

Latin America: What are the real interests behind the creation of the Union of South American Nations?

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Last Friday, May 23, presidents and representatives of 12 South American countries met in Brasilia to sign a treaty creating the Union of South American Nations, or Unasur.

The proposal to create Unasur was first presented during an annual regional meeting in the Peruvian city of Cuzco in 2004. Initially, the proposal was called Casa (the Spanish acronym for South American Community of Nations), but it was subsequently re-baptized during the First South American Energy Summit held in Venezuela last year.

Unasur is to function with a temporary and rotating presidency. Currently, the presidency has been handed to Bolivia. It was to have gone to Colombia, which turned down the offer, and instead will pass to Chile. Chilean President Michelle Bachelet announced that her government would only accept the role based on a consensus of all 12 of the treaty's signatories.

Unasur is to be organized on the basis of some deliberative bodies, including a Council of Heads of State and Government, which is to meet annually, a Council of Foreign Ministers and a Council of Delegates, which would convene every six months. Beyond that, there exists a plan for the creation of a united parliament of Unasur. However, there as yet exist no real possibilities for such a parliament functioning in the near future. Unasur will also include a permanent secretariat, which will be based in the Ecuadorean capital of Quito.

One of the treaty's principal objectives is to develop political, economic and social coordination between the South American states. The stated aim is to use Unasur to adopt joint financial mechanisms and even advance regional fiscal, energy and telecommunications integration, as well as joint projects in the areas of science and education. According to Itamaraty (Brazil's foreign ministry), Unasur's objectives are "the strengthening of political dialogue between member states and the deepening of regional integration."

The countries that make up Unasur, however, have different opinions and objectives with regard to the real role that the regional union should play. Chile's Foreign Minister Alejandro Foxley indicated that his country has three principal interests: energy, infrastructure and a common policy of social inclusion.

Bolivia's foreign minister, David Choquehuanca, stated that Bolivia hopes that Unasur does not limit itself to just trade, but works to become "union of peoples."

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez stated during the meeting that Unasur is a very important treaty for the continent and that it will strengthen the governments of the southern hemisphere. "We are all governments of the left, we have a lot in common and we are committed to making the union of South America dynamic," he declared.

For Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, "A united South America will rearrange the pieces on the board of power in the world, not just in our own benefit, but for everyone." Lula went on to affirm that Unasur would strengthen the countries of the region in relation to the developed nations. During the meeting, he declared that "we are transforming into reality the dream of integration of our liberators. The treaty reminds us that South American integration is essential for the strengthening of Latin America and the Caribbean. It is born under the sign of pluralism."

According to Lula, Unasur should be built as part of the development plans of each country for the benefit of all. He maintained that "our South America will no longer be a mere geographical concept. Beginning today it is a political, economic and social reality, with its own means of functioning."

While over the last several years integration between the countries of South America has deepened in some respects, there exist many problems that impede any effective integration. One of the principal difficulties is economic asymmetry. Brazil, for example, represents nearly half of the gross domestic product of Unasur as a whole. According to data from CEPAL (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), the gross domestic product of the 12 countries of South America reached US\$2.5 trillion in 2006. Brazil alone recorded a GDP of \$1.06 trillion in 2006 and \$1.3 trillion in 2007.

Beyond this economic asymmetry, the governments of Latin America hold different political visions, different national interests and different international alliances. Such political pluralism makes any significant integration of the region only a

distant objective.

National conflicts between the different countries of South America remain widespread. Chile and Peru remain locked in a territorial dispute dating from the 19th century War of the Pacific. This question is still working its way through the International Tribunal at The Hague. Bolivia also lays claim to Chilean territory for an outlet to the sea, which it lost in that same war.

The most recent regional dispute involved Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia, provoked last March by a cross-border Colombian military strike against an encampment of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla movement inside Ecuador. This conflict has yet to be overcome and constitutes one more impediment to any real integration.

In the face of these conflicts, one important question that was also on the Unasur agenda was that of creating a defense council. The proposal for the creation of this council was initiated by Brazil's Lula. According to him, "It is time to strengthen our continent in the area of defense. We should articulate a vision of defense in the region founded on common values and principles, like respect and sovereignty. For this reason, I have instructed my defense minister to carry out consultations with all of the countries of South America on the South American defense council. I think that we should discuss this initiative here." This proposal for the creation of a defense council picked up steam in the wake of the crisis involving Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador.

Brazil's Defense Minister Nelson Jobim stated that the proposal for the council is already defined, with its objectives being the facilitating of organization, communication and collaboration between the various countries. Nonetheless, the council is not seen as developing a structure for regional military integration.

Colombia's President Álvaro Uribe was opposed to Lula's proposal and argued that the organization already has the OAS (Organization of American States), and alluded to differences with neighboring states—among them Brazil and Venezuela—on the classification of illegal armed groups like the FARC as "terrorists." Faced with this impasse, the question of the creation of a defense council was put off until the next meeting six months from now.

In any case, such a project, far from helping guarantee the sovereignty of Latin America, would more likely serve as the pretext for rising investments in the lucrative arms industry and the creation of yet another force for international interventions, like the so-called "blue helmets" of the United Nations, which today, under Brazilian command, are repressing the starving people of Haiti.

The Unasur project consists, in reality, of one more attempt by South America's bourgeois governments (and the sections of capital that control them) to secure a slice of the world market while continuing to exploit the workers in their own countries. The project, despite the nationalist rhetoric,

represents no real threat to big international capital. Not only the government of Colombia, but that of Brazil as well as those in other countries, act in open unity with the interests of the multinationals and big international capital.

The creation of such an economic bloc will not, in the final analysis, constitute even a defense of the nationalist economic interests of the countries involved. Despite the fact that one of the principal objectives of the treaty is to accumulate enough force to overcome the protectionist barriers imposed by the European countries and by the United States, thus opening a path for exports to continue growing and increasing the profits of the big commodity producers, these big producers are, in general, themselves integrated into big international capital.

For example, in the case of soy production, in 2006, the four major companies operating in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso were either multinationals or maintained close links with big international capital. Amaggi, Bunge, Cargill and ADM accounted for 80 percent of the crop exported from Mato Grosso. Amaggi, which alone was originally a Brazilian company, today maintains close links with the US-based multinational, Monsanto.

Thus, what is the significance of the Unasur project for the workers of South America? In the face of the current ever-deepening world economic crisis and in the face of the growing threat posed by spiraling inflation and the food crisis, what is the program of Unasur for the working class? For the workers, it offers nothing but empty promises and speeches filled with made-up phrases. They talk about "union of peoples," "social inclusion," "economic growth," etc., but the real objectives are increased profits for internationally connected banks and corporations at the expense of the broad mass of the region's people.

The proposal for regional integration represented by the creation of Unasur does not spell any alternative or any hope for the workers of South America. This project is, in the final analysis, a sign of the deep crisis of the ruling elites of the continent as well as the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class itself. Neither Unasur nor Chavez nor Morales nor Lula represent an alternative for bettering the conditions of life of the Latin American working class.

The goal of genuine regional unification, the breaking down of the nation-state borders and the harmonious development of economic and social life across the continent cannot be realized under the domination of the bourgeoisie. It can only be achieved through the conquest of power by the working class and the establishment of the Socialist United States of Latin America.



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