

# Bring the Trains Back to Colombia!

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The history of the railroads in Colombia begins with the Panama line (at the time, part of Colombia), which joined the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in a project of worldwide importance. Built between 1852 and 1855, it was 80 kilometers long. It became a prosperous business, whose profits were used to finance the construction of other railroad lines.

The Panama Railway also inspired a major drive for the construction of railroads, starting in 1890, when Colombia joined the project of the Pan-American Railway, which was later promoted by U.S. President William McKinley. This railroad was to have run the entirety of North and South America. Because of its central geographic location, several branches were to have originated in Colombia: the western one, to run parallel to the Pacific Coast; the central line, to connect Panama, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil on one end of the branch line, and Argentina on the other; and the eastern one, to join Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Surinam, and French Guiana, and then run down the entire Atlantic Coast, including Brazil and Argentina.

Colombia's railroads had their heyday from 1915 to 1950, when a large percentage of both cargo and passengers was moving by rail. Cargo transported by rail went from 773,366 tons to 3,289,797 tons, and the number of passengers increased from 3,518,687 to 13,361,753. At the same time, the total number of functional rail kilometers grew from 1,350 to 3,139, peaking at 3,462 kilometers in 1960.

Since that time, rail has "gone downhill": For example, in 1975, there were 4,217,466 passengers and 2,438,520 tons of cargo transported, a decline of 68% and 30%, respectively, from the levels of 1949. During that same period, the Colombian population tripled, from 8.7 million to 25 million inhabitants. Today the situation is even worse. Colombia has a mere 2,000 kilometers of active rail line, and nearly 45 million inhabitants.

## Railroads Key to Economic Development

The railroads played an important role in the colonization of new lands in Colombia, and their development of agriculture and cattle-raising. The impact of the railroads began to be felt when the Antioquian northeast slowly began to come under cultivation. The same then occurred with the states of Santander, Caldas, and Valle, and also when the Atlantic rail line opened up vast zones of the middle Magdalena region, as well as the forests of Canare and of Opón. The increase in banana cultivation in the area south of the Ciénaga resulted in large part from the existence of the Santa Marta railroad.

At the same time, the industrialization of sugar cane cultivation in Valle del Cauca, with the establishment of the first sugar mills, was made feasible because rail provided transportation for the required heavy machinery from Buenaventura port on the Pacific. The huge increase in transport into the interior of the country was also key to the emergence of industries in the cities of Medellín and Bogotá.

Similarly, the mining industry made important advances thanks to the railroad.

For technological progress in general, we owe to the railroad the development of new skills and occupations: Technicians were trained on the railroads at every level, and civil engineers developed their creativity in the construction of bridges and tunnels. It was also in the railroad workshops established in Puerto Berrío, Dagua, and Bogotá, that the country's first mechanical, metallurgical, and electrical engineers began their training. They mastered steam technology, and the workshop engineers learned to produce any part needed to keep the locomotives up and running.

Colombia used dynamite to open up the mountains of the Andes with the 3.7-kilometer Quiebra tunnel, in the central mountain range. U.S. engineer F.L. Weakland participated as an advisor in that project, and the tunnel was inaugurated on Jan. 31, 1930.

## World Bank Treachery

In 1949, John J. McCloy, then president of the World Bank, sent a study commission to Colombia, headed by U.S. economist Lauchlin Currie, whose mission was to come up with a so-called development program to raise the living standards of the Colombian people. The result was just the opposite—as was,

in fact, the hidden intention of the mission. In the mission's final document, "Basis for a Development Program for Colombia," the country is advised to gradually suppress the railroads, to abandon efforts to promote the Greater Colombia Merchant Marine, and to discontinue the National Steel Company of Paz del Río (now known as Acerís Paz del Río).

The Currie report also rejected the Great Western railroad trunk line, as well as the Great Northeastern trunk line and the Armenia-Ibagué branch, with the argument that there was insufficient flow of cargo and passengers to justify their construction. The latter branch line was to have involved the construction of 14 tunnels, to permit railroads to cross the central mountain range from Armenia to Ibagué, which had been legislated as far back as 1922.

Thus, the Currie mission also destroyed the main engineering challenge that Colombians had been preparing to take on, namely, the possibility of breaking through the mountain ranges that run the length of the country. The project, whose central objective was to join Bogotá with the Pacific port of Buenaventura, had already been under way, with feasibility studies all approved, when the Currie mission came to the country and buried it.

One important consequence of Colombia's failure to complete its railway plans is that a large portion of the national territory was left isolated, which paved the way for the creation of focal points of drug trafficking and terrorism, because of the lack of state presence in every part of the nation.

Despite the passage of years, the initial plans for rail projects can still be carried out. A clear example of this potential was President Alvaro Uribe's enthusiastic inauguration Aug. 4 of the 8.6-kilometer pilot Line Tunnel, which opens the way for the parallel construction of the full Line Tunnel itself. This will be only the second tunnel crossing the Colombian Andes; the first is the 3.7-kilometer Quiebra Tunnel, which opened in 1930.

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