

The theory of “self-organization”

Interview with Luis Zamora of Argentina’s Autonomy and Freedom movement

David Walsh
2 June 2003

Luis Zamora, leader of the Autonomy and Freedom (*Autonomía y Libertad*) movement, is a prominent political figure in Argentina. A deputy in the National Congress, Zamora toyed with the idea of running for president in the recently held election—at one point he was leading in the polls—before abandoning the notion last autumn on the grounds that “taking power” was not what his “socialist-libertarian” organization was about.

In the first round of the eventual election, April 27, former president and Peronist Carlos Menem (in power 1989-99) led the balloting with 24 percent of the vote, followed by Néstor Kirchner, another Peronist, with 22 percent; right-winger Ricardo López Murphy with 16 percent; and left-center Elisa Carrió of the ARI (*Alternativa por una República de Iguales*—Alternatives for a Republic of Equals) and a third Peronist candidate, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, both with 14 percent. The United Left (a coalition of left-wing parties, including the Communist Party) won 1.75 percent of the national vote and 8.00 percent of the vote in Buenos Aires. The Socialist Party gained 1.13 percent of the vote and the pseudo-Trotskyist *Partido Obrero* (Workers Party) 0.76 percent.

Only four days before the May 18 run-off, Menem withdrew from the race, effectively ceding the presidency to Kirchner, governor of the southern province of Santa Cruz, without a second vote. Menem claimed that his archrival, current President Eduardo Duhalde, a staunch Kirchner backer, had made a fair vote impossible. “I say to Mr. Kirchner, he can have his 22 percent, I have the people,” the former president proclaimed demagogically. In reality, Menem, a widely despised figure, dropped out because the “people,” according to every opinion poll, were about to give him the worst electoral drubbing of his life, by an estimated 70-30 margin. As a result, Kirchner assumes the presidency, in a country wracked by economic crisis, under very bizarre and unstable circumstances, having received only 22 percent of the popular vote.

In the year before the election, the parties of the Argentine left jockeyed for position, trying out various alliances for size. Last summer, Zamora participated in a number of forums along with Carrió of the ARI and union leader Víctor De Gennaro of the CTA (*Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos*—Confederation of Argentine Workers) on the slogan “Out with all of them!” (“Que se vayan todos!”), a popular watchword of the 2001 anti-government upheavals. In the end, Carrió became a candidate and Zamora did not.

Zamora’s much-publicized claim to fame is that he was the only deputy in the Argentine Congress who could walk around during the upheavals of December 2001 without getting spat on or attacked. He maintains considerable popular support, based on his reputation as a former “Trotskyist” and an opponent of Peronism and the other bourgeois parties.

His credentials, however, need to be scrutinized. Zamora is a former leader of MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo*—Movement Toward

Socialism), the organization claiming to be Trotskyist, founded and directed until his death by Nahuel Moreno (1924-87). Moreno was notorious for his national opportunism, in particular for his adaptation to Peronism. His organization went by the name of “Revolutionary Workers Peronism” (“*Peronismo Obrero Revolucionario*”) at one point, and in the early 1960s, carried pictures of former dictator General Juan Peron and Cuban president Fidel Castro on the masthead of its newspaper.

MAS, founded in 1982 and claiming to be the “largest Trotskyist party” in the world, exploded into a number of different fragments in the late 1980s, including the present-day MST (*Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores*—Socialist Workers Movement), PTS (*Partido de Trabajadores por el Socialismo*—Workers Party for Socialism) and the rump MAS itself.

In the late 1980s the British Workers Revolutionary Party, having split with the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1986, attempted to organize a fusion with the Moreno group. The unprincipled effort came to nothing in the end, in part because these parties’ orientation to the labor and Stalinist bureaucracies proved unviable in the wake of the collapse of the Eastern European regimes and the demise of the USSR. While MAS merely broke apart, the WRP, under the leadership of Cliff Slaughter, liquidated itself shortly thereafter.

We spoke to Luis Zamora days before the first round of the presidential election at his office across the street from the Congress building in central Buenos Aires. A former lawyer, Zamora (born in 1948) comes across as sincere and open, but it was difficult to obtain a serious explanation of political events and his own evolution. Argentina has experienced severe traumas in recent years, and Zamora’s political trajectory has undergone dramatic shifts. His comments on these developments were rather brief and perfunctory. Zamora became truly animated, however, in outlining his rejection of certain Marxist conceptions to which he once adhered.

We first asked his opinion of the presidential election. Zamora commented, “First, I would say they are fraudulent elections because, as they are only presidential, they prevent the possibility of making any changes at the institutional level. But that’s the least important. What the electoral process truly reveals is that the gap between the population and the political leadership keeps widening. It’s an enormous gap, though it isn’t total yet. That’s why the people are still planning to vote.”

Was it because of this “fraudulent character” that he had decided not to intervene as a candidate?

“Yes, it was our movement’s decision. We decided not to nominate a candidate, but we did participate in the process anyway, because we campaigned in favor of rejecting the elections. That is to say, we proposed that the population express its feelings through the vote; to vote for ‘Out with all of them,’ ‘They’re all the same,’ etc.”

When we asked about his party's program and how it saw a way out of the crisis, Zamora explained that it was his organization's objective "to make contributions to the processes of [popular] self-organization," although this formulation was never fully explained. He went on, "We have the impression that in order to confront the barbarism of capitalism and our submissive relationships with the United States and all the financial organizations, the population is the only one which can carry out that fight with its own hands, in Argentina and throughout the world."

Perhaps no one would dispute this, but Zamora interprets this to mean that his organization could not seek to convince the population of any specific policies or program. "One can propose Latin American unity or the unity of the movement against globalization, but it definitely depends on the population. We fundamentally push for that, in opposition to our old conception: that the solution to the problems was the construction of a party that would lead the changes," he said.

This prompted an obvious question: "How do you feel about the history of the socialist movement in relation to the question of leadership and vanguard?"

Above all, Zamora has concluded that it is impermissible for socialists to struggle against prevailing consciousness, that "self-organization" of the masses is sufficient to the task. He explained, "I believe that one of the lessons of 150 years of the socialist movement is that always, in some way or another, people have attempted to build socialism from the top down, with the taking of state power, and I believe that the challenge is to build it from the bottom up, as there is no other way of thinking about an alternative to capitalism."

The socialist workers' movement has never conceived of socialism being built "from the top down." If Zamora has in mind the various *substitutes* for socialism with which he has been associated or allied, the Morenito tendency in Argentina, Stalinism and Castroism, then this characterization is perfectly accurate. But they have been precisely petty bourgeois substitutes for genuine socialist movements, inherently undemocratic and hierarchical because of their need to subordinate the working class to their own narrow interests.

To clarify the point, we asked point-blank, "Is spontaneous [existing] consciousness adequate to make a social revolution?"

Zamora replied, "We are forming a political organization. This is an exploration. 'We advance by asking,' as the Zapatistas say. We don't have answers, but we bet the answer will emerge collectively. It's the population that must give the organizational forms, not the teacher. What we *do* do is push for and defend these movements—for example, the assembly [neighborhood committee] process in Argentina. The construction of the political organization is a complement. The fundamental thing is to promote those processes of self-organization."

But then why, we asked, do we need a party at all? He explained that his organization was not, in fact, a party. "We insist on calling ourselves a movement, not a party. There are five basic points that unite us: anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, internationalism, self-determination, and 'horizontalism.' For us, these principles justify the existence of a political movement that will offer the population a contribution to the process of organization. At the same time, this allows us to have an open attitude in order to learn from experience and from new facts, which the assembly movement can be, which we never imagined would come into being. Ours is a movement that perennially contributes and receives."

Zamora suggested that a Hamlet-like debate was ongoing in his movement as to whether it should exist or not. "We know the way is complicated, because we are not sure on what definite grounds one can justify the construction of a political movement, but at the same time we have to collect [*recoger*] the experiences that peoples live through."

We pointed out that the original idea was that Marxists needed to intervene in the working class because socialist consciousness did not develop automatically out of everyday economic life. Did he disagree with

that viewpoint?

"It's an idea from Lenin," Zamora responded, "who said that consciousness must come from the outside, because it doesn't emerge spontaneously. I have doubts about that conception. It's difficult for me to think that consciousness can only come from the outside. I rather think it's an idea and an exchange between equals."

This conception did not originate with Lenin, but with German and Austrian Social-Democracy. In *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), Lenin cites the following passage from the 1901 draft program of the Austrian Social-Democratic Party: "Of course, socialism, as a doctrine, has its roots in modern economic relationships just as the class struggle of the proletariat has, and, like the latter, emerges from the struggle against the capitalist-created poverty and misery of the masses. But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed, modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process."

Zamora's many references to the "self-organization" of the masses evade the central issue: self-organization on what political and programmatic basis? The upheavals of December 2001 provided many examples of the Argentinean workers' talent for self-organization: a general strike, road-blocking, pot-banging demonstrations, attacks on banks and so forth. What emerged from this huge protest movement? Another reactionary government entirely subordinate to the US and the IMF, a reshuffling of the same political elite that had led the country to disaster, even the re-emergence of the hated Menem.

The Argentinean working class has not, despite great deprivation and many bitter political experiences, organized itself into a mass revolutionary movement. Why not? Because such a movement only arises out of a struggle for scientific, socialist internationalism against all the illusions and false conceptions produced and reinforced by the national political milieu and its institutions, including the trade unions, on a daily basis.

Lenin explained the point a century ago: "There is much talk of spontaneity. But the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology...for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade unionism...and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to *combat spontaneity*, to *divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy."

This proposition Zamora rejects, without bothering to explain how it is that all the "spontaneous" efforts of the past have failed.

As to the state of the Argentinean left, Zamora commented along the same lines, "I see the partisan left too partisan and dogmatic, without any interest in learning from experiences or in self-criticism. This left is too repetitive of what's traditional, which means that a party must be constructed to lead the peoples [of the world] and take power."

We asked how the world population was to confront the threat represented by American imperialism and received a similar answer: "With self-organization... The population is already confronting imperialism, with marches and struggles. But the question is how to win against it. The only way is through self-organization, by being a protagonist in the organization which is unfolding."

On the significance of Trotsky and Trotskyism today—more of the same. Zamora told us, "I have the same respect for Trotsky I've always had. The difference is that I have re-examined some of these positions from a more critical angle—basically, the concept of the construction of a party and the path to the taking of power. It would be interesting what Trotsky,

and especially Lenin, would think of their positions today. They were revolutionaries who wanted to defeat capitalism and were open to different ways of achieving that, without tying themselves to fixed rules.”

How did he assess the MAS? He had very little to say about the experience, which had critical lessons not only for the Argentinean working class.

“From the experience with MAS,” Zamora commented, “I affirm many things with a lot of pride, and there are other things that I re-examine. But if I hadn’t gone through that experience, today I would not have the means to keep thinking about new paths. Basically, the experience of the two aspects I referred to before: the concept of the centralized party, which in my opinion is the wrong path, and the idea of becoming leader; that is, adopting the position of teacher. Thinking that one can have all the answers to all the questions turns a political party into a religious sect, even though it may have a few thousand members.”

Why did the party break up? Here Zamora was honest enough to admit that the collapse of Stalinism and the Communist parties, to whom—along with Peronism—MAS was oriented, had a devastating impact on the party.

“It’s a topic that continues creating debate, but, in my opinion, reality hit us hard, which was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which shook up the world’s left. Rigid parties are not flexible enough to allow debate, because their truths are so rigid that the moment they receive a blow they just creak and break up. They cannot withstand the continuing blows of capitalist reality. In our case, we weren’t able to internalize or discuss what was happening in the world or what we wanted. Since we were centralized and adhered to such rigid dogmas, the leadership was unable to deal with a truth and was not able to answer.”

And a final point: “We are part of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which was founded in 1953, and the Workers Revolutionary Party [WRP] in Britain was one section of that. In the late 1980s, MAS and a section of the old WRP entered into negotiations. By that time, these people had broken from us. We are trying to understand what happened.”

Zamora underlined, perhaps unwittingly, the opportunism of the WRP leadership: “That British group had come to stay in Argentina, thinking that there were possibilities here for the construction of a Trotskyist party with considerable influence. When MAS exploded, the agreement with the WRP was torn up and its members returned to their country. I was a leader of MAS at the time of the break up, but then I went over to another faction and I lost all relations with the British group. I joined the group that calls itself MST, which is now with the United Left.”

A constituent was waiting to see Zamora, and we took our leave.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact