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Eyewitness to the Americas Social Forum

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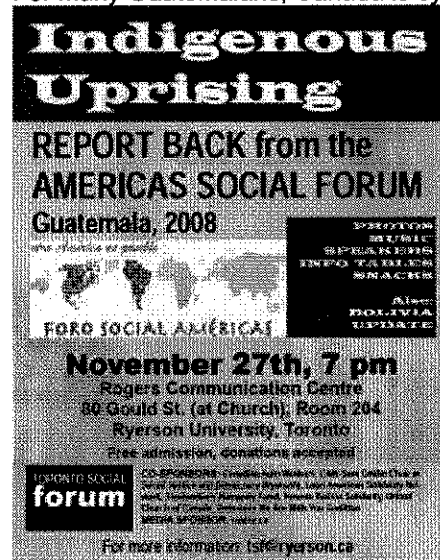
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For many Guatemalans, Canada is synonymous with harsh mining practices



[1]

Just as economies and financial markets were crashing worldwide, more than 7,000 social activists from some 350 organizations throughout the western hemisphere gathered in Guatemala City, October 7 to 12, for the third [Americas Social Forum](#) [2].

Their goal was to elaborate a more democratic and humane vision for the Americas - a vision of strengthened community control that is increasingly coherent as neoliberal corporate systems implode.

Hopeful alternatives emerging in Latin America

The Americas Social Forum gathers social movements from South, North and Central America, as well as the Caribbean. It is our hemisphere's component of the [World Social Forum process](#) [3] which began in Porto Alegre Brazil in 2001. Under the slogan "otra America es posible," the Forum aims to map out popular alternatives to the [Washington Consensus](#) [4] of privatization, free trade and investor rights.

It is in Latin America, in countries like Bolivia, Venezuela, Cuba and Ecuador that a [hopeful alternative](#) [5] to corporate globalization and hemispheric free trade is being made real today. That alternative now formally links six countries of Latin America through the [Bolivarian Alternative to the Americas Agreement \(ALBA\)](#) [6].

Guatemala: The war against the indigenous continues by other means

This year's Americas Social Forum was held in the capital of Guatemala, a country with a very recent [history of tragedy and resistance](#) [7]. The vicious 36-year war against Guatemala's indigenous peoples and democratic forces by the country's oligarchs and their international corporate backers officially ended in 1996. Yet, despite the

genocidal murders of an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans by government and paramilitary forces, not a single military officer, police chief or dictator who planned or directed the massacres has ever been brought to trial.^[8] An end to that impunity is a consistent demand of Guatemalan progressives.

Today, the country is governed by a centrist coalition headed by Alvaro Colom of the social democratic National Union of Hope party. The leftward trend for governments throughout Latin America is having some influence in Guatemala too, but the failure to bring to justice the murderers of the war period is a dark cloud which still hangs over the country.

Canadian mining companies such as Goldcorp have a big role in Guatemala. A protestor was killed blockading a road to Goldcorp's unpopular and environmentally damaging Marlin project.^[9] The company is pressing ahead with the project despite widespread community opposition. For many Guatemalans, Canada is synonymous with harsh mining practices.

An estimated 80 per cent of Guatemalans are indigenous - the highest proportion of indigenous people of any country in Latin America. There were numerous indigenous representatives at the forum, particularly Mayans from Guatemala and southern Mexico.

NAFTA, CAFTA and justice for migrant workers

Protection of indigenous rights to land, water and community, as well as improved human rights, were a frequent theme of discussions. A direct linkage was often made between modern indigenous struggles and international investor rights agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Those free trade policies are forcing farmers from their land, pushing them to seek work in cities, in maquila factories or to migrate northwards.

Forced migration was a major theme of the forum. The slogan "No one is illegal" was strongly emphasized at several workshops which planned strategies of support for the numerous migrant workers who have little choice but to leave families and communities to move north and to work without official documentation. The United Nations Convention on Rights for Migrant Workers^[10] has never been ratified by either Canada or the United States, but here in Canada the November 17 Court decision in Ontario permitting farm workers to unionize^[11] has to be very good news for temporary foreign workers throughout the country.

Regional integration, anti-militarism and women's rights

Regional integration and militarism were topics of several forum workshops. The Americas Policy Program^[12] and Hemispheric Social Alliance^[13] both sponsored discussions on the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America. The Americas Policy Program focused in on U.S. military initiatives such as Plan Mexico^[14] and Plan Merida^[15] which propose U.S. military bases for Mexico and Central America and help enforce deep integration policies under the cover of a "war on drugs."

Women's rights were explored by a strong feminist delegation. A Guatemalan Feminist Declaration^[16] was prepared which, among other things, condemned the Sandinista government of Nicaragua for its law prohibiting abortion.

'The disaster created by the capitalist system has become evident'

The Americas Social Forum was large and diverse. At any one time, there were dozens of concurrent workshops on numerous topics. Other issues covered included the contrast between fair trade and economic solidarity^[17], environmental sustainability, issues facing Latin Americans of African descent and forms of local democracy. Bolivian President Evo Morales had been scheduled to attend, but could not make it due to the current struggle to implement a new, more democratic, constitution for Bolivia^[18].

Because of their size and complexity Social Forums rarely settle on specific next steps or action plans, but they are a valuable space for social movements to meet, exchange and share knowledge. The next World Social Forum will be held in Belem, Brazil from January 27 to February 1, 2009.

The third Americas Social Forum concluded with a mass march that passed by the U.S. embassy on its way to a rally at the National Palace in the main square of Guatemala City.

At the rally, a Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements^[19] was read out. Among other points, the

Declaration took note of the current economic crisis and said: "In these few days, the disaster created by the capitalist system has become evident, something those of us from the social movements have been warning about for some time."

On Thursday, November 27, the Toronto Social Forum presents 'Indigenous Uprising,' a report back on the Americas Social Forum [20] from the people who attended, as well as an update on the current situation in Bolivia.

Blair Redlin is a researcher with the Canadian Union of Public Employees. He attended the third Americas Social Forum as part of a delegation organized by Co-Development Canada [21].

summary:

Just as economies and financial markets were crashing worldwide, more than 7,000 social activists from some 350 organizations throughout the western hemisphere gathered in Guatemala City last month.

Item 1:

Photo Essay: Americas Social Forum Guatemala 2008 [22]

Item 1 (Author, Where published) :

James Rodríguez, NACLA

Item 2:

Americas Social Forum rejects neoliberalism, celebrates resistance [23]

Item 2 (Author, Where published) :

Marc Becker, Upside Down World

Item 3:

Reflections on the third Americas Social Forum [24]

Item 3 (Author, Where published) :

Michael Leon Guerrero and Cindy Wiesner, Latin American in Movement

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Blair Redlin in his own words Latin America Social Forum

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[1] http://www.rabble.ca/sites/rabble/files/node-images/ASFreportback_0.JPG

[2] <http://www.forosocialamericas.org/index.php/en>

[3] http://www.fsm2009amazonia.org.br/forum-social-mundial?set_language=en

[4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/oct/14/economy-development>

[5] <http://www.venezuelaanalysis.com/analysis/1870>

[6] <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/english/news/bolivia3.html>

[7] <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ciidh/qr/english/index.html>

[8] <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/content/view/1327/33/>

[9] <http://theyee.ca/News/2007/02/07/MarlinProject/>

[10] <http://www.unesco.org/most/migration/convention/>

[11] http://www.nupge.ca/news_2008/n18no08c.htm

[12] <http://www.americas.irc-online.org/>

[13] <http://www.web.net/comfront/hems2.htm>

[14] <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5118>

[15] <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5605>

[16] <http://www.reddesalud.org/english/sitio/info.asp?Ob=1&Id=552>

[17] <http://www.geo.coop/node/35>

[18] <http://www.javno.com/en/world/clanak.php?id=194402>

[19]

http://eng.habitants.org/the_urban_way/fsa_2008/the_assembly_of_social_movements_is_committed_to_the_integration_of_all_peoples

[20] <http://www.rabble.ca/whatsup/indigenous-uprising-report-back-americas-social-forum>

[21] <http://www.codev.org/>

[22] <http://nacla.org/node/5138>

[23] <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/content/view/1524/1/>

[24] <http://www.alainet.org/active/27195&lang=en>