

# Latin America Moves Left and Forward

by Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero

The Foro de Sao Paulo (FSP), a forum that brings together most of the Latin American left, had its 18th meeting in the Venezuelan city of Caracas on July 4–6, 2012. In attendance were representatives of practically all of the Foro's member organizations, including El Salvador's FMLN, Nicaragua's Sandinistas, Guatemala's URNG (all three of them former guerrilla groups), the Cuban Communist Party, Ecuador's Alianza PAIS, Uruguay's Frente Amplio, Bolivia's Movement Toward Socialism and the Puerto Rico Socialist Front, as well as leftist and socialist political parties from countries like Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Barbados and Argentina.

The host country's left pulled out all stops in helping to organize the event. Countless youth volunteers of the ruling party—president Hugo Chavez's PSUV—looked after every detail of logistics and protocol, and the local Communist Party, the PCV, was also out in force. There was also a substantial number of observers and dignitaries from other parts of the world, including Russia, China, Vietnam, Saharawi, Lebanon, Palestine, France, Spain and Greece. VIPs included Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú from Guatemala, and writers Ignacio Ramonet and Atilio Boron, who sat in places of honor near President Chavez at the closing activity.

Brazil's delegation, which included the ruling Workers' Party (PT) and the Communist Party (PcdoB, now celebrating its 90 years), had a commanding presence in Caracas. The PT was indeed the main driving force behind the FSP's founding, and the meeting's proceedings were presided over by the extremely capable Brazilian political strategist Valter Pomar, who is not only the Foro's executive secretary but also a member of the PT's top leadership.

Currently one of the world's leading economies, Brazil has a gross domestic product dozens of times the size of any of its neighbors'. The country's political and economic shadow looms over all South America. The PT has won the last three presidential elections—in the first two of these the winning candidate was former factory worker and labor organizer Luiz Inacio "Lula" Da Silva, and the current president is the former guerrilla and political pris-

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## Socialism is becoming an increasingly mainstream proposition except in the USA...

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oner Dilma Rouseff. It must be regarded as the most important political institution of the Latin American left and one of the single most important political parties in the hemisphere. Lula fully intended to come to Caracas but could not do so due to health problems. He did, however, send a video greeting in which he expressed support for President Chavez's reelection bid.

The FSP is definitely not to be confused with the World Social Forum, which also began in Brazil. Whereas the Social Fora are non-partisan, the Foro de Sao Paulo is openly, brazenly and proudly partisan and leftist. The terms of debate and discussion at the FSP are far to the left of what most American progressives would be willing to consider. In it there is open talk of class struggle, anti-imperialism, wealth redistribution and, yes, the dreaded "s" word, socialism. Socialism is indeed becoming an increasingly mainstream proposition all over the world—except in the USA, where the word is still used as an insult.

I must have been the only delegate in Caracas that noticed the total absence of Americans, which

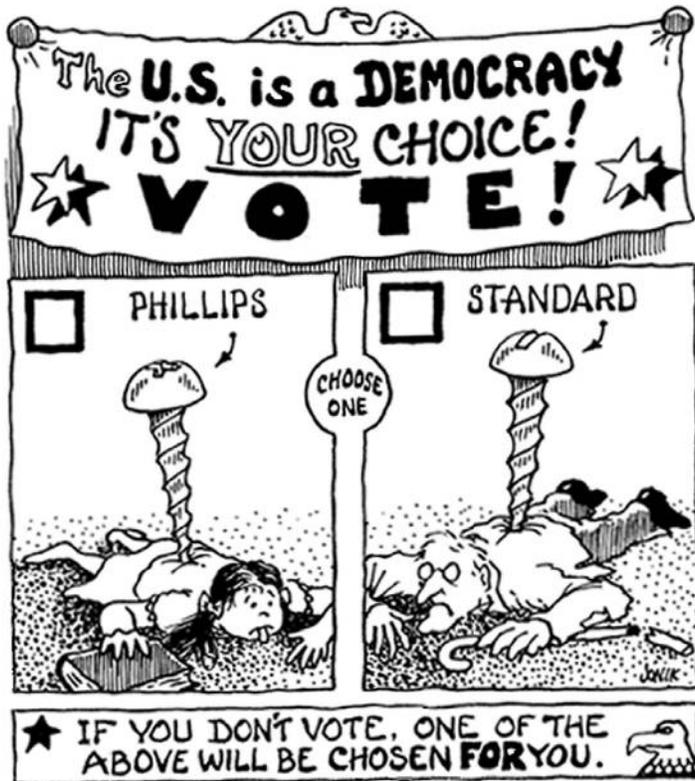
## ...the total absence of Americans says plenty about the provincialism of most American leftists and progressives.

says plenty about the provincialism of most American leftists and progressives. But on the other hand, it was also evident that the Americans were not missed at all; nobody bemoaned their absence. Latin America is increasingly looking south. Only the right wing and ruling classes are looking north for answers and help in these changing times.

## A little history

The FSP was founded in 1990, when the left was in its worst moment. The collapse of the Eastern European socialist bloc, the Soviet Union's implosion, Tiananmen Square, the Sandinista electoral defeat. But the outlook was not all bad. After all, the dictatorships in South America and the genocidal wars in Central America were coming to an end, Haiti had its first freely elected president, Mandela was free and so was Namibia, apartheid ended, the Iran-Iraq war stopped, and cold war conflict zones like Afghanistan and Angola were cooling off.

However, the new post-cold war "democracy" was a hollow political formality. The doctrine of neoliberalism reigned supreme—all talk of social justice, labor organizing and addressing economic inequality, or even merely suggesting that another world was possible, was thrown out the window.



Leftists were jumping ship all over the place, repenting of their past and repackaging themselves into something more user-friendly.

Brazil's PT, back then an opposition party, formed the Foro as a rallying point for all the stalwarts who refused to let the dream die, who insisted on believing in socialism and on choosing the difficult road, the one that leads to the rational society where there are no oppressors or oppressed.

How have times changed since then! The FMLN, which in the 1980s was an outlaw band of guerrillas that the US was bent on stamping out, won the last presidential election in El Salvador, the Sandinistas are back in power in Nicaragua, in Uruguay the leftist Frente Amplio has won its second presidential election in a row and its current president,

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### The PT's political line is felt all over the world thanks to Brazil's activist foreign policy...

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José Mujica, is a former Tupamaro guerrilla, the Cuban revolution survives, the people of Ecuador and Bolivia overthrew neoliberal governments and rewrote their countries' constitutions, and Venezuela's president Chavez, reviled by the corporate media, gets reelected again and again.

Brazil is now practically a different country. The PT has rescued the country from neoliberal stagnation and turned it into the world's sixth economy. The national oil company Petrobras is the world's second largest, larger than Microsoft and Wal-Mart. Brazil's government development bank, BNDES, is by far the largest public sector develop-

ment funder in the world—yes, larger than the World Bank. Sao Paulo's stock exchange is the world's second largest. The PT's political line is felt all over the world thanks to Brazil's activist foreign policy, which is forging solid trade and diplomatic links not only with Latin American neighbors but also with countries in Africa, the Middle East, the Asia Pacific region, China and India. Brazil is one of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries, which together are expected to outgrow the G7 economies by 2032.

And then there are the regional initiatives. The governments of Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela teamed up with civil society activists in trashing then-US president George Bush's proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas and replaced it with the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA). And in the last couple of years, under the initiative of Hugo Chávez, the region's countries are grouping together as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which explicitly excludes the US and Canada. When was the last time that the US progressive media even mentioned this last development?

### Caracas 2012

The Caracas FSP meeting took place in a context of upbeat optimism in the face of these substantial advances. But there is also concern and precaution because of the actions of an implacable enemy that refuses to give up. Only two weeks earlier Paraguay's president Fernando Lugo was overthrown by the country's right-wing and oligarch-dominated legislature. The coups d'état in recent years in Honduras, Venezuela and Ecuador—only the first of these successful—were fresh in the memory of all those present. The meeting's final document, the Caracas Declaration, stated that, "The Honduras coup and the overthrow of Fernando Lugo indicate that the right is willing to use violent means or the manipulation of institutional means to overthrow governments that do not serve its interests."

All over Caracas, on every street corner, there was overwhelming evidence that the presidential campaign had started. It is a totally polarized country. Its public life has no room for the dilettante or the undecided. The tension in the streets was palpable. The Paraguay coup and the even more recent massive electoral fraud in Mexico, courtesy of the right-wing PAN party, are making the mix more volatile. Opinion polls agreed that Chavez had a solid advantage over his rival, the reactionary Capriles-Radonsky.

The meeting's participants were emphatic in condemning the starring role of right-wing news media in the subversion against progressive governments and against the region's leftward trend (If you think Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck are bad, you should see what's on Latin America's right-wing television.) Quoting the Caracas Declaration again, "The right wing has unleashed a broad media cam-

paign operated internationally through powerful communications consortia... Major corporations develop destabilization plans and behave as factors of power, capable of placing themselves above the public powers that emanate from universal suffrage. Large media enterprises defy democracy and its institutions on a daily basis. This is perhaps one of the biggest challenges that leftist governments face: democratizing communications.”

The Caracas Declaration also included expressions of solidarity with the Haitian and Paraguayan people in their struggles against oppression, with the Colombia peace process and with presidents Correa of Ecuador and Morales of Bolivia. The document also declares support for Palestinian self-determination, for the release of Puerto Rican political prisoner Oscar Lopez, who has been incarcerated in the US for 31 years, opposition to military intervention in Syria and Iran, and has statements on other issues such as the environment and discrimination against women.

With regards to decolonization, it calls for the return of the Falkland islands to Argentina, the self-determination and independence of Puerto Rico, the decolonization of the French and Dutch Guyanas, and support for the brave struggle of Northwest Africa’s Saharai. Valter Pomar presented Ecuador’s chancellor Ricardo Patino, who was in Caracas heading his country’s delegation, with an FSP declaration calling on his country to give asylum to Wikileaks’ Julian Assange.

**A long way to go**

But let’s not fool ourselves. There is still plenty of work to do in Latin America. The process of change is riddled with contradictions, as any process of social change would be.

The region still has a long road to go towards socialism. And the failure of the FSP and leftist governments to address environmental issues in any meaningful way is nothing short of alarming. As much as Bolivian president Evo Morales and the new Ecuadorian constitution may talk about the environment,

mother earth (*pacha mama*) and right livelihood (*sumak kawsay*), the fact is that Latin America’s leftist revolution runs on oil and natural gas. Fossil fuels are an indispensable source of foreign exchange for Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, and dependence on their export is increasing.

The agribusiness model of farm production, incompatible with ecology or food sovereignty, is running amok in South America—and among the pesti-

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cide-drenched monocultures, Monsanto’s genetically engineered Roundup Ready soy is

king. The construction of mega hydro dams in the Amazon jungle (like the controversial Belo Monte project) and of super highways linking Brazil to the continent’s Pacific coast continue apace. Contrary to popular perception, bringing greens and reds together is not an easy task. One can argue that it has never been successfully done yet (the insights of social ecologist Murray Bookchin could really come in handy now).

It would be a huge disservice to uncritically worship and glorify the leftward surge and progressive governments of the new Latin America and sweep their failings and inconsistencies under the rug. But it would be equally unhelpful and unfair to dismiss them out of hand for “not being leftist enough” or for being environmentally destructive. It’s a fine line to walk. Ultimately, it is better to embrace these movements and work within them to try to steer them into the right path than to oppose them and bark at them from the sidelines. The latter course of action would play right into imperialism’s strategy.

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