
Andean countries: NO to the FTA that ravages forests and takes over natural resources

The World Trade Organization (WTO) has been one of the main instruments in the advance of economic and power groups that support privatization, globalization and de-regulation of the economy in their eagerness to commercialize the most hidden corners of life. However, since 1995, when the WTO suffered a severe setback in Cancun and when the project for the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) collapsed in Miami, the United States has approached over twenty countries to formally launch bilateral free trade agreements (FTA), in an attempt to accelerate the process through bilateral or sub-regional negotiations, putting pressure on the weaker or more submissive countries. The FTAs are geopolitical instruments to galvanize a wide spectrum of colonialism in the Latin American countries, insofar as they cover aspects ranging from the strictly economic to labour legislation, State management, intellectual property, the environment and natural resources, knowledge, culture and although this seems amazing, the relationship of human beings with what is transcendental.

FTAs are aimed at ending the rights of the indigenous peoples over their territories through provisions that establish that the State renounces its authority to control economic concentration and monopolies; the possibility of obliging countries to pay millionaire sums to US companies when they do not make the profit they expected; the guarantee that a US company cannot be expropriated and that if this were to occur, the investors would have to be compensated for profit not attained; a provision that would among other things, prevent processes such as agrarian reform, environmental rehabilitation, river rehabilitation, basin rehabilitation, etc.; the obligation to guarantee police protection of foreign investments even against strikes and protests; regulations ensuring that US companies can appropriate resources, components of our surroundings and activities that so far had not been considered as merchandise. The clauses open up the way for: a) privatisation of seas, rivers and lakes, education, health, national parks, communications, transport, and anything that the lawyers of US companies have the ingenuity to include; b) allow US companies to take over control of the press, television and radio; c) privatization and delivery to trans-national companies of various governmental functions, such as environmental standards and monitoring, prisons and certain functions of the army (as they have been doing in Colombia and Ecuador in the context of the Patriot Plan); d) the possibility of privatizing anything that can be called a "service" as this is not defined or it is defined in an extremely wide sense. For example, through the term "environmental services," the privatization of the atmosphere, the climate, ecological functions enabling environmental regulation and the whole biosphere starts to be possible.

From 25 to 27 October, Ecuador was the scene of the fifth round of FTA negotiations between the United States and the Andean countries. Spokespeople for the social organizations of Ecuador, Colombia and Peru made it clear that the FTA proposed by the US Government is not only a trade agreement but it also covers all fields of economic, social and political life. The "Ecuador Decide" (Ecuador Decides) movement declared that "the only interest pursued by the United States together with trans-national corporations is to appropriate a biological reserve unique in the world, that possesses one third of the planet's soft water, that is home to the greatest quantity of wildlife in its forests, of which 72 per cent serves as a basis to prepare medicines and that regulates the climate

and the production of oxygen, in addition to its wealth in oil.”

All over Latin America resistance to Free Trade Agreements and to United States re-colonization is growing. Most of the social organizations that engaged themselves at the Social Forum of the Americas held in Quito at the end of July to make the 12th of October into a day of continental struggle fulfilled their promise. On that date, great mobilizations took place in Central America, particularly in Costa Rica and El Salvador, demanding their parliamentarians not to ratify the trade agreements signed by their governments with the United States.

In Colombia, over one million people demonstrated in the midst of a national strike against the FTA and the indigenous leaders are calling for a consultation with their communities to avoid that the wave seeking the wealth of forests and cloud forests in resources and raw material ends up by impoverishing their territories. In Bolivia, tens of thousands of indigenous people met for several days and demonstrated against President Mesa’s attempts at involving his country in the on-going negotiations of the Andean countries with the United States. In Peru, a campaign has been launched to collect signatures to convene a referendum to decide on signing or rejecting the FTA. In Ecuador too, work is underway to convene a peoples’ consultation for the population to decide on the FTA.

The text of the FTA, which is a prototype applied in a more or less equal way in all cases, makes it possible to acquire property rights over plants and animals as if they had been invented by someone. It has transpired that Article 8 of the chapter on intellectual property in the US proposal states that “Each Party (each country signing a FTA) will allow patents to be taken out for the following inventions: a) plants and animals; and b) diagnoses, therapeutic and surgical processes for the treatment of humans and animals.” So far, the authorities of the Andean countries recognize that the United States is setting down conditions going beyond the agreements on intellectual property and patents established by the WTO.

Many of the patents on biological material that the United States and the trans-national companies wish to defend are derived from research processes involving the usurpation of originating peoples’ knowledge – what we call “bio-piracy.”

For the forests of the region and their originating peoples, the FTA would imply not only the trade frontier advancing into nature, insofar as it favours increased activities for the exploitation of natural wealth, but would also strengthen the attempts at appropriation of access to this wealth and the knowledge linked to it.

In Guayaquil, Ecuador, during the FTA negotiations, the reflection of the social sectors was accompanied by protests, such as the one made by Acción Ecológica, when it broke through the security system and unfurled a banner reading “FTA = Free Corruption Agreement” while they shouted “We have no wish to be a colony of the United States.”

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