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## 'leftist' Undermine People's Movements

by Guest

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During the next six months, presidential elections are taking place in Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Each race has at least one contender who blames poverty on free-market orthodoxy and who pledges a stronger government hand in the economy. Purported leftists have already taken power in several Latin American countries. But it is debatable whether any of these governments has taken significant steps against poverty. This has put poor people's organizations in a quandary: should they support a president who says all the right things but often lets them down?

### *Piqueteros (jobless) still protest, but numbers down*

Nowhere is the dilemma hotter than in Argentina. Three years into Nestor Kirchner's presidency, a third of Argentines remain mired in poverty. And the movement of unemployed protesters who enabled Kirchner to take power has split apart on what to do about it. Argentina's unemployed protesters emerged as a force in the late 1990s, when the country's economy was wallowing in recession. The protesters became known as piqueteros (pickets) because of their trademark tactic the roadblock. After Argentina's banking system collapsed in 2001, piquetero roadblocks helped bring down four presidents within two weeks (see NotiSur, 2002-01-11, 2002-02-01, and 2002-07-12). Kirchner, a left-leaning governor, eventually filled the power vacuum when he won the 2003 presidential election.

Piqueteros still hold protests, but their numbers are down. "The movement lost strength for two reasons," says Rosendo Fraga, a leading Argentine political analyst. "One, because unemployment dropped. And, two, they negotiated with the government and accepted [welfare] money." Divided movement But there is another reason the piqueteros are making less noise these days. President Kirchner has appointed some of their leaders to his administration.

"This government gives the piqueteros a place within the state, which has divided the movement," says Uruguayan journalist Raul Zibechi, who studies Latin American social movements. The examples include Jorge Ceballos, who in 2001 helped form Barrios de Pie, a piquetero network focused on nutrition. Since 2004, Ceballos has not only coordinated the network but he has directed the community-aid program of Argentina's Social Development Ministry. He accepted Kirchner's appointment, he says, because "the movement today faces a new political reality," namely a president who sympathizes with the piquetero cause.

Ceballos' group now rarely protests unless President Kirchner condones it, as the president did last year during a boycott of Shell gas stations for alleged price gouging (see NotiSur, 2005-04-15). Appointing piqueteros has also helped Kirchner generate campaign volunteers. That base helped Kirchner's wife, Cristina Fernandez, win a key Senate seat last October (see NotiSur, 2005-11-04).

But other piqueteros say working with the president amounts to treason. Their anger increased in January, when the government paid off its nearly US\$10 billion debt to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). President Kirchner had blamed IMF loan conditions for the 2001 economic meltdown (see NotiSur, 2001-08-10). Piqueteros had called on him to repudiate the debt and invest the money in social programs (see NotiSur, 2006-01-13).

"The government discourse is always that it's necessary to reform the neoliberalism of the 1990s, but they don't confront the empire," says Juan Carlos Alderete, national coordinator of the Corriente Clasista y Combativa (CCC), a piquetero group aligned with the Partido Comunista Revolucionario, Argentina's main Maoist organization.

### *Self-help approaches*

Other piqueteros believe that economic transformation depends on actions by society's poorest members. These piqueteros are pioneering self-help approaches from cooperative housing to community gardens, from sewing workshops to "factory recoveries" (see NotiSur, 2003-05-09). "We've already tried models in which decisions are made from the top," says unemployed nurse Patricia Duro, who helps run a collective bakery in Claypole, an impoverished Buenos Aires suburb. These piquetero cells often cite Argentina's neighbor, Brazil.

Impoverished Brazilians had high hopes when former union leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was elected president in 2003. But Lula has taken a go-slow approach to agrarian reform, which has disappointed Brazil's landless peasants. Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) has responded by distancing itself from the president and accelerating its takeovers of idle plots. That tactic, legal or not, has provided parcels to hundreds of thousands of Brazilians.

Zibechi, the Uruguayan journalist, says the lesson is clear. "It's important for poor people's organizations to maintain autonomy from the government and make their own decisions," he says. "And that means strong internal democracy." The Argentine and Brazilian experiences are reverberating throughout Latin America. Bolivian President Evo Morales nationalized gas and oil production this month (see NotiSur, 2006-05-12), but his fiercest critics may not be foreign energy companies.

Morales also faces battles with people at home labor unions, coca growers, landless peasants, and others who say he is not living up to his campaign promises. Organizing autonomously does have its perils. A group that spurns contact with the government and major political parties risks isolation. And, just two decades ago, much of Latin America was governed by military dictators, many of whom took power in the name of restoring order amid radical street protests.

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