

SOLIDARITY

Solidarity

Latin America and the US Left
in the Era of Human Rights

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Introduction

My scholarly interest in the history of Latin American solidarity comes from a political engagement around Colombia during the past 15 years. Like much of Latin American solidarity, the campaign I have been involved with began when Latin Americans—in this case, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities from the northern province of La Guajira—reached out to international actors. They sought allies in the global North to support their struggle against the rapid expansion of an exceptionally large coal mine owned by Exxon, which in the early 2000s violently evicted the community of Tabaco from its ancestral lands.

Had the Cerrejon mine been owned by a less prominent company, or chosen a less conspicuously violent path for destroying a village, it is quite possible that community efforts to acquire foreign allies would have been unsuccessful. Even with the egregious violation of human rights by a prominent multinational corporation, the communities still struggled to find overseas allies and capture international attention. In an age of information overload, characterized in part by a seemingly endless supply of human crises, it is not easy to get on the global radar.

They eventually did, however, and ever since then a small group of activists from Europe, the United States, and Canada have supported the affected communities during an evolving conflict with the mine's owners and the Colombian state.¹ The campaign has utilized a range of tactics to put pressure on the mine's owner by bringing global attention to its horrid behavior. As we will see, this strategy of "naming and shaming," whereby activists shine a global spotlight on companies or governments in order to alter their practices, has a long history within international solidarity. In our case, we pursued this strategy through a number of tactics. We took international delegations to Colombia in order to witness and publicize the devastation caused by the mine.² We have brought Colombians on speaking tours to educate

and alert us audiences to the true cost of coal. We held conferences to publicize abuses and deepen alliances between communities and other actors. We pressed the mine's owners at shareholders' meetings and mining conferences. And we produced films, articles, and books in order to raise the profile of the cause both in Colombia and abroad.

These efforts generated concrete gains. When we began, the mine barely recognized the existence of the communities, and insisted that the eviction of Tabaco had been handled legally and properly. The matter was closed. The campaign not only forced the mine to reopen the case of Tabaco and address issues of compensation and relocation, but also shaped how the mine dealt with other communities as the enterprise expanded. The campaign served to connect communities with each other as well as with allies within and outside of Colombia—and provided a political education for everyone involved.

At the same time, given the incredible imbalance of power, there have been real limits not only to how much the mine's actions can be influenced, but on the capacity of the campaign to improve the situation of the communities. The mine continues to expand and largely calls the shots in the region. The communities remain politically and economically marginalized, living under exceptionally difficult circumstances in a region where mining has made an already precarious existence nearly untenable.

In a larger sense, then, this campaign confronts many of the same challenges faced by much of Latin American solidarity work. To begin, the broader model of solidarity relies heavily on the ability of Latin Americans to capture the attention of international allies, who must then find ways to pressure corporations by garnering media attention, influencing shareholders, or accessing state power. Their capacity to do so, in turn, is a function of many factors, some of which are quite arbitrary. Most communities, for example, do not have the "benefit" of being exploited by a prominent global corporation such as Exxon.

Likewise, because international attention tends to be drawn to crisis and spectacle, and can require communities to display extreme suffering before a global audience, it can be fickle and fleeting as crises subside or simply fail to attract or sustain attention. A model of solidarity that relies on crisis or public outcry for its fuel can be

prone to move from one fire to the next, addressing the most egregious aspects of particular cases before moving on to the next disaster. Typically, this leaves the underlying issues that produced the crisis in the first place unaddressed, and can have the effect of excluding most people from the political equation altogether, since relatively few people are exploited in ways that will ever place them on the public's radar.

Even more, as much as these campaigns embody and are sustained by remarkable human commitment and energy, they tend to work from very limited political and economic power on both ends of the solidarity equation. The needs of those we work with in Colombia are overwhelming, and far outstrip any capacity that we—as international allies—possess or could realistically develop in the future. Indeed, the communities sought international support in the first place because they could not depend on the Colombian state to defend their interests against foreign mining companies.³ Nor could the communities mobilize sufficient allies or tap into social movements in Colombia to alter the mine's practices, influence the government, or otherwise advance their cause. The pursuit of international support, although courageous and creative, signaled the weakness of their overall position. The balance of power was and is stacked against them.

At the international end, although a committed group of activists from a number of different countries have been working on this campaign for well over a decade, we have few financial or human resources. In comparison with the communities, we no doubt seem, and in some ways are, “powerful.” But we are a small group with no permanent staff, little budget, and limited political power. We have contacts and allies in numerous countries, and have (along with the communities) become skilled at identifying and accessing the mine's pressure points. But there is no political base or larger movement that we can tap into for support or resources.

Nor are we alone. Although this “campaign” model of political engagement, whereby a relatively small group from the global North attempts to support the struggle of a poor and isolated group in Latin America, is not the only form that contemporary solidarity takes, it has become sufficiently widespread to warrant historical and strategic

reflection. How, in a sense, did we get here—to the point where this important, but relatively limited, form of intervention has become such a common form of solidarity? And, more importantly, how can we build effective international solidarity, particularly in a context where progressive forces are so politically marginalized? How do we practice and build revolutionary solidarity in the absence of revolutionary movements? What kinds of immediate, urgent, and (often) short-term struggles might help establish the building blocks for political movements that not only address moments of crisis or egregious cases of human rights abuse, but advance working-class power with the capacity to address broader issues of political and economic inequality—the very inequalities that make crisis and abuse such chronic features of everyday life in the first place?

Latin American Solidarity and Left Internationalism

These political questions led me to explore the broader history of Latin American solidarity in order to better understand how current forms of solidarity came to be, and how past efforts have or have not shaped or diverged from more recent struggles. Why and how did people in the United States embrace and transform a range of internationalisms, including anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, socialism, labor, peace, religious, and human rights, when framing and engaging in solidarity with Latin America? What practices and strategies, forms of organization, and strands of internationalism have us-based activists adopted when participating in “solidarity” with Latin America? How have understandings and practices of solidarity changed over time, why has it mattered, and how has this international engagement shaped the us left?

The following is by no means a comprehensive history of Latin American solidarity. Such a book may one day be written, but the nature of Latin American solidarity will make this a particularly difficult enterprise. A broad range of us actors, often for quite distinct political and personal motivations, have practiced international solidarity throughout us history in a wide array of changing sites, organizations, institutions, and movements. Most of these efforts have not been centralized or coordinated by large or prominent

organizations, and although this book attempts to trace the connections between various people, organizations, and campaigns, a defining feature of Latin American solidarity has been its ideological differentiation, lack of institutional continuity, and inconsistent presence.

The ongoing struggle for Latin American solidarity to cohere and gain consistent political traction is partly explained by the fact that much of its core has always been opposed to American empire, an opposition that has never been particularly easy or popular in the United States. Opponents to empire have not only had to confront the material forces of us political and economic power, but have also faced the uphill ideological battle of convincing Americans that the United States is, in fact, an imperial force. As a result, those from the United States who opposed us empire often found themselves isolated from American society, attacked by the us government, and even divided and disconnected from each other. They have, at times, been quite effective in capturing public attention, and have even secured important victories, but their struggles have been by their very nature pitted against dominant political currents. They have participated in campaigns that were tough to get off the ground, difficult to sustain, harder to grow, and whose impacts are hard to gauge. Writing a “complete” or comprehensive account of this history will be no easy task.⁴

And yet, for a number of reasons, the time is right for a history of Latin American solidarity. For one, the scholarship now exists to support such an endeavor. During the past two decades, academics have produced numerous studies focusing on particular solidarity campaigns and struggles.⁵ Collectively, these fine-grained analyses allow for a broader history to be told. We also have more sweeping, global, histories of internationalism, particularly with respect to the human rights movement⁶ and black internationalism.⁷ This book draws heavily upon this superb scholarship.

More importantly, this is a particularly apt moment for a critical examination of the us left, especially its internationalist expressions. Since the end of the Second World War, the United States arguably has been the most powerful country in the world, both in its military reach and as the leading architect of a global capitalism that has delivered massive inequality and environmental destruction across the

planet. If this imperial power is going to be constrained, reversed, or even overcome, we need to rebuild the us left. The construction of an effective left, with a strong internationalist current, is not only important for working people in the United States. It is imperative for the entire world.

This is hardly news to Latin Americans. They have been on the receiving end of us imperialism for well over a century, and have struggled against us military and economic aggression in their own countries. As a result, they know quite well how important a us left is—or rather could be—for restraining American empire. An oft-told story in solidarity circles reflects this very sentiment. When asked how us activists could help the Latin American cause, many Latin Americans have responded with some version of the following: “The best thing Americans can do is change things in the United States, fix your own country and government.” As we will see, this mandate can be interpreted in a number of ways, emanates from a wide range of political orientations, and does not mean that on-the-ground solidarity in Latin America is not appreciated, welcome, or meaningful. But it does speak to the powerful influence of the us government and corporate interests in the region, as well as to the most important role that Latin American solidarity occupies: namely, to shape how us power operates in the Americas.

Much of the following, then, explores how, when, and why solidarity actors have attempted to advance this project. In the process, it is suggested not only that a left internationalism rooted in the United States is important for the future of the world, but that progressive forays into internationalism provide particularly revealing points of entry for understanding the us left as a whole, including its general decline and uneven disappearance from public life since the 1970s. Internationalism is not just a good measure of us empire. It is a good barometer of the left.

Indeed, the decline of the us left and revolutionary movements in Central America after the 1980s has limited the very forms that internationalism could take in recent decades. Solidarity that depended on mass mobilization, traditional left institutions, or even a critical mass on the left was largely off the table. us-based activists have long struggled over what it means to “be in solidarity” with Latin

Americans, but this ongoing challenge became even more difficult to navigate once revolutionary movements, institutions, and hopes were decimated in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. This was further complicated by the continuing decline of the us left and labor movement during the same period. There was simply less to connect to on both ends as activists struggled to get their bearings across the hemisphere.

Without a left, or at least without one possessing the capacity to influence state power or public debates, international allies have tended to engage in what can be best understood as defensive struggles to help Latin Americans “negotiate the best possible terms of their defeat”⁸—that is, to navigate a political landscape defined by weakened social movements and a particularly savage form of capitalism. In our work in Colombia, we pursued this path not so much because we, or our Colombian counterparts, could not imagine grander forms of internationalism, but because the range of options has been quite limited in a climate devoid of a left with meaningful political power. This is not to say these struggles have been insignificant. In many cases, helping allies make the best of a bad situation can represent an important, if partial, victory.

But it is to say that the ongoing decline of the left—of a force with the capacity to open up the political space necessary for addressing inequality—has made it much more difficult to imagine, let alone actively pursue, efforts to “scale up” political projects in a way that significantly, or even modestly, alters the balance of power for Latin Americans. What, in a political sense, are relatively localized, often isolated, typically under-resourced, and frequently short-term struggles trying to build in the long term? The decline of the left has made it difficult to pursue long-term projects, and challenging to even ask these types of strategic questions, in part because a vibrant left creates the spaces where those questions can be addressed. The relative absence of the left—and the corresponding rise of the right—has also allowed for the emergence of a political economy characterized by constant crisis, in which marginalized groups are often forced to act now (in order to survive) and think later. Under such circumstances, it is often difficult to connect immediate struggles to longer-term political projects.

Organization, Argument, and History

This book attempts to understand recent solidarity efforts historically by tracing the ongoing evolution, relationship, and struggle between moderate and left-wing strands of internationalism within the broader current of Latin American solidarity, and what this has meant for the us left as a whole. The first part, Chapters 1 through 3, explores the long period from the 1800s until the onset of the Cold War, an era during which solidarity was channeled primarily through an anti-imperialism that was at times inflected by pacifism, black internationalism, and radical labor solidarity. Although we now tend to associate anti-imperialism almost exclusively with the radical left, it found a mainstream home during this period in part because imperialism was largely associated with Europe and the establishment of overseas colonies, and thus taken up quite comfortably by us politicians, leading literary figures, and even the core of an emerging labor movement. By the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, imperialism was seen as inherently un-American by liberal sectors of the political establishment.

As European colonies receded from the Caribbean, however, and the United States itself became an (overseas)⁹ imperial power during the late 1800s and early 1900s, this common sense anti-imperialism became harder to maintain, especially as many “anti-imperialists” sought to justify a strong us presence in the Caribbean in order to further national economic interests. Even so, lining up behind imperialism, which included rethinking how to understand it, proved to be an uneven transition. Anti-imperialism retained a mainstream foothold in the United States through the first half of the twentieth century, and arguably played a role in limiting the nature and length of us military occupations in the Dominican Republic (1916–24), Haiti (1915–34), and Nicaragua (1912–33).

It was also during this period, however, that a revolutionary or emancipatory internationalism—rooted in more radical understandings of anti-imperialism—emerged first around the Haitian revolution, persisted unevenly through the 1800s around the global struggle against slavery and the Cuban fight for independence, and then intensified during the early twentieth century around the

Mexican Revolution and us military occupations in the Caribbean. As we will see, this revolutionary internationalism itself flowed through two semi-distinct, semi-intertwined, streams, defined on the one hand by a black internationalism that linked ongoing oppression at home with us imperialism abroad, and on the other hand by a (whiter) radical-socialist tradition that sought to make similar connections between the domestic and the international. The protagonists of revolutionary internationalism, regardless of from which tradition they came, were more likely than their mainstream counterparts to work or identify with Latin Americans, and saw their project not solely in terms of stopping us military intervention overseas, but in terms of a shared struggle to transform the world. What that new world would ultimately look like was not always clear or agreed upon, but revolutionary internationalism assumed a collective notion of liberation that would produce a fundamentally different order.

The ongoing development of revolutionary internationalism during the first decades of the twentieth century was fueled by the expansion of a broader us left that (for example) made connections between labor exploitation on both sides of the us–Mexico border; or between forms of oppression in the Jim Crow South and the racist nature of us imperialism in the Caribbean. It included a deeply internationalist element that was informed by (and at times in solidarity with) causes such as the Spanish civil war (1936–39), the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935–39),¹⁰ and strikes in the Caribbean and West Africa in the late 1930s. There was also an important communist and anarchist presence within what was becoming a powerful labor movement, particularly in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies) and the mass-production unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Put simply, the lines between labor and the left were much blurrier than they became during the Cold War. Indeed, it was precisely the interwoven nature of “domestic” and “internationalist” currents within the left, as well as the vibrant exchange and blurred boundaries between labor and the left, that made the prospects for the emergence of a powerful left rooted in labor and the working class so great during the 1930s.¹¹

It was also the uneasy alliance, or at least willingness to work together and find common ground, between liberal and left anti-imperialists

that made anti-imperialism a considerable force in American politics during the first half of the twentieth century. Part of this was tied to a period in which left ideas, actors, and organizations were (uneasily) accepted as part of the broader political milieu, but it was also because the language of anti-imperialism often meant different things to different people, and hence could house a variety of political projects. Not unlike human rights in the 1970s, the malleability of anti-imperialism served as a political umbrella that could welcome and mobilize a range of groups with differing political ideas and visions.

This would not last. The Second World War and the Cold War deeply disrupted the uneven development of international solidarity. During the war, much of the United States, and especially liberals, mainstream unions, and the left, set aside concerns about US empire and participated in the anti-fascist struggle.¹² This was reasonable enough given the importance of the fight and the fact that the US government itself was preoccupied with Europe, and hence not intervening as aggressively in Latin America. However, once the war was over, and anti-fascism quickly gave way to anti-communism, left internationalism in the United States was not simply slow to rebound. It was largely destroyed by a full-scale assault. This Cold War dismantling was true of the left in general, but the space for radical internationalism was particularly limited during the Cold War, especially from the end of the Second World War through the early 1960s.

The United States emerged from the war a superpower, its imperialism turbo-charged by anti-communism, and there was very little in the way of domestic opposition to empire. Opponents either acquiesced to, or were silenced by, imperial power. Many liberals—both African Americans and their white counterparts—joined the fight against communism, either because they saw it as part of a broader struggle against “totalitarianism,” or because they simply realized that the political space for anti-imperialism was quickly disappearing as the Cold War heated up—and narrowed their political horizons accordingly. Liberals and leftists who stayed course found themselves under attack, and in many cases paid a dear price.

The labor movement, a central target of McCarthyite attacks, responded to the threat by purging most of the left from its ranks and embracing Cold War anti-communism both at home and abroad.¹³