

CounterPunch

OCTOBER 16-31, 2012

TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

VOL. 19, NO. 18

Aiding Corporations Through Death Squad Violence **The Blood Toll of Plan Colombia**

By Daniel Kovalik

As Noam Chomsky predicted back in 2000 as Plan Colombia was just commencing, Colombia would now become the third largest recipient of US military aid, supplanting Turkey for this enviable position (with Israel and Egypt almost invariably coming in at the number one and two spot, respectively). Chomsky explained in *Rogue States* that the US could turn its mighty military power toward Colombia now that Turkey, with massive US aid, had been able to crush its Kurdish population through extreme violence, including “widespread resort to torture.”

Chomsky related that “[b]y 1999, Turkey had largely suppressed Kurdish resistance by extreme terror and ethnic

cleansing, leaving 2 to 3 million refugees, 3,500 villages destroyed (seven times as high as in Kosovo under NATO bombings) and tens of thousands killed, primarily during the Clinton years. A huge flow of US arms was no longer needed to accomplish these objectives.”

Now, with Plan Colombia, or “Plan Washington” as my Colombian friends always refer to it derisively, the US, with more than \$8 billion of military aid over a decade, would reproduce the very same results in Colombia. The facts demonstrate that Plan Colombia was intentionally designed to support the military and their paramilitary allies in their mass displacement and murder of peoples, especially Afro-Colombian

and indigenous, in order to make way for the exploitation of their land by multinational companies.

First of all, as explained with great clarity by Amnesty International (AI) in a 2004 report entitled, “Colombia: A Laboratory of War: Repression and Violence in Arauca,” Plan Colombia was passed at the urging of major oil producers, especially L.A.-based Occidental Petroleum. Thus, AI explained:

“Occidental Petroleum is the second largest oil producer in Colombia. It is also important to note that with insecurity in the Middle East oil markets, and perceived threats to Venezuelan oil exports to the United States, the US administration is keen to stabilize the Colombian oil sector. . . To this end, the US government has poured significant resources into protecting the pipeline . . . [including] \$99 million approved in 2003 [as part of Plan Colombia] to fund

KOVALIK CONTINUED ON P. 2

The Obama Illusion

By Rob Urie

In reading various autopsies of Barack Obama’s performance against Mitt Romney in the recent presidential debate, the one explanation that seems most obvious was nowhere to be found. Once the two men set aside the social issues they used to gain the support of their respective ‘bases,’ they had nothing left to debate. Both men are products of the ‘Washington Consensus,’ the agreement in principle to a set of theories, facts and beliefs that unite Wall Street with both political parties in official Washington. And the political and economic collusion that produced it left a near impenetrable barrier to knowledge of the world outside of it and joint circumstance with the peasantry.

When Democrat Bill Clinton entered office in 1993 a new Gilded Age was under way. The Soviet Union had

dissolved, the Cold War had ended and the view in Washington was that the US had ‘won.’ Explanations coalesced around democracy, or rather ‘freedom,’ and capitalism. A group of antique cartoons were dug up and reformulated into ‘neoliberalism,’ the new guiding economic principles of the West, clearly attached by history to economic imperialism and by imperial utility to both ‘freedom’ and democracy. What better pedigree for Washington’s courtiers, tools of the titans of finance ready to ‘democratize’ capital for the benefit of themselves?

From the combination of facts on the ground and this new ideology a complete mythology sprang forth. Bill Clinton nurtured the first major free-trade deal, NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), through Congress, appointed former Goldman

Sachs Director Robert Rubin, and later economic hit-man Larry Summers, as Treasury secretaries and appointed Savings and Loan bag-man Alan Greenspan as Chairman of the Federal Reserve. Mr. Clinton also cut social spending and warmed a chair in the Oval Office as the mother of all financial bubbles, the ‘dot-com’ boom, produced the illusion of broad prosperity.

As might be expected of policies derived from old cartoons, a series of increasingly severe financial crises erupted. They were managed in high technocratic fashion by various groupings of what *Time* magazine dubbed ‘The Committee to Save the World,’ Robert Rubin, Alan Greenspan and Larry Summers. Epitomized by the resolution of Long Term Capital Management, the exploding hedge fund organized by Nobel Laureates gone wild, Alan Greenspan played financier J.P. Morgan’s role in an earlier Gilded Age by calling the ‘great men’ of Wall Street into

URIE CONTINUED ON PAGE 4 COLUMN 2

the protection of the oil pipeline, mainly through the purchase of helicopters, training, intelligence and equipment to the army's XVIII Brigade. In January 2003, 60 US Special Forces' personnel arrived in Arauca – to join the 10 who were already there – to train units from the XVIII Brigade. Occidental Petroleum has also reportedly contributed financial resources and logistical support to the Brigade, including transport helicopters, to assist with the protection of the pipeline."

The support of the US and Occidental for the XVIII Brigade is emblematic of US government and corporate policy in Colombia, for this aid flowed to this Brigade, despite (or most likely because of) the Brigade's notorious human rights record.

Indeed, AI explained that, though the US cut off aid to Colombia in 1994 due to human rights concerns, President Clinton reestablished this aid pursuant to Plan Colombia "despite overwhelming evidence of the army's continued links with the paramilitaries" which were notorious for their "widespread human rights atrocities." And, Clinton did so, AI noted, not just at the behest of Occidental, but also at the request of BP

Amoco. It did so also at the urging of the Alabama-based Drummond mining company whose president actually accompanied Clinton to Colombia to deliver the first aid check.

As AI explained in its report focusing on the Arauca Department and Occidental, the XVIII Brigade in particular, both by itself and in concert with the right-wing paramilitary death squads, has protected the pipelines by intimidating and suppressing the local community. Thus, according to AI, "[c]ommunities living along the pipeline are closely monitored by the security forces, who often intimidate these communities warning them that the paramilitaries are coming behind them or by using paramilitary proxies to threaten and harass these communities."

AI related that, indeed, "[t]he increase of the paramilitaries in Arauca coincided with the demise of oil exploration and production in Casanare and the announcement of new oil fields in Arauca Department." These paramilitaries, doing the bidding of the XVIII Brigade, Occidental, and the US alike, we are told by AI, protect the pipelines by undermining perceived civilian support for the guerillas through terror tactics such as massacres, selective killings and threats, mainly against human rights defenders, social and trade union activists, journalists, teachers and health workers. These sectors are targeted to silence denunciations of human rights violations committed by the security forces and their paramilitary allies in the region; to break any "perceived or imagined links between civilians and guerillas; to silence opposition to oil exploitation and other economic interests, as well as the privatization of health and education services; *and to forcibly displace peasant farmer or indigenous communities living close to the oil installations or in areas due to be exploited.*"

In the above quote from AI, we see the essence of US policy in Colombia, which continues to this day, and in Plan Colombia in particular. This aid is designed to advance US corporate interests, particularly of extractive companies involved in drilling oil and mining coal and other valuable minerals, through the suppression of social groups resisting the corporate takeover of their country and through

massive displacement of the Colombian population, particularly indigenous and Afro-Colombians, who happen to live on land designated for exploitation.

As Avi Chomsky and Francisco Ramirez detail in their book, *The Profits of Extermination* (Common Courage Press), the rise of right-wing paramilitaries in areas designated for multi-national exploitation is a common one in Colombia, as seen in the cases of those areas sought after by such companies as (the aptly-named) Conquistador Mines, Exxon-Mobil and Harken Energy. And, accompanying the rise of these paramilitaries is the mass displacement of the surrounding communities from their land as well as the murder of social, human rights and labor activists that get in these companies' way.

The best documented example of this grim phenomenon, of course, involves North Carolina-based Chiquita Bananas which actually admitted, in a criminal case brought by the US Justice Department, to paying paramilitary forces \$1.7 million and running them 3,000 kalashnikov rifles between 1997 and 2004. Such material support to paramilitaries of the AUC was illegal after 2001 when the State Department designated these paramilitaries as terrorists.

According to Colombian Attorney General Mario Iguaran, Chiquita's support for these paramilitaries led directly to the takeover of much of Colombian society by the paramilitaries and to the killing of between 4,000 and 14,000 civilians by the particular paramilitaries which Chiquita sponsored. Iguaran opined that Chiquita had paid the paramilitaries to do exactly what they ended up doing – to subdue the banana region of Urabá through violence. However, given that such support for paramilitaries (our terrorists in Colombia) to advance corporate interests is quite consonant with US foreign policy, Chiquita, with the advocacy of its defense lawyer Eric Holder (now US Attorney General), was fined a mere \$25 million for its transgressions. And, incredibly, Chiquita was generously allowed to pay this fine over a five-year period. Moreover, while former paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso has testified that Dole and Del Monte also paid off these right-wing terrorists,

CounterPunch

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

MANAGING EDITOR
JOSHUA FRANK

SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR
NAT ST. CLAIR

BUSINESS
BECKY GRANT
DEVA WHEELER

DESIGN
TIFFANY WARDLE

CO-EDITOR
ALEXANDER COCKBURN
1941-2012

P.O. Box 228 - Petrolia, CA 95558
1-800-840-3683
counterpunch@counterpunch.org
www.counterpunch.org
All rights reserved.

these companies have never even been charged with a crime.

In the end, Plan Colombia's true goal of making Colombia safe for corporate exploitation through the violent suppression and displacement of its civilian population has been a resounding success – in marked contrast, of course, to the professed drug eradication policies of Plan Colombia which, according to both a 2008 US Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (GAO-09-71) and the World Drug Report 2012 of the UN Office on Drug and Crime, have resulted in no net decrease in pure cocaine coming out of the Andean region.

First, the toll of people displaced by this policy has been even greater than that experienced by the Kurds at the hands of Turkey, with massive US aid. Thus, as the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) notes in its most recent (2012) country operations profile on Colombia, over 3.6 million people have been *registered* as forcibly displaced since 1997 – with great aid from Plan Colombia beginning in 2000. However, the UNHCR acknowledges that many displacements, particularly of indigenous, go *unregistered*, so the total number is undoubtedly much greater. And indeed, there are credible estimates, by such Colombian human rights groups as CODHES, that there are over five million internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in Colombia – the largest number of IDPs on earth. And, the UNHCR notes that such displacements have actually increased in recent years, with 100,000 Colombians displaced in 2010 alone – a 35% increase over 2009. The UNHCR further estimates that there will be at least another 300,000 to 400,000 displaced by the end of 2013, swelling the ranks of Colombia's IDP population.

The reasons for this continued displacement, accompanied by massive human rights abuses, are clear. As explained in a November, 2011 report by Peace Brigades International (PBI) – entitled, "Mining in Colombia: At What Cost?" – in the past 10 years, 40% of all Colombian land has been "awarded or solicited by mining and crude oil companies." And, the price for extracting these valuable resources in Colombia is enormous, with thousands of Colombians literally paying for this extraction with their lives, lands and

homes. Thus, as PBI relates, "80% of the human rights abuses in Colombia in the last ten years were committed in mining and energy-producing regions, and 87% of Colombia's displaced population originate from these places."

What's more, such displacement disproportionately falls upon the 102 indigenous groups in Colombia as well as the Afro-Colombian population. Thus, as the US Embassy acknowledged in a February 26, 2010 Embassy Cable released by Wikileaks, 34 indigenous tribes are now being driven to the point of extinction as the result of such displacement. In this Cable, entitled "Violence Against Indigenous Shows Upward Trend," the Embassy explains that this displacement and resulting threat of extinction are due to "capital investments in the

There are over five million internally displaced peoples in Colombia – the largest number on earth.

mining of hydrocarbons sectors" as well as "investments in rubber [and] palm oil." Yet, notwithstanding this acknowledgement, the Embassy refers to the request of the Awá tribe for withdrawal from their land as "impractical."

I note that, according to the March, 2010 report of six Colombian human rights groups to the International Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (E./C.12/COL/5), the Awá is one of the tribes especially targeted by the massacres which have plagued Colombia's indigenous since the beginning of Plan Colombia. All told, the groups in this report explain that more than 1,000 indigenous were murdered between 2002 and 2009, with 151 victims being children, while "176 indigenous were victims of forced disappearances, 187 were victims of sexual violence and torture and 633 arbitrary arrests." This same report concludes that the indigenous groups have been harmed and made vulnerable by "legislative and administrative measures taken that systematically reduce the collective and social rights of the indigenous communities, harming the intangibility of the ancestral territories and the

fundamental right to prior consultation" before the expansion of economic projects. Such measures, the report explains, include Colombia's Mining Code of 2001 and Colombia's "law approving the Free Trade Agreement between Colombia and the United States (Law 1143 of 2007)."

The situation facing Afro-Colombians is just as dire, and for the very same reasons. Indeed, as of 2008, 12.3% of all Afro-Colombians had been displaced by force, including 252,541 Afro-Colombians displaced from the Pacific coast alone. And, Colombia's own Constitutional Court explained that one of the chief reasons for this mass displacement has been the "existence of mining and agricultural processes" which has "favored theft," as well as a deficient judicial and institutional system which "encourages the presence of armed actors that threaten the Afro-descendent population to make them abandon their territory."

Indeed, the killings and disappearances of civilians have taken place on a massive scale throughout Colombian society, and with support from the US military

Subscription Information

Subscription information can be found at www.counterpunch.org or call toll-free inside the U.S. 1-800-840-3683

Published twice monthly except July and August, 22 issues a year.

1 - year hardcopy edition \$55
 1 - year email edition \$35
 1 - year email & hardcopy edition \$65
 1 - year institutions/supporters \$100
 1 - year hardcopy edition student/low income \$45
 1 - year email edition student/low income \$30

Renew by telephone, mail, or on our website. For mailed orders please include name, address and email address with payment, or call 1-800-840-3683 or 1-707-629 3683. Add \$17.50 per year for subscriptions mailed outside the U.S.

Make checks or money orders payable to:
 CounterPunch
 Business Office
 PO Box 228, Petrolia, CA 95558

aid offered through Plan Colombia. According to the Colombian government itself, as reported by the Latin American Working Group, there are 51,000 registered disappeared in Colombia – a figure which makes Colombia the historic leader in this hemisphere for disappearances. However, there are credible claims that this figure, obscured by the active concealment and destruction of bodies, is much higher. For example, according to the Colombian reporter, Azalea Robles – as cited in the book, *Cocaine, Death Squads, and the War on Terror: US Imperialism and Class Struggle* – 250,000 Colombian civilians have been “disappeared” in Colombia. This high figure is indeed corroborated by the US Embassy in Colombia which, as admitted in a November 19, 2009 (Wikileaks-released) Cable, entitled, “2009-2010 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” that there have been 257,089 registered victims of the right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia – a figure unrivaled in this Hemisphere in modern times.

And, these paramilitaries continue to work hand-in-glove with the Colombian military. Amnesty International, in an August 28, 2012 news release on conflict-related rape in Colombia, notes that “[c]ollusion between members of the security forces and paramilitaries has and continues to fuel human rights violations in Colombia’s armed conflict.”

Among the victims of the military-paramilitary alliance in Colombia are those who represent a particular threat to the bottom line of corporations – trade unionists. Thus, Colombia has been leading the world in the killing of unionists since before Plan Colombia and continuing to the present time, with just under 950 unionists in Colombia killed since Plan Colombia began in 2000, representing more than half of all unionists killed in the world during this same time period.

Yet, the US remains undaunted, continuing to double-down on its military policy in that country. Indeed, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, in a March, 2012 article entitled, “US to Share Combat Expertise with Colombia,” President Obama recently sent US brigade commanders “with hands-on counterinsurgency experience in Afghanistan and Iraq” to aid Colombian military and police forces. These

commanders are in addition to the 250 US military personnel already in Colombia – a figure which, does not include the CIA and DEA operatives in that country.

Not surprisingly, the new US commanders will be operating out of a base in Tibu, Colombia (one of 7 joint US-Colombian bases) – home to vast supplies of palm and crude oil.

If past is prologue, we can expect more US-sponsored atrocities to make way for the extraction of these resources. **CP**

Daniel Kovalik is Senior Associate General Counsel of the United Steelworkers and is currently teaching International Human Rights at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law.

URIE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

a room and hashing out a deal to save the global financial system.

The combination of capitalist triumphalism, the new old ideology of neo-liberalism, the illusion of broad prosperity created by a stock bubble and the technocratic management of financial crises by ruling class technocrats produced the illusion of a ‘golden age.’ All that was needed was to follow a few simple rules and the world was ‘ours’ went the thinking. The increasing intensity of financial crises was there for anyone with eyes to see. But why let inconvenient facts get in the way of good theories, especially as Washington and Wall Street grew increasingly isolated from the consequences of their imperial policies?

When Barack Obama entered office in the midst of a global bank panic and a severe recession he brought with him what he likely hoped were the new ‘Committee to Save the World,’ Clintonites Larry Summers and Timothy Geithner and Greenspan protégé Ben Bernanke. What he either didn’t understand or know how to reconcile was that no Clintonite had ever saved the world. Like the crazed firefighter who lights fires so he can put them out, Mr. Obama’s appointees had mainly helped create the rot of late-stage finance capitalism. Their ‘fixes’ had always been to cover up financial looting and never for the benefit of the public. And while Mr. Obama’s supporters have insisted that his own economic policies are the result of Republican intransigence, the

more plausible answer, and that offered in his very own words, is that his core economic beliefs are part and parcel of the consensus conceived in Washington and executed on Wall Street.

And this consensus is banker economics—specifically the economics of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) used by international financiers to impose extractive economic policies on victim nations for the last seven or so decades. Western ‘liberal’ consternation over austerity being forced by Germany and France, the ‘European Union,’ on Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain misses that this is US economic policy, and Barack Obama’s, quite explicitly. Those surprised by Mr. Obama’s plans to cut Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, his indifference to large-scale unemployment and his unconditional bailouts of Wall Street banks simply haven’t been paying attention.

The Bank Bailouts

Of all of Mr. Obama’s policies, the unconditional bailouts of Wall Street banks have garnered the most public outrage. Banks have long been tools of neocolonial hegemony through their ability to create debt and trade it as a commodity. Excessive household debt lies behind ongoing economic weakness in the US and sovereign debt lies behind European Union control over the EU periphery and increasingly over its center. And far from representing the moral failings of debtors, banks have instantiated debt into the fabric of Western economic life as they have increased their legal power over debtors. Bankers had bankruptcy laws tightened in the US in 2005 just as their predatory mortgage lending reached its peak.

And while the details of the bank bailouts in the US are relatively well known, readers may not be aware that this is about the only Obama administration policy that the IMF absolutely rejects when considering its ‘structural adjustment programs’ for other (neo) colonial states. The rationale for not bailing out corrupt banks is that they are predatory and extractive. And that role is reserved exclusively for the IMF’s client banks. This is to say that the bailouts engineered by the Obama administration were too corrupt for even the IMF, at least in theory.

Why this matters is that it adds

perspective to the motives behind the bailouts. The IMF is a tool of Wall Street. It claims its policies are politically neutral, designed to benefit its victim nations. If one believes this, then Mr. Obama and his economic team harmed the US by saving corrupt banks against IMF policy. But the IMF claim was always that it was corrupt banks on the receiving end of its policies that must be closed. And this is for the benefit of external debt holders—Wall Street and assorted connected financiers. Reviving Wall Street in this context was exclusively for the benefit of Wall Street. In other words, it was to revive wealth extractors for the system of wealth extraction. And while this may seem self-evident to some, it likely isn't to supporters of Barack Obama in particular and either political party in Washington in general.

One example is the HAMP (Housing Affordable Modification Program) program engineered by the Obama administration and specifically designed to lure desperate homeowners into wasting months of their lives 'negotiating' with banks that had no intention of making material mortgage modifications. The rationale for the program, as stated by Obama lieutenant Timothy Geithner, was to slow foreclosures to protect banks from the deluge their predatory lending had created. Along the way the banks used the program to run-up illegal fees that made foreclosure more likely. And the bank's activities were premised on the legal right to foreclose which they didn't have because in many cases the mortgage documents needed to do so simply didn't exist.

Following this came the celebrated 'mortgage settlement' purported to rectify bank foreclosure malfeasance that is itself a near complete fraud. Not only does the settlement not effectively punish banks for past illegal behavior—immaterial fines and ineffective enforcement guarantee that the banks that made predatory mortgage loans can continue to take homes from people without the legal right to do so. To be clear, knowing full well the implications of its actions, the Obama administration engineered the settlement to provide legal cover for predatory banks to steal houses from citizens with impunity and de facto legal immunity. Welcome to neocolonial America.

The other half of this equation lies in

the transfer of public wealth to corrupt private banks to save culpable bankers from economic ruin and possible prison sentences. Again, for purely economic reasons even the IMF rejects this practice because corrupt banks are predatory, extractive and pose a systemic risk to the global financial system. And there are alternative models such as the one Sweden developed in the early 1990s that revived a functional credit system without the corruption. But early on Obama appointee Timothy Geithner decided the Swedish model wasn't 'American' so the administration went with, what from a public policy perspective is the worst of all possible solutions, the blanket transfer of social wealth to Wall Street banks and pardon from legal consequences for several decades of criminal behavior.

The Automaker Bailouts

It was December 12th, 2008 when a *New York Times* headline appeared reading "White House Read to Aid Auto Industry." The Bush administration had been negotiating with recalcitrant congressional Republicans for over a month trying to engineer a bailout of the auto industry. Negotiations were under way with the U.A.W. (United Auto Workers) to win concessions and Dick Cheney had gone to Congress to twist arms to save the industry. The broad parameters of a deal had been worked out but congressional Republicans remained resolute in their opposition, so the Bush administration provided TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program) funds to meet the immediate cash needs of the automakers until the Obama administration and new Congress entered office.

Barack Obama continued the bailout along the lines that had been engineered by the Bush administration. He kept most of the corrupt, incompetent management that had destroyed the industry in place at full pay. He negotiated wages and benefits for labor lower. He saved the corrupt financial arms of the automakers and turned them into banks so that they could be bailed out and banker bonuses could be paid. He left the incentives to send autoworker jobs to low wage countries intact. Four years later auto executives are again earning multi-million dollar bonuses for sending jobs overseas and Detroit is selling cars using

a higher proportion of sub-prime loans than before the financial panic began and in loan amounts greater than the cars are worth.

Because the automakers are tied to a much larger economy through their supply chains, there was little choice but to provide financial support for them in the near term. But Detroit is world renowned for being run by a cloistered aristocracy descended from its founders. It was this cloistered aristocracy that brought us two decades of behemoth gas-guzzlers under the guise of 'consumer demand' (SUVs fit on existing truck chassis and were therefore cheaper to make and subject to less stringent gas mileage standards) just in time for a Wall Street driven spike in oil prices. The automaker bailouts could have been used to 'horizontalize' Detroit, eliminate incentives to send autoworker jobs overseas, shift the industry toward environmental sustainability and reorient pay away from corrupt, incompetent management toward labor. Mr. Obama chose the plan favored by finance capital instead.

Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid

One of the primacies of IMF 'structural adjustment' programs is to cut social spending so as to leave more wealth to be extracted by predatory financiers. To sell such a program in the US two misdirections are used: (1) an economic rationale that suggests that we will all benefit from cutting social spending and (2) a contrived emergency that lends urgency to the effort. The suspect economic rationale in this case is the neo-liberal canard left over from the Clinton administration that combines 'crowding out,' the argument that government spending leaves less room for more economically beneficial private investment, with the idea that the confidence of financiers in fiscal probity will lower borrowing costs and therein bring the return of prosperity.

The contrived emergency comes directly from banker ghettos in New York, London and the ECB (European Central Bank) that claim that fiscal profligacy led to the severe recessions now under way in the West and that only fiscal probity can fix the problem. This is considered fact by Clintonites in the Obama administration and there is

evidence in his words that Mr. Obama holds the same view. That the feared boogieman—rising interest rates on government debt, never manages to appear has done little to sway true believers. They simply shift to projections of future shortfalls without asking whether their very policies are to blame for them?

And true believers can be found prominently on Mr. Obama's committee to 'solve' the problem, deficit committee Chairs Alan Simpson (Republican) and Erskine Bowles (Democrat). It was Barack Obama's decision to create this commission and there is little rationale for doing so unless he is convinced that a fiscal emergency is both real and a priority. And again, the same conceit is behind European austerity policies and few victims of those policies are of the view that they are for their own benefit.

First, there is little evidence that a fiscal emergency exists. The Federal Debt to GDP (Gross Domestic Product) ratio used to promote the idea ignores history in that the last time it was as high in the US (1948), it was GDP growth from public investment that brought it down, not spending cuts. Second, claims of a fiscal emergency have been opportunistically raised in the rare lulls between unnecessary wars and massive corporate welfare giveaways since Richard Nixon was in the White House. Over how many decades can claims of the same public emergency remain credible? And the best plan to preserve social spending is to pay labor its rightful wage.

It is the extractive economic policies embraced by Barack Obama that favor finance over labor that have led to the projected shortfalls in social programs. The private health insurance system squanders upwards of 30% of healthcare spending on its healthcare denial bureaucracy. And the practices of the Wall Street banks that Mr. Obama bailed out with public resources are largely responsible for the upward redistribution of wealth that is starving Social Security by reducing the wages of labor relative to its product. The Obama deficit committee's claim that social spending is bankrupting the country has it perfectly backwards—it is the extractive policies of finance capitalism that are making social spending increasingly difficult.

If Mr. Obama is re-elected, his first

priority will be 'entitlement reform'—cutting social spending. The local rationale will be demographics—Americans are living longer and Social Security must be adjusted to reflect this change. This is both true and irrelevant. The actual problems are that the labor that contributes to Social Security is being systematically underpaid and those who depend most on Social Security aren't living longer. Simply returning the wages of labor to the proportion of its product of the 1970s would 'save' Social Security. And medical savings from a single payer healthcare system would slow the medical inflation behind projections of future healthcare 'insolvency.'

Conclusion

Barack Obama came into office at a time of historic turmoil and opportunity. One needn't have swallowed his campaign rhetoric of hope and change to look through it to the policies of Democrat FDR that saved capitalism from its own excesses and built America's large middle class. But lost in that thinking is that Democrats long ago buried the New Deal and Republicans had only ever bought in when the political winds required it. That massive unemployment and taming a predatory, extractive economic system aren't considered emergencies but implementing the economic prescriptions of the radical right by cutting social spending should demonstrate straightforwardly whose interests Mr. Obama represents. And should that fail, try listening to his words.

The tragedy of Barack Obama is that we allowed him to sustain a political economy that is beyond repair through an historic opportunity to shove it out of the way in favor of something workable. Supporters who see his 'liberal' social policies don't appear to understand that in the context of his ability to effectively sell the economic policies of the radical right, they are nearly meaningless. The cliché when I was studying economics was the social liberal but fiscal conservative. But the reflexive fiscal conservative simply doesn't understand the economics. And when the question is asked: who benefits from fiscal conservatism, it is Wall Street and Wall Street alone.

And the greater tragedy still is that

we aren't collectively re-imagining a supportive, nurturing, sustainable economy premised on creativity and the fulfillment of human possibility. In that sense Barack Obama is light years into dreary irrelevance. So are Mitt Romney, Democrats, Republicans and the entirety of the Washington-Wall Street worldview. Vote with a pen, a typewriter, paint and canvas, a poem, posters, banners, bricks, sticks, marches, sit-ins, boycotts, strikes, mutual aid, co-operatives, refusals and revolutions. The 'Washington Consensus' is a tried and failed dead end and unfortunately also Barack Obama's core belief. CP

Rob Urie is an artist and political economist in New York.

Learning from the Zapatistas Compañeros of the Word

By Greg Ruggiero

In the dead of winter, 1994, a mysterious caller left a voice-message on my answering machine. Speaking in English, but with a Mexican-sounding accent, the female voice simply said, "The compañeros asked me to call you to thank you for the pamphlet you made about the struggle." Compañeros? It was the first time that I had consciously heard the word, and it would be years before I really understood it.

A few weeks earlier, I had opened that day's *New York Times* and stood, without moving, while reading the paper's cover story. It was January 3, 1994. An indigenous uprising was taking place in Chiapas, Mexico. The article described how a well-orchestrated, surprise action staged by thousands of Mexican rebels had managed to seize control of several towns. Photos showed the rebels, many armed with nothing more than sticks. Without words, the faces in the photos spoke: *Estamos aquí. No queremos morir, ya no! Somos ustedes. Ustedes son nosotros. Ven, compañero. Ven, compañera. Levantarse!*

Day by day, coverage of the rebellion deepened, and day by day, bits and pieces of the words of the indigenous

communities and their spokespeople made it into print. When they did, phrases floated out like lines from great writers like Pablo Neruda, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Benedetti or Walt Whitman; words you never forget, words that hold you in their hands, words that call you, invite you, and stay with you as if they were those of someone you have always known and loved, but never met.

A young woman, Barbara Pillsbury, began posting her translations of the rebels' writings on the website of the Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy. From these initial translations, the Mexican rebels' own perspectives began to gradually emerge in their own voice, in their own rhythm, and in their own words. Declarations of indignation, dignity, justice, democracy and freedom flowed like mountain springs from remote Mayan communities to the rest of the world.

"Here we are, the dead of all times, dying once again, but now in order to live," began one of the rebels' communiqués. Through simple and heartfelt language, 500 years of indigenous resistance was being signaled out as both a local Mexican struggle and as a global defense for humanity itself. As an activist and a movement publisher, everything about this resonated and inspired. By February 1994, my friend and I began publishing pamphlets in support of the rebellion that included the Zapatistas' first declarations. Not long after, the mysterious voice message was left on the answering machine. But it wouldn't be until August 1999 that I made my first trip to Chiapas, met with the insurgent communities, and began to hear the living voice of the people in struggle and learn bits and pieces of their language of community, dignity and resistance.

In the meantime, I learned by reading Zapastista literature. As support for the movement spread, new translators emerged with new styles of translating that preserved some terms in the Spanish original. Among the words that appeared most abundantly were *compañero* y *compañera*. For example, many of Zapatista letters and public presentations begin with greetings to others in the struggle: "Brothers and sisters, *compañeros* y *compañeras*..." In Chiapas, *compañero*, or *compa* for short, is how Zapatistas refer to one another,

and to anyone or anything in solidarity with the movement. You might also hear "compita," an affectionate version of *compa*, which I first came across through written correspondence with freed Zapatista political prisoner, Javier Elijorriaga.

Time, memory and oral history all flow differently in the Zapatista communities. Their braid of struggle is woven equally with strands of the past, the future and the present, and whatever helps them weave it is a weapon against oblivion. "We have other arms," states one of their letters. "For example, we have the arm of the word. We also have the arm of our culture, of our being who we are...We have the weapon of the mountain, that old friend and *compañera* who fights along with us, with her roads, hiding places, and hillsides, with her trees, with her rains, with her suns, with her dawns, and moons..."

Paolo Freire said language is never neutral, and Alfred Korzybski said words are like maps, but never the territory to which they refer. In the case of insurgent discourse, the territory to which the terms of struggle refer is the possible world, experienced in glimpses through collective acts of the imagination, conscience and yearning. The genius of Zapatista literature is the narrative it voices to protect its historical memory and parent the possible. "In our dreams we have seen another world, an honest world, a world decidedly more fair than the one in which we now live. We saw that in this world there was no need for armies; peace, justice and liberty were so common that no one talked about them as far-off concepts, but as things such as bread, birds, air, water"

The words dignity, dream, democracy, justice, struggle and liberty are among those central to the Zapatista vision, but perhaps it is the word *compañero*, the building block of the community and the organization, that holds and contains all of these other words in it. A *compañero*, like Subcomandante Marcos, "is a human being, any human being, in this world...all the exploited, marginalized, and oppressed minorities, resisting and saying, 'Enough.'"

While its meaning may change from place to place, the word *compañero* is common in conversation, movement songs, and the literature of resistance throughout Spanish-speaking culture.

You can hear it in the dialogue of the characters in the film *Corazon del Tiempo*, in the one-word title of Jorge Casteñada's biography of Che Guevara, and in the lines of Argentine poet Juan Gelman:

Nosotros vamos a empezar otra vez la lucha

Otra vez vamos a empezar

Otra vez vamos a empezar nosotros

Contra la gran derrota del mundo

Compañeritos que no terminan

O arden en la memoria como fuegos

Otra vez

Otra vez

Otra vez

In art as in life, the word carries the love and aspiration of people who use language, like territory, to struggle for a better world.

* * *

On November 16, 2012, I will stand trial for taking part in a march across the Brooklyn Bridge during which 700 people were swept up in a mass arrest. Spending the night in a cell with 115 other protestors was a galvanizing and affirming experience. In the year since my night in jail, more than 7,621 arrests have occurred as a result of actions carried out by elements of the US democracy movement. During my first court appearance I was reunited with some of the 115 movement people with whom I shared a jail cell on October 1. With great joy, I passed around copies pamphlets I had published since our arrest and chatted with young organizers about plans for upcoming actions. A few blocks away, Zuccotti Park was roiling with activity. When the judge called out my name, I made my way up from my seat, passed through a small wooden gate, and stood before the bench. I declined the court's offer for an adjournment in contemplation of dismissal, and chose to fight all charges against us. As I turned from the judge and began to exit the space before his bench, a Latina woman from the movement was called up. For a moment we stood facing each other, the gate between us.

It was for me to exit before she approached the bench, but I said, "After you, *compañera*," and opened the gate for her to come forward first.

"Gracias, *compañero*," she answered.

We looked at each other again, but now with new eyes, a new understanding

return service requested

connecting us. Unlike the very real bond we also shared with everyone else in the room through the movement, the march, and our mass arrest; this stranger and I, through a single world, communicated and connected with something deeper. In calling each other *compañeros*, it was as if the struggle we were waging went far beyond one arrest, one place, one time, one movement, one people, one language, one history. It was as if the tables were turned: a whole world was now ours to speak, and the silence that came with sharing it was clandestine and beautiful.

“Words are deeds,” wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. They can divide and conquer or tie things with possibility; they can serve systems of domination and control or help overturn them. In learning words and phrases from other struggles, and creating new ones, a literacy of resistance and emancipation is advanced that creates territory out of consciousness itself. “It is the word that gives form to that walk that goes on inside us,” say the Zapatistas. “It is the word that is the bridge to cross to the other side. Silence is what Power

offers our pain in order to make us small. Speaking we heal the pain. Speaking we accompany one another. Power uses the word to impose his empire of silence. We use the word to renew ourselves.”

As an act of renewal, social struggle succeeds most not when it focuses on winning a single-issue reform, but when people involved become capable of imagining and enacting change in new ways. A literacy of struggle and solidarity, drawing on terms borrowed or those just born, can open the way to thinking and acting outside of set of choices imposed by the system in much the same way achieving regular literacy opened the path for Frederick Douglass pursue and win his own liberation, fomenting resistance and movement organizing in the process.

We live in a time of indignation, outrage, uprisings, rebellion, and democracy movements against systems that make no attempt to serve the public interest. Developing a literacy of solidarity and resistance can not only help break step with consumer society, but also assist people identify with and articulate with the traditions of resistance

developed over generations of struggle by the indigenous, people of color, women, and defenders of the Earth’s natural environment.

“Challenges to the system,” writes Raúl Zibechi, “are unthinkable without spaces beyond the control of the powerful.” After a year of crack downs against the US democracy movement, 7,621 arrests, timed entrapment cases, mass surveillance, and a police state presence waged against public plazas and squares, language offers itself as an open yet clandestine space to occupy and mobilize in the effort to freely name the world, its injustices, and our narratives toward common emancipation.

The struggle forward, and repression against organizing, continues. As it does, we learn to find one another and connect in new ways, learning from one another as we go, finding solidarity in disobedience, in stories of community and resistance, and in simple words we carry in from sister struggles, words like *compañero* and *compañera*. **CP**

Greg Ruggiero is an editor at City Lights Press and founder of Open Media Books.