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"Labour and sustainable development in Latin America: rebuilding alliances at a new crossroad"

Labour movement in Latin America is undergoing a reconstruction and reorientation of its strategic alliances. The debates regarding sustainable development have raised considerable concern within the trade union movement for the need to rebuild decade-old alliances with other social movements and NGOs in order to face the challenge of extractive industries' advance over territories and rights and the transnationalization of the region's economy. The current context of global debates surrounding sustainable development and climate change has led to reconsidering the necessary alliances with social movements beyond the sphere of traditional labour, similar to the alliances formed at the time of the struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA, or ALCA in Spanish).

This paper analyzes the reactions of the trade union movement in Latin America, with a focus on the most relevant organization the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas, to the debates around sustainable development and the policies of Latin American governments regarding economic development. The main argument behind the paper is that the trade unions are slowly returning to broader alliances with other social movements, especially organizations with an environmental agenda, to face the challenge of the predominant role gained by extractive industries (agribusiness, mining, non-conventional and conventional oil and gas) dominated by transnational capital. This is the model of development that has been referred to as a "Commodities' Consensus". Initially, the trade unions have been supportive of the governments carrying out this development strategy, but with the environmental damage and the social contradictions the model produces labour has began to question it. A central element to this reaction is the solidarity created with socio-environmental movements struggling in the territories.

The capacity of the labour movement to broaden the alliances is central to this paper, and it brings to the forefront the debates around the opportunities and challenges globalization presents to workers and their organizations. In order to face this debate, the paper connects the current strategic building with the one produced during the times when neoliberalism was dominant in the region, and the United States pushed for a Free Trade Area of the Americas, which was meant to cover the entire continent. Labour initially intended to negotiate within the parameters established by the governments for the trade agreement—and inside its own industrial relations conceptions—but after years of negotiations, decided to carry a massive opposition campaign, in alliance with social movements and NGOs. This process of resistances led to establishing a network known as Hemispheric Social Alliance. The challenge of free trade was a consequence of the process of globalization, but it also allowed for the creation of alliances unimagined before. Similarly, the current debates around sustainable development and climate change are also a product of an increasingly global context, which poses a challenge for labour's survival but also an opportunity for allying itself with movements beyond its conventional orbit. A significant challenge explored in this essay are the different approaches on "development" between the trade unions and the environmental movements,

In sum, this paper intends to dwell into the specific case of alliance-building in Latin America

between labour and socio-environmental movements in the context of climate change and the need to encourage sustainable development. In order to consider the possibilities of this alliance with the environmental movement, the paper revisits the successful experiences of the anti-FTAA campaign of the past decade and introduces the current opportunities for alliance-building.

Biography

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