

The Summit of the Americas and the development of a genuine opposition to global capital

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This weekend's Summit of the Americas—a large gathering in Quebec City of government and corporate leaders, including US President George W. Bush and the heads of 33 other national governments—will be the target of widespread protests.

In an attempt to intimidate the Summit's opponents and stigmatize them in the eyes of the general public, the Canadian government has transformed the center of Quebec City into a veritable armed camp. Publicly, the Canadian government admits to having mobilized more than 6,000 police and 1,000 army personnel. A four-kilometer chain-metal fence, anchored in concrete and topped by barbed wire, encircles the section of Quebec City where summit delegates will meet and be housed. According to a report in the *Washington Post*, Ottawa stands ready to declare Quebec City a militarized zone should anti-summit protests prove unruly.

Most of the opposition to the summit focuses on a plan, given tentative approval at a similar Organization of American States (OAS) gathering in 1994, to create a hemispheric “free trade” zone by the end of 2005. President Bush is expected to use the summit as a platform to press the US Congress to give him “fast track” authorization to negotiate what has been dubbed the FTAA or “Free Trade of the Americas Agreement.”

Undoubtedly, the majority of the workers and youth who take to the streets of Quebec City this weekend will do so out of deep-felt concern over the ever-increasing domination that transnational corporations and financial institutions exercise over the lives of working people and society as a whole.

But it must be said forthrightly that the political forces in the leadership of the anti-summit protests and the political program that animates the movement against the FTAA in no way represent a genuine and progressive alternative.

A lot of water has gone under the bridge since public disquiet over the social consequences of capitalist globalization surfaced in the protests against the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) conference in Seattle.

The trade union bureaucracy has moved to take the so-called anti-globalization movement under its wing, with the dual aim of politically emasculating it and using it to promote its own reactionary political agenda.

The US and Canadian trade unions opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and oppose the proposed FTAA not from the standpoint of developing a united struggle of the international working class against the capitalist order, but by blocking with those weaker sections of capital who fear that in the event of the dismantling of protectionist barriers they will be driven under.

Similarly, the unions and their liberal and social-democratic allies counterpose to capital's drive to gut labor and environmental regulations, the call for pressure to be placed on the state to “control capital.”

The call for workers to orient to the nation-state, itself a creation and instrument of capital, is diametrically opposed to the struggle to organize the working class as an independent political force through the construction of an international workers' party. Rather than futile attempts to resurrect the capitalist Welfare State, working people must fight for an entirely new international social and economic order.

The various proponents of direct action are in no way politically independent of the FTAA's trade union and other establishment opponents. What they advocate is more muscular protests. Their antics are aimed at securing maximum media coverage, not developing a politically independent movement of the international working class. They boost the trade union bureaucracy by joining its protests and by claiming that the pro-capitalist unions are the legitimate voices of working people.

What lies behind the push for the FTAA

Since its creation in 1948, the OAS has served as an instrument of US imperialism. Through the creation of the FTAA, US big business, with the enthusiastic support of Canadian capital, is trying to institutionalize and increase its traditional economic domination over Latin America. Motivating this policy shift are Washington's and Wall Street's fears over the emergence of the European Union and East Asia as powerful rival trading blocs and the inroads that European and Japanese capital have made in South America over the past two decades.

However, the FTAA is far from the only initiative the US is taking to bolster its strategic position in South America. Ostensibly a campaign to fight drugs, the Colombia Plan has served to dramatically increase the presence of US military personnel in South America, thus projecting US geo-political power.

The Brazilian bourgeoisie, which has long-harbored hopes that Brazil will become South America's dominant regional power, is fearful that its small number of aspiring multinational companies will be destroyed by North American competition. Consequently, it is seeking to delay the dismantling of tariff barriers, but it has thus far been careful not to openly challenge US interests by opposing the FTAA negotiations.

Brazil's efforts are undermined by the extreme weakness of the other Latin American bourgeoisies. Having been compelled by increasing economic marginalization to abandon their attempts to promote independent capitalist development, the various national bourgeoisies of Latin America have dropped their anti-American rhetoric and now aspire to become the provisioners of cheap labor and natural resources to North American capital.

Their model is Mexico. Since the implementation of NAFTA, foreign investment in Mexico's *maquiladoras* region has soared, enabling Mexican's economic and political elites to enrich themselves. But for the Mexican masses, NAFTA has meant economic and social dislocation and growing poverty and social inequality. Living standards today are lower

than they were at the beginning of the 1980s.

Notwithstanding the nomenclature, the FTAA has nothing to do with freedom. It is about creating a regional trade bloc, that can provide Wall Street a stronger position from which to vie for markets and profits against its European and Japanese rivals. And it is about further promoting the mobility of capital, so as to drive down wages and social conditions and pit worker against worker in the struggle for corporate competitiveness.

The connection between the FTAA, the drive to remove all restrictions on capital, and the assault on the social position of the working class was spelled out clearly in an op-ed piece written by Brian Mulroney, the Conservative who was Canada's Prime Minister from 1984 to 1993. In an article published by the *Globe and Mail* April 17, Mulroney declared, "Free trade is part of a whole that includes ... deregulation, privatization, and a concerted effort to reduce deficits, inflation, and interest rates ..."

However, in opposing the FTAA, working people must clearly distinguish between the increasingly global character of production and exchange of goods—in and of itself a progressive development fuelled by revolutionary advances in computer science, telecommunications and transport—and the socially destructive program of globally-organized capital.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* declared at the time of the Seattle protests: "The great question today is not to roll back development to some largely mythical age of isolated national economic life—it is this: who is going to control the global economy, whose interests are going to determine how its immense technical and cultural capabilities are utilized? The only social force capable of organizing the global economy in a progressive fashion is the international working class."

People's Summit or a second line of defence for the existing social order?

A more detailed examination of the anti-summit protests only serves to underline how opposed their organizers are to such a perspective, and the urgency of freeing the working class from their influence.

In the days preceding the opening of the Summit of the Americas a counter-summit, known as the Summit of the People, convened in Quebec City. The organizers of this counter-summit are involved in a myriad of other anti-FTAA actions and are the official sponsors of what will be the largest anti-summit demonstration, Saturday's "March of the People."

It is no exaggeration to say that the People's Summit is an adjunct of capital, and not just because the Canadian and Quebec governments provided \$500,000 of the \$800,000 spent on organizing the counter-summit.

Numerous groups have been accorded a place in the Summit's "rainbow" coalition from Oxfam and the Sierra Club to the Catholic Church.

But its chief organizer is the Hemispheric Social Alliance, an organization that has its roots in a body founded by the US-based AFL-CIO and the Canadian trade unions to oppose NAFTA.

In their opposition to the 1988 Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, the Canadian unions openly allied themselves with those sections of Canadian capital that feared increased US competition, first and foremost the traditional governing party of Canadian big business, the Liberals. (Among the chief spokespersons of the current anti-FTAA campaign is Maude Barlow, a one-time Liberal Party aide, who now heads the Council of Canadians.)

In opposing NAFTA, the UAW and other AFL-CIO unions welcomed right-wingers like billionaire businessmen Ross Perot onto their platforms. And in campaigning against China's admission to the WTO and the reduction of tariffs on African textiles, the US unions have allied with one-time Nixon aide and "American first" demagogue Pat Buchanan.

These nationalist campaigns in alliance with the weaker sections of capital have gone hand-in-hand with the North American unions' systematic suppression of the class struggle—their imposition of job and

pay cuts in the name of preserving corporate competitiveness and subordination of the working class to the political parties of big business.

As for the People's Summit claim to represent the oppressed Latin American masses, it is belied by the leading role of the AFL-CIO, which for decades has not only supported US foreign policy in Latin America, but also is notorious for providing assistance to CIA operations there.

Among the most prominent participants in the Summit of the People, and indeed the anti-FTAA movement, has been Canada's social-democratic party, the New Democratic Party. NDP leader Alexa McDonough has in recent weeks assumed the guise of a born-again anti-corporate crusader. But when the NDP has come to power, most importantly in Ontario between 1990 and 1995, it has implemented the dictates of big business, slashing public and social services and attacking workers' rights.

On its opening day, the Summit of the People was addressed by Quebec's Parti Québécois Premier Bernard Landry. No matter that Landry, who until last March was Quebec's Finance Minister, presided over massive social spending cuts and his government just delivered a budget providing massive corporate tax incentives.

Actually, Landry is a long-time proponent of free trade and had spent the previous weeks protesting over the Canadian government's refusal to allow the Quebec government to participate in the summit.

This ambivalence is by no means exceptional among many of the participants in the Summit of the People. The North American trade union bureaucracy, while ready to whip up chauvinist opposition against workers in other countries when faced with rank-and-file pressure to defend jobs and working conditions, recognize that the interests of their corporate masters are bound up with the struggle to dominate global markets. Even as they denounce the FTAA, the union bureaucrats have sent signals that they are ready to bargain.

In answer to an invitation this week from Canadian Trade Minister Pierre Pettigrew to attend the Summit of the Americas, Quebec Federation of Labour President Henri Massé said he would go if the unions were given a permanent place in the trade talks. "If we go, it will be because it will be the beginning of a true permanent process." When asked if there was not a contradiction between participating in a purported counter-summit and angling for a place at the summit table, Massé declared that there is none. "On the contrary, when people sit down to negotiate, there is nothing more effective than to have the support of thousands of demonstrating in the streets to make your argument," he said.

The union leaders' model is the European Union, which provides numerous tri-partite structures in which the trade union bureaucracy is accorded a modicum of power as the price for policing the working class.

Rightly, civil liberties groups, artists and many ordinary people have spoken out against the measures the Canadian government has taken to insulate the summit from any sign of popular opposition. The fence constructed around the Summit site has become a symbol of governments' readiness to run roughshod over democratic rights in pursuing the agenda of big business.

But it must equally be recognized that the Summit of the People is an establishment-sanctioned opposition movement—sanctioned because its politics do not transgress the debates within the ruling class itself over how best to uphold its interests.

Beside this, the proponents of direct action might at first blush appear quite radical. Indeed some of them mouth anti-capitalist phrases. But closer examination reveals that their orientation is fundamentally the same—one of pressuring big business and the nation-state.

Several right-wing commentators have noted that it is ironic that there are a number of prominent summit participants who a decade or two ago would have been found in the company of the summit's more radical opponents. Take the case of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. In 1990 he railed against US domination of Haiti and its decades-long

support for repressive regimes. Today as Haitian President he implements the dictates of the US-dominated International Monetary Fund and under US pressure has moved to incorporate in his government elements associated with the Duvalier and Cédras dictatorships.

The evolution of Aristide and so many like him, both in Latin America and in the social-democratic, Stalinist parties and trade unions of the advanced capitalist countries, is not simply, or even primarily, a matter of careerism and personal corruption. The opposition of these forces to capital and imperialism was never rooted in an international socialist perspective—that is in a program articulating the historic interests of the working class. Rather it was an opposition which in a programmatic sense articulated the anguish of the petty bourgeoisie, the petty producers, who fall victim to capital's compulsion to consolidate and develop technique so as to vanquish its rivals.

This is not to say that the working class is indifferent to the sufferings of the middle classes. But the working class fights for its interests and all exploited sections of humanity by advancing a program for the reorganization of the economic and social order which takes forward the developments in technology and the global integration of production already achieved under capitalism.

A product of the development of capitalism itself, the working class is the only force that can free the productive forces from capitalist social relations—from a system which is driven by the anarchic pursuit of private profit and which is wedded to an outmoded national form of political organization.

To accomplish this task the working class must draw the lessons of the last century of great class struggles and build a genuine international socialist workers party. It is to this task that the *World Socialist Web Site* is dedicated.



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