

## **U.S. and Latin America Beyond the Border Wall**

by Anne Winkler-Morey

Beyond Donald Trump's overt anti-Mexican racism, his war on immigrants, and his puzzling anti-NAFTA rhetoric, there are other less obvious factors influencing U.S. Latin America relations we need to be aware of in 2017.

New products dominate the market and new players hold the reins, yet the centuries-old practice of impoverishing masses to enrich a tiny elite, while depleting resources for future generations, continues. For peace and justice activists in the United States, these changes alter our strategies while sustaining our goal of building solidarity across borders.

### **Palm oil and a new era of mining**

When trans fats went out in 2002, processed food companies turned to palm oil. Overnight former jungles in Brazil were clear-cut and transformed into palm plantations. In the "banana republics" of Guatemala and Honduras, palm oil began to replace the yellow fruit. The pesticide practices of the palm oil industry are so destructive to water tables that activists in Guatemala are charging the industry with ecocide.

Likewise, new mining enterprises are extracting formerly unextractable subsoil resources using techniques that are more environmentally destructive than anything we have seen before. They are also more mechanized, creating fewer jobs for shorter periods than historic mines.

Aided by these new technologies, markets for gold and silver are on the rise again, fueled by new investors from Europe and Asia. China's growing consumption of steel is industrializing jungles and traditional subsistence farming regions. Iron ore production has skyrocketed. In addition, there is a new product—coltan—essential to cell phone production. It is especially lethal, poisoning both the water tables and workers. Brazil and the Congo are primary regions for coltan extraction.

### **New players**

For a century the United States dominated the export economies of Latin America. It was the majority buyer and seller to the region, taking the place of Britain and Spain as the dominant power in the region. The U.S. would intervene militarily when political and economic pressures were not enough to protect its interests. At first these interventions were overt—gunboats on the shore, military interventions in a dozen nations and long-term occupations in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Later the intervention would be covert (hidden from the U.S. public)—the CIA coup in Guatemala in 1954, Bay of Pigs in Cuba in 1962, the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, the decade of wars in Central America in the 1980s. Destabilization of regimes threatening U.S. economic interests continued into the 21st century—most notably Venezuela. Barack Obama continued the imperial relationship, funding its interests with drug war money, and supporting a coup in Honduras to unseat a president who curtailed mining interests.

In the 21st century however, the United States is no longer the economic king in the region. China, Canada, Japan, and the EU are investing heavily in the region. China's interests are growing especially fast, and they have become the dominant power in some nations, such as Nicaragua. Regional powers like Brazil and Argentina have gained the economic stature to be able to aid or exploit smaller neighbors. In addition, the fact that there are national industries within Latin American countries does not mean local people have any more control of profits than external parties. The Honduran palm oil company Grupo Dinan, for example, has resorted to assassinations of activist leaders fighting for worker and water rights.

Finally, there are non-state investors in Latin America whose interests are not as direct as a fruit or mining company. TIAA-CREF, a retirement investment company, is heavily invested in the palm oil industry. It uses the hard-earned savings of U.S. workers to steal land, suppress Latin American workers' rights and facilitate environmental crimes.

Such diversity in investment and trade should be good for local sovereignty, providing a measure of leverage, but for Latin America to use its leverage, it needs a level of regional cooperation, and national administrations committed to regulating export industries to maximize the profits that remain in the country, and social policies that distribute those goods for public welfare. Without those things, market competition can actually lead to more oppression for workers. Those of us who lived through the Cold War know well how struggles amongst the big global powers get played out in the regions they are exploiting.

### **Problems and possibilities with regional integration and distributive administrations**

In the 1990s and 2000s there was a so called "pink tide" in which more left-leaning regimes, committed to regional cooperation to loosen the hold of the United States and distributive social policies, took over in a majority of Latin American nations. Hugo Chavez' Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela in the '90s provided both the leadership and the revenue to make regional economic cooperation possible.

Unfortunately, while leading regional trade groups and providing oil grants and barter deals to its neighbors, Venezuela did not diversify its own economy. The inevitable fall in world oil prices put an end to those deals.

Today we see a rise of right-wing regimes in the southern cone—a desperate response to the failures of the "pink tide" to deliver on or sustain their distributive promises. One of the most egregious examples of how fractured regional cooperation is today: the new Argentine president has initiated an anti-immigrant crusade à la Trump, criminalizing Bolivian migrants who provide cheap agricultural labor in Argentina.

### **The roots and strength of local grassroots organizations**

What inhibits wholesale exploitation of workers and land, is local nongovernmental community-based organizing. Bolstered by the recent rise in global environmental and indigenous movements, activists confront plantations and mines at every turn. We hear about the tragic crimes such as the murder of the indigenous environmental activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras,

but we may not realize that day in and day out grassroots activists make life difficult for corporate exploiters. This 2012 quote from *AZO Mining*, the “leading online publication for the mining community,” illustrates how concerned the mining interests are about this activism:

“Guatemala’s mining conflict is a major roadblock for mining operations in the country. Recently, many communities in Guatemala protested against mining companies as they fear that indiscriminate mining in certain areas will lead to damage of land and water pollution, thus affecting their livelihoods. These communities accused the government of permitting exploration in indigenous territories without consulting local communities and failing to fulfill its international obligations.” [tinyurl.com/n4dxgad](http://tinyurl.com/n4dxgad)

### **What should we in the United States do?**

The global economy is changing, altering struggles for economic sustainability and sovereignty in Latin America. As we fight walls, bans, raids, detentions, deportations, and disappearances on our side of the border, we also need to support the right of Latin America to stay home, and build sustainable economies and small “d” democracies. We need to stand with the Latin American people as they uphold indigenous sovereignty and the protection of resources for future generations.

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