

# Social movements

## bring change in Latin America

Social movements in Latin America have achieved much in the last five years. **Anna Davies-van Es** gives an overview of their achievements and assesses how radical these changes are.

Latin America represents the biggest challenge to neo-liberalism and its globalisation project. Across the world activists are eagerly watching, hopeful that the shifts leftwards will present the world with alternatives to neo-liberal hegemony.

As yet there has been no widespread revolutionary transformation of property or social relations of production. However, some states are using their power to secure national resources in order to finance social welfare similar to the social democracies in Europe between 1946-1960. In addition, the shift left can be seen in the factory take-overs, land redistribution and invasions, attempts at participatory democracy, political representation of indigenous people and the rising resistance to US imperialism. The growth of the World Social Forum process also counts as a victory.

### BRIEF BACKGROUND

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Latin America experienced what has been called the 'golden age of imperial pillage'. During this time massive legal and illegal transfers of wealth flowed from Latin America to the US and the EU (European Union) facilitated by institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and, later on, through the World Trade Organisation (WTO). US control was enforced through the co-option of local elites, economic blockades and military threats. This was further entrenched through regional trade agreements favouring US interests like the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (ALCA) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The neo-liberal prescriptions of the IMF were followed in full with Latin American rulers faithfully carrying out privatisation, running public services like private businesses, selling off lucrative public enterprises, cutting taxes on corporations, removing restrictions on trade and financial flows, deregulating markets and forcing people to pay for public services.

The continued pillage coupled with the impact of neo-liberalism led to socio-economic crises and near collapse of the imperialist model of capital accumulation in Argentina (1998-2002), Ecuador (1996-2006), Bolivia (2002-2005) and Brazil (1998-2005).

During this time Latin American governments were unresponsive to the needs of the majority. Political life was dominated by the descendants of white Europeans who accumulated ownership and capital in the hands of the white elite, foreign nationals and multinational corporations (MNCs). The descendants of the indigenous people and the black slaves were marginalised and male supremacy strengthened.

During the 1960s and 1970s left wing guerrilla movements were crushed, trade union leaders killed and incarcerated and communist parties either became reformist or disintegrated. Into this vacuum has stepped a collage of social movements throughout the continent.

### RISE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ACROSS SOUTH AMERICA

In the context of mass poverty and the failure of traditional left parties, socio-political movements emerged generating large-scale popular uprisings throughout most of Latin America in the 1990s. Mass social movements won important victories against neo-liberalism, taking over large territories and crucial aspects of society. Examples include the take-over of many businesses by workers in Argentina, land invasions and participatory budgets in Brazil, as well as community governments and land take-overs by the Zapatistas in Mexico.



*Bolivian President-elect Evo Morales*



*Michelle Bachelet sworn in as Chile's first woman president*

The popular uprisings continent-wide deposed ten neo-liberal client 'Presidents' installed under the patronage of the US/EU (three in Ecuador and Argentina, two in Bolivia, one in Venezuela and Brazil). The end of these presidents did not mean the end of globalisation. It remains a continent full of neo-liberal regimes. But important victories were won by the working classes in a number of countries.

People are challenging the domination of political power by white European descendents and indigenous majorities are starting to have representation, including the election of President Evo Morales in Bolivia.

In Bolivia, from 2002 to 2005 there were mass struggles involving new social movements, particularly amongst the indigenous people. At Cochabamba activists successfully reversed the privatisation of their water. In 2005, mine workers went on strike to call for the nationalisation of the mines and forced new general elections.

In Venezuela, successive attempts by the conservative minority to win referendums against President Hugo Chávez have failed and a US-backed coup attempt to kidnap him failed when a mass uprising led to his



*Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez*

release. Pressure from former workers resulted in Chávez's government making it policy to expropriate and re-open abandoned companies. By October last year some 800 companies were earmarked for expropriation and a movement for the recovery of companies was born.

In Argentina the debt crisis and collapse of the peso in 2002 led to banks freezing people's accounts overnight. Mass strikes and stayaways led to four pro-IMF/US governments collapsing in three months in 2002/3. The Sindicato de Amas de Casade Santa Fe (Housewives Trade Union of Santa Fe) was key to protest against economic crisis in Argentina. In December 2001, a mass march of women banging pots and pans

flooded the streets to protest against the bankrupt Argentinean economy and a decade of government corruption, sales of public utilities, and systematic destruction of industry which made millions unemployed.

Argentina has also seen the rise of the neighbourhood movements, the piqueteros, and a new, more militant, trade union movement. Workers have occupied and run some factories. As a result of pressure from social movements, the government of Kirchner, although pro-capitalist, has adopted a defiant stand on debt repayments to the IMF.

Since 1996 radical social movements arose throughout Ecuador. National Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), an alliance of social movements, emerged and then floundered as a result of uncritical support for the populist Gutierrez for president in 2002. Since then, however, CONAIE in alliance with mass urban trade unions, has been effective in derailing ALCA and cancelling oil contracts with Occidental Petroleum, a US oil company. They are now threatening to oust interim President Alfredo Palacio if he does not end free trade negotiations.

Brazil experienced a rise of the landless workers' movement (MST). Its members occupied the land of large landowners and then began to run farms as democratic co-operatives. The workers' party (PT) backed by the trade union federation (CUT) won key state elections including Rio Grande do Sol and municipal elections in Porto Alegre and Sao Paulo and started experimenting with forms of participatory democracy.

In 1999, the Zapatistas, a social movement of poor peasants in Mexico's poorest province, Chiapas, began to challenge the national state. It forced the state to recognise its control over the countryside in Chiapas. Strong peasant and indigenous people's movements became a feature of political life and the fight against NAFTA.



#### WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

Women form the backbone of the social movements in Latin America – including the rural and urban movements for improved living conditions, democratisation and land reclamation. There are also specific organisations of women – *movimientos populares de mujeres* (grassroots women's movements) – focusing on community

development. An example of this is the *Unidas Para Vivir Mejor* (UPAVIM, United to Live Better) collective in Guatemala which provides services for their communities funded through the sale of crafts.

Women's struggles have led to some concrete political gains. Two significant examples are the women's police stations of Brazil (1985) and the state provision of wages to housewives in Venezuela (2006). Other groups have taken action against those in power to fight for women's socio-economic rights including *Sindicato de Amas de Casade Santa Fe* (Housewives Trade Union of Santa Fe) protesting against the economic crisis in Argentina (2001).

The Zapatista movement presents the most significant challenge to patriarchy. Gender is seen at the root of the Zapatista uprising and not just a token issue and women have contributed greatly to the revolution. The Zapatista women issued *The Women's Revolutionary Act*, which made a list of demands by indigenous and mestizo women of Chiapas, and reflects the needs of women everywhere.

#### SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND ELECTORAL VICTORIES

The victories of the social movements can be seen in the election of a number of centre-left presidents who have adopted an anti-US, anti-neoliberal stance.

Mexico and Argentina are still dominated by neo-liberal governments. In the case of Brazil, Lula's election in 2001 marked the beginning of centre-left presidents in Latin America but his government has since embraced neo-liberalism. But these

governments have asserted a larger degree of independence from US imperialism because of the changes in Venezuela and Bolivia and because there are strong social movements in their countries.

In 1999 President Hugo Chavez was elected in Venezuela charting a course independent of US imperialism and instituting a series of important reforms called the Bolivarian Revolution. These include state-funded literacy, health, education and nutrition programmes. The government has raised taxes on foreign businesses, strengthened the nationalisation of the oil industry and used the revenue to support upliftment programmes. It also supported the take-over of certain factories by workers who instituted joint community-worker management. It made state-owned land available to poor people for subsistence farming.

Chávez promotes and actively implements regional integration which is a direct challenge to US and EU domination in Latin America. Venezuela has also initiated trade agreements, first with Cuba, and then with other countries, in clear opposition to the US-dominated treaties such as ALCA. Venezuela has implemented a programme of 'participatory democracy' by giving citizens more voice in the running of the state and by supporting independent community and labour organisations with state resources.

Since 1 May 2006 100 000 Venezuelan female heads of household have received 380 000 Venezuelan Bolívares per month (\$185) for domestic work (approximately 80% of the minimum wage in Venezuela). Another 100 000 more women will

begin receiving payments from the state in the next six months

In 2005, Evo Morales, a coca farmer, of the Movement towards Socialism (MAS) became the first indigenous president of Bolivia. Morales enforced the nationalisation of the gas fields and told MNCs that they must negotiate new terms for mining rights in Bolivia. He increased state revenues by extending control over private business in the energy and mining sectors. He has also expropriated under-utilised land for use by poor farmers. The outcome of these measures is still in the balance but Morales seems committed to using state power to implement changes to carry out the anti-neoliberal programme on which his government was elected.

In Nicaragua the US-backed President Enrique Bolanos faces a huge challenge from the left-wing Sandinistas as his own Liberal Party turned against him in congress and joined forces with their former rivals. The US's old foe, Daniel Ortega, currently leads in the opinion polls for forthcoming presidential elections.

In Mexico in 2006 there was some hope that the outgoing neo-liberal, Vicente Fox, would be replaced with the centre-left candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador but election polls indicate that he just lost to Felipe Calderon in the July elections (he is currently contesting the results). But the popularity of Obrador who promised pro-poor legislation and renegotiating NAFTA is a significant shift left on the doorstep of the US.

And in Chile after many years of rule by the US-installed military dictator Pinochet and a difficult shift towards democracy in the 1990s, the centre-left candidate

Michelle Bachelet (who was jailed under Pinochet's regime) won the elections in early 2006. She became Chile's first women president. Despite a 'centre-left' orientation her government however still supports neo-liberal policies.

#### HOW LEFT HAVE THEY GONE?

There is evidence that the tide of social movements was at its height in 2002 and has subsequently begun to falter. In this sense the centre-left electoral victories have occurred in the aftermath of the mass struggles of the late 1990s and early 2000s. There are therefore dangers that many leaders are being co-opted. Despite this the mass struggles of 1996-2002 have led to some significant challenges to neo-liberalism.

Despite the many challenges to the neo-liberal status quo not described above not even Bolivia or Venezuela has attempted to abolish the fundamental elements of capital production: private property, foreign ownership, profit repatriation, market access or supply of gas, energy or other primary goods nor have they outlawed future foreign investments.

For example, despite Venezuela's defiant stance to the US, MNCs are not losing their rights but merely a decrease in share of profits. Chávez's 'radical' tax and royalty increased from less than 15% to 33% which is lower than most other continents' agreements. Some analysts say that the shifts are merely towards a form of 'modern capitalism' rather than shifts left.

But the social movements of mass resistance are explicit in their policies and the implications of their positions speak of possibilities beyond social democracy. This can

be seen in the worker takeovers of factories in Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina based on co-operative systems of production and profit sharing. These present a direct challenge to the political and social relations of capital. And the experiments in radical forms of participatory democracy in Venezuela create new alternatives to social democracy.

#### CONCLUSION

For 30 years neo-liberalism has ruled the world. Now Latin American workers and poor farmers, by electing anti-neoliberal governments and experimenting with new forms of power, are a beacon of hope for activists worldwide. Even as the US more aggressively imposes its power militarily in the world there are signs that popular power is on the upsurge in imperialism's back yard.

It is an indicator of how right-wing neo-liberal ideas dominate the world that the same sorts of social democratic measures which were considered the norm in Europe post WW2 are now considered 'left-wing'. But, notwithstanding some setbacks it is clear that the golden age of pillage is over in Latin America and mass movements have demonstrated the possibilities of alternatives. While it remains to be seen if the social movements will maintain their strength and push governments beyond social democracy, Chávez and Morales' policies are a clear challenge to neo-liberalism and a victory for the mass movements that led to their elections.

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