

*Published on Wednesday, June 8, 2005 by CommonDreams.org*

## **Bush at OAS: Same Old "Free Trade" Tune**

**By Deborah James**

This weekend, foreign ministers and ambassadors of 34 nations of the western hemisphere met in Ft Lauderdale, Florida at the 35th meeting of the Organization of American States. The meeting occurs during a time of major shifts in the relationship of the US with Latin America, particularly the erosion of US domination in the region due to a growing resentment of US double standards on democracy, and the growing rejection of the "Washington Consensus" economic model of corporate globalization in the region.

The core agenda of the OAS is promoting democracy, and strengthening the Democratic Charter of the OAS was high on the agenda of the organization this weekend. Unfortunately, the US is still attempting to impose the outdated ideology that democracy and free trade are two sides of the same coin. During Condoleezza Rice's recent tour of Latin America, the Secretary of State espoused the "twin pillars of democracy and free trade," failing to read the signs in the region that the model of corporate globalization is becoming increasingly unpopular. Latin Americans are turning away from this model of "free trade", increasingly electing governments that represent the needs of the majority, and looking towards alternative models to jump-start their economies and address economic inequality.

But the US still conditions its support of Latin American leadership on those leaders' support of the US economic model. Those that follow a different path are often subject to the criticism of being "undemocratic." So the main foreign policy objective of the State Department during the conference was to create a committee within the OAS to monitor the "exercise of democracy" in the hemisphere. This is a new interpretation of the OAS's Democratic Charter, an attempt by the US Administration to create a mechanism whereby they could criticize governments that have been democratically elected for supposedly "not governing democratically." The proposal was widely rejected as setting the stage for US intervention in the region. It was also seen as a thinly-veiled attack on Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who has overwhelmingly won three national elections and whose popularity stands at over 70% (according to opposition polls). Fortunately, Latin American governments have decided that the time of the US's domination of the OAS is over, and the proposal failed outright. Latin Americans have demonstrated a firm commitment to democracy, overcoming military dictatorships across the hemisphere in the last several decades - but following the US-mandated "free trade" model is another story.

President Bush took advantage of his appearance at the OAS meeting June 6th in Florida to urge the US Congress to approve CAFTA, the Central America-Dominican Republic-United States Free Trade Agreement. But two decades of "free trade" economic policies that have failed to eradicate poverty in Latin America. "For the young democracies of Central America, CAFTA would bring new investment, and that means good jobs and higher labor standards for their workers," he promised. It seemed a strange argument, considering that CAFTA lacks even the unenforceable labor provisions included in NAFTA. But then he got to the big lie when he argued that, "by bringing economic growth to Central America, CAFTA will contribute to the rise of a vibrant middle class." During the 1960's and 70's, Latin Americans averaged an 80% gain in income per person. Not so with the following two and a half decades, when per capita income grew by only 12% total. That means that for the last 25 years, Latin American governments employed economic policies mandated by the Washington-dominated IMF and the World Bank - the same model as CAFTA - and have grown an average of only .5% per year. After 25 years of privatization of essential public services, de-regulation of industry, and opening up borders to foreign investors, the majority of Latin Americans have less economic opportunity than ever before.

May 28 marked the one-year anniversary of the signing of CAFTA. Supporters hoped that the deal would have been approved by Congress long ago. But so far, most estimates give CAFTA opposition -- which now includes many Republicans -- a significant lead; only 65 Representatives have declared their support, while 166 publicly opposed the deal. Even pro-free trade Democrats have come out to oppose

CAFTA, and on May 24th the Hispanic Caucus voted 14-1 against it. CAFTA will likely be a huge political defeat for Bush. The Bush Administration has pulled out all the stops in attempting to convince the US public that Central Americans want CAFTA, sending Central American Ambassadors, then Trade Ministers, and recently even their Presidents across the U.S. on pro-CAFTA tours. Now he took advantage of the OAS meeting to push it, not even addressing the agenda of the meeting during his short speech. And once again he relied on the rhetoric of false promises instead of taking a hard look at the record of the model in the region. But anyone with an ear to the ground in Central America knows that just about every citizen group opposes CAFTA because they've actually reviewed the record of the failed experiment of NAFTA, the model for CAFTA. In particular, about 1.5 million Mexican farmers have been pushed off their land due to NAFTA, devastating rural communities across the country. Families are torn apart as breadwinners migrate to cities, or to the U.S., in search of jobs to feed their children. And hundreds of thousands of US workers have lost their jobs due to NAFTA, the opposite of the false promises of 200,000 new jobs that would be created.

Bush told the OAS meeting that "[F]or the Western Hemisphere, CAFTA would continue to advance the stability and security that come from freedom." But the biggest threat to hemispheric security -- the leading cause of death in the region -- isn't terrorism, it's poverty; lack of access to clean water, enough food, and affordable medicine. So Latin Americans find it hard to believe that the privatization of public services like health care and water distribution, or opening up their industries to foreign investment, will make them more secure. That is especially true at a time when the U.S. government -- with breathtaking hypocrisy - has refused to extradite Luis Posada Carriles, the most notorious terrorist in the hemisphere. Instead, governments that are eager to "deliver the benefits of democracy," the OAS conference's theme, are looking to focus their efforts on eradicating poverty in the region. The Venezuelan Foreign Minister, Ali Rodriguez Araque, commented at the OAS that "240 million poor inhabit our continent, and of them, almost 100 million survive under conditions of extreme poverty. In such conditions, the quality of life is simply nonexistent and, as a consequence, the quality of democracy is simply precarious and uncertain. So much so that there will not be political stability in the region, while these high indices of social inequality still exist."

A new tool for promotion of human rights was introduced by the Venezuelan government at the OAS meeting this weekend, a Social Charter. The Social Charter would commit OAS member states to ensure that their populations can access economic, social, and cultural human rights including the right to health care, the right to education, the right to dignified work, the right to social security, and the right to housing. It also includes community-based rights such as rights to social organization, public participation, and cultural identity. Considering the extremely high rates of poverty, lack of access to health care, and illiteracy rates across the hemisphere, the Social Charter is an instrument that would bring significant benefits to communities struggling for their economic, social, and cultural rights through the established intergovernmental system.

Democratic governance must be combined with sensible national economic policies, so that the poor can hope for a better future. US attitudes toward Latin America are still framed by a trade policy that benefits US corporate interests at the expense of the vast majority of workers and farmers in Latin America. But Latin Americans have suffered long enough under those policies, and they are just not taking it anymore.

**Urge your Representative or Senator to vote AGAINST CAFTA. Call the Congressional switchboard at 202. 225.3121.**

*Want to learn more about Latin American resistance to CAFTA? Travel to Central America with Global Exchange. Contact [andreav@globalexchange.org](mailto:andreav@globalexchange.org) and check out [www.globalexchange.org](http://www.globalexchange.org) for more information.*

*Deborah James is the Global Economy Director of Global Exchange, an international human rights group. You can contact her at [deborah@globalexchange.org](mailto:deborah@globalexchange.org).*