illegal by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at the Hague in July 2004.

Tel Aviv University, the institution administering this award, as other Israeli academic institutions, is notorious for its deep and well documented collaboration with the Israeli military and intelligence establishment, its racially exclusivist university policy toward Palestinian citizens of Israel, and its refusal to acknowledge its past and to commemorate the destroyed Palestinian village on which grounds it was built.

A comprehensive report by the Palestine Society at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) presents strong evidence of intensive, purposive and open institutional cooperation of TAU with the Israeli military establishment. TAU must therefore be condemned for providing cross-departmental legal, technological and strategic support for maintaining and deepening the Israeli occupation by assisting ongoing lethal assaults on the occupied Palestinian territories and by defending and justifying Israel's occupation policies.

These policies are implicitly and explicitly supported by TAU's Law Faculty which appointed an Israeli army colonel, Pnina Sharvit-Baruch, to its staff recently. As the army's principal international law counsel Sharvit-Baruch is responsible for green-lighting the decision to target civilian infrastructure and for a 'relaxing of the rules of engagement' regarding civilians on the army's International Law Division.

The SOAS Report points out:

“... (T)here is nothing unique about state institutions being implicated in the pursuit of state objectives, including security-related objectives. The tense military mobilisation of Jewish-Israeli society, its constant-war footing, and the closely related knowledge of circles which compose the defence research and development community in this comparatively small country, together amplify the role played by academic institutions in military affairs. TAU, as the largest university in Israel, is, unremarkably, at the centre of this militarization.... Ultimately, ...this collusion with the military amounts to the commissioning of war crimes and crimes against humanity.”

With the Dan David Prize allegedly aiming “to foster universal values of... justice, democracy and progress and to promote the ...humanistic achievements that advance and improve our world” Tel Aviv University is only attempting to distract from its criminal record.

The Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) National Committee recently stated that “Palestine today has become the test of our indispensable morality and common humanity.” In the face of decades of unrelenting oppression, Palestinian civil society has called upon supporters of the struggle for freedom and justice throughout the world to take a stand and heed our call for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel until it recognises Palestinian rights and fully complies with international law. Many prominent international cultural figures including John Berger, Ken Loach, Arundhati Roy, Roger Waters, John Williams, among others, have declared

their support for the boycott. Other renowned international artists, including Sting, Bono, Snoop Dog, Jean Luc Goddard and Joan Manuel Serrat have also heeded our call and cancelled their gigs or participation in festivals in Israel (see International Guidelines for the Academic Boycott of Israel).

In conclusion, and appealing to your sense of justice and moral consistency, we hope that, until Israel fully abides by international law, you shall treat it exactly as most of the world treated racist South Africa, or indeed any other state that legislates and practices apartheid: a pariah state. Only then can there be a real chance for a just peace in harmony with international law and based on equal human rights for all, irrespective of ethnicity, religion or other identity considerations. We urge you to reject the prize and to refuse to participate in a ceremony presided over by the head of a state accused of war crimes and other serious violations of international law.

Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) was launched in Ramallah in April 2004 by a group of Palestinian academics and intellectuals to join the growing international boycott movement. This statement was published on their website.

Socialist Voice #425, April 11, 2010

Quebec Government Joins Campaign Against Muslims and Other Minorities

by **Richard Fidler**

With its Bill 94, introduced last month in the Quebec National Assembly, the Liberal government has joined the crusade against Muslims and other minorities. The bill would deny government-funded health care, education and child care services to all whose clothing prevents disclosure of their face, and would bar them from government and public-service employment.

The bill patently targets a tiny number of Muslim women who wear niqabs (which limit facial visibility to their eyes) or burqas (which totally conceal the face). However, as an initial limitation on universality of public services and equal job opportunities, the government's action has encouraged the loud voices calling for a ban on the hijab or scarf worn by thousands of Muslim women, as well as further dress code restrictions that would affect the rights of other religious and cultural minorities to jobs and services.

The bill is already being termed the "Naïma law" in reference to a Muslim immigrant of Egyptian origin, Naïma Amed, who was recently expelled by the government from French-language classes she was taking in order to practice her profession as a pharmacist. Amed, who wears a niqab, was told repeatedly and insistently to remove it — although she had lowered her veil many times, to be photographed for her student identification card and then on numerous occasions in class at the request of the teacher and despite the presence of the male students. Expelled from one language school, she was studying at another when the immigration ministry found out and interrupted her during an exam to expel her.

The case was widely publicized — and very inaccurately reported — in the Quebec Francophone media. Although Muslim organizations report that at most a couple dozen women among the 200,000 Muslims in Quebec wear the niqab or burqa — the human rights commission recently reported that out of 146,000 people served in provincial health insurance board offices in 2008-09, 10 were veiled — Naïma Amed's ordeal fueled the growing debate in Quebec over "reasonable accommodation" of minority cultural practices. *A Manifesto for a Pluralist Quebec*, advocating an "open secularism" that respects freedom of conscience in a context of state neutrality, was countered recently by a *Declaration of Intellectuals for Secularism* calling for a ban on all personal displays of "religious signs" such as the Muslim hijab in public institutions. The self-proclaimed "intellectuals" who signed it include prominent nationalist politicians, academics and trade unionists.

Bill 94 is draconian in its provisions. Montreal Gazette columnist Don Macpherson asks whether it could be "invoked to refuse emergency medical treatment in a non-life-threatening situation to an injured woman wearing a niqab? Or to bar a girl from publicly-funded schools if she starts to wear the face veil when she reaches puberty, as some Muslim women do?" That, he says, is "what Premier Jean Charest and his justice minister, Kathleen Weil, have implied is the intent of the bill."

Macpherson notes that the bill

“would establish a ‘general practice’ that during ‘the delivery of services’ by a public employee to an individual, both would have to ‘show their face.’ This practice would apply even when it is not necessary for security reasons or identification purposes. So a niqabi, as women wearing Muslim face veils are called, who requests an income-tax form at a government service counter could be turned away. And the bill provides no specific exceptions for emergencies.”

The bill says an “adaptation” of the practice could be made if “dictated by the right to equality” under the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. But, as Macpherson notes,

“The Quebec Charter recognizes a right to assistance only for someone ‘whose life is in peril.’ And Bill 94 would take precedence over every law and regulation other than the Quebec and Canadian charters of rights. But, as its title says, the bill would establish only ‘guidelines.’ It would be up to each department, body, or institution to ensure compliance. So the bill could be interpreted differently from one school board to another. The court system could be clogged with challenges.”

The Official Opposition in the National Assembly, the Parti Québécois, has denounced Charest’s bill and calls for a blanket ban on public employment or delivery of publicly-funded services to anyone wearing a symbol of his or her religious belief. This would conceivably cover not only hijabs, niqabs and burqas but Christian crucifixes, Jewish kippahs and Sikh kirpans.

In fact, the kirpan — a ceremonial dagger worn concealed in the clothing of a Sikh male — was the symbol at issue in a 2006 Supreme Court of Canada judgment that was widely attacked by hard-line secularists in Quebec. When Gurbaj Singh Multani was pulled out of a French-language school because he was wearing a kirpan, he had to enrol in an English private school. When the court upheld his right to wear the kirpan, he greeted its ruling as a sign that young Sikhs could now attend French school and become integrated into Quebec society — a right the school’s decision had denied him. The parallels with Naïma Amed’s case are striking.

(Incidentally, Bill 94’s legislative sponsor, Attorney General Kathleen Weil, forged her legal career as counsel for Alliance Quebec, a federally-funded Anglophone lobby group that fought tooth and nail against Quebec’s popular Charter of the French Language, a.k.a. “Bill 101”.)

It was precisely the need to find ways to accommodate minority religious and cultural practices as a means of integrating them into Quebec society, in which French is the common language of public discourse, that has fostered the concept of “open secularism”. The concept was embraced by the government-appointed Bouchard-Taylor commission on accommodation practices, which recommended in its 2008 report that there be no such ban on the display of religious signs other than for “state agents in a position of authority” such as judges and police officers. A commission official, Pierre Bosset, recently told the newspaper *Le Devoir* that their recommendation had been directly inspired by a brief to the commission from the Bloc Québécois, the pro-sovereignty party in the federal Parliament.

The Bloc's parliamentary leader, Pierre Paquette, has told *Le Devoir* that its position remains the same; it is the PQ, which took a similar stance with the B-T commission, that has now changed its position. The PQ claims to advocate "la laïcité tout court" (plain secularism), although it recently voted with the other parties to retain the giant crucifix hanging in the legislature. None of the major parties opposes property and other tax breaks for the churches, including the Catholic church that bars women from the priesthood.

The federal leaders of the Conservatives and Liberals support Bill 94. A spokesman for Prime Minister Stephen Harper says it "makes sense". Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff says it is a "good Canadian balance".

What about Québec solidaire, Quebec's new left-wing party? At its convention last November, QS delegates voted by a substantial majority for a resolution favouring a "model of secularism" that combined neutrality of public institutions with individual freedom to express or display one's own convictions. And they opposed dress codes that would restrict access to public services or employment, subject to exceptions for religious signs "used as instruments of proselytism", interfering with a "duty of discretion" or violating safety or job performance standards.

How, then, is one to explain the qualified support for Bill 94 expressed by Amir Khadir, Québec solidaire's lone MNA? In a statement posted on the party's web site, Khadir says the government "has taken a step toward establishing guidelines on accommodation, which comes down to explicitly interpreting the notion of accommodation." He says "it is reasonable, for example, to prohibit those holding positions of authority, such as police officers, judges or other peace officers, from wearing religious signs". And he calls on the government to be "more active in ensuring equality of men and women when that equality is threatened by religious fundamentalisms."

Religious "fundamentalists" are what the government claims it is attacking, when in reality it is the right of minorities to dress according to their religious beliefs. Niqabs and burqas are not in themselves evidence of fundamentalism. True, for many of us, they are symbols of patriarchy and women's oppression. But for some Muslim women they are simply an integral expression of their private religious belief. In fact, the government's bill does not "interpret the notion of accommodation"; it recognizes no right to accommodation. Instead, it limits the rights of some Québécois to jobs and services. It does not even mention religion — no doubt in an attempt to immunize it legally and constitutionally as a violation of religious freedom. Any why not allow cops and judges to wear insignia of their religious beliefs; wouldn't that be more transparent than fostering the illusion that they are neutral in such matters?

Let us hope that the members of Québec solidaire will challenge and correct Khadir's initial reaction to the bill, which now goes to public debate as it wends its way through the legislative process.

Let me conclude with some quotations from a hard-hitting comment by Sheetal Pathak in the *McGill Daily*. Her article bears careful reading:

“Why do we want to ban the niqab? It is at least partly because many consider it a symbol of patriarchy. Apparently we think we live in a post-feminist utopia where only the niqab and practices of “other” cultures are symbols of patriarchy. Marriage is a symbol of patriarchy. You know the part where the father gives away the bride, because she used to belong to her father, but now she belongs to the groom? It’s a symbol of an ancient and current practice of what Gayle Rubin called the traffic in women. So, let’s ban marriage! Any takers? No? Hmm.

“Furthermore, feminism and women’s liberation is about choice. Empowerment is about choice. Let’s say it again, folks, CHOICE. It is her body, and her choice how to dress it. In no way is it legitimate for anyone to question her decisions. She should not have to explain her reasons.”

Referring to Naïma Amed’s frustrated efforts to learn French, Pathak notes: “After being expelled from CEGEP St. Laurent, she did not give up; she found herself another French class in which to enrol. Subsequently, when denied again, she filed a human rights complaint against the province. These are not the actions of someone who is isolated or unwilling to integrate in Quebec society.” Yet “Quebec officials and politicians, the people who speak for us, refused to allow her to participate in Quebec society — all because of an over-politicized piece of cloth. All in all, wearing a niqab seems to be a tough gig....”

Tough gig, indeed. And Bill 94 will make it that much tougher, as well as fueling the mounting crusade against immigrants and minorities.

Socialist Voice #426, April 11, 2010

Cuban Medical Aid to Haiti: One of the World's Best Kept Secrets

by Emily J. Kirk and John M. Kirk

Media coverage of Cuban medical cooperation following the disastrous recent earthquake in Haiti was sparse indeed. International news reports usually described the Dominican Republic as being the first to provide assistance, while Fox News sang the praises of U.S. relief efforts in a report entitled “U.S. Spearheads Global Response to Haiti Earthquake” — a common theme of its extensive coverage. CNN also broadcast hundreds of reports, and in fact one focused on a Cuban doctor wearing a T-shirt with a large image of Che Guevara — and yet described him as a “Spanish doctor”.

In general, international news reports ignored Cuba's efforts. By March 24, CNN for example, had 601 reports on their news website regarding the earthquake in Haiti — of which only 18 (briefly) referenced Cuban assistance. Similarly, between them the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* had 750 posts regarding the earthquake and relief efforts, though not a single one discusses in any detail any Cuban support. In reality, however, Cuba's medical role had been extremely important— and had been present since 1998.

Cuba and Haiti Pre-Earthquake

In 1998, Haiti was struck by Hurricane Georges. The hurricane caused 230 deaths, destroyed 80% of the crops, and left 167,000 people homeless.[1] Despite the fact that Cuba and Haiti had not had diplomatic relations in over 36 years, Cuba immediately offered a multifaceted agreement to assist them, of which the most important was medical cooperation.

Cuba adopted a two-pronged public health approach to help Haiti. First, it agreed to maintain hundreds of doctors in the country for as long as necessary, working wherever they were posted by the Haitian government. This was particularly significant as Haiti's health care system was easily the worst in the Americas, with life expectancy of only 54 years in 1990 and one out of every 5 adult deaths due to AIDS, while 12.1% of children died from preventable intestinal infectious diseases.[2]

In addition Cuba agreed to train Haitian doctors in Cuba, providing that they would later return and take the places of the Cuban doctors (a process of “brain gain” rather than “brain drain”). Significantly, the students were selected from non-traditional backgrounds, and were mainly poor. It was thought that, because of their socio-economic background, they fully understood their country's need for medical personnel, and would return to work where they were needed. The first cohort of students began studying in May, 1999 at the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM).

By 2007, significant change had already been achieved throughout the country. It is worth noting that Cuban medical personnel were estimated to be caring for 75% of the population.[3] Studies

by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) indicated clear improvements in the health profile since this extensive Cuban medical cooperation began.

Improvements in Public Health in Haiti, 1999-2007[4]

Health Indicator	1999	2007
Infant Mortality, per 1,000 live births	80	33
Child Mortality Under 5 per 1,000	135	59.4
Maternal Mortality per 100,000 live births	523	285
Life Expectancy (years)	54	61

Cuban medical personnel had clearly made a major difference to the national health profile since 1998, largely because of their proactive role in preventive medicine-as can be seen below.

Selected Statistics on Cuban Medical Cooperation, Dec. 1998-May 2007[5]

Visits to the doctor	10,682,124
Doctor visits to patients	4,150,631
Attended births	86,633
Major and minor surgeries	160,283
Vaccinations	899,829
Lives saved (emergency)	210,852

By 2010, at no cost to medical students, Cuba had trained some 550 Haitian doctors, and is at present training a further 567. Moreover, since 1998 some 6,094 Cuban medical personnel have worked in Haiti. They had given over 14.6 million consultations, carried out 207,000 surgical operations, including 45,000 vision restoration operations through their Operation Miracle programme, attended 103,000 births, and taught literacy to 165,000. In fact at the time of the earthquake there were 344 Cuban medical personnel there. All of this medical cooperation, it must be remembered, was provided over an 11-year period before the earthquake of January 12, 2010.[6]

Cuba and Haiti Post-Earthquake

The earthquake killed at least 220,000, injured 300,000 and left 1.5 million homeless.[7] Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive described it as “the worst catastrophe that has occurred in Haiti in two centuries”.[8]

International aid began flooding in. It is important to note the type of medical aid provided by some major international players. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), for example, an organization known for its international medical assistance, flew in some 348 international staff, in addition to

the 3,060 national staff it already employed. By March 12 they had treated some 54,000 patients, and completed 3,700 surgical operations.[9]

Canada's contribution included the deployment of 2,046 Canadian Forces personnel, including 200 DART personnel. The DART (Disaster Assistance Response Team) received the most media attention, as it conducted 21,000 consultations-though it should be noted they do not treat any serious trauma patients or provide surgical care. Indeed, among the DART personnel, only 45 are medical staff, with others being involved in water purification, security, and reconstruction. In total, the Canadians stayed for only 7 weeks.[10]

The United States government, which received extensive positive media attention, sent the USNS "Comfort", a 1,000-bed hospital ship with a 550-person medical staff and stayed for 7 weeks, in which time they treated 871 patients, performing 843 surgical operations.[11] Both the Canadian and US contributions were important-while they were there.

Lost in the media shuffle was the fact that, for the first 72 hours following the earthquake, Cuban doctors were in fact the main medical support for the country. Within the first 24 hours, they had completed 1,000 emergency surgeries, turned their living quarters into clinics, and were running the only medical centers in the country, including 5 comprehensive diagnostic centers (small hospitals) which they had previously built. In addition another 5 in various stages of construction were also used, and they turned their ophthalmology center into a field hospital-which treated 605 patients within the first 12 hours following the earthquake.[12]

Cuba soon became responsible for some 1,500 medical personnel in Haiti. Of those, some 344 doctors were already working in Haiti, while over 350 members of the "Henry Reeve" Emergency Response Medical Brigade were sent by Cuba following the earthquake. In addition, 546 graduates of ELAM from a variety of countries, and 184 5th and 6th year Haitian ELAM students joined, as did a number of Venezuelan medical personnel. In the final analysis, they were working throughout Haiti in 20 rehabilitation centers and 20 hospitals, running 15 operating theatres, and had vaccinated 400,000. With reason Fidel Castro stated, "we send doctors, not soldiers".[13]

A glance at the medical role of the various key players is instructive.

Comparative Medical Contributions in Haiti by March 23 [14]

	MSF	Canada	USA	Cuba
No. of Staff	3,408	45	550	1,504
No. of Patients Treated	54,000	21,000	871	227,143
No. of Surgeries	3,700	0	843	6,499

These comparative data, compiled from several sources, are particularly telling as they indicate the significant (and widely ignored) medical contribution of the Cubans. In fact, they have treated 4.2 times the number of patients compared with MSF (which has over twice as many

workers, as well as significantly more financial resources), and 10.8 times more than the Canadian DART team. (As noted, Canadian and US medical personnel had left by March 9). Also notable is the fact that the Cuban medical contingent was roughly three times the size of the American staff, although they treated 260.7 times more patients than U.S. medical personnel. Clearly, there have been significant differences in the nature of medical assistance provided.

It is also important to note that approximately one-half of the Cuban medical staff was working outside the capital, Port-au-Prince, where there was significant damage as well. Many medical missions could not get there, however, due to transportation issues. Significantly, the Cuban medical brigade also worked to minimize epidemics by making up 30 teams to educate communities on how to properly dispose of waste, as well as how to minimize public health risks. Noted Cuban artist Kcho also headed a cultural brigade made up of clowns, magicians and dancers, supported by psychologists and psychiatrists, to deal with the trauma experienced by Haitian children.

Perhaps most impressively, following the growing concern for the health of the country, due to a poor and now largely destroyed health care system Cuba, working with ALBA (the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América) countries, presented to the WHO an integral program to reconstruct the health care system of Haiti. Essentially, they are offering to rebuild the entire health care system. It will be supported by ALBA and Brazil, and run by Cubans and Cuban-trained medical staff. This is to include hospitals, polyclinics, and medical schools. In addition, the Cuban government has offered to increase the number of Haitian students attending medical school in Cuba. This offer of medical cooperation represents an enormous degree of support for Haiti.[15] Sadly, this generous offer has not been reported by international media.

While North American media might have ignored Cuba's role, Haiti has not. A pointed remark was made by Haitian President Mr. René Préval, who noted, "you did not wait for an earthquake to help us".[16] Similarly, Haiti's Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive has also repeatedly noted that the first three countries to help were Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

Sadly (but not surprisingly), while Cuba's efforts to assist Haiti have increased, international efforts have continued to dwindle. The head of the Cuban medical mission, Dr. Carlos Alberto García, summed up well the situation just two weeks after the tragedy: "many foreign delegations have already begun to leave, and the aid which is arriving now is not the same it used to be. Sadly, as always happens, soon another tragedy will appear in another country, and the people of Haiti will be forgotten, left to their own fate". Significantly, he added "However we will still be here long after they have all gone." [17] This in fact has been the case. Canadian forces, for example, returned home and the USNS Comfort sailed several weeks ago. By contrast, Cuban President Raúl Castro noted: "we have accompanied the Haitian people, and we will continue with them whatever time is needed, no matter how many years, with our very modest support".[18]

A representative of the World Council of Churches to the United Nations made the telling comment that "humanitarian aid could not be human if it was only publicized for 15 days".[19] Today Cuba, with the support of ALBA and Brazil, is working not to build a field hospital, but

rather a health care system. And, while international efforts have been largely abandoned, the Cuban staff and Cuban-trained medical staff will remain, as they have done for the past 11 years, for as long as necessary. This is a story that international media have chosen not to tell—now that the television cameras have gone. Yet it is an extraordinary story of true humanitarianism, and of great success in saving lives since 1998. Moreover, in light of Cuba's success in providing public health care (at no cost to the patients) to millions of Haitians, this approach to preventive, culturally sensitive, low cost and effective medicine needs to be told. That significant contribution to this impoverished nation, and Cuba's ongoing commitment to its people, clearly deserve to be recognized. Until then it will sadly remain as one of the world's best-kept secrets.

Notes

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- [12] John Burnett, "Cuban Doctors Unsung Heroes of Haitian Earthquake", National Public Radio report, January 24, 2010, and found at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story.php?storyID=122919202>. Accessed 28 January, 2010.
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Session of the U.N. Human Rights Council on Haiti. It can be accessed at “Cuba en Ginebra: ‘Ante tan difícil situación humanitaria en Haití no puede haber titubeos ni indiferencia,” on the Cubadebate website: <http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2010/01/27/cuba-en-ginebra-sobre-reconstruccion-haiti>

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[15] In a March 27, 2010 meeting in Port-au-Prince between President Préval and the Cuban and Brazilian ministers of health (José Ramón Balaguer and José Gomes), details were provided about what Balaguer termed “a plot of solidarity to assist the Haitian people”. Gomes added “We have just signed an agreement-Cuba, Brazil and Haiti-according to which all three countries make a commitment to unite our forces in order to reconstruct the health system in Haiti. An extraordinary amount of work is currently being carried out in terms of meeting the most basic and most pressing needs, but now it is necessary to think about the future [...] Haiti needs a permanent, quality healthcare system, supported by well-trained professionals [...] We will provide this, together with Cuba-a country with an extremely long internationalist experience, a great degree of technical ability, great determination, and an enormous amount of heart. Brazil and Cuba, two nations that are so close, so similar, now face a new challenge: together we will unite our efforts to rebuild Haiti, and rebuild the public health system of this country”. See “Cuba y Brasil suman esfuerzos con Haití,” Juventud Rebelde, March 28, 2010 (Translation to English provided by authors).

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Socialist Voice #427, April 16, 2010.

Recent Media Coverage of Cuba: Selective Commendation, Selective Indignation

by Emily J. Kirk, John M. Kirk, and Norman Girvan

The January 2010 earthquake in Haiti caused some 230,000 deaths, left 1.5 million homeless, and has directly affected 3 million Haitians — 1/3 of the population. On March 31, representatives of over 50 governments and international organizations gathered at the United Nations Haiti Donor Conference to pledge long-term assistance for the rebuilding of Haiti. At the conference, Cuba made arguably the most ambitious and impressive pledge of *all* countries — to rebuild the entire National Health Service. While the efforts of other government have been praised, those of Cuba, however, have largely been ignored in the media.

The aim of Cuba's contribution is to completely reconstruct the Haitian health care system — and to do so in a sustainable manner. The new system will be based on the Cuban model, embracing primary, secondary and tertiary health care, in addition to the training of additional Haitian doctors in Cuba. In summary:

- The primary level will include 101 clinics to treat annually an estimated 2.8 million patients, perform 1.3 million emergency operations, deliver 168,000 babies, and provide 3 million vaccinations.
- The secondary level will be provided through 30 community hospitals. They will have the capacity to treat annually 2.1 million patients, and provide 1 million emergency surgeries, 54,000 operations, 276,000 electro-cardiograms, 107,000 dental exams, 144,000 diagnostic ultrasounds, and 487,000 laboratory tests. In addition, due to the high numbers of poly-traumatized patients, the 30 rehabilitation rooms will be included throughout the country and will provide 2.4 million therapeutic treatments for some 520,000 patients.
- The tertiary level of health care will be delivered by the Haitian Specialties Hospital, staffed by 80 Cuban specialists. It will contain various clinical departments, and will be used for research and teaching, as well as the further training of Haitian professionals who will gradually replace the Cuban professionals.
- Finally, 312 additional medical scholarships are to be provided for Haitian students to study in Cuba.[1]

What is also significant point is that these are not just 'pledges' from Cuba, but rather a development of medical assistance which has been provided over the last eleven years, and dramatically increased since the earthquake. A Cuban medical brigade has been in Haiti since 1999 and has "a presence in 127 of the 137 Haitian communes, saved 223,442 lives, treated 14 million people, performed 225,000 operations and delivered 109,000 babies." [2]

Furthermore much of the promised programme is already in place, as “post-quake, 23 of these primary care health centers, 15 community reference hospitals and 21 rehabilitation rooms are up and running.”

The cost of the Cuban programme over a ten-year period is estimated at \$690.5 million — using 50 percent of international prices for services of this kind.[3] This is an enormous amount for a small developing country (11.2 million population); and moreover one that has been under a crippling economic blockade from its powerful neighbor for nearly half-a-century.[4]

It is even more notable when compared to those of other governments, particularly those of industrialized countries.

For example, Cuba’s contribution in relation to its GDP is 155 times that of the United States, which pledged \$1.15 billion.[5] Among other G-7 countries, France, the former colonial power, pledged \$188.93 million, Germany \$53.17 million, Japan \$75 million, and Canada \$375.23 million, while Italy and the United Kingdom, though not specifically listed, were probably included in the \$203.19 million pledge that was made in the name of “EU Remaining” group of countries.[6]

Hence in absolute terms the monetary value of Cuba’s contribution is almost 4 times that of France, 12 times that of Germany, and almost twice that of Canada. Indeed, excluding the U.S., Cuba’s contribution is more than the rest of the G7 countries combined, as well as 35% more than the contribution of the World Bank (\$479 million). In all, 59 pledges were made from governments, regional blocs and financial institutions.

In other words, *while other countries are pledging money, Cuba is actively creating an entire sustainable health care system which will treat 75% of the Haitian population, and save hundreds of thousands of lives.*[7]

And yet, in spite of the extraordinary value of this commitment, it has been largely ignored by the principal North American media.

Media Representation of United Nation Haiti Donor Conference, Including Cuba and the United States’ Contributions [8]

News Agency	Posts regarding the UN Haiti Donor Conference	Posts stating US Monetary Contribution following Conference	Posts regarding the UN Haiti Donor Conference that Mention Cuba
CNN	8	3	0
New York Times	4	3	0
Boston Globe	3	1	0

Washington Post	12	7	0
Miami Herald	11	8	1
Total	38	22	1

As we can see from the accompanying Table, of 38 posts on the Haiti Donor Conference in five major U.S. media on the ten days following the Conference, only one mentioned the Cuban contribution — and that only briefly. Moreover, *CNN*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and the *Washington Post* entirely ignored Cuba’s contribution. The amount of media coverage is also instructive in indicating the gradual decline in media interest following the disaster.

That said, the UN Haiti Donor Conference was clearly worthy of widespread attention, with a major gathering of some of the world’s leading decision-makers — yet there was noticeably little published about it, and especially about Cuba’s extraordinary contribution.

In addition, our analysis of the first fifty results in *Google News* for ‘United Nations Haiti Donor Conference,’ generated only two articles that mentioned Cuba’s role. One of these focused on the rarity of Cuban and United States officials working together. By contrast, 31 of the 50 articles discuss the contributions of developed countries at the Donor Conference, and 21 specifically discuss that of the United States — 9 of which mention the \$1.15 billion pledged by the US government.

Indeed a content analysis of the articles reveals that their main theme was the importance of the role of the United States in helping Haiti. The dollar amount pledged was repeatedly stated, and the U.S. effort was often described as being equally (or more) important than that of the UN.

According to one article, “The biggest contributions came from the United States and the European Union.”[9] Even if one compares the absolute amounts pledged, this is simply not true — as the Venezuelan pledge was for \$2.4 billion.

Another article singles out the United States, explaining “Over 140 nations, including the United States, have provided immediate assistance and relief to millions of Haitians,”[10] and in media coverage the United States consistently headed the list of contributing countries. Another article lists the United States as having a more important role than the United Nations, noting “Haiti’s friends, as they are called – including the U.S., France, Brazil, Canada, the UN and the Red Cross”. [11]

In sum, while relief efforts in Haiti were/are an international affair, the media have largely focused on contributions made by the United States.

Another common theme in coverage was the lack of assistance from other countries. Hence, when the assistance of the United States was not praised, those of other countries were denigrated. As one article states, “The United States pledged \$1.15 billion, in addition to the

\$900 million it has already given... By comparison, China pledged \$1.5 million yes, you read it right, million with an “m” — in addition to the nearly \$14 million it has already given.”[12]

Thus, there is a consistent pattern of disproportionately positive representation by the media of the role of the United States, one that both emphasizes the actual pledge and ignores blatantly the significant Cuban pledge.

There is a dramatic contrast between the cover-up of Cuba’s extraordinary contribution to Haiti by mainstream US media and the enormous attention by the same media on alleged human rights abuses in that country. Literally dozens of articles on this topic have appeared in recent weeks. Of particular media interest was the death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo (a jailed “dissident” with a criminal record who refused food for 80 days before dying) and the hunger strike of Guillermo Fariñas. The death of Zapata as a result of the hunger strike continues to be written about and discussed. Indeed it has been used consistently as a springboard to increase criticism of the Cuban government. The table below illustrates the extent of this coverage.

**Media Coverage of Hunger Strikes
in Cuba between February 10 and April 9 [13]**

News	Stories about the
CNN	5
New York	7
Washington	13
Boston	4
Miami	48
Total	77

In analyzing the coverage of these two Cuba-related stories, the difference in the number of articles is quite striking, and reveals a clear disinterest in providing any positive information on Cuba, while at the same time maintaining a significant appetite to criticize Cuba. The comparison of the two in the following table is telling.

Comparison between Media Coverage of Hunger Strikes in Cuba and Cuba's Contribution at the United Nations Haiti Donor Conference from February 10 to April 9.

News Agency	Stories About the Hunger Strikes In Cuba February 10 – April 9	Posts Regarding the UN Haiti Donor Conference that Mention Cuba March 31 – April 9
CNN	5	0
New York	7	0
Washington	13	0
Boston Globe	4	0
Miami Herald	48	1
Total	77	1

As a result, instead of reporting on an enormously important and topical story on a programme aimed at improving the lives of 75% of Haiti's population, the media have chosen to focus on the individual cases of two men who have consciously and deliberately decided to embark on a suicidal course.

It does not take much to work out that the aim is to embarrass the Cuban government by following these "human interest" stories about two individuals who oppose the Cuban government, presenting them as martyrs. It is also obvious that there is a clear media filter, one which seeks to prevent any media coverage that could be construed as being positive of Cuba — in this case seen in the government's commitment to the reconstruction of Haiti.

In examining the media's representation of Cuba's role in Haiti's development and the stories of two "dissidents", it is clear that politically biased "infotainment" has won out. Sadly (but perhaps predictably), in their coverage of Cuba, the media in the "developed world" have focused on the latter while ignoring Cuba's remarkable offer that will surely and significantly improve the lives of millions of Haitians, (while at the same time highlighting the role and contribution of the United States).

Yet again we have an example of selective commendation and selective indignation in the North American media's presentation of Cuba.

Notes

[1] "Pledge Statements". United Nations International Donors' Conference Towards A New Future For Haiti". 2010. Retrieved 6 April, 2010 from <http://www.haiticonference.org/pledges-statements.html>

[2] From the statement by Foreign Minister Rodriguez.

[3] The total "includes the medical services provided, calculated at 50% of international prices; the sustainability of these services and the personnel providing them; and the training of a further 312 Haitian doctors in Cuba". Whereas

the Official Text of the Cuban Statement published on the UN website refers to this cost “over four years,” the text of Foreign Minister’s Bruno Rodríguez’s speech as published by Granma International refers to this cost over ten years (see Overseas Territories Review).

[4] Speech given at the United Nations by Cuban foreign minister, Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla. See “Declaración del Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba en la Reunión de Donantes a Haití”.

[5] Cuba’s contribution is approximately 1.22 percent of its GDP (\$56.52 billion in 2009); that of the U.S. amounts to 0.00785 percent of its 2008 GDP (14,204, billion)

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See search results for “United Nations Haiti Donor Conference” —

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- Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.thestar.com
- Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.washingtonpost.com
- Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.boston.com
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[13] See search results for “Hunger Strike, Cuba” —

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Socialist Voice #428, April 16, 2010

Remembering Michel Chartrand

by **Richard Fidler**

Michel Chartrand, an outstanding leader of the Quebec labour, nationalist, socialist and social justice movements, died on April 12 at the age of 93.

A multitude of Québécois worked with Michel in the causes that marked his long life, and the Quebec media this week are full of tributes to his contributions. Translated below is an older tribute by 110 well-known activists, published on the occasion of his 90th birthday, that summarizes some of the key events of his life. It is followed by some personal memories of my own.



At a demonstration of the Front Commun pour la Défense de la Langue Française. (From CSN Archives) Left to right: Alain Beiner (Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière), Michel Chartrand, Robert Lemieux, Raymond Lemieux (leader of the Saint-Léonard language struggle), and Pierre Bourgault (former RIN leader).

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IN PRAISE OF A PASSIONATE DEFENDER OF THE WORKERS

Le Devoir, November 18, 2006

Next December 20, Michel Chartrand will celebrate his 90th birthday. One of the very few public personalities to have never deviated from his ideals, this exceptional fighter has for 70 years participated in all the memorable events in Quebec's history. He has become an integral part of those events since he has been on the line of fire in all the major social and political battles, starting in the mid-1930s. For example, during the Fifties, in the "Grande Noirceur" [the dark days of Duplessis], he acted as a spearhead of the trade-union movement, which was the real opposition to Duplessism and opened the way to the Quiet Revolution. Chartrand personally

paid the price, being jailed no fewer than seven times in the course of the hard-fought conflicts that marked that period, the best known of which were those in Asbestos and Murdochville.

The fate he suffered then gave a foretaste of the troubles he would later have with the legal system and the many further jailings — including his detention for four months under the *War Measures Act* decreed by the Trudeau government during the October Crisis of 1970. His trial — like that of all the 300 or so other persons unjustly jailed at that time — ended in a dismissal of the charges.

A political man

Michel has been predominantly a political man. Throughout his life, he has concerned himself with public issues and spoken abundantly about them. “Everything is political”, he loves to say. But this patriarch of the Quebec left has consistently scorned the traditional parties, which in his view seek only power without real change.

In the first part of his public life, he was deeply involved in the adventure of the reformist nationalist parties of the Thirties and Forties — Action Libérale Nationale and the Bloc Populaire — precursors of the contemporary sovereigntist formations, the Parti Québécois and Bloc Québécois.

As his thinking radicalized he opted for more marginal parties. In the Fifties he succeeded Thérèse Casgrain as leader of the Parti Social-Démocrate, the Quebec wing of Tommy Douglas’s Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). And in the early Sixties he was the founding president of the Parti Socialiste du Québec (PSQ), while Jean Lesage’s “Equipe du tonnerre” [“thunder team”, the All-Star Liberal cabinet] ruled in Quebec City.

Michel was an independentist from the very beginning, but he never supported the Parti Québécois, criticizing it as overly centrist for his taste and denouncing some of its neoliberal policies. However, that did not prevent him from occasionally supporting progressive PQ candidates.

Pillar of the trade-union movement

Driven out of the CTCC, the CSN’s predecessor,[1] by its then secretary general, Jean Marchand — one of the three “doves” who, with Trudeau and Gérard Pelletier headed off to Ottawa in 1965 to “put Quebec back in its place” — Chartrand went back to practicing his trade as a printer for ten years.

But it was as president of the Montréal Central Council of the CSN, from 1968 to 1978, that Michel gave his full measure as a man of action and an orator. He became one of the pillars of the Quebec union movement, which he helped to transform into an instrument of struggle.

He was also the keenest enthusiast of the innovative orientation adopted by the union central, which sought to add to the traditional mission of trade-unionism — the negotiation of collective agreements, referred to as the “first front” — a “second front”. This was expressed, for example, in the Central Council’s involvement in various social and political causes, such as

- the defense of the rights of tenants and assistance to injured workers;

- the founding of a popular newspaper, the weekly *Québec-Presse*;
- the establishment of superstore food co-operatives (Cooprix);
- support to the Front d'Action Politique (FRAP), the first progressive party to oppose Jean Drapeau, the autocratic mayor of Montréal;
- the successful campaign to abolish the private hunting and fishing clubs, which earned Chartrand yet another stay behind bars;
- and, above all, the practice of international solidarity with the Centre international de solidarité ouvrière (CISO), founded by the late Roberto Quévillon, and the Québec-Palestine and Québec-Chile committees.

Return to the co-operative movement

Following his withdrawal from full-time union activity, in the late Seventies, Chartrand returned to one of his first loves, the co-operative movement, and he devoted himself primarily to his duties as chairman of the board of directors of the Caisse populaire des syndicats nationaux [the CSN's credit union].

Still tireless, in the mid-1980s he established the FATA [Foundation to assist injured workers], where he spent several years working with such valued collaborators as Roch Banville, Émile Boudreau and Claude Pételle, all of them now deceased.

When he was over 80 years old, Michel launched a campaign in favour of establishing a "citizenship income". For several months he criss-crossed Quebec holding dozens of meetings to publicize the manifesto he had written on this topic. He even made a lengthy stop-over in Jonquière, during the 1998 elections, to run against the then premier Lucien Bouchard, as a spokesperson for the Rassemblement pour l'alternative progressiste (RAP – Coalition for a progressive alternative), one of the predecessors of Québec solidaire. His slogan was "Zero poverty through a citizenship income", which contrasted with the controversial "Zero Deficit" of the PQ government.

Sixty years after his activism in Catholic Action movements (following a spell as a Trappist monk at Oka), he was smitten with the same ideal of social justice, and had the same horror at injustice. Paradoxically, he became a nationalist while he was a monk. "Nationalism," he explains, "is the precondition to an opening toward the world."

The idealist

In 1993, after 51 years of marriage, Michel suffered the painful loss of his companion Simonne Monet. Canon Lionel Groulx, who married them and baptized their seven children, described them in 1942 as "two young idealists whose fates will be joined forever". He could not have said it better. Even if, in their quest for greater social justice, Simonne and Michel chose the difficult road of financial insecurity and adversities of all kinds, they always supported each other as two inseparable accomplices.

This very incomplete overview will, we hope, have the merit of acquainting the younger generation of some of the accomplishments of an exceptional personality, thirsting for justice, who has devoted his life to the defense of the most disadvantaged in our society.

Some have been overly critical of his mood swings, his aggressiveness, his verbal violence, his utopian projects; but no one has ever been able to dispute his loyalty to the people, his idealism, his authenticity, his patriotism and his attachment to the French language. His many friends, among whom we wish to include ourselves, have had the privilege of discovering what lies hidden beneath the armour of the public figure. They can testify to the generosity and sensitivity of the man, his literary culture, his love of art, his profound humanism and even . . . his insolent language.

On the eve of his 90 years, therefore, we express the wish that this majestic oak will prolong for several years yet his peaceful retirement in the family home in Richelieu with his companion Colette Legendre. Long live Michel Chartrand, our young ninety-year-old!

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MY MEMORIES OF MICHEL

by Richard Fidler

As a high school student in Toronto who had joined the CCF in 1958, I was vaguely aware of Michel Chartrand as the leader of the Quebec wing of the party. He seemed a lonely but heroic figure, combatting the forces of darkness in what most of Canada saw as “priest-ridden Quebec”.

But he had a major impact at the founding convention of the New Democratic Party in Ottawa in 1961, which occurred just as Quebec’s Quiet Revolution was getting under way. There, along with Gérard Picard of the CTCC, Michel headed a delegation of some 300 from Quebec who were inspired by the effort to build a new party of the left in Canada, more solidly based in the labour movement than the CCF. They fought successfully to get the new labour party to recognize, as part of its founding program, that Quebec was a distinct nation with the right of self-determination. It was not an easy victory; in a widely publicized gesture, Eugene Forsey, then research director of the Canadian Labour Congress, quit the NDP on the floor of the convention in anger at this decision. (Trudeau later made Forsey a Liberal senator.)

These differences persisted after the convention, and in 1962 the new party forces in Quebec split, most of the Anglophone leaders — such as philosopher Charles Taylor and Professor Michael Oliver (who was federal NDP President) — refusing to accept the majority decision at the new party’s orientation convention to build the party in Quebec as an autonomous Québécois partner of the Canadian NDP. The largely Francophone component went on to found the Parti socialiste du Québec (PSQ), independent of the NDP but not running against it in federal elections. In November 1963, as a student recently arrived in Montréal, I attended the PSQ’s founding convention in Quebec City, where Michel Chartrand was elected president of the party.

The PSQ, as it turned out, was somewhat ahead of its time. Although it was sympathetic to Quebec independence — its 1966 program called for an “État Libre du Québec”, a free Quebec, in “association with Anglophone Canada” — it was outflanked in the growing nationalist milieu

by the Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (RIN). In 1967 dissident Liberal cabinet minister René Lévesque adopted the associate-states formula and went on to found the Parti québécois shortly thereafter. The RIN dissolved into the PQ. These developments effectively undercut the PSQ and — lacking significant support in the unions — it soon disappeared.

Michel's involvement with the CCF, NDP and PSQ reflected his profound conviction that the workers' movement could not confine itself to collective bargaining and on-the-job representation but must strive to replace capitalism with a socialist society, through working to achieve a government of and for the working people. Thus it jarred me this week to read, in the CSN leadership's tribute to Michel, the statement: "With the death of this outstanding trade-unionist, there comes to an end an entire epoch during which union action was inspired by anarcho-syndicalism." Michel was anything but an anarchist. The CSN statement reflects not his views but the narrow concept of trade unionism as little more than economic struggle over wages and "benefits" that is held by the union bureaucracy.

Michel's Québécois nationalism was internationalist to the core, informed by a profound sense of solidarity with the oppressed everywhere. He was an "altermondialiste" — an opponent of capitalist globalization — long before the term became fashionable in progressive circles. In 1964, shortly after the founding of the PSQ, he spent almost a month touring revolutionary Cuba. When I interviewed him upon his return, he told me Cuba had "a government which works for the people", and he discussed frankly and sympathetically the difficulties confronted by the Cubans and their innovative efforts to overcome them. The interview also illustrates Michel's appreciation of artistic accomplishment as he observed it in Cuba, as well as his sense of humour and his keen anti-imperialism. In later years he was active in building solidarity with Allende's Chile and the Palestinians.

Although best known as a trade-union activist and politician, Michel was self-educated as a typographer. After he was fired as a CTCC organizer by Jean Marchand, he built a sizeable printshop, managed as a worker-owned cooperative, in the basement of the large A-frame house he and his wife Simonne Monet-Chartrand inhabited with their seven children. One evening, the Cuban consul in Montréal, Julia Gonzalez, and I visited them at their home in Longueuil, a suburb of Montréal on the south shore of the St. Lawrence river, and Michel took great pride in demonstrating to us the modern typesetting and printing equipment in the shop. His shop, *Les presses sociales*, was where many of the left and labour publications were printed during the 1960s, each bearing the CSN union label.

Around that time, the League for Socialist Action, a Trotskyist organization headquartered in Toronto, decided to establish its own printshop. Ross Dowson, the LSA's national secretary, asked if I could enlist Michel's help in checking out the operational capability of a second-hand Verityper for sale in Montréal. Michel readily agreed and one of his workers spent an entire afternoon with me putting this equipment through its paces; she recommended its purchase.

A further encounter with Michel was in 1971, when I was living in Toronto. It was shortly after the War Measures crisis. He came to Toronto along with his lawyer Robert Lemieux — both had been arrested during the army occupation of Quebec — and spoke eloquently, in English, to a

huge and appreciative audience at the University of Toronto's Convocation Hall about the repression and the situation in Quebec. Later that year, Michel was active in the Front Commun pour la Défense de la Langue Française, a broad coalition of nationalist and left organizations that organized some mass demonstrations in favour of making French the official language of Quebec; this was the beginning of the radicalizing wave of actions that swept through Quebec not long after the Trudeau government's war measures.

Michel was an enthusiastic supporter of left regroupment and initiatives to build a new left party in Quebec. Although in his mid 80s, he attended the 2003 founding convention of the Union des forces progressistes (UFP), a forerunner of Québec solidaire. And at the recent convention of Québec solidaire, in late November 2009, we listened attentively as Paul Cliche, a founder of the FRAP in 1970, brought Michel's greetings to the delegates.

Michel Chartrand was best known to many as a colourful speaker — “un homme de parole”. His speeches were powerful because they spoke to real injustice, and many are collected in a volume published by his biographer Fernand Foisy.[2] He had a remarkable ability to arouse an audience with both anger and humour in denunciations of capitalist exploitation and oppression, while articulating an alternative vision of another, possible Quebec of solidarity and emancipation. He fought with courage and principle. He shall long be remembered with affection and gratitude for his remarkable contribution to our struggles.

Notes

[1] CTCC – Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada; CSN – Confédération des syndicats nationaux.

[2] *Michel Chartrand: Les Dires d'un Homme de Parole* (Lanctôt Éditeur, 1997). See also *Michel Chartrand: Les Voies d'un Homme de Parole* (Lanctôt Éditeur, 1999) and *Michel Chartrand: La Colère du Juste* (Lanctôt Éditeur, 2003), also by Fernand Foisy, the latter being a biography of Chartrand's life between 1968 and 2003.

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Clara Zetkin's Struggle for the United Front

This article is based on a talk presented in June 2009 in Chicago. It was first published in the November-December, 2009, International Socialist Review. John Riddell is a co-editor of Socialist Voice and the editor of eight annotated volumes of Communist International documents, including two that have been announced for publication in 2011.

For background on Clara Zetkin, see the biographical note at the end of this article.

by John Riddell

Genossinnen und Genossen!

That is how Clara Zetkin began her speeches. It is German for “women comrades and men comrades.”

Few socialists used that salutation in her time, and there were few women at their meetings. But that was beginning to change, and Zetkin was part of those changes.

Clara Zetkin was a revolutionary leader, who over her long life took part in many struggles, on many issues. This article will consider only a small slice of her activity, one that was central to the tragedy of German communism in the 1920s.

Our topic today is the united front policy – a crucial part of our political inheritance from the era of the Russian revolution. This policy, adopted by the world communist movement in December 1921, proposed that revolutionary socialists should press for unity with other political forces in action for demands benefiting working people. The character of such a united front was a topic of dispute among socialists then, and remains so today.

Let us examine this policy through Zetkin's eyes.

Clara Zetkin was the outstanding woman communist leader of the 1920s, and she is best known today as an apostle of women's emancipation. However, she also helped shape the communist movement's policy on unity in action. She favoured a broad and non-partisan approach, aiming for unity with non-revolutionary currents; action in the interests of the working class as a whole; and efforts to win social layers outside the industrial working class. She stressed the need for Communist policy to reach out to the less radical layers of working people and producers. She opposed a focus on the concerns of the revolutionary vanguard.

Zetkin – a pioneer Marxist

When the Communist International (Comintern) adopted the united front policy in 1921, Zetkin, at 64, was more than a dozen years older than any other of its main leaders.[1] She had joined the German Social Democratic party in its early, heroic days. A friend of Engels, she later formed a



close partnership with Rosa Luxemburg to defend this party's revolutionary heritage and oppose its right-wing current, which sought to make peace with Germany's capitalist state.

In this period, women were almost completely excluded from political life. Zetkin and Luxemburg were the first women to fight their way into the central leadership of socialist parties. To this day, few women have been able to follow them down this path.

Zetkin led the Socialist International's work among women, and in this capacity she called the first international socialist conference in opposition to the First World War.[2] This war was ended by revolutions in Russia and Germany in 1917 and 1918. In 1919, Zetkin joined the newly formed German Communist Party, the KPD. That same year, most of the party's central leaders, including Rosa Luxemburg, fell victim to a wave of government terror.

Zetkin was an influential figure in the party's new leadership and, from 1921, in the Communist International – the world union of revolutionary organizations formed two years earlier in Moscow.

Origin of the united front policy

After the German revolution of 1918, Social Democratic leaders had led and organized the restoration of capitalist power in the country, and had been notoriously complicit in the terror against revolutionary workers. Nonetheless, they had retained the support of most workers, while Communists led a small minority.

In March 1920, when extreme rightists staged a military takeover, the Social Democrats played a major role in the massive general strike that defeated the coup. How could the momentum of this victory be maintained?

A fruitful initiative to break the stalemate came later that year from revolutionary metalworkers in Clara Zetkin's home base, Stuttgart. It was here that worker activists, six years earlier, had convinced Karl Liebknecht to launch open socialist opposition in Germany to the imperialist world war.[3]

In December, an assembly of Stuttgart's metalworkers, acting on the initiative of Communist Party activists, adopted a resolution calling on the leadership of their union, and of all unions, to launch a joint struggle for tangible improvements in workers' conditions. This campaign, the resolution stated, should call for the following five demands "shared by all workers":

- Reduced prices for food and essentials of life.
- Opening of the capitalists' financial records and higher jobless benefits.
- Lower taxes on workers and higher taxes on the rich.
- Workers' control of raw material and food production and distribution.
- Disarming of reactionary gangs and arming of the workers.[4]

Strikingly, the Stuttgart demands embraced not only issues of bread and pay but to initial steps toward workers' power. This was an early example of the communist concept of transitional demands, which are rooted in immediate needs but point toward workers' rule.

The Social Democrats, then organized in two parties, first ignored, then rejected this appeal, some saying the demands were too aggressive, others that they did not go far enough. But the Communists campaigned to rally support for the Stuttgart appeal, and a great many union councils voted their support.[5]

The Open Letter

A month later, in January 1921, the German Communist Party central bureau made a more comprehensive appeal to all workers' organizations, including the Social Democrats, for united action. Zetkin was a leading member of this body, but the appeal's main author was party co-chairman Paul Levi.

Known as the "Open Letter," this call included the Stuttgart five points, in more detailed form, plus demands for the release of political prisoners and resumption of Germany's trade and diplomatic relations with the Russian Soviet republic.

The Open Letter, too, was rejected by Social Democratic and union national leaderships. Union officials began expelling the appeal's supporters. But this time, the campaign to rally rank-and-file support was broader and more successful – to the point where the national union confederation felt compelled to issue counterproposals. Subsequent exchanges, while they did not achieve agreement, showed that fruitful negotiations between Social Democrats and Communists were possible.[6]

Reparations crisis

The month of January 1921 also saw Britain, France, and other victors of the world war levy their demands for reparations. They demanded that Germany pay a sum equivalent to a dozen times the entire yearly revenue of the near-bankrupt German state, and threatened military occupation in case of non-payment. All shades of German opinion held the reparations to be unpayable, and a wave of indignation swept the country.[7]

The Communists responded by elaborating the final point of their Open Letter and calling for Germany to conclude an alliance with Soviet Russia. Clara Zetkin had already raised this call in her first speech in the German Reichstag, or parliament, on July 2, 1920.[8] As the reparations crisis came to a head, she raised this demand again in the Reichstag, on January 24, 1921, as "the only way to achieve a revision of the Versailles Treaty and ultimately to tear it up."

By promoting united action on this demand, Zetkin sought to point the indignation of the German masses against the Versailles Treaty in a socialist direction. The establishment of workers' power, she said, will be "the hour when the German nation will be born, the birth of a unified German people, no longer divided into lords and servants." [9]

A storm of controversy

The Stuttgart and Open Letter initiative marked a sharp change in direction for the Communist Party. Instead of merely denouncing the Social Democrats' pro-capitalist course, Communists were now proposing a test in action of Social Democrats' capacity to struggle for demands consistent with the Social Democrats' formal program.

This shift alarmed many German Communists, who felt their party was playing down the goal of overthrowing the government and concentrating on moderate demands more acceptable to Social Democrats. They feared that Zetkin's invocation of a workers' Germany as a new nation gave ground to reactionary nationalism.

The initiatives of Levi, Zetkin, and their allies also encountered objections abroad. A current led by Hungarian Communists such as Béla Kun called on Communists to sharpen their slogans and initiate minority actions that could sweep the hesitant workers into action – the so-called “theory of the offensive.” Although criticized by Lenin, this concept found some support in the Moscow-based Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), including from Nikolai Bukharin and Gregory Zinoviev.[10]

The ECCI initially criticized the Open Letter. Lenin supported it, however, and the matter was referred to the next world congress.[11]

Divided working class

The dispute on the united front policy was rooted in a dilemma facing the German working class. It had been defeated, with heavy casualties, in the civil war organized against it by the Social Democratic leaders in 1919. In the following years, hunger and destitution spread: average grain consumption was now little more than half pre-war levels; meat consumption was reduced by two-thirds. Capitalist attacks rained down, and the workers' movement was in retreat.

By the end of 1920, the Communists grown into a mass party, with more than 400,000 members, but they held the support of fewer than 20 percent of workers voting socialist.[12]

This produced a division among German workers. A Communist vanguard was frustrated and impatient to act, while the majority of workers were pessimistic and passive. In Zetkin's words, the workers were “almost desperate” yet “unwilling to struggle.”[13]

Zetkin and her colleagues urged efforts to unite workers in a defensive struggle, in which they could regain the confidence needed for a renewed and concerted offensive for workers' power. However, her left-wing opponents within the party urged minority action to provoke a crisis. As one of them later commented, “A stagnant swamp was everywhere. A wall of passivity was rising. We had to break through it at any cost.”[14]

Leadership was needed to rein in impatience and pursue consistent work for unity in action – but this was lacking, both in Berlin and in Moscow.

The ‘March Action’

The tensions in the KPD exploded over an issue not directly related to the united front issue. At the January 1921 congress of the Italian Socialist Party, until then affiliated to the Communist International, a wing of the Comintern supporters walked out to form a Communist party – with strong backing from the ECCI representatives, the Hungarian Mátyás Rákosi and the Bulgarian Kristo Kabakchiev. A larger and less radical grouping, who claimed to support of the Comintern but opposed an immediate break with the party's right-wing, reformist minority, stayed in the Socialist party.

In a subsequent discussion among KPD leaders, Levi and Zetkin argued that the split, while inevitable, had been driven through by representatives of the Comintern Executive Committee (ECCI) in an aggressively inflexible manner that unnecessarily divided the pro-Comintern forces. Karl Radek, then representing the ECCI in Germany, defended its actions in Italy, winning the support of the KPD leadership's radical wing. The dispute became heated, touching off tensions in the KPD regarding united front policy, the theory of the offensive, and the ECCI's role.

The party's Central Bureau adopted a motion by Zetkin that smoothed over the difference, but it soon flared up again.

At a KPD Central Committee meeting on February 22, Rákosi, representing the ECCI, reopened the debate, going so far as to suggest that a split of the type that had occurred in Italy might be needed in Germany as well. By 28 votes to 23, the Central Committee backed Rákosi and rejected Levi's position. In protest, Levi, Zetkin, and three others resigned from the Central Bureau, the day-to-day leadership body. They were replaced by new, more radical leaders, who had been critical of the party's united front initiatives. Zinoviev, addressing a Russian party congress, greeted the overturn.[15]

There were precedents in Communist history for Zetkin's demonstrative resignation. Zinoviev himself had quit the Bolshevik Central Committee in this manner only a few days before the October 1917 insurrection that established Soviet power. However, the resignation of Zetkin and her allies from the German leadership had disastrous results. The new leadership viewed it as disloyal – an act of desertion. Moreover, it placed Zetkin outside the day-to-day leadership discussions during the decisive events that soon followed.

In March, the KPD, with strong encouragement from ECCI envoys, put the "offensive" concept into action, attempting to launch an insurrectional general strike based on the party's forces alone. The so-called "March Action" was a costly failure, but party leaders held to their course. Paul Levi publicly denounced the party's conduct as a "putsch," an action for which he was expelled.

Correction at World Congress

This left Zetkin as the most prominent advocate of a united front course in the KPD and the International. At the April 7-8 meeting of the KPD's Central Committee, she condemned the party's Bureau for having abandoned the Open Letter and the alliance with Soviet Russia and for launching the party on a confrontation course that excluded the masses. "Party campaigns can prepare the road for mass action, can provide goals and leadership for them, but cannot replace them," her proposed resolution stated.[16]

Yet Zetkin stood almost alone, surrounded by "a frigid wall of rejection, mistrust, and hostility" and branded as an "opportunist" and "renegade," writes biographer Louise Dornemann. Zetkin "felt herself dreadfully alone, as never before in her life." [17]

When the International met in congress in Moscow, in June, Zetkin found support. Lenin and Leon Trotsky launched a campaign to overturn the ultraleft “Theory of the Offensive” and won the International to a course similar to what Zetkin had advocated.

Meanwhile, the dispute among German Communists raged at the congress, with Zetkin leading the critics of the March Action. In her view, the party leaders had shown no sense of reality. “They treated ... trends as already-existing facts,” she said. “Concentrating on what was conceivably possible, they overlooked what was real. They believed that a resolution concocted in a test tube ... could master the situation and instantly reorient the party rank and file,” who were entirely unprepared.[18]

In a compromise decision, the congress adopted the essence of the political course that Zetkin had advocated. This outcome opened the door to the International’s adoption of the united front policy in December 1921. It enabled Zetkin to carry out two years of fruitful work as the International’s best-known non-Russian leader.

United front in practice

As the head of the Communist International’s work among women, Zetkin sought to imbue it with united front concepts. This work was never a high priority for party leaders, and women made up at best 10 per cent of the total membership. Still, the Communist Women’s International had its own publications and conferences both internationally and nationally, which reached far beyond the party membership. Zetkin “wanted to win not only women [industrial] workers, but women who were office employees, peasants, civil servants, intellectuals,” writes biographer Gilbert Badia. “She favoured appealing to Social Democratic women, setting aside invective in order to win a hearing.”[19]

In the mid-1920s, as the International was bureaucratized under Stalin, the Communist Women’s International was among the first victims. In 1925, Zetkin’s international women’s magazine was shut down as “too costly”; the next year, over strenuous objections by Zetkin and her colleagues, the women’s secretariat was dissolved and formation of further women’s organizations prohibited, amid warnings regarding “feminism” and “Social Democratic methods.”[20]

Zetkin also was among the central leaders of two organizations established to coordinate solidarity across borders: International Workers Aid, which provided humanitarian relief, and International Red Aid, which defended victims of political persecution. Established to help counter the famine in Russia in 1921, the Workers’ Aid soon had 200,000 people fully under its care; it then provided funds for industrial development equal to half what the Soviet government summoned up from its own resources. This vast effort rested on worker donations and also contributions from more affluent friends of Soviet Russia; even some banks were induced to provide loans.[21]

These efforts were organized on a non-partisan basis; sponsors included Anatole France and Albert Einstein.[22] But later, in the Stalin era, the non-partisan principle could not survive. Despite Zetkin’s vehement protests, these organizations were purged in the late 1920s, eliminating all critics of Stalin, including her closest collaborators.[23]

Zetkin was an exponent of the concept of a workers' government, that is, a government based on the mass movement of working people and acting in their interests. This was an application of the united front that originated in Germany and became part of the political tool-chest of communists in Lenin's time. I leave this topic for separate discussion.[24]

Unity with the peasants

The Bolsheviks' agrarian policies, aimed at forging an alliance with small-scale, exploited farmers, had aroused objections from many Marxists elsewhere in Europe, including Rosa Luxemburg. Zetkin, however, in a November 1922 speech on the fifth anniversary of Soviet power, emphasized the Bolsheviks' achievements in reaching out to the peasantry. In the following passage, she expresses a thought that I have not found elsewhere in world communist literature of the time.

“Among the Russian poor peasants,” Zetkin said, “there are old and deeply felt traditions of indigenous village communism that have not entirely died away. They have been sustained and reinforced by primitive religious feelings that view all property as ultimately from God, as God's property.... And these beginning of communist understanding are systematically encouraged and promoted by the measures of the proletarian state.”[25]

This conception reaches back to ideas of Marx that were unknown in Zetkin's time, and reaches forward to the positions of José Carlos Mariátegui of Peru and Marxists today regarding survivals of original communism among indigenous peoples.

Uniting creative producers

The dominant event in European politics in the 1920s was the rise of fascism, which triumphed in Italy in 1922, and was then gaining strength in Germany. Zetkin made an important contribution to Marxism's understanding of this unprecedented phenomenon.

Zetkin believed that in these conditions of generalized social crisis, the workers' united front must be extended far beyond the industrial proletariat. Her distinctive approach is indicated by a word used by her, and only by her, with reference to the forces that must be united: die Schaffenden, a German word combining the meaning of “producers” and “creators.” The Schaffenden, Zetkin says, are “all those whose labour, be it with hand or brain, increases the material and cultural heritage of humankind, without exploiting the labour of others.”[26] They include many who are not exploited wage labourers – whether fishers, artists, or physicians – but are nonetheless victims of capitalism whom the proletariat must strive to win.

Commenting on a strike by German civil servants working on the railways, she viewed it as symptomatic of disintegration in the German state. Communists should “develop their ties among all public employees – not just railwaymen and postal workers but teachers, judicial clerks, etc.”[27]

Addressing a united-front anti-fascist conference in 1923, Zetkin explained that “broad layers of petty bourgeois and intellectuals have lost the conditions of life of the pre-war period. They are not proletarianized but pauperized.” Their hopes in capitalist democracy have been betrayed; it

no longer produces reforms. But the proletariat offers them a road forward, because “only revolutionary class struggle wins reforms.”[28]

The struggle against fascism

Zetkin’s concept of creative producers gives depth to her analysis of fascism. Unlike other forms of right-wing dictatorship, fascism is sustained “not by a narrow caste but by broad social layers, large masses that reach even into the proletariat,” she told a Comintern conference in 1923. “We cannot defeat them through military means alone.”[29]

She regarded fascism as “an expression of the decay and disintegration of the capitalist economy and a symptom of collapse of the bourgeois state.” In these social conditions, Zetkin continued, not only is the proletariat driven into poverty, but petty-bourgeois layers, peasants, and intellectuals are proletarianized.[30]

These layers “have lost faith not only in reformist [Social Democratic] leaders but in socialism itself.”

Fascism offers a “refuge for the politically homeless and socially uprooted, who are disillusioned and deprived of the basis for living.” Yet “the vital interests of these layers is in growing contradiction to the capitalist order,” as is also their “longing to rise to a higher cultural level.” Such “despairing layers need hope, a new world outlook,” which the proletariat can provide.[31]

These ideas were taken up by the International Provisional Committee Against Fascism, formed in 1923 with Zetkin and the French author Henri Barbusse as co-chairs.[32]

Zetkin in Stalin’s Comintern

This promising beginning was undone the following year when the Communist International and its KPD reverted to a more extreme version of the ultraleftism of the “Theory of the Offensive” period. Social Democracy was now seen as a “wing of German fascism,” or, in Stalin’s word, its “twin.” The term “united front” was still used, but it was now to be a “united front from below,” that is, no appeals to leaders of other political currents; instead, attempts to win rank-and-file workers to communist-led movements.

This reversal was dictated by the tactical needs of a bureaucratic faction that ruled in Moscow, in the first stage of a process that quickly led to the Communist International’s degeneration.

Except for a partial respite in 1926-27, Zetkin now became an oppositionist, expressing her most deeply held views only in private letters, closed meetings, and confidential memos.

The then-dominant left faction of the KPD was aligned with Comintern President Gregory Zinoviev, and in 1926 they followed him into the United Opposition, led by Zinoviev and Trotsky. Zetkin allowed her animosity to the German ultralefts to colour her assessment of this new opposition. She lined up with Nikolai Bukharin, then allied with Stalin, in a combination that was promoting bureaucratization of the International. Tragically, in 1927 she vocally supported measures to expel the United Opposition’s supporters.

Only two years later, Zetkin supported the current led by Bukharin, the so-called “Right Opposition,” in its rebellion against an ultraleft turn in Stalin’s policies. Bukharin’s tendency

was defeated, and its supporters expelled or forced to recant. Zetkin alone remained at her post, never recanting her views, and proclaiming them when she could in letters, memos, and personal discussions. She made no secret of her scorn for Stalin, once writing of him, in the chauvinist idiom of the era, as “a schizophrenic woman wearing men’s pants.”[33]

During these tormented years, her health, never good, gave way. Circulatory problems increasingly impeded her walking. She suffered the after-effects of malaria, and in her last years she was almost blind.

She held to the hope that the Communist International could be reformed – as did Bukharin, Trotsky, and almost all Communist oppositionists at that time. She did not quit the official Communist movement. But she could not prevent Stalin from utilizing her enormous prestige for his own purposes.

On one occasion she managed to assert in print that she disagreed with the International’s line. Two of her closely argued critiques of Stalinist policy somehow reached independent socialist periodicals, which published them.

Zetkin’s greatest concern was the rise of German fascism. Faced with this threat, the Communist International retreated into sectarianism, branding the Social Democrats as fascist, rejecting a broad alliance against Hitlerism, and making no attempt to prepare concerted resistance. Zetkin favoured a united-front response, a position similar to that championed by Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

When the German parliament reconvened in 1932, it was Zetkin’s right, as its oldest member, to officially open the session. When she heard this, she exclaimed, “I’ll do it, dead or alive.” The Nazis vowed to kill her if she appeared. Now near death, she was carried in a chair to the speakers platform, to face an arrogant throng of uniformed Nazi deputies. Her voice, weak at first, grew in volume and passion,[34] expressing both her defiance and her insight into how the fascist menace could be defeated:

“The most important immediate task is the formation of a United Front of all workers in order to turn back fascism.... Before this compelling historical necessity, all inhibiting and dividing political, trade union, religious and ideological opinions must take a back seat.”[35]

Nonetheless, the German workers’ movement went down without making a stand. In the early months of 1933, the Nazis took power and crushed the Communist Party and the workers’ movement.

Clara Zetkin died in July that year. It was a time of defeat and demoralization. Had she lived five years longer

That would make it 1938. Didn’t the right turn occur a bit earlier, in 1934-35? , she would have witnessed the Communist International turn sharply to the right, embracing alliance with bourgeois forces in defence of capitalism, while Stalin organized the murder of almost all her friends and colleagues then living in the Soviet Union.

What does Clara Zetkin say to us today? Let me suggest three points:

1. Political conditions and class relations have changed enormously since Zetkin's time. But her insistence on the need for unity in action on the road toward workers' power remains valid.
2. As a communist leader, Zetkin was distinguished by her attention and sensitivity to the moods of more backward and more privileged working people. A revolutionary party leadership should not consist solely of such leaders. On the other hand, such a leadership needs to encompass this outlook. Zetkin's example illustrates the need for inclusivity and breadth in the leadership of a revolutionary party.
3. Clara Zetkin was often wrong, sometimes tragically so. Yet she succeeded in contributing enormously to the struggle for human liberation in her time. She provides an example of what we, working together, can achieve in the coming decades.

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Biographical Note:

Zetkin: A Life of Struggle for Socialism

Clara Zetkin was one of the most prominent leaders of the world movement for socialism from 1890 until her death in 1933.

Zetkin was born in 1859 in Saxony, when it was still one of several dozen German feudal principalities then in the earliest stages of industrialization. Trained as a teacher, in 1878 she joined the German socialist movement, later known as the SPD. The repressive policies of the newly established German empire forced her into exile in 1882. She returned in 1890 and joined her party's publishing apparatus as editor of a woman's rights magazine, *Die Gleichheit*(Equality).

Ten years later, Zetkin joined her close friend Rosa Luxemburg in opposing the "revisionist" policies of Eduard Bernstein, who had abandoned the goal of socialist revolution. She also led the struggle to win the Socialist International to a campaign for women's personal freedom, political rights, and to equality on the job.

During the first years of the new century, Zetkin resisted the SPD leadership's drift to the right and took part in the initial steps towards creation of a revolutionary opposition current. When war broke out in 1914, the SPD leaders betrayed socialist principles by committing the party to support of German government's war effort. Zetkin was among the first party leaders to protest. In 1915, she convened a socialist women's conference that was the first international gathering to reassert the principle of unity of working people across the battle lines.

Zetkin joined Luxemburg during the war in launching the Spartacus League, the revolutionary current that founded the German Communist Party in January 1919. *Gleichheit* was reborn under her editorship as *Kommunistin* (Communist Woman). She served as an elected deputy in Germany's parliament from 1920 until her death. From 1921, she supported the wing of the German party most committed to the united front policy. She was a prominent leader of resistance to international fascism.

Zetkin headed the Communist Women's International from 1921 until its dissolution in 1926. During this period, and until her death, she worked primarily in Moscow as part of the Communist International's apparatus. She carried out major responsibilities in international efforts to defend workers from political repression.

In 1928, Joseph Stalin imposed an ultraleft policy on the International, rejecting the united front approach. Zetkin strongly opposed this turn. Defeated but unrepentant, she continued her work in the International until her death near Moscow in 1933.

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Notes

- [1] Lenin, whom Russian communists often called "the old man," was born 13 years after Zetkin.
- [2]. See John Riddell, ed., *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International* (New York: Monad Press, 1984) 276-79.
- [3] Riddell, *Lenin's Struggle* 172.
- [4] Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution 1917-1923* (London: Merlin Press, 2006) 468-69; Arnold Reisberg, *An den Quellen der Einheitsfrontpolitik* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1971) 50-51.
- [5] Reisberg 51-53.
- [6] Reisberg 53-62, 65-67.
- [7] Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten, *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1986) 99-101.
- [8] The winning of women's suffrage had been one of the gains of the German revolution of 1918; only then was Zetkin eligible to stand for election.
- [9] Reisberg 71. Zetkin's statement recalls a passage in the "Communist Manifesto": "The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984) 502-503.
- [10] Koch-Baumgarten 81. Lenin, " 'Kommunismus,' " in *Collected Works* vol. 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960-71) 165-67.
- [11] Broué 473.
- [12] Reisberg, 97; Koch-Baumgarten, 87.
- [13] Zetkin, "Die Lehren des deutschen Eisenbahnerstriks," in *Kommunistische Internationale* 20 (1922), 1.
- [14] Quoted by Trotsky in *Protokoll des III Weltkongresses der Kommuinistischen Internationale*(Hamburg: Verlag der Kommunistischen Internationale, 1921) 274.
- [15] The complex story of the Italian split and its impact on German Communists is well told by Broué 474-90.
- [16] Reisberg 125.
- [17] Luise Dornemann, *Clara Zetkin: Leben und Wirken* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1973) 423.
- [18] *Protokoll des III Weltkongresses* 601.
- [19] Gilbert Badia, *Clara Zetkin, féministe sans frontières* (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1993) 256.

[20] Badia 257; Bernhard Beyerlein, "Zwischen Internationale und Gulag. Präliminarien zur Geschichte der internationalen kommunistischen Frauenbewegung (1919-1945). Teil 1." in *The International Newsletter of Communist Studies Online*, vol. 12 (2006), no. 19, 38-42.

[21] *Protokoll des Vierten Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Hamburg: Verlag der Kommunistischen Internationale, 1923) 550, 555

[22] Badia 265

[23] Badia 267.

[24] See Zetkin, "Die Arbeiterregierung," *Die Kommunistische Fraueninternationale* 9-10 (1922): 651-57.

[25] *Protokoll des Vierten Kongresses* 250.

[26] From a speech to the German Reichstag (parliament), March 7, 1923, published that year by the KPD and quoted in Tânia Puschnerat, *Clara Zetkin: Bürgerlichkeit und Marxismus* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2003) 346.

[27] Zetkin, "Die Lehren des deutschen Eisenbahnerstriks," in *Kommunistische Internationale* 20 (1920) 8.

[28] Zetkin, "Kampf gegen den internationalen Faschismus," in *Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz* 52 (1923) 418.

[29] *Protokoll der Konferenz der erweiterten Executive der Kommunistischen Internationale Moskau 12-23. Juni 1923* (Hamburg: Verlag Carl Hoym, 1923) 205.

[30] *Protokoll der Konferenz* 205-209.

[31] *Protokoll der Konferenz* 222.

[32] Puschnerat 283

[33] Puschnerat 374.

[34] Badia 302-303.

[35] Philip S. Foner, ed., *Clara Zetkin: Selected Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1984) 174.

Socialist Voice #430, April 25, 2010

China Challenges U.S. Hypocrisy on Human Rights

Introduction by Fred Feldman

On March 5, 2010, the government of the People's Republic of China issued a detailed report entitled "The Human Rights Record of the United States in 2009." It is a unique document in world diplomatic history.

The U.S. government annually issues reports on the "human rights" records of various countries. Almost invariably these are oppressed nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Washington always gives its imperialist allies a passing grade, and the State Department never fails to give the United States an A+. Some countries regularly receive bad grades: Venezuela, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Iran, North Korea, Nicaragua.

The ratings of other countries swing up and down. One that is receiving worse grades now, as its relations with the United States get more strained, is China.

The actual level of political freedom among these countries varies widely, but this is not the basis of the selection. The real message from the U.S. government to the targeted country (and "targeted" is the right word) is: "We have issues with you. Settle them to our satisfaction and you may get a better grade. Refuse to do as we demand of you, and these charges will be used to justify a hostile international campaign, subversion, sanctions, or even war."

An example of how little Washington's talk about human rights has to do with political and cultural freedom is the shifting position of Washington on Honduras since the overthrow of President Zelaya. At first, the Obama administration claimed to oppose the coup, which was an embarrassment to Washington's democratic posturing, but now, since a rigged election was held, it has shifted to strongly defending the coup regime, even though attacks on democratic rights are rising and death squads have taken dozens of lives of oppositionists.

Usually governments that are targeted by these reports make a minimal response. They deny or dismiss the charges, they denounce hypocrisy and intervention in their political affairs and then, at least publicly, they let the matter drop.

But China's government had a more creative response. It noticed that,

"as in previous years, the [U.S.] reports are full of accusations of the human rights situation in more than 190 countries and regions including China, but turn a blind eye to, or dodge and even cover up rampant human rights abuses on its own territory."

So they prepared a thorough and carefully produced report on the human rights situation in the United States. They did not focus on refuting or confirming or correcting errors in any of the charges against China. Instead they focused on the deteriorating situation of democratic and social rights in the U.S. And they included a stern admonition to the U.S. government to clean up its act.

The result is a powerful, well-documented, and actually chilling indictment, which deserves to be widely read and studied by as many people as possible. It is a real contribution from China to the work of fighters for social and political justice internationally, and especially, of course, in the United States. I have never seen this material put together in one concise, pamphlet-sized and readable package.

The document includes sections on crime and violence, surveillance and secrecy, prison abuse including rape and the spread of AIDS, discrimination against Blacks and Latinos, attacks on women's rights, U.S. attempts to control and monopolize the Internet, unemployment, health care, the treatment of children, torture, and other matters.

Two areas that were passed by were the death penalty, which both China and the United States use, and abortion rights, probably because of the Chinese government's reliance on obligatory abortion as a method of birth control.

The report makes no effort to defend the practices of the Chinese state on any of these issues. I think this is positive, because it suggests that there may be room for improvement in the areas of political rights and social conditions there as well.

The report concludes:

“We hereby advise the U.S. government to draw lessons from the history, put itself in a correct position, strive to improve its own human rights conditions and rectify its acts in the human rights field.”

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The following excerpts from the 8,000-word report, “The Human Rights Record of the United States in 2009,” were selected by Fred Feldman from the English text published by Xinhua.

Life, property, and personal security

The United States ranks first in the world in terms of the number of privately-owned guns. According to the data from the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), American gun owners, out of 309 million in total population, have more than 250 million guns. In the United States, about 30,000 people die from gun-related incidents each year (The China Press, April 6, 2009).

According to a FBI report, there had been 14,180 murder victims in 2008 (USA Today, September 15, 2009).

Campuses became an area worst hit by violent crimes as shootings spread there and kept escalating. The U.S. Heritage Foundation reported that 11.3 percent of high school students in Washington D.C. reported being “threatened or injured” with a weapon while on school property during the 2007-2008 school year. (Heritage Center for Data Analysis, School Safety: New Data for the 2007-2008 School Year, <http://www.heritage.org>).

In New Jersey public schools, a total of 17,666 violent incidents were reported in 2007-2008 (NJ New Jersey Department of Education, October 2009, <http://www.state.nj.us>).

Civil and political rights

According to a New York Police Department firearms discharge report released on Nov. 17, 2009, the city's police fired 588 bullets in 2007, killing 10 people, and 354 bullets in 2008, killing 13 people (<http://gothamist.com>, November 17, 2009).

According to the Amnesty International, in the first ten months of 2009, police officers in the U.S. killed 45 people due to unrestrained use of Taser guns. The youngest of the victims was only 15. (<http://theduckshoot.com>).

Prisons in the United State are packed with inmates. According to a report released by the U.S. Justice Department on Dec. 8, 2009, more than 7.3 million people were under the authority of the U.S. corrections system at the end of 2008. About 2.3 million were held in custody of prisons and jails (<http://mensnewsdaily.com>, January 18, 2010).

According to the U.S. Justice Department, reports of sexual misconduct by prison staff members with inmates in the country's 93 federal prison sites doubled over the past eight years. It was estimated that there were at least 60,000 rapes of prisoners across the United States during the same period (NYT, June 24, 2009).

According to a report from the U.S. Justice Department, a total of 20,231 male inmates and 1,913 female inmates had been confirmed as HIV carriers in the U.S. federal and state prisons at yearend 2008. (<http://thecrimereport.org>, December 2, 2009).

A report by the Human Rights Watch released in March 2009 said although the New York State prison registered the highest number of prisoners living with HIV in the country, it did not provide the inmates with adequate access to treatment, and even locked the inmates up separately, refusing to provide them with treatment of any kind. (www.hrw.org, March 24, 2009)

Poverty led to a sharp rise in the number of suicides in the United States. It is reported that there are roughly 32,000 suicides in the U.S. every year, nearly double the cases of murder, which numbered 18,000 (<http://www.time.com>).

The population in hunger was the highest in 14 years. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported on Nov. 16, 2009, that 49.1 million Americans living in 17 million households, or 14.6 percent of all American families, lacked consistent access to adequate food in 2008, up 31 percent from the 13 million households, or 11.1 percent of all American families, that lacked stable and adequate supply of food in 2007, which was the highest since the government began tracking "food insecurity" in 1995 (NYT, November 17, 2009; 14.6% of Americans Could Not Afford Enough Food in 2008, <http://business.theatlantic.com>).

Racial discrimination is still a chronic problem of the United States. Black people and other minorities are the most impoverished groups in the United States. According to a report issued by the U.S. Bureau of Census, the real median income for American households in 2008 was \$50,303. That of the non-Hispanic white households was \$55,530, Hispanic households \$37,913, Black households only \$34,218.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, by the end of 2008, 3,161 men and 149 women per 100,000 persons in the U.S. Black population were under imprisonment (www.ojp.usdoj.gov).

The number of life-imprisonment-without-parole sentences given to African-American young people was ten times of that given to white young people in 25 states. The figure in California was 18 times.

In major U.S. cities, there are more than one million people who were stopped and questioned by police in streets, nearly 90 percent of them were minority males. Among those questioned, 50 percent were African-Americans and 30 percent were Hispanics. (The China Press, October 9, 2009).

A report released by New York City Police Department, of the people involved in police shootings whose ethnicity could be determined in 2008, 75 percent were Black, 22 percent were Hispanic; and 3 percent were white (NYT, November 17, 2009).

Since the Sept. 11 event, discrimination against Muslims is increasing. Nearly 58 percent of Americans think Muslims are subject to “a lot” of discrimination, according to two combined surveys released by the Pew Research Center. About 73 percent of young people aged 18 to 29 are more likely to say Muslims are the most discriminated against (<http://www.washingtontimes.com>, September 10, 2009).

Immigrants live in misery

According to a report by the U.S. branch of Amnesty International, more than 300,000 illegal immigrants were detained by U.S. immigration authorities each year, and the illegal immigrants under custody exceeded 30,000 for each single day (World Journal, March 26, 2009).

At the same time, hundreds of legal immigrants were put under arrest, denied entry or even sent back under escort every year (Sing Tao Daily, April 13, 2009). Tens of thousands of longtime residents of cities like Los Angeles and Philadelphia were sent, by force, to remote immigrant jails in Texas or Louisiana (NYT, November 2, 2009).

The New York City Bar Association received a startling petition in October 2008 which was signed by 100 men, all locked up without criminal charges in the Varick Street Detention Facility in the middle of Manhattan. The letter described their cramped, filthy quarters where dire medical needs were ignored and hungry prisoners were put to work for \$1 a day (NYT, November 2, 2009).

Some detained women who were still in lactation period were denied breast pumps in the facilities, resulting in fever, pain, mastitis, and the inability to continue breastfeeding upon release (www.hrw.org, March 16, 2009).

A total of 104 people have died while in custody of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency since October 2003 (The Wall Street Journal, August 18, 2009).

Ethnic hatred crimes are frequent. According to statistics released by the U.S. Federal Investigation Bureau on November 23, 2009, a total of 7,783 hate crimes occurred in 2008 in the United States, 51.3 percent of which were originated by racial discrimination and 19.5 percent

were for religious bias and 11.5 percent were for national origins (www.fbi.gov). Among those hate crimes, more than 70 percent were against Black people.

On the rights of women and children

According to statistics released by the U.S. Census Bureau in September 2009, the median incomes of full-time female workers in 2008 were \$35,745, 77 percent of those of corresponding men. (The Wall Street Journal, September 11, 2009; www.census.gov, September 10, 2009).

By the end of 2008, 4.2 million, or 28.7 percent of families with a female householder where no husband is present were poor (www.census.gov, September 10, 2009).

About 64 million, or 70 percent of working-age American women have no health insurance coverage, or have inadequate coverage, high medical bills or debt problems, or problems in accessing care because of cost (The China Press, May 12, 2009).

The United States has the highest rape rate among countries which report such statistics. It is 13 times higher than that of England and 20 times higher than that of Japan (Occurrence of Rape, <http://www.sa.rochester.edu>).

According to a report released by the Pentagon, more than 2,900 sexual assaults in the military were reported in 2008, up nearly 9 percent from the year before. And of those, only 292 cases resulted in a military trial. The report said the actual numbers of such cases could be five to ten times of the reported figure (CBS, March 17, 2009).

American children suffer from hunger and cold

A report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed that 16.7 million children, or one fourth of the U.S. total, had not enough food in 2008 (The Washington Post, USA Today, November 17, 2009).

The food relief institution Feeding America said in a report that more than 3.5 million children under the age of five face hunger or malnutrition. (www.feedingamerica.org, May 7, 2009).

According to statistics from the U.S.-based National Center on Family Homelessness, from 2005 to 2006, more than 1.5 million children, or one in every 50 children, were homeless in the U.S. every year. Among the homeless children, 42 percent were younger than 6 and the majority were African-Americans and Indians (CNN.com, MSNBUC.com, March 10, 2009). In 2008, nearly one tenth of the children in the United States were not covered by health insurance.

It was reported that about 7.3 million children, or 9.9 percent of the American total, were without health insurance in 2008. On August 13, 2009, a state board voted that California will begin terminating health insurance for more than 60,000 children on October 1. The program could ultimately drop nearly 670,000 children by the end of June 2010 (The Los Angeles Times, The China Press, August 14, 2009).

A research led by the Johns Hopkins Children's Center showed that lack of health insurance might have led or contributed to nearly 17,000 deaths among hospitalized children in the U.S. in the span of less than two decades (Journal of Public Health, October 30, 2009).

1,494 children younger than 18 nationwide were murdered in 2008 (USA Today, October 8, 2009).

A survey conducted by the U.S. Justice Department on 4,549 kids and adolescents aged 17 and younger between January and May of 2008 showed, more than 60 percent of children surveyed were exposed to violence within the past year, either directly or indirectly. Nearly half of all children surveyed were assaulted at least once in the past year; about 6 percent were victimized sexually. (The Associated Press, October 7, 2009).

According to research of U.S.-based institution and public health media reports, in the U.S., one third of children who run away or were expelled from home performed sexual acts in exchange for food, drugs and a place to stay every year. The justice system no longer considers them as young victims, but as juvenile offenders (The China Press, October 28, 2009).

The U.S. is the only country in the world that does not apply parole system to minors. Detentions of juveniles have increased 44 percent from 1985 to 2002. Many children only committed only minor crimes.

Socialist Voice #431, April 29, 2010

Cochabamba: Climate Justice Has a New Program and New Hope for Victory

by Ian Angus

On April 22, a mass international assembly in Cochabamba, Bolivia, adopted a charter for action to protect our planet from ecological devastation.

Following the failed climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December, where Barack Obama tried unsuccessfully to impose a toothless backroom deal, Bolivian President Evo Morales invited “the peoples of the world, social movements and Mother Earth’s defenders, . . . scientists, academics, lawyers and governments,” to attend a conference “to define strategies for action and mobilization to defend life from Climate Change and to defend Mother Earth’s Rights.”

That call struck a chord with activists around the world. Despite the volcanic ash that prevented many European delegations from attending, more than 30,000 people from over 100 countries took part in the *World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth* in the central Bolivian city of Cochabamba, April 19-22. The participants included more than 40 official government delegations and thousands of activists and representatives of social movements.

Particularly notable was the large number of Indigenous people from throughout South and North America, who played leading roles in defining the meeting’s environmental philosophy and drawing up a program for action. Morales urged the delegates to commit to learn and benefit from the wisdom of the world’s indigenous peoples. “The peoples of the Andes believe in the concept of ‘living well’ instead of wanting to ‘live better’ by consuming more regardless of the cost to our neighbors and our environment.”

Cochabamba Protocol

Over three days and nights of intensive discussions in 17 working groups, the participants drafted a People’s Agreement that some are calling the “Cochabamba Protocol.” It places responsibility for the climate crisis on the capitalist system and on the rich countries that “have a carbon footprint five times larger than the planet can bear.”

The People’s Agreement calls on developed countries to cut domestic emission reductions to 50% below 1990 levels by 2017, and to create a “transparent and equitable” Adaptation Fund to compensate developing countries for the destruction caused by climate change.

It rejects the use of market mechanisms, in particular the World Bank’s REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) program, which purports to pay governments and companies in the South for not cutting down forests. The best way to protect forests, the Agreement says, is “to recognize and guarantee the collective rights of lands and territories, especially considering that most of the forests and jungles are in the territories of indigenous peoples and nations, and traditional farming communities.” It calls for full

implementation of the U.N. declaration on Indigenous Peoples Rights, which neither the U.S. or Canada have signed.

In view of the failure of many countries (including Canada) to honour their commitments under the Kyoto Accord, the meeting in Bolivia proposes creation of “an International Court of Climate and Environmental Justice which will have binding legal capacity to prevent, prosecute and punish States, companies and people who by act or omission cause contamination and climate change.”

And in response to the efforts of the U.S. and other countries to limit climate negotiations to a hand-picked group of so-called world leaders, the Conference calls for a worldwide “people’s referendum” on climate change, in which everyone can vote on emission reduction targets, the creation of a Climate Justice Court, the need for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, and the need to change the capitalist system.

The organizers of the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth are determined that the resolutions adopted in Cochabamba be put into action, in two parallel ways.

On one hand, the resolutions will become part of negotiations for a new climate treaty. Evo Morales told the delegates that the eight member countries of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) will go to the next round of international climate negotiations in Cancun Mexico, in December, with a submission that is “based on ... the proposals that came out of the seventeen working groups of the Cochabamba conference.”

As Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez said at the final session of the conference:

“In Cancun we cannot permit the imperial dictatorship to impose itself. We must go to Cancun to continue the battle of Copenhagen with greater fury... we are not going to allow the imposition of a document that does not include the voices of the people.”

At the same time, the Cochabamba meeting is a major step toward building a mass democratic movement against climate change. The resolutions adopted in Bolivia provide a programmatic basis for such a movement – but more importantly, the thousands of young activists who attended are returning invigorated and excited about building a movement in the streets.

As noted U.S. environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote on Earth Day, mainstream environmentalism “no longer does enough real organizing to build the pressure that could result in real change.” The impetus to change that will come from young activists, armed with a new vision of a mass movement that has the potential to force governments to adopt and implement concrete changes to cut emissions.

As Kimia Ghomeshi of the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition writes:

“I also feel incredibly empowered because what I am seeing before me, here in Cochabamba, is a truly global resistance. A resistance to the world’s greatest polluters – polluters who refuse to accept their responsibility for causing this global catastrophe. And

this movement is building, becoming more tactful, more united, more committed, with a common vision: Systems change, not climate change.”

Ghomeshi will be one of the speakers at a “Report Back from Cochabamba” meeting in Toronto on May 7. Such activists, and the movement building that such meetings can initiate, are the best hope we have that the planet can be saved.

Ian Angus is editor of the online journal Climate and Capitalism. His most recent book is The Global Fight for Climate Justice, published this year by Fernwood Publishing.

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