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Socialist Voice #244, May 5, 2008

Toronto Transit Strike Exposes Labour Movement Fault Lines

By Paul Kellogg

The Ontario legislature convened at 1:30 pm, April 27 – the first time in history that the august body had met on a Sunday. In 35 minutes, the politicians had time to have prayers, make a few speeches and, oh yes, give three readings to a bill called the “Toronto Public Transit Service Resumption Act.” By 2:05 pm it was finished, with the support of the NDP and its leader Howard Hampton, his “reservations” notwithstanding.[1] Workers in Ontario will be living with the repercussions of these actions for some time.

Unionized workers at the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) had been on legal strike since midnight, Friday April 25, and the strike had caught most by surprise. The *Toronto Star* of April 24 carried a short article headlined “TTC contract expected to pass vote.”[2] Tense negotiations had resulted in a tentative agreement between the Toronto Transit Commission and the 8,900 strong Amalgamated Transit Union (Local 113) that most saw as a victory for the union. TTC drivers won a wage increase of 3 per cent a year in each year of a three-year deal. On top of that, in what became known as the “GTA clause” drivers received the right to remain the highest paid transit drivers in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area). What it means is that if, at the end of 2009, city of Toronto transit drivers are earning less than transit drivers in Mississauga or any other municipality in the GTA, they would “get an increase of 5 cents an hour above the other drivers’ wage.” The Mississauga example is key, because “TTC drivers have been earning 5 cents an hour less than those in Mississauga.”[3]

Conservative members of Toronto City Council were outraged at the deal. “I think it’s a mistake ... We’ve turned over control. It’s not wise,”[4] said Councillor Doug Holyday. “I don’t know where we are going to get the money from,” said Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong.[5] But if the right-wing was dissatisfied, so was the rank and file – but for completely different reasons.

First – one of the key areas of disagreement, the treatment of workers injured on the job, had not been fully addressed. Under the old contract, workers injured on the job received 85% of their pay while they were away from work. The union wanted that raised to 100%, and while they made some headway, “obviously, we didn’t get everything we wanted,” said local president Bob Kinnear.[6] The importance of the issue was graphically demonstrated April 20, when two TTC workers were injured, one seriously, after two subway cars collided in a maintenance yard.[7]

There were other issues. While drivers were awarded the “GTA clause,” no such agreement existed for other sections of the local, including maintenance workers who represent about 1/3 of the locals’ membership. Skilled trades workers were also dissatisfied. They had wanted a 10-cent an hour premium raised to 50 cents, but were offered only 25 cents. Tensions around these issues were so high, that seven members of the local’s 16-member executive refused to sign the tentative agreement.[8] In this context of a division at the top, and a feeling that drivers were being treated differently than non-drivers, rumours began to swirl through the membership – most starkly, that there were plans afoot to contract out much of its maintenance work.

But to really understand the events, the entire context has to be seen. City workers – including transit workers – have lived through years and years of budget crises, cuts to services, threats to wages and threats of attacks on conditions such as contracting out. But this year, for the first time since the creation of the amalgamated City of Toronto in 1997, the City came forward with a balanced budget. With Canada’s labour party (the NDP) dominating many of the key positions in the City (including in the mayor’s office, held by David Miller, a long-time NDP stalwart), and with the threat of a budget deficit finally removed from over the heads of the city’s workers, there was a sense that now was the time to make up ground lost in the difficult years of the 1990s. There was developing what labour historian Stuart Marshall Jamieson called in earlier times, a “momentum of rising expectations,”[9] expectations that it was time to make some progress. In that context, we should not be surprised that maintenance and other workers should want to be treated just as well as drivers in the new contract. That is the context in which the tentative agreement was rejected, 65% voting it down.

The rejection of the transit deal was announced late afternoon, Friday April 25. By midnight, the transit system was shut down, the local leadership having called its members out on legal strike. But it was a strike of a special kind. There were no picket assignments, no picket signs, no picket lines, no activity of any sort. At midnight, the doors were locked, the union’s members were sent home and the “strike” was on. The rank and file had spoken, decisively, and the union leadership responded by showing absolutely no leadership.

The workers had been put in an incredibly vulnerable position. Their leadership had announced up and down throughout the long negotiations that any strike would happen after 48 hours’

notice. Instead there was none, maximizing the possibility of a backlash against the union. And with no picket lines, the striking workers were expected to take on their boss, the city and the anti-union media by staying at home – a recipe for failure and demoralization. Perhaps Kinnear and the rest of the ATU leadership were too divided to come up with a plan. Perhaps they were so surprised at the rejection of the deal that they were paralyzed. Perhaps Kinnear was himself “on strike” against the rank and file – pulling them out after the vote, but refusing to do anything to give shape and structure to the strike. In any case, the effect was total confusion.

It did not take long for anti-union forces to enter into the vacuum created by the local leadership’s inaction. Shamefully, it was mayor Miller, flanked by TTC head Adam Giambrone (former head of the federal NDP) who led the charge, calling the strike “unacceptable and unnecessary.”[10] This set the stage for the provincial NDP to help out the Liberals and the Tories in making the strike illegal. So as quickly as it was over, the strike was done.

There is now talk of declaring the TTC an “essential service” and completely stripping its workers of the right to strike. It is not clear that this will happen without a fight. Sid Ryan, Ontario president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) said in a press release: “We successfully mobilized labour throughout the province when [former Tory premier] Mike Harris tried to suspend the right to strike during amalgamation, and we are prepared to do that again. The right to strike is a fundamental right in any democracy ... If you take that right away, workers are little more than indentured servants.”[11]

The whole experience has shed light on the fault lines that exist inside the labour movement in this country. The rank and file showed surprising militancy, rejecting a deal that most saw as a victory – saying that they deserved more. The union leadership showed itself incapable of providing a lead to this new sentiment of militancy. And social democratic politicians showed again, that – when forced to choose between working class militancy and being good corporate managers – it is their management hat that often carries the day.

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Socialist Voice #245, May 7, 2008

Race and Policing: Inquiry into Police Killing of Frank Paul Shows the Power of Protest

By Ivan Drury

On December 5, 1998 a Vancouver police officer dragged Frank Paul, a 47-year-old Mik'maq man, soaking wet and unconscious, from the downtown holding cells and dumped him in an alley across town. He was drunk and could not stand or speak clearly. His body was found at 2:30 am in the same alley by a passerby.

According to the pathologist's report, Paul had died of hypothermia accelerated by acute alcohol poisoning. He was likely already dying of hypothermia when Sergeant Russel Sanderson ordered the rookie wagon driver Constable David Instant to dump Frank Paul into the night.[1]

How the police investigate the police

If Frank Paul's death is tragic, the investigation process that followed is frightening and infuriating.

The death of Frank Paul was investigated by Detective Robert Douglas Staunton — one single officer. Staunton later said that he pursued his investigation “in a way I thought would be neutral.” At the recent inquiry Staunton testified that “neutrality” meant he did not seek to find fault. In fact, he worked to obscure evidence of the criminal actions of the police. In contravention of police regulations, Staunton did not perform any of the routines normal for a homicide investigation.

This break with routine is the norm for police investigation of police crimes. Between 1992 and 2007, 52 people died at the hands of members of the Vancouver Police Department (VPD). Not a single one of these deaths resulted in charges being laid against a single officer.[2]

Why this “neutral” stance in cop killings? Staunton explained that unless, before the investigation started, it was already known that the suspected police-criminals “were absolutely guilty of a criminal offense, it basically served no purpose,” because if investigators took steps towards prosecution “we would receive no information.”[3] An astonishing admission! What is more, “that is a practice that the Major Crime investigators followed” in all 52 or so cases of deaths at the hands of the police in the previous 15 years, he said. “We didn't make judgments.”

Former Vancouver coroner and former mayor Larry Campbell confirmed Staunton's description of police practice, telling the inquiry that as coroner he would always take the word of the investigating officer over that of crown prosecution on the viability of charges.[4] Don Morrison, police complaints commissioner at the time of the Frank Paul killing relied on the same “neutrality” when he opposed calls for a public inquiry in 2001 saying, “What do you want me to do, wreck a young officer's career?”[5]

Morrison's stonewalling came at the prompting of BC's Liberal government. Solicitor-General Rich Coleman wrote Morrison that year explaining that he would not open a coroners inquest into Frank Paul's death where "culpability, liability and issues of racial discrimination are likely to become the central features.... [A] responsible coroner would not permit the pursuit of those matters. Public acrimony would almost certainly follow."

Staunton's "neutral" investigation in fact paralyzed any process of accountability for the death of Frank Paul. No disciplinary actions resulted beyond the light slap on the wrist delivered earlier by the VPD itself following its internal investigation: a one-day suspension for Instant, and two days for Sanderson.

Complaints process exposed

In the final days of the public inquiry, Mike Tammen of the BC Civil Liberties Association accused the Vancouver Police Department of cover-up. In fact, the cover-up was not solely the work of the police. From the original police "investigation" to the Office of the Police Complaints Commission, to the Coroner, to the BC Liberal government, all authoritative bodies barred the door against any investigation or inquiry into the killing of Frank Paul. A conspiracy of silence around Frank Paul's death continued, virtually without exception, until early 2007. The NDP fell into step, and did not speak a word about Frank Paul until halfway through the inquiry.

The Frank Paul cover-up is only too typical of standard police procedure. In a document called "Towards More Effective Police Oversight" the Pivot Legal Society explains how complaints against police in BC are processed.[6] The complaints process is compromised from start to finish, the Pivot document shows, by the watchful eye of the police, backed up by the government and ruling elite that the police protect.

The report cites John Westwood of the BC Civil Liberties Association, "I have never met an internal investigator who is biased in favour of a civilian complainant.... Nor have I assisted in a complaint where the police witnesses support the complainant's account of events in opposition to the accused officer's account."

The Pivot Society calls this the "blue code between officers which undermines the public interest in police accountability"[7]

Role of police in society

The "blue code" serves the underlying role of police in society as protectors of the status quo of capitalist property relations. The heavy arm of policing falls on capitalism's victims — especially the poor, the sick, and racialized people.

It is quite true that neither Constable Instant nor his colleagues create the conditions that killed Frank Paul. The set-up was carried out by the provincial and federal governments, in collaboration with the Downtown Eastside real estate barons who sit on block after block of

empty buildings as speculative investments, and with the big capitalists who juggle market relations to maintain a reserve army of labour in the person of people like Frank Paul.

The neo-liberal reforms carried out by the BC Liberal government and its counterparts in other provinces have a clear agenda — to deepen the suffering of poor, oppressed, and working people. Police are called in to put down dissent. Hundreds of years of colonial genocide and repression have hammered people like Frank Paul in order to steal and plunder the land of the Mik'maq and other Indigenous nations.

David Dennis, the Vice-President of United Native Nations (UNN), an organization that represents off-reserve Indigenous peoples, sees police institutions as being responsible for the day-to-day oppression and racism that many native youth experience. “There’s a direct relationship between the way the police are treating these young people and the way that these young people end up getting dead.”[8]

How the inquiry was won

Despite all of these systemic barriers, a demand for a public inquiry came out of the Indigenous community in Vancouver, and an inquiry was won. A major factor in making Frank Paul’s death an issue big enough to force an inquiry was the work of Kat Norris and the Indigenous Action Movement (IAM). In an interview conducted in the last days of the public inquiry, Kat Norris explained that she was motivated to organize for Frank Paul because “what happened to him should not happen to anyone. The gall of racism just hit me. I just couldn’t let it go by without doing something.”[9]

It’s instructive to compare this case with the killing of would-be Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski by taser-wielding cops at the Vancouver airport on October 14, 2007. That case too would no doubt have been covered up if the unprovoked attack hadn’t been captured on video. But once it was public, the death of a European immigrant generated far more response — including from the corporate media — than the death of a homeless Mik'maq.

The United Native Nations was the first organization to lay a public complaint about the death of Frank Paul in 2002,[10] and it remained involved throughout the public inquiry. UNN took an interest in Frank Paul’s case because, David Dennis explained, it confirmed “our fears about the police’s role, the cover-up that occurred, and the kind of the complicity of the provincial government to keep this death at the hands of the police suppressed for so long.”[11]

Limitations of the Frank Paul inquiry

It wasn’t until February 2007 that the government allowed the public inquiry to go ahead, while barring it from finding fault or laying charges.

The very fact that the death of Frank Paul, which had been covered up, lied about, and silenced for nearly ten years, made it to a public inquiry is a testament to the strength and potential power of social movements. However, the Frank Paul inquiry can only be considered a partial victory for the movement that fought and organized for it.

Kat Norris points out that although Const. Instant “is being used as a scapegoat to take the blame ... he was following *someone*’s orders.” And David Dennis explains, “There are limitations to the inquiry, and we’ve been really vocal about how it’s not designed to assign fault. But it can assign responsibility to people and with that we can take it further.”

The final stage of the Frank Paul inquiry will take place April 28 to May 16 with government and police policy hearings. While the inquiry commission cannot place binding recommendations on the government or police, it has and will present a platform where demands can be put forward. UNN presented their demands at the inquiry hearing on May 1, and IAM will be making their demands heard in the streets with a march from the Vancouver Detox to Main and Hastings on May 8.[12]

For both UNN and IAM, the inquiry has opened a window to bring pressure against higher places in the police administration and government. David Dennis said, “We need someone like Police Chief Graham or Solicitor General Coleman to go down. These are the ones who knew about [the killing of Frank Paul] and didn’t do anything about it.”[13]

Development of movement demands

Kat Norris wants “to bring the police to justice. Someone has to answer for what happened to him. Someone needs to be held accountable. I want for this to never happen to one of my people again.” For her, the inquiry itself has been “a sign of how much power the police and the justice system has over its own ... they take care of their own. The police and the higher-ups are great friends. I’ve always said that just by instinct. But you can see it. It all goes back to land ownership and the corporations.”

David Dennis and the UNN are working out a more ambitious program of reform, beginning with “tangible things that can be changed” like challenging the provincial contract for the RCMP that comes up for renewal in 2012.

The UNN calls for civilian investigations; but Dennis recognizes the potential problem of corruption in such a civilian investigation body. Volunteers for a similar group in Ontario are mostly former cops. The other danger is that people who join also quickly adopt the mentality of the “Blue Shield.” To protect against these trends, UNN is demanding that membership in such a body be based on recommendations from Indigenous community groups and leadership. “People who are there are our eyes,” he says. “It’s kind of one step up.” In this way, such civilian investigation units could be linked with the grassroots movement and mass organizations that will fight to keep them in line.

Reform and the need to survive

Both Dennis and Norris focus on Indigenous peoples’ struggle for survival against police repression. Police racism, harassment, brutality, and even murder are a grim reality for Indigenous peoples, particularly those who live off-reserve in urban centres.

In an article published by the United Nations Chronicle in 2007, Melissa Gorelick quantifies the hostile relationship between the Canadian “justice” system and Indigenous peoples. “According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, aboriginals make up about 19 percent of federal prisoners, while their number among the general population is only about 3 percent[14]. Between 1997 and 2000, they were ten times more likely to be accused of homicide than non-aboriginal people. The rate of natives in Canadian prisons climbed 22 percent between 1996 and 2004, while the general prison population dropped 12 percent.”[15]

Kat Norris points out that Frank Paul “represents the discrimination, racism, murder, sexual abuse, residential schools, colonization that our people have suffered. He represents our people.” And she draws a connection between police harassment and colonization. “We’re suffering simply because the imperial powers desired our land.”

In the face of this brutal oppression, oppressed peoples respond with strategies for survival. Their day-to-day struggle against police violence contributes to the process of getting rid of police and prison institutions along with the entire capitalist structure they serve.

The front lines of struggle

The Indigenous community has taken on the struggle against police repression more consistently and effectively than any other community in Canada. The work of United Native Nations, the Indigenous Action Movement, the Downtown Eastside Womens’ Centre Elders Council, and Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association in Vancouver practice important examples. They must not be left to struggle alone. They need broad and effective support.

Racialized people all across Canada are familiar with the club and gun of the police departments — whether you are Latino or South Asian in Vancouver, Black in Toronto, or Arab in Montreal. The same is true of the multi-racial communities of the hand-to-mouth poor, homeless, drug users, and mental health consumers in neighbourhoods like the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. We should work to forge unified action groups between these diverse communities and cultures and their supporters.

White workers also have a strong stake in supporting these struggles. First, racist treatment must be opposed because it divides working people and violates the human dignity of us all. Second, police are also the enemies of the labour and activist movements as they struggle for progressive change. Unionists who have found their strikes and actions attacked by police defending the bosses’ interests understand this well, as do activists who have been beaten up and arrested by police because of their actions for social justice.

The movement for a public inquiry into the police killing of Frank Paul holds an important lesson. Without a grassroots struggle in the streets, the demands of the movement — survival-based or otherwise — would not have carried weight. In fact, the street movement is where the demands are rooted, and where survival-based demands for reform can move forward.

The movement that Kat Norris has helped initiate has a potential to advance both the survival struggle and the broader movement against police violence, provided it is backed by the mounting pressure that only a street movement can advance. The breadth and strength of the grassroots movement against police brutality will decide how powerful and far reaching these demands can become.

Footnotes

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- [10] "Interview with David Dennis", Ivan Drury, March 26, 2008.
- [11] "Interview with David Dennis", Ivan Drury, March 26, 2008.
- [12] March and Rally organized by Indigenous Action Movement, May 8th, 5pm at Vancouver Detox (377 E. 2nd Ave, Vancouver) <http://indigenousaction.blogspot.com/>
- [13] "Interview with David Dennis", Ivan Drury, March 26, 2008
- [14] Statistics on numbers of Indigenous people in Canada vary greatly depending on the source used. 3% is a common (though dated) government number, based on "Status Indians" and those voluntarily identified by census. Other sources place Indigenous peoples at between 5% and 10% of the population in Canada. Many Indigenous nations regularly refuse to participate in the Canada census, and an unknown number of individuals do the same.
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Socialist Voice #244, May 5, 2008

Food Crisis (Part Two): Capitalism, Agribusiness, and the Food Sovereignty Alternative

By Ian Angus

(Ian Angus is editor of Climate and Capitalism. Part One of this article was published in Socialist Voice and in The Bullet (Socialist Project), on April 28, 2008.)

“Nowhere in the world, in no act of genocide, in no war, are so many people killed per minute, per hour and per day as those who are killed by hunger and poverty on our planet.” —*Fidel Castro, 1998*

When food riots broke out in Haiti last month, the first country to respond was Venezuela. Within days, planes were on their way from Caracas, carrying 364 tons of badly needed food.

The people of Haiti are “suffering from the attacks of the empire’s global capitalism,” Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez said. “This calls for genuine and profound solidarity from all of us. It is the least we can do for Haiti.”

Venezuela’s action is in the finest tradition of human solidarity. When people are hungry, we should do our best to feed them. Venezuela’s example should be applauded and emulated.

But aid, however necessary, is only a stopgap. To truly address the problem of world hunger, we must understand and then change the system that causes it.

No shortage of food

The starting point for our analysis must be this: *there is no shortage of food in the world today.*

Contrary to the 18th century warnings of Thomas Malthus and his modern followers, study after study shows that global food production has consistently outstripped population growth, and that there is more than enough food to feed everyone. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, enough food is produced in the world to provide over 2800 calories a day to everyone — substantially more than the minimum required for good health, and about 18% more calories per person than in the 1960s, despite a significant increase in total population.[1]

As the Food First Institute points out, “abundance, not scarcity, best describes the supply of food in the world today.”[2]

Despite that, the most commonly proposed solution to world hunger is new technology to increase food production.

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, aims to develop “more productive and resilient varieties of Africa’s major food crops ... to enable Africa’s small-scale farmers to produce larger, more diverse and reliable harvests.”[3]

Similarly, the Manila-based International Rice Research Institute has initiated a public-private partnership “to increase rice production across Asia via the accelerated development and introduction of hybrid rice technologies.”[4]

And the president of the World Bank promises to help developing countries gain “access to technology and science to boost yields.”[5]

Scientific research is vitally important to the development of agriculture, but initiatives that assume in advance that new seeds and chemicals are needed are neither credible nor truly scientific. The fact that there is already enough food to feed the world shows that the food crisis is not a technical problem — it is a social and political problem.

Rather than asking how to increase production, our first question should be why, when so much food is available, are over 850 million people hungry and malnourished? Why do 18,000 children die of hunger every day?

Why can’t the global food industry feed the hungry?

The profit system

The answer can be stated in one sentence. *The global food industry is not organized to feed the hungry; it is organized to generate profits for corporate agribusiness.*

The agribusiness giants are achieving that objective very well indeed. This year, agribusiness profits are soaring above last year’s levels, while hungry people from Haiti to Egypt to Senegal were taking to the streets to protest rising food prices. These figures are for *just three months* at the beginning of 2008.[6]

Grain Trading

- *Archer Daniels Midland (ADM). Gross profit: \$1.15 billion, up 55% from last year*
- *Cargill: Net earnings: \$1.03 billion, up 86%*
- *Bunge. Consolidated gross profit: \$867 million, up 189%.*

Seeds & herbicides

- *Monsanto. Gross profit: \$2.23 billion, up 54%.*
- *Dupont Agriculture and Nutrition. Pre-tax operating income: \$786 million, up 21%*

Fertilizer

- *Potash Corporation. Net income: \$66 million, up 185.9%*
- *Mosaic. Net earnings: \$520.8 million, up more than 1,200%*

The companies listed above, plus a few more, are the monopoly or near-monopoly buyers and sellers of agricultural products around the world. Six companies control 85% of the world trade in grain; three control 83% of cocoa; three control 80% of the banana trade.[7] ADM, Cargill and Bunge effectively control the world's corn, which means that they alone decide how much of each year's crop goes to make ethanol, sweeteners, animal feed or human food.

As the editors of *Hungry for Profit* write, "The enormous power exerted by the largest agribusiness/food corporations allows them essentially to control the cost of their raw materials purchased from farmers while at the same time keeping prices of food to the general public at high enough levels to ensure large profits." [8]

Over the past three decades, transnational agribusiness companies have engineered a massive restructuring of global agriculture. Directly through their own market power and indirectly through governments and the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organization, they have changed the way food is grown and distributed around the world. The changes have had wonderful effects on their profits, while simultaneously making global hunger worse and food crises inevitable.

The assault on traditional farming

Today's food crisis doesn't stand alone: it is a manifestation of a farm crisis that has been building for decades.

As we saw in Part One of this article, over the past three decades the rich countries of the north have forced poor countries to open their markets, then flooded those markets with subsidized food, with devastating results for Third World farming.

But the restructuring of global agriculture to the advantage of agribusiness giants didn't stop there. In the same period, southern countries were convinced, cajoled and bullied into adopting agricultural policies that promote export crops rather than food for domestic consumption, and favour large-scale industrial agriculture that requires single-crop (monoculture) production, heavy use of water, and massive quantities of fertilizer and pesticides. Increasingly, traditional farming, organized by and for communities and families, has been pushed aside by industrial farming organized by and for agribusinesses.

That transformation is the principal obstacle to a rational agriculture that could eliminate hunger.

The focus on export agriculture has produced the absurd and tragic result that millions of people are starving in countries that export food. In India, for example, over one-fifth of the population is chronically hungry and 48% of children under five years old are malnourished. Nevertheless, India exported US\$1.5 billion worth of milled rice and \$322 million worth of wheat in 2004.[9]

In other countries, farmland that used to grow food for domestic consumption now grows luxuries for the north. Colombia, where 13% of the population is malnourished, produces and exports 62% of all cut flowers sold in the United States.

In many cases the result of switching to export crops has produced results that would be laughable if they weren't so damaging. Kenya was self-sufficient in food until about 25 years ago. Today it imports 80% of its food — and 80% of its exports are other agricultural products.[10]

The shift to industrial agriculture has driven millions of people off the land and into unemployment and poverty in the immense slums that now surround many of the world's cities.

The people who best know the land are being separated from it; their farms enclosed into gigantic outdoor factories that produce only for export. Hundreds of millions of people now must depend on food that's grown thousands of miles away because their homeland agriculture has been transformed to meet the needs of agribusiness corporations. As recent months have shown, the entire system is fragile: India's decision to rebuild its rice stocks made food unaffordable for millions half a world away.

If the purpose of agriculture is to feed people, the changes to global agriculture in the past 30 years make no sense. Industrial farming in the Third World has produced increasing amounts of food, but at the cost of driving millions off the land and into lives of chronic hunger — and at the cost of poisoning air and water, and steadily decreasing the ability of the soil to deliver the food we need.

Contrary to the claims of agribusiness, the latest agricultural research, including more than a decade of concrete experience in Cuba, proves that small and mid-sized farms using sustainable agroecological methods are much more productive and vastly less damaging to the environment than huge industrial farms.[11]

Industrial farming continues not because it is more productive, but because it has been able, until now, to deliver uniform products in predictable quantities, bred specifically to resist damage during shipment to distant markets. That's where the profit is, and profit is what counts, no matter what the effect may be on earth, air, and water — or even on hungry people.

Fighting for food sovereignty

The changes imposed by transnational agribusiness and its agencies have not gone unchallenged. One of the most important developments in the past 15 years has been the emergence of La Vía Campesina (Peasant Way), an umbrella body that encompasses more than 120 small farmers' and peasants' organizations in 56 countries, ranging from the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil to the National Farmers Union in Canada.

La Vía Campesina initially advanced its program as a challenge to the "World Food Summit," a 1996 UN-organized conference on global hunger that was attended by official representatives of 185 countries. The participants in that meeting promised (and subsequently did nothing to achieve) the elimination of hunger and malnutrition by guaranteeing "sustainable food security for all people." [12]

As is typical of such events, the working people who are actually affected were excluded from the discussions. Outside the doors, La Vía Campesina proposed food sovereignty as an alternative to food security. Simple access to food is not enough, they argued: what's needed is access to land, water, and resources, and the people affected must have the right to know and to decide about food policies. Food is too important to be left to the global market and the manipulations of agribusiness: world hunger can only be ended by re-establishing small and mid-sized family farms as the key elements of food production.[13]

The central demand of the food sovereignty movement is that food should be treated primarily as a source of nutrition for the communities and countries where it is grown. In opposition to free-trade, agroexport policies, it urges a focus on domestic consumption and food self-sufficiency.

Contrary to the assertions of some critics, food sovereignty is not a call for economic isolationism or a return to an idealized rural past. Rather, it is a program for the defense and extension of human rights, for land reform, and for protection of the earth against capitalist ecocide. In addition to calling for food self-sufficiency and strengthening family farms, La Vía Campesina's original call for food sovereignty included these points:

- Guarantee everyone access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity.
- Give landless and farming people — especially women — ownership and control of the land they work and return territories to indigenous peoples.
- Ensure the care and use of natural resources, especially land, water and seeds. End dependence on chemical inputs, on cash-crop monocultures and intensive, industrialized production.
- Oppose WTO, World Bank and IMF policies that facilitate the control of multinational corporations over agriculture. Regulate and tax speculative capital and enforce a strict Code of Conduct on transnational corporations.
- End the use of food as a weapon. Stop the displacement, forced urbanization and repression of peasants.
- Guarantee peasants and small farmers, and rural women in particular, direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels.[14]

La Vía Campesina's demand for food sovereignty constitutes a powerful agrarian program for the 21st century. Labour and left movements worldwide should give full support to it and to the campaigns of working farmers and peasants for land reform and against the industrialization and globalization of food and farming.

Stop the war on Third World farmers

Within that framework, we in the global north can and must demand that our governments stop all activities that weaken or damage Third World farming.

Stop using food for fuel. La Vía Campesina has said it simply and clearly: “Industrial agrofuels are an economic, social and environmental nonsense. Their development should be halted and agricultural production should focus on food as a priority.”[15]

Cancel Third World debts. On April 30, Canada announced a special contribution of C\$10 million for food relief to Haiti.[16] That’s positive – but during 2008 Haiti will pay five times that much in interest on its \$1.5 billion foreign debt, much of which was incurred during the imperialist-supported Duvalier dictatorships.

Haiti’s situation is not unique and it is not an extreme case. The total external debt of Third World countries in 2005 was \$2.7 trillion, and their debt payments that year totalled \$513 billion.[17] Ending that cash drain, immediately and unconditionally, would provide essential resources to feed the hungry now and rebuild domestic farming over time.

Get the WTO out of agriculture. The regressive food policies that have been imposed on poor countries by the World Bank and IMF are codified and enforced by the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Agriculture. The AoA, as Afsar Jafri of *Focus on the Global South* writes, is “biased in favour of capital-intensive, corporate agribusiness-driven and export-oriented agriculture.”[18] That’s not surprising, since the U.S. official who drafted and then negotiated it was a former vice-president of agribusiness giant Cargill.

AoA should be abolished, and Third World countries should have the right to unilaterally cancel liberalization policies imposed through the World Bank, IMF, and WTO, as well as through bilateral free trade agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA.

Self-Determination for the Global South. The current attempts by the U.S. to destabilize and overthrow the anti-imperialist governments of the ALBA group — Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada — continue a long history of actions by northern countries to prevent Third World countries from asserting control over their own destinies. Organizing against such interventions “in the belly of the monster” is thus a key component of the fight to win food sovereignty around the world.

* * *

More than a century ago, Karl Marx wrote that despite its support for technical improvements, “the capitalist system works against a rational agriculture ... a rational agriculture is incompatible with the capitalist system.”[19]

Today’s food and farm crises completely confirm that judgment. A system that puts profit ahead of human needs has driven millions of producers off the land, undermined the earth’s productivity while poisoning its air and water, and condemned nearly a billion people to chronic hunger and malnutrition.

The food crisis and farm crisis are rooted in an irrational, anti-human system. To feed the world, urban and rural working people must join hands to sweep that system away.

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Socialist Voice #247, May 19, 2008

Popular Struggle Intensifies in Bolivia

by **Federico Fuentes**

These articles were first published in Green Left Weekly. Federico Fuentes is the editor of Bolivia Rising.

Recall referendum opens new struggle

May 17, 2008—A new period of uncertainty and opportunity has opened up in Bolivian politics following the calling of recall referendums on August 10 for the national president and prefects of Bolivia's nine departments (states) by the opposition-controlled Bolivian senate. President Evo Morales has been pushing for this measure since last year.

The law, first introduced into the House of Deputies by the governing Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) last December, had been gathering dust due to the refusal of the right-wing opposition to approve it in the Senate. The sudden move to pass the law has left many wondering why the opposition controlled senate would take such a decision.

The initial idea behind the law had been to let the people resolve through the ballot box the “catastrophic deadlock” between the popular government of Evo Morales, backed by the social movements, and the right-wing opposition, spearhead by the elites from the eastern region tied to gas transnationals and agribusiness.

MAS and the social movements have been campaigning to approve the new constitution, finally handed over by the Constituent Assembly last December, which would dramatically broaden recognition of indigenous rights within a new plurinational state, and increase state intervention into the economy and control over natural resources.

Right-wing ‘autonomy’

In reaction, the elites based in the eastern department of Santa Cruz, in a move to defend their economic and political interests, counterposed to the new constitution their proposal for increased autonomy for the eastern regions – where they control the prefectures and where most of the natural resources are located and more than 60% of GDP originates.

Stepping up a gear in their campaign, Santa Cruz held an illegal referendum on May 4 over proposed autonomy statute that would hand enormous power over to the prefectures, including control over natural resources, distribution of land titles, and the right to sign international treaties.

The rights claimed a massive victory, with supposedly 85% support for the Yes vote. But high abstention – promoted by the government and social movements – meant that the Yes vote in reality represents just over 50% of the electoral.

Since then, the four prefects of the eastern departments have rejected Morales' calls for negotiations, forming a united bloc that will return to the negotiating table only after the other autonomy referendums are staged. Autonomy referendums will be held June 1 in Pando and Beni, and June 22 in Tarija.

These sectors received the Senate's decision as a cold shower. "A grave error," "a political stupidity" and "a disservice to autonomies" were just some of the comments to come out of these quarters.

Opportunity for popular forces

Among the prefects, the opposition control six, MAS two, and one is up for election on June 29, following the resignation of the prefect of Sucre who was elected on the MAS ticket.

Moreover, to be recalled, the president and prefects have to receive a vote of rejection superior in votes and percentage to those obtained in the December 2005 general elections. So whilst the opposition will have to surpass 53.74% of votes (1,544,374 votes national) to remove Evo Morales. The prefects are left in a more complicated situation: given none of them got over 50% they could be revoked with a minority vote against them.

The most precarious case is that of opposition La Paz prefect, Jose Luis Paredes, who received only 38% of the vote in the 2005 elections, and who will have to obtain 62% to remain in his post.

Many believe the move by Podemos, the largest opposition party in the Senate, was aimed at regaining the initiative within the opposition camp, pushing the Santa Cruz autonomists to the background. Part of the thinking behind the move was the hope to put a halt to the referendum to approve the new constitution, as the law on referendums allows only one consultation per constitutional period.

MAS senator Felix Rojas, quoted on Bolpress on May 13, said however that Podemos miscalculated and that "errors in politics are made to pay." He argued not only do recall referendums fall under different regulations; it would also be possible to hold the referendum on the new constitution in conjunction with the recall referendums.

Right-wing defiance

Responding to these events, the proclaimed "governor" of Santa Cruz, Ruben Costas, announced on May 14 the constitution of a provisional legislative assembly of the "autonomous government of Santa Cruz."

"Following the political earthquake caused by the approval of the recall referendums ... Santa Cruz had to once again put on the agenda the issue of autonomy, and to do this it needed a radical dramatization" a well-known journalist from Santa Cruz told Argentine daily *Clarín* on May 15.

“They can call it what they want, it is only symbolic. For us what counts is the constitution,” was the response of Vice-President Alvaro Garcia Linera. MAS Senator Antonio Peredo called for charges of sedition to be laid against the Santa Cruz leaders.

Meanwhile, in the presidential palace, excitement is rising for the possibility of removing at least two opposition prefects –La Paz and Cochabamba, heartlands of the MAS base – and the further opportunities in Pando and Tarija, which have a strong presence of peasant movements and where MAS mayors control the departmental capitals.

The recent mobilizations in defence of national unity and against the autonomy referendum in Santa Cruz, along with the nationalizations announced on May 1, have not only seen Morales support increase, but have acted to bring about greater unity and mobilisation of the popular sectors.

A concerted campaign of mass mobilization that builds on the greater unity and mobilisation of the popular sectors of the last few weeks in defence of national unity could ensure an important victory for Morales. The upcoming referendum may become a vote to ratify Morales and his national project for change and strengthen him both nationally and internationally.

* * *

Fraud, violence and mass resistance marks right-wing push

May 9, 2008 — “A day of violence, fraud and a ‘grand rebellion’ against the Santa Cruz oligarchy.

This is how Bolivian president Evo Morales Ayma described the result of the unconstitutional May 4 “autonomy” referendum organized by the authorities in Santa Cruz — which many feared was aimed at dividing Bolivia.

The referendum was the first in a series of proposed referendums to be held in the departments of the so-called Half Moon — Santa Cruz plus Pando, Beni and Tarija, resource-rich departments in Bolivia’s east. The Half Moon remains dominated by the white oligarchy despite the coming to power nationally of Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president, on the back of a mass movement against neoliberalism led by the indigenous majority.

Illegal vote

While the National Electoral Court had ruled that the autonomy referendum — which the government had proposed be held simultaneously with a referendum to approve the new constitution — could not go ahead on May 4 due to lack of time and suitable political conditions, the prefecture and civic committee of Santa Cruz, backed by the Santa Cruz Electoral Court, decided to go ahead with what was an illegal referendum.

The referendum revolved around proposed autonomy statutes, drafted by the oligarchy without any discussion, and which less than 15% of *crucenos* (Santa Cruz residents) had read before May 4. The statutes hand enormous power over to the opposition-controlled prefectures, including

control over natural resources, distribution of land titles, the right to sign international treaties and its own police force and judicial system.

On the day, the Yes vote received 483,925 votes, representing around 85% of the votes cast, against 85,399 No votes. However, calls by the social movements and the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS — Morales's party) national government to abstain led non-participation to rise to 39%, or 366,839 registered voters — more than double the usual abstention rate.

This result was obtained in the face of threats and intimidation by bosses who told workers they would lose their jobs if they did not vote and the menacing patrols of the fascist Union Juvenil Cruceñista (UJC) — renowned for carrying out violent, racist attacks on indigenous people.

Oppressed mobilize

However, in the “other Santa Cruz” — such as the popular urban area of Plan Tres Mil and the rural areas of San Julian and Yacapani — organized resistance by the popular civic committee and indigenous *campesino* (peasant) organizations ensured the non-installation of voting tables.

Despite physical attacks by the UJC, which left more than 20 injured and one dead, in these areas abstention was almost total.

Across the country, massive mobilizations were organized by the powerful indigenous *campesino* organizations, together with trade unions and urban popular organizations. A week before, Morales had called for demonstrations in all capital cities, except Santa Cruz in order to avoid violence, behind the banner of national unity.

Underlying these events is an intense class struggle, infused with strong ethnic and regional components. The ruling elites are fighting to restore the political power they have begun to lose.

The election of Morales came on the back of five years of intense social struggle by the combative indigenous and *campesino* movements, which gave birth to an alternative national project based on the demands of nationalization of gas and a constituent assembly to refound Bolivia.

In December of 2005, unified behind its “political instrument” — MAS — this movement propelled former coca growers' union leader Morales into the presidential palace.

Since then, Morales has initiated a process of returning Bolivia's gas to state hands, begun implementing an agrarian reform and organised elections for a constituent assembly that has prepared a new draft constitution to be submitted to a national referendum.

For the oligarchy, particularly those with interests tied to the gas transnationals and agribusiness, these changes are intolerable.

Forced to retreat to its trenches in the east, the elite has run a propaganda line that combines rallying against “La Paz centralism,” tapping into the long held sentiments of a “cruceñista [Santa Cruz] identity” and outright racism to regroup and mobilise a section of the white

population of the east against the government — whose stronghold is in the impoverished and largely indigenous west. This campaign is receiving heavy funding from the U.S. government.

While it cannot be ruled out that the oligarchy could use these social base to move to divide Bolivia through secession, its main plan at the moment is to put a halt on the process unfolding since Morales' election — aiming to wear down popular support for the government by forcing concessions from the government at the negotiating table and paving the way towards ultimately getting rid of him, via a coup or elections.

Post-referendum struggle

In this context, the results of the May 4 referendum were clearly not a victory for the oligarchy. Forced to rely on fraud and intimidation, the right was unable to get the resounding vote they would have required to turn the results of their illegal referendum into a legitimate mandate.

Yet nor was it a complete defeat — the large Yes vote showed that an important section of Santa Cruz continues to back the oligarchy.

For the popular movements, the important resistance of the “other Santa Cruz” represents a new phase in their struggle. This was reflected in the high abstention and the emergence of an important middle-class layer grouped around Santa Cruz Somos Todos, who, although not part of the MAS project, called for a No vote and support autonomy within the framework of the new constitution.

The actions of the counterrevolution have pushed those forces in favour of change towards greater unity. This was demonstrated in the May Day rallies where, importantly, the Bolivian Workers' Central (COB), which had until now been very critical of the government, was on the main stage promoting a united front.

The oligarchy, claiming victory from the May 4 vote, will undoubtedly be calling for a return to the negotiating table to force concessions out of the government to water down the new constitution and insert its autonomy statutes.

However, these two projects are incompatible. The government needs to shift the debate back to the draft constitution by calling the referendum for its approval as soon as possible — as the social movements are demanding.

Any autonomy must be within the framework of what has been democratically decided by the constituent assembly. In this way, the movements can counterpose their autonomy based on social justice and solidarity to that of the Santa Cruz elites and win support among the Santa Cruz population.

Moreover, the government needs to continue to implement its economic program of nationalizations — such as those announced on May 1, which included recuperating majority control of four gas transnationals and total control over ENTEL, Bolivia's largest telecommunications company.

These moves can demonstrate the role of a strong national state and build the confidence and dignity of the popular movements and middle classes to continue pushing the democratic revolution forward.

These nationalizations, along with agrarian reform and wealth redistribution, are crucial to give further momentum to the popular movements. Together with continuing to give soldiers and officials in the armed forces an active role in enacting these measures, this would make possible a strong campaign to win them over to the side of the popular movements. It is a vital to strengthen the nationalist wing of the military against those right-wing elements conspiring to overthrow Morales.

To ensure that the result of May 4 can become a real victory for the popular forces, it is necessary to continue to develop the unity that has been built over the last few weeks to continue the mobilization of the masses and deepen the revolutionary process through decisive economic and political measures.

Socialist Voice #248, May 26, 2008

Haiti and the Politics of Containment

Peter Hallward. *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment* Verso Press. 2008

Reviewed by Roger Annis

In April, mass protests against hunger and rising food prices erupted in Haiti and led to the fall of the government. On April 18, Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis resigned following a vote of non-confidence in Haiti's senate. The vote was orchestrated by some of Haiti's wealthy elite, seeking to bring the government of President René Préval more directly under their control.

The story of hunger in Haiti goes far beyond recent hikes in world food prices. The country's crushing poverty — it is the poorest country in the Americas — is the result of decades of exploitation and interference by the world's big powers, principally the United States, with Canada and France increasingly joining in.

This important new book tells that story.

A courageous twenty five-year struggle against hunger and poverty

In 1986, a popular uprising overthrew the Duvalier family dynasty, one of the most ruthless tyrannies in modern history. Four times since then, in 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2006, the Haitian people have elected governments that promised socially-progressive policies. The first three in fact encouraged and supported Haiti's peasant farmers so that the country could become food self sufficient.

Two of those governments were overthrown, in 1991 and 2004, by Haiti's elite and its foreign backers. Both times, the ousted president was Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Catholic priest and advocate of liberation theology, now living in exile in South Africa. The U.S., Canada and France directly backed Aristide's overthrow in 2004 by sending thousands of soldiers and police to finish an assault begun by Haitian paramilitaries. The foreign intervention was sanctioned by the UN Security Council.

Peter Hallward's new book tells the tragic tale of 2004. *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment* is a hard-hitting and thoroughly-researched exposé of the international conspiracy that led to the latest overthrow of Haitian democracy and sovereignty. The "flood" in the title refers to the political movement and party, created by Aristide and his colleagues, known as "Lavalas," a word in Haiti's Kreyol language that expresses the imagery of the Biblical flood sweeping away an unjust and immoral social order.

Canadian-born Hallward is a professor of philosophy at Middlesex University in London, UK. His book, acclaimed by Noam Chomsky and Dr. Paul Farmer, themselves authors on Haiti, systematically demolishes the lies and distortions that have been spread in the countries of the big-three conspirator governments — the U.S., Canada and France.

The conspiracy was presented as salvation for the Haitian people, as “liberation” from Aristide’s allegedly repressive government. Hallward sums up the conspiracy in these words:

“The effort to weaken, demoralize then overthrow Lavalas in the first years of the twenty-first century was perhaps the most successful exercise of neo-imperial sabotage since the toppling of Nicaragua’s Sandinistas in 1990... Not only did the coup of 2004 topple one of the most popular governments in Latin America, but it managed to topple it in a manner that wasn’t recognized as a coup at all.”

Damming the Flood describes the calamitous consequences of two years of foreign-imposed government following the 2004 overthrow, including widespread killings and jailings of Aristide supporters, economic ruin, and deepening misery for the majority of the Haitian population. The book’s narrative ends in 2007, but readers will find many keys to understanding the social calamity that continues to unfold, two and a half years after the election of René Préval in February 2006 and four and a half years after the U.S., Canada and France seized effective control of the country.

Préval has disappointed the Haitian masses who voted overwhelmingly for him. He has bowed to demands to surrender Haiti’s beleaguered economy to international capital, including privatizations of the few remaining public enterprises. He has done little to stand up to foreign police and military rampaging through the vast, poor neighbourhoods where people cling to the dream of a return of Aristide and the reform policies of his Fanmi Lavalas party.

A devastating account of ‘left’ and NGO support to imperialism

Hallward describes the array of domestic and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and “left” parties whose material interests and blind hostility to the post-year 2000 government of President Aristide led them into an alliance with imperialism and the Haitian elite in the 2004 coup. They supported Aristide’s overthrow and then became complicit with the massive human rights violations that followed.

The scope of this betrayal will shock many readers. Among the partners in the reactionary alliance against Lavalas are the leaders of Haiti’s failed Stalinist parties; former allies of Aristide within the Fanmi Lavalas party; the Communist Party of France; a multitude of NGOs in the U.S., France and Canada, including the not-so-alternative Montreal-based left-media NGO Alternatives; the Quebec Federation of Labour; parties of the “Socialist” International, including Canada’s New Democratic Party and France’s Socialist Party; and the political/quasi-trade union Haitian grouping known as Batay ouvriye (Workers Struggle).

Hallward also documents the silence or complicity of such agencies as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in response to post-coup human rights violations.

Haiti today

Hallward’s book is an emotionally difficult read. It is hard to imagine that a people can survive all that has been thrown its way in Haiti — poverty, political violence, environmental

degradation, loss of political sovereignty — only to have its fate largely ignored by “progressive” world opinion. Still, the author expresses cautious optimism for the future.

As demonstrated by the remarkable events surrounding the 2006 election, the popular movements in Haiti retain a strong and defiant capacity to mobilize. New, younger leaders are moving to the fore.

And important lessons have been drawn from the Aristide years. One of the strengths of *Damming the Flood* is its recounting of Haitian rethinking about the past 25 years. Could Aristide and his movement have taken more decisive measures to counter imperialist sabotage of their social and political project?

The foreign military and political presence in Haiti, a reading of the book suggests, is weaker than surface appearance might suggest.

Hallward to speak in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver

Beginning in late May, Peter Hallward, author of *Damming the Flood*, will speak in four Canadian cities in a tour organized by the Canada Haiti Action Network. Public meetings will take place in Montreal on May 31, Ottawa on June 1, Toronto on June 2, and Vancouver on June 7. Appearing with Hallward in Montreal and Ottawa will be Paul Chery, Secretary General of the Haitian Workers Confederation (CTH). Chery is one of the international guests at the convention of the Canadian Labour Congress to take place in Toronto May 25 to 30. For details on this speaking tour, visit the website of the Canada Haiti Action Network.

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