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Ecuador

Indigenous mobilization defeats neo-liberalism

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV329 - March 2001 -

Publication date: Saturday 10 March 2001

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The agreement signed between Ecuador's President Noboa and the powerful National Confederation of Indigenous peoples of Ecuador (Conaie) on February 7, 2000 represents a new victory. In the course of three years, the radical mobilization of the peasant-indigenous movement, alongside the popular urban sectors, has overthrown two neo-liberal governments, divided the Armed Forces, and won a popular plebiscite against dollarisation of the economy and the payment of the foreign debt.

Today the struggle has prevented the implementation of the most anti-popular economic measures like the increase in gas tariffs and fuel prices. The Conaie has ensured the cancellation of the debt owed to the state by the body responsible for rural social security, together with the establishment of a policy of protection for Ecuadorian emigrants (in particular those going to the EU) and a credit mechanism for the poorest agricultural workers. They have also ensured the non-participation of Ecuador in "Plan Colombia", a political decision which is fundamental for the entire region. Conaie president Antonio Vargas stressed that this agreement was a victory that can be attributed "to our struggle, which is not only that of the indigenous peoples ... it is one step more on the road that leads to the end of poverty and exclusion".

During this new popular uprising organized by the Conaie, the National Peasant Coordination, the Popular Front and the Pachakutik movement, the Ecuadorian Federation of Evangelical Indigenous Peoples rallied to the movement for the first time, allowing, as its leader Marco Murillo stressed, "the complete unity of the indigenous people".

This uprising was marked by the death of four indigenous activists, with more than 50 wounded and 300 demonstrators held. Unlike the mobilisation that overthrew the government of Jamil Mahuad in January 2000, this movement set itself more modest objectives: to block the government's neo-liberal measures. Some 8,000 indigenous people, trades unionists, and students confronted the police, blocked the roads, organized strikes and occupied the universities and churches, showing once again the depth of popular discontent and the inability of the ruling class to establish a system of political domination which allows the implementation of the IMF programme with any chance of success.

The persistence of this indigenous radicalism influences other social sectors and feeds a growing politicisation of struggles and demands. There is no longer a real division between social and political questions. The mobilizations which initially affected the provinces and the peasant communities then spread to the national level, witnessing to the spirit of revolt of the indigenous peoples and, beyond this, the whole of the Ecuadorian people, against a cruelly inhuman economic policy.

Dollarisation has bought neither stability nor improvement of the quality of life. It has not revived growth or reduced inflation. The economic situation is still further degraded. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the rate of inflation, which could exceed 35% this year, is linked to the policy of dollarisation that has pushed up the price of goods and services, aligned on international rates, and increased the speculative search for available dollars. This has led to an unprecedented concentration of incomes; the rigidity of rates of exchange has made exports less competitive and encouraged imports, ruining thousands of companies, with more than 200,000 people thrown into unemployment. The foreign debt is expected to reach 1.2 billion dollars, the equivalent of 30% of the public expenditure budget and nearly 8% of GDP.

Ecuador is in a situation of social emergency: 20% of the population lives on an income of less than a dollar a day and poverty affects 85% of the country's inhabitants; the poorest 10% of the population receive 0.6% of income while

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the richest 10% get 43%; nearly 50% of children suffer from malnutrition; half the indigenous population is illiterate and three children out of four leave school before the end of the primary stage.

This recent victory, beyond immediate conquests, underlines the decisive political importance of the indigenous movement, in terms of the relations of forces and the definition of a project on a national scale, but also in the construction of a vast network of solidarity, on the scale of the country as well as on the international level.