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Colombia

Autonomy, war, globalisation

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A WAR is raging in Colombia and many of those caught in the crossfire have been made invisible. Many readers have heard the statistics: a unionist is assassinated every three days; over the last ten years an average of one Indigenous leader has been murdered per week; 2 million of the 40 million (mainly Afro-Colombian and Indigenous) peoples have been violently displaced, living now as internal refugees. And all this before the recent launch of the U.S.'s "Plan Colombia," which will increase violent repression to dismantle resistance and improve multinational access to resources both in Colombia and, ultimately, in the region as a whole. While the Colombian State continues the peace talks of the last few years with the main guerrilla groups (the FARC and ELN) and the paramilitary, unarmed leftists in Indigenous, union, Afro-Colombian, women's and other social movements are excluded.

In response to this, the Social and Political Front (FSP) was launched in 2000 to make visible these struggles through building a unified, broad-based forum for popular struggle. It opposes Plan Colombia and neo-liberalism and defends self-determination of peoples, and wants a seat at the negotiating table. One of the groups in the FSP is Presentes por el socialismo (PPS). What follows is a translated and interpreted excerpt from a PPS document of this year entitled "Autonomy of Social Organizations [in Colombia] in Times of War and Globalisation."

Autonomy, Independence and Sovereignty in the Age of Globalisation

IN the age of intensified globalisation of the economy, winning ideological and cultural hegemony or dominance is key. Part of this is making individualism the fundamental dogma of neo-liberal ideology in an environment in which the market is all, and basic needs and human rights become internationally regulated goods and services. Neo-liberal autonomy is individual, fragmented and not a collective act.

Today, in the name of IMF-style (International Monetary Fund) autonomy, companies can negotiate directly with Colombian mayors, governors or Indigenous communities. And if Indigenous communities are fortunate enough to autonomously arrive at agreements for mineral and oil exploitation, the fragility of their social force and political and economic power in the face of trans-national power is undeniable. As such, this kind of decentralization, fragmentation and autonomy are part of a strategic plan to put an end to the little sovereign control over the exploitation of natural resources that still exists.

For those Communist parties and revolutionary forces that managed to survive and later reflect on the political defeats of the last 10 years, the problem of autonomy has been difficult to understand theoretically and then resolve. The political and social autonomy of the working class and popular movements continues to be veiled by a kind of pseudo class independence that is supposedly only guaranteed by following the directives of a political or political-military organization.

The Parties in the Armed Conflict

The armed struggle in Colombia arose linked to campesino struggles and in solidarity with workers. While for many

years its role was to be a rural complement to urban struggles, this function reached its limit and, in the last decade, their objectives became more urbanized. Rebel groups responded differently to this challenge. While the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) moved their main focus to jungle and colonization zones that later became important in drug-trafficking, the ELN (National Liberation Army) concentrated around the pipeline and in the oil production regions. Clearly, with this change in politico-military strategy, they came to exercise control in areas that ended up becoming strategically important. Their strong presence in areas that had little other institutional presence meant that the insurgent movements gradually replaced the political, economic and legal functions of the state.

When the hegemony of a leftist force is established through armed action and territorial control, the relationship that develops with social movements in these rural areas is the key to extending or limiting this hegemony in the urban and social, national and international stages. Its degree of revolutionary legitimacy is determined by the degree of direct or indirect support of social movements and general national sympathy.

On the other hand, right-wing paramilitary groups affirm their hegemony through the fascist terror of massacres and forced displacements as they prepare for the return or insertion of military institutions. The state opted for the paramilitary strategy when both the growth of the insurgency and international pressure over the Colombian armed forces' human rights violations started to worry the international and domestic ruling classes. The development of paramilitary activities through involvement in the brutal drug cartel confrontations de-legitimised the paramilitary groups from the start due to the deployment of a new level of murderous brutality that was before unknown in the wars of the continent.

A violent and anti-democratic state must have a similar paramilitary, whose activities the state denies any connection with. Its job is to do the state's dirty work so the state can be free of charges of human rights violations. It also allows the cattle ranchers, landowners and drug-traffickers that support it to maintain their political and economic power in the region. What land it accumulates today through violence, tomorrow it will sell at a high price to multinationals, along with a guarantee of no social conflict in the region. Concentrating land implies disrupting the collective resistance in rural communities, and therefore the political autonomy and independence of those who live in rural communities.

Relations Between the Insurgency and the Organized Popular Movement

The clear anti-democratic attitude of the military and paramilitary does not have such a clear counter-position in the leftist insurgency.

In the case of the two main insurgent forces of the dozen or so that exist, the FARC and the ELN, their respective 40 and 30 years of struggle for the popular and socialist cause, their own birth (in the case of the FARC) as a popular campesino self-defence force, is starting to be clouded by an ongoing sequence of errors with respect to the social movements. If these were just human errors, they would not be so serious. But when they become the main weapon of the enemy and the principal obstacle for inserting the FARC in the mass movement, the issue must be looked into thoroughly, in spite of the difficulties and resentment that may be generated.

More than once, social movements, campesinos, Indigenous peoples and even NGOs have kept quiet about their differences with, or criticisms of, the insurgents out of respect for the strategic cause that many of their members share. Today the insurgents' continuing incomprehension of the particular rights of autonomy of Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and other social movements in the areas of insurgent activity is troubling. Their militarist conception

imposes the importance of territorial control above all other social opinions and progressive or leftist politics. They have a notorious inability to consider that political positions that are better than their own can arise from social movements. To this is added the mistaken and complicated relationship that has been developed with the powerful in the zones of influence. While the insurgents charge the drug cartels a tax for their drug harvests, the cartels will in turn ask for the curbing or sidetracking of social struggles that affect them - something that has been done for the cartels not just a few times.

The grave error committed in the summary execution of three US Native and environmental rights activists in 1999 was a serious blow to the international image of the FARC. If the FARC had just respected the rights of the Native Uwa people (that the activists had come to support) who, in a virtually lone confrontation with multinational oil companies, had enough authority to demand their independence from the state, such a foolish move would never have taken place.

As well, when any of the insurgents carry out summary executions of paramilitary collaborators, public opinion sees no difference between this and that which the state carries out against the civilian population. Rarely is popular opinion sought or does the insurgency attempt to show the reasons why its military project is ethically superior.

This situation in relation to social movements showed itself clearly earlier this year when the union movement was in day 21 of a general strike, facing repressive forces in the street as never before. Yet, while both the FARC and the ELN were right then in the peace dialogue process, they ignored or hardly mentioned in their speeches this heroic popular struggle. This was not because the insurgents did not think they were valid; it was because for many years now they have underestimated the capacity of the union movement to put up such a struggle and, at the same time, because they felt that such struggles were secondary to, or competing with, the peace stage that the insurgents had been able to erect. And all this when separating the social conflict and the armed one was the central political objective of the government.

This happens on the left when it is decided from above to defer the unions' and popular struggles' urgent demands in favour of a position more in line with the peace agenda. The result though can be demobilization and disillusion. It only works when the will of the mass struggle directs the process and the making of such decisions - not when agreements are made by those at the top in the interests of a specific group who, by itself, cannot guarantee victory.

The PPS has also confronted the labour movement for first harshly criticizing the guerrillas for their lack of public support for union struggles, then later saying that the labour movement should not be part of the peace talks as they needed to maintain their autonomy. Class autonomy and independence in relation to peace and political processes must be expressed programmatically, rising above the limits of a set of peace negotiations, but not by isolating the social movement from fundamental political arenas. The labour officialdom still sees the solution to the armed conflict as a task external to the workers' and popular movements and one to be left to official political parties who would treat the struggles in the usual top-down way.

Even if the laws of war are not the same as those of social and political life, the problem is deeper than this. The PPS does not believe that just because arms are taken up in revolutionary struggle, authoritarian conduct has to be developed. There are other issues too. The political education of the combatants - with all the difficulties this implies in the middle of a war - could be grounded in the perspective that each daily act must reflect the condition of representatives of the working class and campesinos, that both the party and the popular army are specialized detachments that have arisen from the oppressed and exploited but are not to take the place of, or quash, them, and that the most central part of their action is to raise the base's consciousness so that it sees itself as a ruling class of society. If these were the basic axes of the practical political development of the combatants, half of the errors that occur would not be committed.

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