An exchange on the Colombian FARC

24 June 2002

Dear WSWS,

Obviously Uribe's election is a turn for the worse for Colombia's struggle of the revolutionaries in Colombia. It's one thing to analyze the theoretical and electoral conditions in Colombia, but does the ICFI actively support the armed struggle of the FARC-EP or the ELN?

Regards,

G

Ottawa

Dear G:

We do not "actively support the armed struggle of the FARC-EP or the ELN" and do not believe that the political perspective and practice of these organizations offer any way forward for the working class and the oppressed masses of Colombia. On the contrary, the activities of these guerrilla organizations have themselves helped to create the political conditions in which the extreme rightist, Uribe, was elected the country's president.

Against the growing US intervention in Colombia and the repression backed by Washington and carried out by the Colombian armed forces and its ultra-rightist paramilitary allies, the International Committee of the Fourth International fights for the perspective of socialist internationalism, based on the struggle to mobilize the independent strength of the working class, in Colombia, the US and internationally.

Branding the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army) as "terrorists," Washington is making Colombia a key front in the international "war on terror," with the aim of establishing unimpeded US control over the region and its extensive oil reserves. The inevitable target of this intervention will be not just the guerrillas, but the poor peasantry, the Colombian workers and the urban poor.

Guerrillaism has a long history in Colombia. Founded in 1966, the FARC is often touted as "the oldest guerrilla movement in Latin America." In reality, its roots go back to the late 1940s and the wave of murderous repression and rural civil war that followed the killing in 1948 of Liberal Party candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan and the "Bogotazo," the massive social upheaval that this assassination provoked.

Originally formed out of self-defense groups created by sections of the peasantry that then aligned themselves with Colombia's Stalinist Communist Party, the FARC's central political orientation has been that of agrarian reform. In a country that is 70 percent urban, its popular support has steadily diminished.

For its part, the ELN was set up by student and petty-bourgeois elements seeking to emulate the success of Fidel Castro in Cuba and adopting the focoist theories propounded by Ernesto Che Guevara. It attracted to its ranks the radical priest, Camilo Torres Restrepo, who was killed in his first battle in 1966.

While the rightist paramilitaries of the AUC (United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia), operating jointly with the armed forces, have produced the lion's share of the massacres, assassinations, forced expulsions and other atrocities suffered by Colombians in recent years, the methods employed by both the FARC and ELN betray a reactionary indifference to their effect on the consciousness of the working class.

Even though popular support for the guerrillas has declined, their financial base has grown considerably, in large part thanks to "taxes" levied from coca growers and drug traffickers in return for protection in the areas under FARC and ELN control. The paramilitaries of the AUC, of course, enjoy similar funding.

The guerrillas have supplemented their income through the kidnapping of civilians for ransom, including that of the Green Party presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt, last February. This act represented an utterly reactionary attack on the democratic rights of the Colombian people.

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Meanwhile, the guerrillas have conducted indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population, through the use of car bombs in cities and, in the countryside, gas cylinder bombs, like the one that claimed the lives of over 100 civilians in May.

These actions are in line with the retrograde theories of Castroism and Maoism embraced by both organizations, which pose revolution being realized by a peasant war encircling and strangling the cities. This conception is rooted in contempt for the struggle to politically educate and organize the Colombian workers and gives rise to policies and actions that serve only to divide the working class and the peasantry.

Alienated by armed actions that have no apparent socially progressive—not to mention revolutionary—ends, broad sections of the Colombian population have come to see the guerrilla organizations as little more than mercenary bandits offering no political alternative to the oppression and social polarization that dominate the South American country. Uribe and his supporters in the military and the right-wing death squads have exploited the resulting confusion.

Both the FARC and the ELN have agreed to "dialogue" with the government, explicitly promoting the conception that the corrupt and reactionary Colombian bourgeoisie is capable of carrying out far-reaching social reforms in order to bring about "peace." Three years ago, the FARC went so far as to welcome the head of the New York Stock Exchange to its "zone of control" for discussions, receiving a reciprocal invitation from NYSE Chairman Richard Grasso to join him on Wall Street's trading floor to "see how capitalism works."

These positions clearly indicate that either or both of these organizations could take the path of "institutionalization," like the guerrilla movements in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua—not to mention the M-19 movement in Colombia itself—transforming themselves into bourgeois political parties and entering into pacts with the very forces responsible for massive repression.

An earlier attempt by the FARC to pursue such a trajectory in the 1980s, with the establishment of the Patriotic Union party, was aborted by the wholesale assassination of its candidates and campaign workers.

Cheerleaders for the guerrillas in the various middle class radical protest outfits in the advanced capitalist countries never bother to make a class analysis of these organizations. Behind their hollow rhetoric about the "armed struggle" or "prolonged people's war" are concealed all of the essential strategic issues confronting the revolution in the oppressed countries.

What class is to play the leading role in the social revolution? What is the connection between the revolution in one's own country and the world revolution, and what is the relation between the struggle of the workers and oppressed in the oppressed country and that of the working class in the advanced capitalist ones? Those proposing a "concrete" policy of supporting the "armed struggle" are generally indifferent to these crucial questions.

Founded by the nationalist petty bourgeoisie and finding a limited base among the poor peasants, these movements are invariably hostile to the independent revolutionary struggle of the working class. Exercising military discipline in their own ranks and exerting their authority through armed force in the backward areas where they hold sway, they are also profoundly undemocratic. In the final analysis, they function in a way that subordinates the oppressed masses as a whole to the needs of the national bourgeoisie.

The US war drive in Colombia and the repressive schemes of the native ruling class will not be defeated by "actively supporting the armed struggle" of these guerrilla organizations, but by building independent, revolutionary parties of the working class that strive to unite the struggles of the Colombian workers and oppressed with those of the working class throughout the Americas and the world, based on the program of socialist internationalism.

Sincerely,

Bill Vann, for the WSWS

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