

From Venezuela with Love & Solidarity

reflections from the AMI (Agricultural Missions, Inc) Agrarian Delegation to the
World Social Forum, Jan 19-31, 2006

by Stephen Bartlett (delegation co-coordinator)

February 2, 2006

Pragmatic idealism is being reborn today in Latin America. A socialism grounded in the diverse cultures and struggles of the suffering excluded ones of the 2/3rds world is rising from the ground, from the grassroots. Our 12 person agrarian delegation to the WSF in Caracas, Venezuela, hailing from the U.S., El Salvador and Chile was witness and participant to that new hope and idealism, and caught some of the smoldering fever and the passion from our brothers and sisters in struggle across the Americas.

How socialism is defined and envisioned today goes beyond rigid Marxist Leninist or even Maoist concepts, and seeks for its roots in indigenous cosmivision and collective governance practices, in a ***radically decentralized vision for a world in which, as the Zapatistas demand, all worlds fit.*** This is so even as the impoverished have-nots from the underclass of the Venezuelan people burst from the seams with hope and transforming actions to reclaim the dignity of those who previously had none. This is so as the indigenous peoples of Bolivia rise to power from the ashes of 520 years of exploitation and exclusion. This is so as the left takes political office from Brazil to Uruguay to possibly Peru and Mexico. The alternative, a continuation of neoliberal pillage and ultra exclusion and impoverishment, is simply intolerable and Latin Americans are voting with their feet and upraised fists on the barricaded streets, and they are voting at neighborhood committee meetings and in good works of all kinds, and they are voting at the polls as well. The peoples rising to action are the new superpower capable of confronting and standing down the superpower of North America and transnational commercial imperialism and economic colonialism.

It was gratifying to hear Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez Frías, outspoken promoter of a socialist future, say that socialism in its broadest sense existed in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. To hear Chávez evoke the names of Tupac Amaru, Bartolina Sisi, and Tupac Katari, the latter who before being executed declared that he would return made into millions. To hear Evo Morales leader of a socialist party upon his inauguration to the presidency of Bolivia declare that he would, in the words of Subcomandante Marcos, lead in obedience to the peoples, a concept that serves both as a fundamental principle of indigenous governance as well as of true Christianity.

But this new day is bringing not just a decentralized concept of grassroots democratic governance in obedience to the people, but also a keen sense of the need for international solidarity and coordinated and passionate global struggle and resistance. For the adversaries of the new socialist vision are centralized and global in reach, mega corporations laying waste to the environment and human aspirations for economic justice, and their international financial institutions (IFIs), the many headed hydra composed of the World Bank and

regional development banks, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the governments that do the bidding of monopoly-seeking corporate ambitions to hegemony and world market domination. In particular the governments of the G-8 fall within this rarified category of instruments of corporate domination, but the acquiescence of governments of rural elites within the peripheral or rising nation states of the global south also play to the dark vision of totalitarian commercial interests. The unpayable and illegitimate foreign debt of these countries is used to make them submit to the agendas of the IFIs, which are the agendas of the transnational corporations. And so-called free trade agreements imposed behind closed doors on increasingly desperately impoverished peoples stalk the continent like the grim reaper. The FTAA may be, as Chávez asserts, buried in Mar de Plata, but CAFTA'DR is about to take force, NAFTA continues to crush Mexican farmers, and bilateral agreements and Andean negotiations continue.

In the face of this dark cloud over all our heads, the new socialism of grassroots social movements and international networks of solidarity calls for radical globalization of the bottom-up variety. This local-global strategy of resistance could be likened to the socialist internationalism of the last century, or it could be seen as the shining anti-oxidant-rich new fruit of a world tightly wound by instantaneous global communications and swift air transportation.

It was into this positive vibration, this maelstrom of unrest and organizing, of tolerance and conviction, that our agrarian delegation plunged, ready to contribute our grain of salt but also to learn and absorb. We were also riding on the cusp of an emerging focus and emphasis, gradually come to the forefront and brought as new wine from several years of patient fermentation: the need for forging alliances and solidarity between Latin American social movements and those that exist within the United States, within the belly of the beast, as they say. Chávez had recently spoken at the United Nations on the need of the world to support and defend the poor within the United States, in the wake of the Katrina disaster, portraying the underclass within the U.S. as victim of an imperialistic, militaristic U.S. government bent on neglecting or suppressing them. This coincided with the strategy chosen by the committee of the World Social Forum, to provide a tent space for the peoples of North America to showcase their struggles and engage with representatives of Latin American organized struggles. The high-profile presence of celebrity status anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan at the WSF made this new solidarity connection even more poignant.

To our great satisfaction, the US tent space was a billowing success, centrally located and adorned by banners, photographs of poor peoples in action, and nearly always full of people, especially at night for dancing. The food sovereignty workshop presented by the AMI delegation on the first afternoon was also a success, despite the need for shouting in two languages since a sound system had not yet been installed. Presentations were made by representatives of Agricultural Missions, the Missouri Rural Crisis Center/ National Family Farm Coalition, the Community Farm Alliance/National Family Farm Coalition, the Justice for Farmworker Coalition of New York State, the Farm Labor Organizing

Committee and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. The speaking and dialoguing event was distinguished by the interconnectedness in the analyses of both farmer and farmworker organizations, and the contextualization provided by Alberto Gomez of UNORCA from Mexico who represented a Latin American Vía Campesina perspective. A symbolic moment was provided by a gift of maize seed from the Ohio valley cultivated in Louisville to the people of Mexico and Latin America, maize that later ritually adorned the head table at the Vía Campesina tent. And the debate pro and con about Genetically Modified Seeds added friction and reality to the proceedings. The surprise words of a young indigenous man from Wisconsin concerning the sacredness of wild rice in danger of being expropriated through a patent by researchers at the University of Minnesota brought the whole event around full circle, with a powerful critique of science at the beck and call of commercial interests emerging from various comments made by participants to the event. A smashing event indeed in which more than one participant related that this had broken down stereotypes about what is happening within the U.S.

The AMI anti-water privatization workshop led by Concerned Citizens of Newport (CCN) in Wisconsin likewise was a big success. Speakers included CCN activist Arlene Kanno who related how they stopped Nestle from building a bottling plant in their backyard and then contacted the communities in neighboring Michigan that were subsequently targeted by Nestle for the project. Following this were women from impoverished communities in Detroit fighting the same Nestle bottling plants, efforts to privatize their water and a conspiracy to do away with the poor through selling their water to outlying communities and charging exorbitant prices for public services, especially water. Yours truly related these struggles to the fight against the World Bank and IMF, notorious for pushing for water privatization in 2/3rds world nations, and for being investors and financiers for those deals. He also spoke of coordinated actions protesting SUEZ during its shareholders meeting in France and its U.S. subsidiary United Waters, including sending a Bolivian water activist to speak with the Vice President during that protest in New Jersey. Finally a Colombian activist joined the analysis with advice for how to globalize the anti water-privatization struggle based on the legal framework of the recently ratified international treaty on tobacco. An excellent event indeed!

Another solidarity building event that took place at the U.S. tent concerned the U.S. embargo of Cuba and the imprisonment of the Cuban 5 political prisoners. In short, the U.S. tent space was a tremendous success and will further the building of greater understanding and solidarity of Latin American movements with U.S. social movements, including the farmer and farmworker movements for economic justice.

AMI delegates led other workshops, one on farmworkers struggles and one on farm policy in the U.S., and a third activity which consisted of a highly spiritual celebration of cultures of the land (which miraculously converted a curious Chávez critic passing by in a park into a sympathizer of an ecological vision and spiritual values for humanity). AMI delegates attended many seminars and workshops including ones on community water projects in Venezuela, on urban

agriculture, and some delegates even climbed the mountain standing tall and forest-covered to the north of Caracas in the company of Jaime Mariqueo, our Mapuche advisor on indigenous cosmovision, healing and ritual. The fresh fruits we ate upon the mountain known as Ávila but revealed to us by a local historian as named originally Guaraira Ripano, were exquisite. Fresh peach juice and powerfully sweet and sour raspberries, among others! We harvested eucaliptus leaves and cedar from the farmer's fields on the north side of the mountains near Galipan, using these elements in our gratitude ritual during our celebration.

Another high point was the speech delivered by Hugo Chávez at the Poliedro, a modernistic stadium big enough for 25,000 or so. Some of our delegation attended in person and others watched from our hotel room with friends from campesino organizations in Ecuador, while recording the proceedings on a VHS tape. We have now transferred the VHS to DVD and intend to provide subtitles and distribute with some written materials as part of our follow up from the WSF.

The degree of solidarity and connection we experienced far surpassed expectations. The warmth and hospitality of the Venezuelan people was palpable. Nights dancing in the Cuba house, or following impromptu Brazilian drummers down the boulevards will long be remembered.

On our last day in Venezuela we had the opportunity to visit two agricultural cooperatives a couple of hours from Caracas, in vehicles provided by the Venezuelan government. I had made the contacts with the cooperative organizer Omar Guerra during a stay in Venezuela last August, with the help of leaders of CANEZ (Coordinadora Agraria Nacional Ezequial Zamora). What we saw that day on January 30 in a municipality called Paz Castillo, visiting *Ranchón de la Hortaliza* and *Pais del Futuro '86 Agricultural Cooperatives* was unexpected in its intensity and beauty. We saw lands being productively worked by farmer cooperativists where previously the land lay idle. We saw people occupying lands illegally usurped years ago by wealthy local families, determined to make it productive and to live from its production. We saw 700 families spread across a vast field along a road, squatting in tiny huts, for the right to build their houses there, on land, once again, proven to have been illegally usurped by a large land holder or *latifundista*. We saw, felt and embraced people taking their struggles to the land, and hoping for a better day! And they did not hesitate to ask for our help. They asked us to make known what we had learned to international media outlets and to their own Channel 8 government-run television station, to lighten the burden of bureaucratic traps and obstacles, to move their revolution forward, step by step! They fed us with papaya and sugar cane and later beer, chicken and arepas and received us with joy and alert friendliness and the hospitality that makes campesinos famous throughout the world.

Or to repeat the slogans we sang in the opening march of the WSF, along with the highly disciplined phalanxes of farmers composing the Frente Ezequiel Zamora (a Venezuelan farmers confederation), ***Wherever we Go, People Ask Us, Who are You? And so we reply; Campesinos, Si Señor, De lo Bueno, Lo Mejor! (Campesinos, yessir, Of the Good, we are the Best!)*** This vindication of a farming vocation and rural pride was music to our ears!