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Progress at Foro De Sao Paulo

by LADB Staff

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On Dec. 2-5, Antigua, Guatemala, hosted the organized left from Latin America and beyond. Representatives of left parties met at the XI Foro de Sao Paulo to advance an anti-imperialist agenda and try to make some progress on a model of integration that could serve as an alternative to the neoliberalism under which the region has struggled for decades (see NotiSur, 1999-07-16). The 700 political leaders of some 142 parties and organizations from 46 countries of Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, and Oceania were particularly energized by the recent presidential elections that brought victories for Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil (see NotiSur, 2002-11-01) and Lucio Gutierrez in Ecuador (see NotiSur, 2002-12-06).

Oswaldo Palacios, spokesman for Ecuador's Partido Comunista Marxista-Leninista (PCMLE) asked for the Foro's support for Gutierrez, who was elected president with the support of the majority of Ecuadoran left organizations and parties. "There is in Ecuador a growing anti-oligarchic, anti-imperialist, and democratic spirit," he said. His enthusiasm resonated with that of Bolivians celebrating the surprisingly strong second-place showing of Evo Morales in presidential elections this past June. Morales, an indigenous leftist, might well have become president of Bolivia; the vote was tight enough that a president had to be chosen by the legislature (see NotiSur, 2002-08-09).

These outcomes prompted Pablo Ceto, Guatemalan congressional deputy to sum up for the press, "The population is beginning to opt for new leadership and for different parties to renounce neoliberal policies." Ceto represents the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), the revolutionary organization that battled government forces until the peace accords of 1966 turned his organization into a political party. German Rodas of the Partido Socialista Ecuatoriano (PSE) said that Latin America is advancing in its confrontation with the prevailing neoliberal socioeconomic model, which has generated crisis and hopelessness in the region. He expressed hope that the meeting would allow for reflection and exchange of experiences so that the parties would be able to initiate activities and actions that would permit construction of real democracy in America.

High on the list of global policies for which the Foro seeks alternatives are the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP), and Plan Colombia (see NotiSur, 2002-09-20, 2002-11-01 and NotiCen 2002-10-24). "The Foro, with the conviction that another model of integration is possible, proposes that we confront the FTAA, Plan Colombia, and the PPP with greater resistance and that we move forward with regional projects in the proposals for change," read the final document of the meetings.

The alternatives consist in reinforcing the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Comunidad Andina de Naciones (CAN), the Central American integration process, and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). "Our perspective is the construction of a Latin American Community of Nations that defends the sovereignty and wealth of its peoples." The declaration leans on the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as an example of what the Foro is

fighting, pointing out that NAFTA "has increased poverty, insecurity, disarticulation of the chains of production, and foreignization of banking, industry, and commerce.

This reaffirms what we have been saying in past meetings: FTAA as it was proposed by the United States constitutes a plan of annexation and not an accord of true integration for the Americas. Against this strategy, we propose an alternative integration that contemplates, first and foremost, the political and social dimension," read the text. To advance these objectives, the Foro agreed that it is necessary to strengthen the links among the social movements, particularly with women, indigenous peoples, campesinos, and young people.

Turning to Plan Colombia, the Foro rejected it as "constituting a strategy of United States domination in the region," which calls for the proliferation of US military bases surrounding Colombia and extending to other countries in the zone "with the complicity of some governments in detriment to their own sovereignty." Plan Colombia, in this view, "sharpens and amplifies the conflict and the humanitarian crisis. The Foro advocates negotiation and dialogue toward a political solution that resolves the original causes as the only way out of the Colombian conflict." Even with the raging US-fueled war in Colombia, social and labor organizations there have worked to stanch the growth of the neoliberal model.

"That should serve as an example to the rest of the region," said Alfredo Quin, delegate to the Foro's Andean subregion. The idea that action by one party, in one country, can serve as example to others recalls Lula's speech to the VII Foro in El Salvador, where he took the assembly to task for the self-destructive bickering among the region's left organizations. The unity of purpose he called for then appears to have been much in evidence this year in Guatemala. This year's host country was singled out at the forum as a specific area of concern.

The final document says of Guatemala, "We view with concern how the Peace Accords, which constitute an agenda for the construction of a new multiethnic, pluricultural, and multilingual nation with social justice, are replaced by neoliberal policies, and by the increase in the military budget, aggravating conditions of poverty, exclusion, and social marginalization. We appreciate the struggle of campesino and indigenous organizations for land, and we salute the preparations of the URNG for the next elections as the alternative for the real fulfillment of the Peace Accords."

It's not just "them"

One of the most pressing issues of the meeting was that of gender. In a workshop on the subject, Hermina Rodriguez Pacheco of the Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas set the tone by insisting that just as there can be no exploitation or oppression for reasons of class, ethnicity, or religion, so must there be none for reasons of gender. She said that progress on gender equity lags in Latin America, where women are not only victims of a patriarchal culture that exists throughout the world, but where women are also oppressed as a class. To that must be added the indigenous aspect, which makes the gender problem even more complex.

The issue requires a concerted and concrete social struggle, Rodriguez said. Rodriguez's concerns were incorporated into the Foro's final document: "The parties of the Foro de Sao Paulo consider

unjust the oppression for reasons of sex that women are victims of....The struggle for participation of women and men in equality of rights, opportunities, and conditions form part of our strategy since it responds to a historic responsibility of the revolutionary forces of the left to construct a framework of social relations, integrally human, based on justice and alternatives to the structures of oppression and exploitation."

The statement goes on to describe a process by which all the parties will promote discussion among leaders and members about gender relations to highlight the situation of women in each country and within each organization. From that should come a program that will spell out specific measures to be taken to advance the struggle against gender inequality. But it wasn't easy The question of gender equality on the left is a long-simmering one, its antecedents going back to the Russian revolution and coming to full boil from time to time, during peace and war.

Despite Rodriguez's words, and the issue finding its way to formal acknowledgment at the Foro as one central to the concept of justice for all, it was rough going for sexism's opponents, even in Antigua. Only 12 of the 46 countries at the Foro sent delegates to the forum on gender. Of the 77 who attended, only three were men. The subject was not included on the general discussion document prior to the meetings. Women representatives at the Foro from Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, Austria, Spain, and England formally charged that discrimination still exists against women within the left parties.

Lety Mendez of the Consejo Nacional of El Salvador's Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) explained that the scant attention paid gender issues by the parties at the meeting is because many party members still consider these as women's issues which explains the lack of men at the gender forum. In Central America, there has been a notable march backward for the participation of women in leftist organizations.

Julio Cesar Macias of the Alianza Nueva Nacion (ANN), a Guatemalan political party, said that "there are women who took part brilliantly in the armed conflict and who take part brilliantly in the construction of leftist parties. That's the case in the URNG and in the ANN. Nevertheless, in general, few have risen to decision-making roles." He added that, in the military structure of the URNG during the war, women 25% of the fighting force fought in equal conditions with men. "Now the situation is that they've gone back to the old roles: the woman in the house and the man in public and political spaces." Luz Mendez of the URNG said that one of the main causes of this situation "continues to be the unjust sexual division of labor, the undervaluation of the capacity of women within the party, and the lack of practical ways to facilitate the participation of women." Lety Mendez of the FMLN agrees.

In 1997, in El Salvador 33% of legislators were women. Now it is 23%. One countermeasure to this trend is a quota system. Most of the left parties in Latin America are said to have some variant of this idea under discussion. The URNG has adopted a Propuesta de Equidad as an internal law of the party. It guarantees that neither sex have more than 70% of available posts in internal elections, as well as in popular election candidacies.

Naturally, said URNG Secretary General Alba Estela Maldonado, the 30% would likely be the women. But even that is not a final figure. "In the campaign that we're conducting to double the party affiliation, we established that no fewer than 40% be women, to compensate for [the fact that] previously there were 25%," said Maldonado. Women in rural areas have additional difficulty in participating. The FMLN has also set quotas. Theirs are that the ratio for membership and candidates be 35:65, and within the party they have met and exceeded this, but externally there is the complication of primary elections. They can name women as candidates, but cannot get them elected in predictable numbers. These two Central American parties are at the forefront in the attack on the left's global problem of women's participation.

Not all the parties are in agreement with the concept of quotas. Manuela d'Avila of the Unidad de Juventud Socialista de Brasil said, "We are against quotas within the left organizations. Only conscience can break the difficulties of gender. An organization is only sufficiently advanced when it overcomes the problem of gender as a matter of conscience, and quotas don't resolve the problem of conscience."

In Venezuela, women have taken a more fundamental approach to "their" problem. Griselda Oliveros of the Fuerza Bolivariana de Mujeres (FBM) said that women have taken a decisive role in constructing the Bolivian Constitution. They have written into it some bedrock concepts aimed at the economic and social bases of women's exclusion. They include issues of domestic work, nonsexist language, equality in work and access to work, and social security for homemakers.

FBM has also facilitated the creation of the Banco de la Mujer, and the Instituto Nacional de la Mujer. On the basis of several measures, the Foro de Sao Paulo appears to have justification for a celebratory mood. Externally, its member parties have made important electoral gains; internally it has made progress on its attempts to end the counterproductive infighting of previous years. And with its nemesis, the US, occupied elsewhere, it looks forward to further gains. As one observer put it, "When the cat's away..."

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