

REVIEW

Education in the Americas Project (U.S./LEAP)—successful.

However, the book's ultimate focus is not so much on the unions' successful or unsuccessful interactions with the transnationals and NGOs, but on the ways organized, goal-oriented, democratic union work and women's movements have substantially transformed worker-to-worker relations—often the difference between successful labor unions and those that have fallen through the cracks. Success and transformation, then, for the banana unions in Latin America has been a matter of education—the kind of education that can move mountains when, together, men and women push hard enough. ■

—Diana Medina

## In Brief

### News from Latin America

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#### ARGENTINA: Government Pays Back IMF Debt

ON JANUARY 3, AFTER YEARS OF AN openly hostile relationship with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Argentina cleared its entire \$9.81 billion debt with the multilateral financial institution. Announcing the decision last December, President Néstor

Kirchner, said the payment “will allow us to build a more just future, with greater flexibility in the design and implementation of economic policies.”

Opinion polls indicate that over 70% of Argentines supported the move, a sign of the bitterness left by the Fund's role in the country's economic collapse in 2001-2002. But despite praise from varying sides of the political spectrum, some left-wing critics blamed Kirchner for ignoring the “social debt” owed to the Argentine people, saying the money would be better spent alleviating the country's internal social problems.

The government says it will save \$800 million in interest payments and become autonomous from the IMF. In his announcement, Kirchner called the debt “a constant vehicle for meddling, because it is subject to periodic reviews and was the source of requirements that contradicted each other and were opposed to the objective of sustainable development.”

Despite using nearly a third of the Central Bank's foreign currency reserves, the Kirchner Administration was confident that Argentina's booming economy would allow the government to recoup the loss by the end of 2006. Under Kirchner, Argentina's economy has rebounded miraculously, with 8% annual growth rates since 2003, but social indicators have not improved to pre-crisis levels.

The debt payment came a few months after mid-term congressional elections in October in which Kirchner's allies had a strong showing. Some analysts say the October victory has allowed Kirchner to distance himself from more centrist politicians

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and to become more directly involved in policymaking. Kirchner, for example, replaced Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna, giving the job to Felisa Miceli, a self-proclaimed *kirchnerista*. The President repeatedly clashed with Lavagna, and in early December, just before the debt repayment announcement, he asked Lavagna to resign. Although Lavagna is widely credited with engineering the economic recovery, he was also a supporter of Kirchner's rival, Eduardo Duhalde. The two Peronists have openly battled for control of their party.

Argentina's debt payback shows more coordination between Mercosur

countries and the bloc's newest member, Venezuela. Two days before Kirchner's announcement, Brazil's Finance Ministry said it would pay the outstanding \$15.5 billion owed to the IMF. Kirchner told Argentina's newspaper *El Clarin*, "If Brazil hadn't taken the first step, Argentina wouldn't have been able to advance on its own."

Kirchner also indicated that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez helped make the repayment possible. Over the last year, Venezuela has become one of Argentina's major creditors, buying \$1.5 billion in Argentine bonds and promising to buy more, as part of Chávez's initia-

tives to build an anti-imperialist bloc in Latin America. Chávez called the bond purchase a step toward the creation of his proposed "Bank of the South," which he says would displace the IMF and offer loans free from conditionalities.

Within Argentina, many social movement and debt relief organizations have challenged the IMF payback. A group of civil society organizations working with Jubilee South issued a scathing press release disputing the legitimacy of the debt and accusing Kirchner and Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of neglecting the "social debt" owed to their peoples. The statement also questions whether paying off the IMF made fiscal sense, noting that Argentina's interest payments on loans from international markets are in some cases twice as high as IMF rates.

Left-wing congressman and economist Claudio Lozano told Inter Press Service: "Placing a priority on making payments to the multilateral lending organizations and paying off the IMF debt, without demanding any compensation for their shared responsibility in the process of indebtedness, is a strategy that fully complies with the demands of the IMF itself." ■

—Alex van Schaick

### GUATEMALA: Violent Deaths Break Records

GUATEMALA HAD A RECORD-BREAKING year in 2005. At 5,330, the number of violent deaths was the highest since the end of the civil war in 1996. And in the first 20 days of 2006, 304 people were known to have been murdered. Many of these deaths are not attributable to criminals but rather

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to ordinary citizens taking vengeance for alleged crimes against them.

“What is happening,” said Claudia Rivera of Casa Alianza, a human rights organization specializing in the rights of the young, “is that there is a lot of crime and nobody has confidence in the government’s ability to provide security. Crime is out of control and the state cannot stop it. So people in neighborhoods get together and do it themselves.” The government’s human rights prosecutor Sergio Morales seconds the assessment. “The state is weak. The people have no confidence, either in the security forces or in the justice system,” he said. Nor have they reason for even the slightest confidence. As the government seeks to fulfill the criteria for cooperation in the U.S.

war on drugs and its latest corollary, the war on gangs (*maras*), it comes ever closer to fulfilling those for a failed state.

Meanwhile, broad samples of the population, both in the cities and in the rural areas, see extrajudicial killing as both necessary and positive, say recent reports. In the nation’s second-largest city Quetzaltenango, bodies are found with leaflets attached reading, “Eliminate rabies by killing the dogs that carry the disease.” In Santiago Atitlán, an interviewee on the street told a reporter, “When those who are killed are *mareros* (gang members), people are pleased.” In the upscale Zone 10 in the capital, an office worker said, “Good riddance to bad people.”

There is nothing new in this. During the reign of de facto President Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), people from these same populations cheered on the gunning down of presumed criminals, questioning why a poor country should waste money on trials and lawful policing. Now, as then, scarcity drives both crime and the criminal response to it. The human rights community is largely united behind the idea that poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and lack of prospects move people to steal what they need and protect by whatever means necessary what little they have. Development agency figures place Guatemala at the bottom of the list of economic development levels in all of Latin America. Half the population lives in poverty, 2.5 million in extreme poverty, and the U.S. government returns the least able to earn and the most likely to commit crime in numbers that the country lacks any possibility of absorbing.

His approval rating at an all-time low, President Oscar Berger blames the gangs, a political stance now popular among neighboring presidents Ricardo Maduro in Honduras and Antonio Saca in El Salvador. He also blames the growing criminality on drug trafficking. On January 19, Berger welcomed President Álvaro Uribe of Colombia in Guatemala City and asked him to support Guatemala’s candidacy for becoming the home to the headquarters of the Regional Center for Coordination Against Narcotrafficking, a recent creation of 17 Latin American and Caribbean countries and the United States.

Uribe did not bite on Berger’s bid because El Salvador also wants the headquarters. But he did commit to asking the United States to extend aerial drug interdiction flights to Central America. Berger’s spin on the record number of murders last year is

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that many are attributable to organized crime. Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann detailed the rationale, saying the struggle between established drug cartels and the *maras* for control of the drug trade is at the root of the massive violence. Vielmann contends that eight of these established cartels are operating in the country and that they are responsible for the murders of 100 gang members in the past three months.

Guatemala is packed with international security organizations at present. An FBI mission is investigating the gang phenomenon. Colombian experts are involved in reorganizing the Anti-Narcotics Analysis and Information Service (SAIA), the recently busted and disbanded police organization that was

created after the break up of its predecessor organization. Guatemala's anti-drug credentials have been further tarnished since the embarrassing arrest of SAIA chief Adán Castillo for his role in the New Year's Eve theft of half the organization's stash of seized cocaine, nearly 500 kilos. ■

—NotiCen

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