

Melbourne: Conference builds left alliances and international solidarity

Tuesday 23 October 2007, by [MACDONALD Lisa](#) (Date first published: 24 October 2007).

Melbourne,

More than 400 people participated in around 65 workshops and 10 plenary sessions to discuss a myriad of national and international campaigns against imperialism and neoliberalism at the Latin America and Asia Pacific International Solidarity Forum held at Victorian Trades Hall and the RMIT on October 11-14. The participants included 33 activists and leaders from people's movements and political parties in 20 countries, the most diverse left gathering hosted in Australia for years.

Presentations by panels of international guest speakers in the plenary sessions, in particular those on "War and neoliberalism" and "Workers' struggle, global fight", exposed the strikingly common consequences of imperialism and neoliberalism for the mass of ordinary people around the world. Whether factory workers in South Korea, rural workers in Colombia or indigenous people in Chile, the increasing exploitation, impoverishment and repression that accompany neoliberal globalisation are shared. Privatisation, deteriorating health and education services, environmental destruction and the removal of basic democratic rights in the name of "fighting terrorism" were themes common to all the presentations.

A stronger theme in all the discussions, however, was the rising popular resistance to repression and injustice. The plenary panels on "Rebellion and liberation in Latin America", "Indigenous struggles and resistance" and "Movements of resistance in the Asia Pacific" provided numerous detailed examples of how the rulers' escalating assault on the living conditions of the majority of people is generating campaigns and struggles on many fronts.

The presentations by the impressive range of activists from the Asia-Pacific provided many insights into new campaigns and movements that are on the rise in this region in response to the declining legitimacy of neoliberal governments. Presentations on the Pakistani lawyers' militant protests against the military dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf, the formation of new, united left organisations such as Papernas in Indonesia and Laban ng Masa in the Philippines, and the development of cross-national workers' rights campaigns in Asia, all underlined the increasing vulnerability of the neoliberal status quo in our region.

The role of Australian imperialism was the focus of a major session in which speakers from Papua New Guinea and East Timor demanded their peoples' right to own and manage all of their countries' abundant natural resources, and called for the control or expulsion of Australian mining corporations.

In Latin America, resistance to the brutalities of capitalism has developed into open rebellion across the continent, dealing some severe blows to US imperialism. Speakers from Colombia, Bolivia, Mexico, Cuba and Venezuela contributed to a discussion that wove throughout the conference about the huge impact of the Venezuelan revolution on Latin American and world politics, and how the Venezuelan idea of "socialism of the 21st Century" has given new hope and energy to other struggles for liberation.

The announcement by Venezuelan Charge d'Affairs Nelson Davila that President Hugo Chavez is planning to visit Australia in 2008 drew loud applause.

While many of the presentations and discussions at the conference focused on the immediate issues confronting the majority of people living under capitalist rule, a sizeable chunk of the program was devoted to addressing experiences of constructing alternatives to neoliberalism and capitalism, especially in Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Vietnam. A range of quite different strategies for creating societies based on equality and justice were presented, generating interesting discussions and debates about the nature of participatory democracy and "popular power", many of these taking place in the dozen or so workshops that examined different aspects of the Venezuelan revolution.

Jody Betzien, one of the conference organisers for the Australia-Venezuela Solidarity Network, explained to Green Left Weekly: "When the Democratic Socialist Perspective [DSP] first approached the AVSN late last year about combining its planned 2007 Asia Pacific International Solidarity Conference with AVSN's annual Latin America solidarity conference, it was clear that bringing together Latin American, Asia-Pacific, Australian and other activists to discuss and learn from each other and, crucially, extend practical solidarity to each other, was one way we could support and extend the Venezuelan revolution's profound internationalism.

"The Venezuelan revolution is unquestionably at the centre of world politics today. It has shifted the power balance between the haves and the have-nots much more in favour of the oppressed. This conference has affirmed and practically strengthened what the Venezuelans are showing in practice: that international solidarity of the oppressed is the indispensable weapon in all of our struggles for liberation from capitalism."

Another feature of the conference was the strong labour movement stream, which included a plenary panel on workers' rights addressed by labour movement activists from six countries, workshops on topics ranging from "Unions and the environment" to "Stop the race to the bottom", and a two-day labour movement exposure tour on October 9-10 in which union activists attending the conference from overseas visited a variety of workplaces in Melbourne and regional Victoria and met with some Australian trade unions.

Manrico Moro from Australia Asia Worker Links told GLW: "This year, the international solidarity forum replaced the AAWL Open Day conference. The labour movement tour to Morwell and Melbourne was great, and the meetings with ACTU [the Australian Council of Trade Unions], VTHC [Victorian Trades Hall Council], and a number of unions and union councils were important.

"AAWL workshops at the forum ... developed some new proposals concerning a global minimum wage campaign, and for global campaigns for occupational health and safety and full residence and organising rights for migrant workers. Our international guests and AAWL were pleased with the results of the conference."

Reflecting the diverse participation and discussions at the forum, the final session of the conference passed resolutions in support of migrant workers' rights; condemning the Howard government's invasion of Aboriginal lands in the Northern Territory; for the closure of all immigration detention centres and full rights for refugees; in solidarity with the Basque people who are currently suffering escalated repression by the Spanish state; and in support of Burma's democracy movement.

Resolutions arising from workshops addressed issues including freedom for the Cuba Five and lifting the blockade against Cuba; the need for international coordination to ensure that the "Troops out!" rallies next March — the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq — are as large as possible; mass mobilisations around demands to halt global warming on World Environment Day next year; and

opposition to the Colombian government's brutal repression (visit <http://www.solidarityforum2007.org> for more).

The conference undoubtedly achieved its main aim of facilitating the sharing of ideas and experiences between Latin American, Asia-Pacific and Australian social movements, political organisations and activists in order to strengthen international networks, campaign coordination and solidarity. Jorge Jorquera, one of the conference organisers from the Bolivarian Circle (now the Centre for Latin America Solidarity and Studies — CLASS), told GLW: "The forum proved a great framework for new and renewed collaborations. It was not only an opportunity to discuss and learn from the experiences of others, but also to establish more links and work together on new projects.

"As a result of the forum, CLASS is now working with others on a new journal aimed at bringing to our Asia-Pacific region some of the theoretical debate and revival of theory now taking place in Latin American movements and left organisations. We are also working with other comrades on a new internet radio project, radiovenceremos.org. In addition, our projects and links with Colombia and Venezuela have been strengthened."

The organising of the conference was in itself an important contribution to strengthening united left activity in Australia, being jointly organised by the DSP/Asia Pacific International Solidarity Conferences (APISC), the AVSN, AAWL, CLASS, the Latin American Solidarity Network and Unity for Peace. More than 20 other Latin American solidarity groups, left parties, community media, and environmental and other social movement organisations sponsored the conference.

The conference was also strongly supported by the trade union movement, including participation and assistance from the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union; the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union; the Australian Services Union (services division); the Australian Workers Union; the Communication, Electrical and Plumbing Union (plumbers and telecommunications divisions); the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (construction and mining divisions); the Electrical Trades Union; the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance; the Maritime Union of Australia (Victoria and WA branches, and national); the Rail Tram and Bus Union; the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union; and the United Firefighters Union; as well as the ACTU; Geelong and Gippsland trades and labour councils; and the VTHC's occupational health and safety unit and Trades Hall Literary Institute.

P.S.

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* Lisa Macdonald was one of the conference organisers, representing the DSP/APISC.