

Bush mouths support for “social justice” while asserting US interests in Latin America

Bill Van Auken
7 March 2007

In a speech delivered on the eve of his trip to Latin America this week, US President George W. Bush cast his administration as a champion of “social justice” in the region. This hypocritical posturing is designed to conceal the real agenda of the American president’s tour, which is to reassert US imperialism’s power in its “own backyard” and to counter growing popular unrest that threatens its strategic interests.

The *Wall Street Journal* cited White House aides as saying that Bush’s rhetoric was part of an “effort to demonstrate his sensitivity to the region’s poverty as well as its potential.” The paper added bluntly, “Bush is trying to counter a rise in leftist sentiment symbolized by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.”

The paper was referring to the series of elections last year that brought candidates espousing various forms of left nationalism and populism to power in a series of countries, ranging from Chavez himself, elected to a third term in Venezuela, to Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. A year earlier, Evo Morales was elected in Bolivia.

While all of these figures—as well those identified by the US political establishment as the more “responsible left,” Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay and Chile’s Michelle Bachelet—defend capitalism, they have also been forced to distance themselves, at least rhetorically, from the policies promoted by Washington. The election of such figures and the wholesale repudiation of traditional US allies on the Latin American right reflect growing radicalization among masses of working people throughout the continent.

Bush’s five-nation, six-day tour will take him to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico. Demonstrations against the US president have already been organized in every one of these countries. In Mexico, talks between Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderon are being held in Merida, the capital of Yucatan, in a transparent attempt to avoid the massive popular protests that would inevitably confront the two in Mexico City.

The Bush administration has come under fire from both ruling circles in Latin America and from within the political establishment in the US itself for largely “neglecting” a region that had been considered a US sphere of influence for over a century. Critics have blamed this inattention on the administration’s overwhelming concentration on its increasingly crisis-ridden wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the meantime, America’s economic rivals in Asia and Europe have steadily increased their own interests and influence in the region. The European Union more than doubled its trade figures with Latin America as a whole between 1990 and 2005, and is today the largest

trading partner with the Mercosur trade bloc—Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay and Paraguay—as well as with Chile. For its part, China’s trade with the region soared by 500 percent between 2000 and 2005, topping \$50 billion. President Hu Jintao has toured of the region, signing \$100 billion worth of investment deals, as burgeoning Chinese capitalism seeks to secure supplies of strategic raw materials ranging from Venezuelan oil to Chilean copper and Brazilian iron ore.

In his speech Monday to the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Washington, Bush signaled what the administration itself, echoed by the media, is promoting as a “new approach.”

Peppering his remarks with brief phrases in Spanish, Bush praised the countries of the region for making “great strides toward freedom and prosperity” and for adopting “fiscal policies that bring stability.”

“Yet, despite the advances,” he continued “tens of millions in our hemisphere remain stuck in poverty, and shut off from the promises of the new century. My message to those *trabajadores y campesinos* [workers and small farmers] is, you have a friend in the United States of America. We care about your plight.”

In reality, of course, Bush is promoting the same economic and social agenda, labeled in the 1990s as the Washington Consensus, which landed hundreds of millions in this plight. This “free market” prescription entailed opening up national markets to unrestricted penetration by foreign capital combined with the wholesale privatization of state-owned enterprises and the drastic slashing of state spending on social welfare. The result of this global policy—not only in Latin America, but internationally, including in the US itself—has been the unprecedented growth of social inequality, as vast resources have been transferred directly into the coffers of a financial aristocracy.

Aside from his phony words of sympathy for the conditions facing Latin America’s working people, Bush has relatively little to offer. In his speech in Washington, he touted a hodge-podge of minor aid programs, ranging from English language classes to a goodwill tour by a US Navy medical ship. In sum, these initiatives amount to less than a drop in the bucket compared to the social devastation that has been wrought throughout the region as a result of US-backed economic policies.

In advance of the trip, Bush’s national security advisor, Stephen Hadley, denied any “neglect” of Latin America on the administration’s part, boasting at a press briefing that Washington had doubled aid to the region since taking office. A closer examination of the \$1.6 billion total aid figure, however, reveals that the lion’s share of this money is going to fund military assistance programs and the so-called war on drugs, with Colombia by far the biggest recipient.

Bush’s first stop on the tour is Sao Paulo, the financial and industrial

capital of Brazil, where he will meet with Lula. The two are supposed to sign a memorandum to promote the production of ethanol as a renewable alternative fuel. The US administration is also interested in securing Brazilian collaboration in suppressing popular upheavals in the region. Lula's government has already provided the main military forces for the occupation of Haiti in the wake of the US-orchestrated ouster of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and subsequent invasion of the Caribbean nation.

Having failed in its attempt to impose its goal of a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, the administration is attempting to forge a series of bilateral sub-regional pacts, often with less success than the European Union. This is the purpose of his visit to Uruguay, the continent's smallest Spanish-speaking country, with a population of little more than 3 million people.

Earlier this year, Uruguay signed a trade and investment framework agreement with the US. Washington sees expanding these ties as a potential wedge to weaken the Mercosur trading bloc, which the administration views as an impediment to its own aims of reasserting American capitalist hegemony in the region.

The next two stops of the trip will bring Bush to Colombia and Guatemala, two countries whose right-wing, pro-US governments have been rocked by recent scandals involving death squads and political repression.

Since 2000, Washington has poured some \$5 billion into "Plan Colombia," a combination of drug eradication and counterinsurgency operations that has led to a deepening of the country's civil war and the internal displacement of some 3 million people. The current budget calls for the appropriation of another \$600 million for the coming year, 80 percent of it destined for forces of repression.

A mounting scandal has implicated officials and allies of the right-wing government of President Alvaro Uribe—often touted by Washington as a champion of democracy—to paramilitary militias and death squads, which are responsible for the bulk of the bloodshed that the country has suffered in recent years. Paramilitary leaders who have turned themselves in have made detailed confessions of how they conducted torture, assassinations, kidnappings and massacres with full cooperation from the country's military, police and political elite.

The so-called "para-politics" crisis has seen eight of Uribe's supporters in the national legislature arrested for paramilitary ties. Colombia's Foreign Minister Maria Conchego Araújo was forced to resign after her brother, a Colombian senator, was named as a collaborator of the death squads, and implicated, together with her father, in the kidnapping of a political rival.

Wading through still more blood, Bush will fly on to Guatemala, where the government has been rocked by a string of savage killings involving death squads in the national security forces. Three weeks ago, policemen carried out the brutal murder of three Salvadoran lawmakers, who were participating in a Central American parliament, together with their driver. They burned them alive in their vehicle. The three lawmakers were all members of El Salvador's right-wing ARENA party, and included the son of its founder, the death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson.

Four cops were arrested in connection with this brutal killing and placed in a maximum security prison, where they themselves were executed, reportedly by a group of heavily armed men who "stormed" the jail, passing without hindrance through multiple check points.

The events led UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Anders Kompass to describe Guatemala—a favored US ally—as a "failed and collapsed state" due to the total impunity enjoyed by violent and

corrupt security forces. Trained and funded by the US, these forces were responsible during decades of Washington-backed dictatorships for the slaughter of over 200,000 impoverished peasants and workers. Now, they are fully integrated into drug trafficking and organized crime.

This is the legacy throughout Central America of the dirty wars fought by the CIA and the Pentagon with the aim of suppressing popular revolt in the region. With the recent appointment of former director of national intelligence John Negroponte as deputy secretary of state, the elaboration of US foreign policy in Latin America as a whole has been placed under the direct supervision of one of the key architects of the bloodbath that was carried out in Central America in the 1980s.

Bush's final stop, on March 13 and 14, will be Mexico, where he is expected to talk with Calderon on the abortive attempts to legislate a US immigration "reform" as well as drug trafficking and trade issues.

Behind the rather far-fetched attempts by Bush and his administration to feign humanitarian concern for the social inequality and grim poverty that the Washington's own policies have wrought in Latin America, US goals in the region are no different than they are in the Middle East and Central Asia—securing American hegemony over key strategic resources and markets.

In the end, the methods that they are prepared to use in pursuing these goals are also fundamentally the same. In a little noted "America's Energy Conference" held in Florida last summer, this was spelled out by the chief of the military's US Southern Command, Gen. John Craddock.

"Energy, production, exploration and transport is pivotal to the economic well-being of the region, and, as a military commander, I foresee that given the uneven global distribution and use patterns of energy, future conflicts will be increasingly motivated by this critical resource," declared the general.

The significance of these remarks is unmistakable: despite the drastically weakened position of US imperialism in the region and the debacles it has suffered in the Middle East, planning for Iraq-style wars and occupations in Latin America is already well advanced.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact