

Latin America's Social Movements and the ALBA Alliance

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An important summit of global significance, held in Brazil May 16-20, has largely passed below the radar of most media outlets, including many left and progressive sources. This summit was not the usual type, involving heads of states and business leaders.

Instead, it was a gathering of social movement representatives from across Latin America and the Caribbean — the site of some of the most intense struggles and popular rebellions of the past few decades.

This region also remains the only one where an alternative to neoliberal capitalism has emerged. Pushing this alternative is the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA). Spearheaded by the radical governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Cuba, it has eight member states, but seeks to relate to people's movements, not just governments.

The purpose of the Brazilian gathering, the First Continental Assembly of Social Movements Towards ALBA, was to go beyond a simple talk shop. It aimed to set up a region-wide coalition that could, as its final declaration states, "build continental integration of social movements from below and from the left, promoting ALBA and peoples' solidarity against imperialism's project".

The document defines ALBA as "essentially a political, anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist project. It is based on the principles of cooperation, complementarity and solidarity, that seeks to accumulate popular and institutional forces for a new declaration of Latin American independence.

"It is a movement of peoples and for peoples, for peoples' integration, for life, justice, peace, sovereignty, identity, equality, for the liberation of Latin America, through an authentic emancipation that envisions Indo-Afro-American socialism."

The assembly also adopted the name "Hugo Chavez" in honour of the recently deceased Venezuelan president, who together with Cuban leader Fidel Castro first proposed ALBA.

It was no coincidence that the assembly was held in the state of Sao Paulo at the national education school of Brazil's Movement of Landless Workers' (MST), not only the largest and best-known social movement in the region but also a key proponent of this initiative.

Speaking to *Green Left Weekly* in November 2011, the coordinator of the ALBA social movement's council, Ruben Pereira said: "At the ninth ALBA summit in Caracas in April [2010], the social movement council was proposed as a space to propose social and

economic policies for ALBA, rather than to simply raise sectorial concerns.”

However, it quickly became clear that many social movements from non-ALBA countries, in particular Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), which had met with Chavez to discuss the initiative, wanted to be part of a coalition of all social movements supporting the ALBA project.

Addressing the assembly, MST leader Joao Pedro Stedile said the gathering represented a third phase in the struggle of Latin America’s social movements.

According to a May 16 Comunicacion ALBA-Movimientos report, Stedile said the first phase, from 1990 to 1998, represented “a moment of resistance, in which we were able to halt the advance of neoliberalism and imperialism, and when networks, organisations and continental forums began to emerge, and which had as its culminating point the overwhelming victory of Chavez” in 1998, when he was first elected president.

The second phase involved a series of debates and gatherings that led to the creation of the Assembly of Social Movements, a broad anti-neoliberal alliance, but one that did not have socialism as its explicit goal. This period also involved the election of other progressive governments and the creation of government-based regional integration organisations.

However, the third phase now required social movements to “create a proposal for integration independent of the governments, although united behind the same project,” said Stedile. Social movements needed “an autonomous space, with the moral obligation to criticise and support these governments when needed.”

An example of this stance of critical support was the assembly’s call to end the United Nations occupation of Haiti, which involves troops from a number of Latin American countries, including ALBA member Bolivia.

However, the newly formed Continental Coalition of Social Movements towards ALBA was clear in identifying its main enemy: US imperialism.

The final document notes that since the onset of the global economic crisis, the US has unleashed “an even greater imperialist counteroffensive across the continent, expressed through an increased presence of transnationals in our territories; the plundering of our natural resources and the privatization of social rights; the militarization of the continent, the criminalization and repression of popular protest; US involvement in coups in Honduras and Paraguay; the permanent destabilization of progressive Latin American governments; the attempt to recover political and economic influence through initiatives such as the Pacific Alliance and other international agreements.

“Within this context marked by an imperialist offensive on the one hand, but also by the opening up of new possibilities in the direction of the project outlined by the ALBA governments, coordination among social movements across the continent is more necessary than ever.”

A number of proposals were adopted including the creation of a publishing house, establishment of a network of ALBA movement media outlets, and continent-wide days of action against the occupation of Haiti, in support of Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and the Bolivarian revolution, against militarisation, and in defence of the environment.

An organisational secretariat was formed, comprised of delegates from Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, Venezuela and Colombia, with the aim of helping consolidate local based chapters of the coalition. Similarly, a coordinating commission made up of two representatives from each country and a number of working groups – media, education, mobilisation/solidarity – were established

Below is a translation of the final declaration of the Assembly.* * *

From the 16th to the 20th of May, at the Florestan Fernandes National School, in the municipality of Guararema, state of São Paulo, Brazil, we – more than 200 delegates representing women's, peasant, urban, indigenous, student, youth, worker's and agro-ecological movements and organisations from 22 countries – made up the First Continental Assembly of Social Movements towards ALBA (The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas).

We came here as part of a historic process that has seen us unite in forums, campaigns, international networks, sectorial organisations and diverse struggles within our countries, raising the same banners of struggle and sharing the same dreams for real social transformation.

We are living through a new epoch in Our Americas, which over the last few years has expressed itself in diverse mobilisations and popular rebellions, attempts to overcome neoliberalism and in the construction of an alternative society which is just and inclusive, something that is now both possible and necessary.

The defeat of the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas) in 2005 was evidence of the existence of social movement resistance and a new continental geopolitical configuration, characterized by the emergence of popular governments that have dared to confront the empire. Its most advanced element in this regard, launched in 2004 by Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, is today called the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA).

ALBA is essentially a political, anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist project, it is based on the principles of cooperation, complementarity and solidarity, that seeks to accumulate popular and institutional forces for a new declaration of Latin American independence, a movement of peoples and for peoples, for people's integration, for life, justice, peace, sovereignty, identity, equality, for the liberation of Latin America, through an authentic emancipation that envisions Indo-Afro-American socialism.

However, the empire continues to mobilise against the reorganization of popular forces and the emergence of new autonomous projects for the integration of the Great Homeland. In the wake of the first anti-neoliberal rebellions, the US has begun to reorient its foreign policy, seeking to recover its hegemony over the continental process across various spheres: economic, military, legal, cultural, media, political and territorial.

The explosion of the capitalist crisis in the heart of Wall Street in 2008 reinforced these plans. Since then, we have seen an even greater imperialist counteroffensive across the continent, expressed through an increased presence of transnationals in our territories, the plundering of our natural resources and the privatization of social rights; the militarization of the continent, the criminalization and repression of popular protest; US involvement in coups in Honduras and Paraguay; the permanent destabilization of progressive Latin American governments; the attempt to recover political and economic influence through initiatives such as the Pacific Alliance and other international agreements.

Within this context marked by an imperialist offensive on the one hand, but also by the opening up of new possibilities in the direction of the project outlined by the ALBA governments, coordination among social movements across the continent is more necessary than ever.

We have to assume the historic challenge of coordinating our resistances and go on the offensive with an original ideology and new proposals for models of civilisation, that build upon the best traditions of our peoples.

We ratify the principles, guidelines and objectives set out in our first Charter of Social Movements of the Americas to build continental integration of social movements from below and from the left, promoting ALBA and peoples solidarity against imperialism's project.

We affirm our commitment to the project of Latin American integration, to continue the anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-patriarchal struggles, based on the principle of permanent and active solidarity between the peoples, via concrete actions against all forms of power that oppress and dominate.

We reaffirm our commitment to achieving the self-determination of our peoples, and popular sovereignty in all spheres: territorial, food, energy, economic, political, cultural and social.

We will defend the sovereignty of our peoples to decide what happens in their territories, to their natural resources and we commit ourselves to defending the rights of Mother Earth.

The social movements of Our Americas call for:

- The promotion of regional unity and integration centered on an alternative, sustainable, durable and solidarity-based model, where the modes of production and reproduction are in the service of the peoples.
- The re-launching of the struggles of the masses and the class struggle at the national, regional and continental level, in order to halt and dismantle neoliberal capitalist programs and projects.
- The creation of effective networks and coordination between popular media outlets, that can allow us to carry out a battle of ideas, and put a halt to the manipulation of information by media corporations.
- Deepen our processes of political and ideological education in order to strengthen our organisations, as well as advance in processes of unity that are consistent and consciously in accord with needed transformations.

At the same time,

- We declare our support and solidarity with the Colombian people during this crucial moment in the process of dialogue and negotiation towards the signing of a peace agreement based on social justice, and that truly resolves the problems that gave rise to the armed conflict. We are attentive to the development of this process, and willing to collaborate and accompany it in any manner the Colombian people see fit.
- We declare our support for the Bolivarian government of Venezuela, headed by comrade President Nicolas Maduro, who represents the unmistakable popular will of the Venezuelan

people as reflected in the elections of April 14, in the face of continuous attempts at destabilization by the right that seek to ignore the sovereign decision of the people and lead the country towards a political, institutional and economic crisis.

This Continental Coalition of Social Movements towards ALBA is part of an emancipatory process that since the Haitian revolution until today has sought to construct a more just and profoundly human society. Our commitment is to continue the legacy of millions of revolutionaries such as Bolívar, San Martín, Dolores Cacuango, Toussaint L'Overture, José María Morelos, Francisco Morazán, Bartolina Sisa and many others who in solidarity dedicated their lives for these ideals.

Reaffirming our own history, our Assembly has adopted the name of one of them, that of our Comandante Hugo Chavez, whom we honour by re-raising his banners of struggle for unity and fraternity between all the peoples of this great, free and sovereign Homeland.

“The unity and integration of Our Americas is our goal and our path!”

[Translated by Federico Fuentes. Together with Roger Burbach and Michael Fox, he is the co-author of *Latin America's Turbulent Transitions: The Future of Twenty-First-Century Socialism* (Zed Books 2013). Fuentes also edits [Bolivia Rising](#).]

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