Latin America’s Autonomous Organizing

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In February 2006 activists met in Uruguay for the fourth Latin American Conference of Popular Autonomous Organizations. Over 300 delegates from Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay organized this year’s annual event as a space to strategize autonomous organizing and coordinate direct actions. This year's conference, held February 24-26 in Montevideo, focused on building popular power in Latin America among organizations autonomous from the state, political parties and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

Galpon de Corrales, a community center in a working class neighborhood in Montevideo, coordinated the conference. The Galpon features a community radio station, a community library and a large indoor space to hold cultural activities. Activists from the community center take pride in the fact that the Galpon is completely self-managed and sustaining, and several times a week they organize a collective meal.

The participating organizations were generally oriented towards class struggle and libertarian practices such as grass-roots organizing, direct democracy and mutual solidarity. Within the debate of how to build popular power, delegates discussed strategies for communities to solve their own problems independently of the state or other institutions.

The current context offered by Latin American state politics emerged as a focal point during the two-day meeting. In each of the nations represented, social organizations have faced new challenges due to the resurgence of "progressive" social democratic governments. Take, for example, the case of Uruguay’s social movements, where many of these have demobilized after the inauguration of Tabare Vazquez. At the conference all eyes were therefore on Bolivia due to the recent victory of the Movement to Socialism’s (MAS) leader, Evo Morales. In all of the workshops, participants discussed how to prevent the growing expectations populations have of their social democratic governments from impeding the accumulation of popular power.

Everything at the congress was auto-gestionado (self-managed), from the olla popular (collectively cooked meal) to cleaning and maintenance. Artists performed spontaneous theatre and Afro-Uruguayan popular music, Candome, into the wee hours of the night. The 200 participants represented a diverse array of activist work and focuses that included human rights groups, community centers, alternative media outlets, anarchist organizations, unemployed worker organizations, student groups, popular education teams and movements of cardboard collectors.

Beyond each group’s particular focus, activists within each country are working to create venues for political formation and popular education as part of a larger plan for an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist Latin America.

The workshops focused on the construction of popular power at a grass-roots level on each front: human rights (impunity for police and military accused of human rights violations and historical memory, the ongoing problem of political prisoners, and the criminalization of protests); labor organizing (worker movements, class struggle tendencies, democratic union organizing and recuperated enterprises); barrio (neighborhood organizations, community organizing, unemployed worker organizations and community radios); student (student movements and student autonomy); and environmental (land and production and the privatization of natural resources).

Neighbourhood Organizing

For decades social movements have taken on the task of organizing in their barrios (neighborhoods). Historically, neighborhood organizations have mobilized to improve basic services in the barrio, for example potable water, paved streets, sewage installations and schools. With growing unemployment and poverty levels in the 80s and 90s, many neighborhood organizations took on the role of demanding work or subsidies for basic survival. The unemployed, who have no access to labor unions or tools to protest in their workplace, have organized in Latin America’s barrios for work and dignity.

Within the workshop on neighborhood organizing, participants concluded that the working class needs to reverse the fragmentation and build popular power within neighborhoods. The barrio has become a territory where all sectors of social movements come together. The workshop focused on creating a new working class subjectivity so that the working class can identify the oppression they must survive, and create tools for struggle.

The Galpon is an excellent example with respect to the problems and possibilities offered by organizing on a community level. Its members work with residents from the surrounding barrio, including children and many unemployed adults. One of the challenges facing the Galpon is meeting urgent needs of participants while moving away from traditional forms of social work.

During the conference I interviewed Gustavo, who helped build the Galpon de Corrales as a political space. Gustavo advocates a platform similar to that of anarchists like Errico Malatesta, who believed that anarchist organizations need to carry out a political agenda based on autonomy and independence, and therefore take on full responsibility. In his 1897 essay, “Anarchism and Organization” Malatesta argued that organization is necessary, and that anarchists are able to come together and arrive at an agreement without
submitting to authority. He also advocated mass organizations building popular power rather than orthodox anarchist groups. Malatesta writes: “To become a convinced anarchist, and not in name only, they must begin to feel the solidarity that joins them to their comrades, and learn to cooperate with others in defense of common interests and, by struggling against the bosses and against the government that supports them, they should realize that bosses and governments are useless parasites and that the workers could manage the domestic economy by their own efforts.”

In the interview, Gustavo summarized expectations for the conference and expressed a desire for groups to work on a territorial level because of diverse needs within working class struggles:

We’ve organized this congress as a way to see other experiences and exchange ideas with social organizations in Latin America, to familiarize ourselves with another global reality in Latin America. This practice is needed so we can put into practice the central focus of this Congress: popular power. The first congress was held in Brazil in 2003, the second in Cochabamba, Bolivia and the third in La Plata, Argentina in February 2005. During the fourth congress we will discuss the theme of building popular power. We need to create a strategic perspective of social struggle, while bringing this perspective from all the popular fronts where social movements are organizing. It’s fundamental that the people exercise popular power and that they raise class-consciousness as part of this strategic perspective. During the congress, we debated how to build popular power: to create participatory spaces and an atmosphere for struggle. We also need to adopt a new political concept, which is that of territorial struggle. Resistance on a territorial level is fundamental because the working class is very diverse and fragmented. A territorial struggle implies building a space for construction, participation and socialization. We look to the historic banners from society in the beginning of the century, taking from historic examples like the worker councils where they built popular power and values from our class.

**Human Rights**

The workshop on human rights focused on the increasing criminalization of protests and campaigns for the release of political prisoners. Throughout the conference, participants noted that progressive governments are increasing their attacks against forms of social protest and autonomous organizing.

Delegates described the situation of human rights in their own countries, mentioning the situation for activists facing growing repression and political arrests. In Uruguay, thousands rallied last year for the release of four prisoners detained during the Anti-Bush demonstrations in Montevideo that took place during the fourth Summit of the Americas held in Mar del Plata, Argentina. They
were held for over six weeks. Currently the Patagonian city of Las Heras, in Argentina's southern province of Santa Cruz, is under siege. Striking oil workers stormed a police station, killing a police officer and injuring 15 others, to free a jailed union leader in February. The government sent over 300 national guardsmen to Santa Cruz to disperse protestors in response to the clash. Oil workers have reported that the situation is very tense, with regular attacks and threats against unionists. Reports from Chile suggested that social activists and the indigenous Mapuche people face permanent repression, imprisonment and killings on part of the Chilean state. Since the return to democracy in 1990, hundreds have been arrested for struggling against injustice. More than 30 activists have been murdered since Chile’s return to democracy.

According to Maio, a Mapuche activist from the Encuentro Por la Libertad (Gathering for Freedom), social organizations in Chile need to work at both the macro and micro levels in order to confront this repression. Maio has worked for many years for the release of political prisoners in Chile:

Our organization is building a space to fight for the freedom of the people, freedom for social activists. We are working against the anti-terrorist laws implemented in Chile and against the criminalization of protests because working for the release of political prisoners isn’t enough. If we don’t get to the root of the problem, political repression will continue to be a revolving door.

In Chile, a large number of political prisoners were released after the dictatorship. However, Chile's first democratic government of Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994) arrested a large number of new political prisoners. While everyone said that democracy returned to Chile, it wasn't the case. They built a high-security prison to imprison social activists from Frente Patriotico Manuel Rodriguez and the MIR. We’ve come to this congress to strategize how we can effectively fight for the release of political prisoners. First we have to break with the image of political prisoners as terrorists, so that the population doesn’t imagine a hooded criminal. We want the people to associate the term terrorist with torturers, those who are in government and politicians ordering police repression. The government accuses social activists fighting against oppression of terrorist acts and they throw us in jail.

In the workshop on human rights we talked about the criminalization of protest. We strategized over how we can reverse human rights abuses in our daily organizing efforts. How can we stop the system from advancing? We always talk about this on a macro level, we talk about neoliberalism and capitalism. But how do we deal with oppression on a day to day basis? We also need to strategize how to deal with the aggressions, when we don’t have food for our collective meals, when we don’t have shoes to put on our children’s feet when they go to school, when there’s no jobs.
Labour Organizing

During the workshop on syndicalism, participants debated strategies for workplace struggles. Argentina has witnessed a resurgence of struggle inside the workplace, using the working class's historical tools for liberation: the strike, sabotage and the factory takeover. Argentina's labor struggles in the Buenos Aires Subway, public hospitals, public universities, bank sector and recuperated enterprises have resulted in new visions and victories for the country's working class.

Social movements, especially unemployed worker organizations in Argentina, have ended up in a deep state of fragmentation. With unemployed worker organizations fragmented and some co-opted, even the most radical experiences closed their doors to the forms of resistance used during the late 90's: direct action, popular assemblies and the road blockade. However as living conditions in Argentina continued to deteriorate, many compañeros began to regroup to fight for campaigns unheard of in the 90's, the decade of privatization and destabilization of the working class. During Argentina's crisis demands were limited to increased unemployed subsidies. Today, workers have organized in internal commissions functioning autonomously from traditional unions to demand livable salaries and improved social conditions.

Alex, from Brazil's National Movement of Collectors of Recycled Material Movimento Nacional dos Cartadores de Material Reciclavel (MNCR) says that workers organizing need to develop new tools against exploitation. He said that workers clearly can't depend on state-run unions or bourgeois labor laws to protect workers from unsafe conditions or firings:

During the congress we've met with compañeros who are struggling, people who discuss strategy and at the same time are truly fighting. The bourgeois control most of the unions, but they are disguised as union leaders. They are paid a lot of money to run a union. I'm talking about Latin America as a whole. Most of the bureaucratic unions are allied with the government. The union decisions don't come from the workers. The government works so that workers can't unite. We've agreed with a lot of what has been said here at this conference.

We concluded during the workshop: first that all workers should be unionized, even the workers who don't have jobs. Unemployed workers and informal workers also form part of the working class in struggle. Second: for the unions to be completely independent from the government. We also talked about how the labor laws are developed to favor the capitalist. The laws are all pro-bourgeoisie. Laws are used to institutionalize unions. The laws are all bourgeois which is why we can't look to them as tools for struggle.
Worker organizations throughout Latin America are proving that they can organize themselves effectively and democratically. Argentina’s subway workers along with public health employees, public school teachers, telecommunications workers, train workers, and unemployed worker organizations have formed a coalition of grassroots worker’s organizations—the Movimiento Inter-Sindical Clasista (MIC, or the Class Struggle Union Coalition Movement). MIC is working to coordinate struggling workers throughout Argentina. MIC’s 14 principles state a commitment to democratic organizing and unity among workers struggling against exploitation. Workers participating in this coalition self-define themselves as class-based, antagonistic and critical of union bureaucracy. This coalition has gone so far as to create a long-term syndicalist school in Buenos Aires. MIC’s first education workshop focused on “companies' strategies for flexible labor standards and unions."

**Autogestión: Self-management**

The phrase "self management," derived from the Spanish concept of "auto-gestión," means that a community or group makes its own decisions, especially those kinds of decisions that fit into processes of planning and management. Latin America’s recuperated enterprises are putting into action systems of organization in a business in which the workers participate in all of the decisions.

Many organizations participating in the Latin American Conference of Popular Autonomous Organizations have initiated self-management projects in their own communities. The Galpon de Corrales is a prime example of autogestión. The cultural center solves problems within the community and provides infrastructure for cultural alternatives. They have built the cultural and social center on the principles of autonomy and autogestión.

While no representatives from Latin America’s recuperated enterprises attended the conference, there was much debate about the importance of the some 300 businesses and factories currently run by worker self-management in Latin America.

Latin America’s occupied factories and enterprises represent the development of one of the most advanced strategies in defense of the working class and of resistance against capitalism. The experiences of worker self-management and organization have directly challenged the structures of capitalism by questioning private property, taking back workers’ knowledge, and organizing production for objectives other than profit.

This new phenomenon catching hold throughout Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela continues to grow, despite market challenges. More than 30,000 Latin
American workers are employed at cooperatively run businesses, which were once closed down by bosses and have now been reopened by employees. The occupied factories and enterprises are proving that they are organizing to develop strategies in defense of Latin American workers susceptible to factory closures and poor working conditions. While these experiences are forced to co-exist within the capitalist market, they are nonetheless forming new visions for a new working culture.

The conference was organized carefully, with participants divided into random groups to ensure diversity in the discussion and participation. Organizers developed a list of central themes or topics for each workshop for focused and productive discussion. During the simultaneous theme workshops, attendees participated in the workshop based on their organizational focus. In many of the workshops, participants discussed how racism, homophobia and sexism relate to class-based oppression. The discussions however, did not focus on reforms like abortion rights or same sex marriage. The workshops discussed integral ways to fight against all interlocking forms of oppression on each front (human rights, neighborhood organizing and labor union organizing for example).

During the concluding discussions, participants agreed to coordinate a number of actions against the Free Trade Accords throughout the region that the Uruguayan, Argentinean, Chilean, Brazilian and Bolivian governments are eagerly awaiting to sign. Even in the face of progressive continentalism among so-called “Leftist” governments, popular autonomous organizations continue to resist imperialism and struggle against the denials of basic rights such as food, education, health and shelter. Progressive governments in the region have not only continued with the neoliberal economic model, but have strengthened their embrace of neoliberalism. This fact will prove to be a considerable challenge for autonomous organizers in Latin America, and will be a main point of discussion and strategizing at the Fifth Latin American Conference of Popular Autonomous Organizations which will be held in Chile next year.

The Fifth Latin American Conference of Popular Autonomous Organizations promises to go beyond sharing ideas, but also developing a sense of shared commitment to action and community. Chilean libertarian organizations have taken on the task of organizing the upcoming conference, which will bring a new characteristic to discussions. The theme will continue to focus on building popular power, but will surely focus on the struggle of the Mapuche and Tehuelche communities against the rise of nationalist attacks on their land and people.

References

Malatesta, Errico. (1897). “Anarchism and Organization.”

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Notes

1 In Argentina and Brazil, several groups of workers (cartoneros) who collect paper and other recyclables from the streets to survive have formed organizations to fight for their rights. From Argentina, the UTRACA (Union de Trabajadores Cartoneros de Argentina) participated in this conference. From Brazil the Nucleo de Apoio ao Movimento dos Catadores, an independent organization of cardboard collectors that formed in Porto Alegre in the late nineties, also participated in the conference. In Brazil, the National Movement of Collectors of Recycled Material- Movimento Nacional dos Cartadores de Material Reciclavel (MNCR) has become an important social movement, challenging the government’s ability to provide solutions for the working class. The MNCR helped to organize the first Latin American Conference of Popular Autonomous Organizations in Porto Alegre in 2003.

2 Malatesta, Errico. (1897). “Anarchism and Organization.”

3 All interviews were conducted and translated by the author of this article.