
Conference Report

Trade unionists support Panama

by Robyn Quijano

Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma celebrated two months in office by inaugurating the first "Solidarity with Panama Trade Union Conference" on April 28. Having resisted two months of total siege, Panama received unqualified support from the largest and most important trade union confederations of Ibero-America, marking the defeat of U.S. efforts to strongarm Panama's neighbors into supporting the U.S. war on the smallest nation of Spanish-speaking America. Over 3,000 Panamanian trade unionists rallied to hear the President and to welcome 150 delegations from 25 nations.

The Reagan administration's insistence that only Cuba, Nicaragua, and Libya were supporting Panama was undermined by the crucial support of the Mexican labor movement. The first international guest to address the gathering was José Sosa, a high-ranking leader of the Mexican Petroleum Workers, one of the most powerful unions of the multi-million member Confederation of Mexican Workers. He told the delegates about the U.S. aggression against Mexico with the Senate's decertification of Mexico's anti-drug effort, a move well understood within Mexico as the beginning of the "Panama treatment." Like the U.S. accusations against Defense Forces Commander Manuel Antonio Noriega, the decertification is designed to justify imperial aggression against sovereign nations. Sosa brought the support of Mexico's trade unions and the people of Mexico for Panama's fight against U.S. aggression. He quoted Benito Juárez, the Mexican President who defeated the French imperial invasion of his nation: "Respect for the rights of others, is peace."

This Mexican trade union support occurred the same week that the Mexican government made it official that it would supply Panama with oil and other goods, to break the stranglehold of U.S. economic warfare. An AFP wire datelined Washington, April 27, cited State Department sources enraged that Mexico had "joined Libya and Cuba . . . in helping Noriega resist U.S. pressures, by providing petroleum." In reality, the Ibero-Americans had declared support for Panama against U.S. economic aggression weeks before during a meeting of the Latin American Economic System (SELA). But Mexico's actions ended the U.S. ability to isolate Panama, and then use the isolation to charge that Noriega could only get help from the communists, and therefore was turning

Panama into another Cuba.

This entire scenario went down the drain, with the broad-ranging support of Ibero-America's democratic trade unions for President Solís Palma and Defense Forces commander Noriega.

While the Communist World Federation of Trade Unions sent delegations from all over the world, the conference was dominated by the strength of the democratic union delegations from Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia. Ernesto Dávalos of the Argentine State Natural Gas Workers addressed the delegations, bringing the support of the Argentine workers. He told the history of the coup against popular leader, President Juan Domingo Perón, and compared the way it was run directly out of the U.S. embassy to the U.S. aggression against Panama today. The United States was out to destroy the nationalist movement of Argentina then, just as it is determined to wipe out the nationalist Torrijista movement represented by General Noriega today, he told the delegates.

Miguel Angel Castrillón, executive of the Union of workers of Cauca, one of a larger delegation from the democratic sector of the CUT, Colombia's largest workers' confederation, addressed the delegates. Castrillón spoke of the battle in his nation to end the domination of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank over economic policy, a fight being waged by most of the trade unions of the continent.

Two days before, Jorge Carrillo, president of the CUT, former labor minister and leader of Colombia's Liberal Party, met with President Solís Palma and General Noriega, offering the support of hundreds of thousands of Colombian workers for their fight for sovereignty. On his arrival, Carrillo held a press conference. It is bad enough that the United States always imposes its choice for finance minister on the nations of Latin America, he said. But when they start telling us who should be President, and what is or is not democracy, Carrillo quipped, this is going too far. We're here to join the battle for Panama, he said.

The Single Popular Front (FUP), which sponsored the Trade Union conference, distributed to all the delegates the programmatic document prepared by the Schiller Institute, "How Panama Can Defeat the 'Financial Malvinas': Ibero-American Integration" (excerpts begin on page 22, above). The work of the trade unions in every nation of the continent is now to organize concrete economic support so that Panama can withstand the economic aggression and begin to rebuild a sovereign economy based on increased trade with her sister republics.

Hector Alemán, president of the Panamanian National Federation of Public Employees Associations (Fenasep) and key organizer of the conference, was in Peru this past March, meeting with trade unionists and political leaders. An important delegation of Peruvian trade unionists attended the conference. Aníbal Culiolis García, also a leader of the Fenasep, made a similar tour through Mexico, receiving broad press coverage and support from Mexico's trade unions on the highest level.

President Solís Palma's speech

Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma greeted the labor leaders April 28. Excerpts follow:

Above all, I want to express my warmest welcome to our country to the leaders and representatives of more than 400 million workers of the world, from all continents, organized in unions and present in this significant Trade Union Conference in Solidarity with Panama.

The Panamanian people and my government, subjected to merciless North American intervention, deeply appreciate and thank the workers of the world who have made themselves present in our country through the distinguished delegates of the world trade union movement meeting [here] with the Single Popular Front for this palpable demonstration of solidarity and respect. . . .

What kind of democracy do we want? There are two aspects basic to democracy: the real side and the formal side. If only one aspect is present, it is not democracy. The key point is that it is not democracy if only the formal aspects are there. It is indispensable that there be democracy which recognizes and accomplishes the real side of democracy.

We have spoken of deepening democracy. And this democratic deepening is contained in my government's and my own conception of what democracy is. There cannot be full democracy if part of the city, if part of the inhabitants of both city and country do not have food. There cannot be democracy if the majority of the country's population does not have clothes to wear. . . .

Every time I am asked a question at press conferences, it is whether we are going to keep the social communications media closed or when we will open them. But, none of the reporters—and I'm not criticizing them, I'm just mentioning this—asks me: "When is there going to be food? When is there going to be clothing? When is there going to be education? When is there going to be work for the Panamanian people?"

I want a free and broad electoral process, a pure and honest one, but not so that those who are going to preserve the people's misery and their caste's privileges can win them. Not for that! Democracy is for the majority of the Panamanians. . . .

Economists, those who develop the economy, cannot continue thinking that the country has to develop on the basis of mortgaging the Republic to those who do not respect the dignity of the people. The economy has to develop with our own resources and the resources of our friends, with the

resources of brother countries and not with the resources of the enemy countries. So that we can steer the economy to the path of dignity, respect, and progress, without subjugating ourselves, without being drowned, without losing our condition of being a Nation. Selling out for a dollar is finally over and done with, that selling out which stained the honor and dignity of the Republic. . . .

Why are they assaulting us? Why does the North American President dislike one man? What's so disturbing to the desires of that gentleman, about one man, that he causes a Nation to lose its good name in the world? Gentlemen, this man is being attacked because he represents the leadership of the Defense Forces, because he represents the leadership of large popular sectors of this country. And this disturbs, and this hinders North American interests from making their stay in this country permanent. . . .

And this man, Manuel Antonio Noriega, is an obstacle to their staying in Panama with their bases and with the canal, especially with their bases. This man is an obstacle for reaching accords with them about all the contractual positions of the future. That's why they have to finish off Manuel Antonio Noriega. . . .

We have learned from the crisis we are undergoing. We have lost the fear of fear itself. People could not speak of sanctions by the U.S. without us trembling . . . and we trembled. But no longer. The Panamanian people are on their feet and more united than ever.

Fear of what? we now ask. No sirs, the valor of our struggle and our efforts enhances our dignity and determination to be a country, to be a free, independent, and sovereign nation. But our experience did teach us that we have to change the course of our economy, of our trade relations. We have to negotiate with all the countries in the world who want to negotiate with us. . . .

They can't figure out how we could have held up for more than 60 days; and I can't understand why they never realized the dignity and quality of the Panamanian people. They never realized its sacrifice nor all our love for the Fatherland. They look everywhere for explanations—did Libya give [money], did that [country] give. Nobody has given us anything so far. What we have given is a demonstration of national dignity, decorum, and valor. We have given that at every moment. . . .

Representatives of the workers of the world, I reiterate our thanks for your presence in Panama, and you may be sure that the battle we are fighting for the liberation of Panama is also the battle for the liberation of the peoples of America and the oppressed peoples of the world. We are glad to give our sacrifices as we are to receive you here. And I hope you have a pleasant stay, that you see the truth, that you see the same thing can happen to any people, because we are giving our quota of sacrifice, since Panama has always seen fit to put itself in this position as the center of the world and the heart of the universe. It will continue to do its share for the world, for the good of mankind.