

Hugo Blanco - Lesser Spotted Comrades

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On 25 June 2023, Hugo Blanco, the renowned Peruvian activist, champion of indigenous struggles and pioneer of ecosocialism, died in Sweden. Blanco organised and fought throughout his life, with tactics ranging from strikes, land occupations, and armed struggle, based on the principle of mass action, rather than the actions of a small, self-selected vanguard. He endured many imprisonments, police beatings, periods of exile, hunger strikes, and was present during coup d'états in Peru, Argentina, and Chile.

Born in Cusco, the former capital of the Inca, on 15 November 1934, he became politically active at an early age, protesting with his siblings against the dictatorship of General Manuel Odría (1948-56), for which his older brother and sister were imprisoned, and Hugo was injured by police. In 1954 he moved to La Plata in Argentina to study agronomy. Here he joined the local Trotskyist group led by Nahuel Moreno, and his ideas began to take shape under their guidance. Feeling that his skills in agronomy would only be used to aid landlordism in Peru, he dropped out to work in a meat-packing factory. While there, he took part in workers resistance following the coup against Juan Perón in 1955. In 1957, Blanco moved to Lima to rebuild the Trotskyist movement in Peru. Following repression of protesters against the visit of US Vice President Richard Nixon in 1958, he returned to Cusco, unionised young newspaper sellers, and was briefly detained for his efforts. A chance encounter with fellow imprisoned peasant union activists, who encouraged him to join their struggle, changed his life.



At the time, Peru was an extremely racist society. Indigenous peoples were largely illiterate, excluded from land ownership, politics, and the institutions of the state, and often treated worse than animals. Unpaid labour and tribute was expected of peasant farmers (campesinos), and flogging, rape, and humiliation was common. In the valley of La Convención, the local campesinos, largely indigenous, had formed a union to struggle against these neo-feudal conditions imposed by the big landlords (gamonales). Blanco, who spoke the native language, Quechua, had long been inspired by indigenous culture and resistance, including their system of communal organising and ownership, the ayllu, inherited from pre-Inca times. He was also heavily influenced by Peruvian socialists José María Arguedas and José Carlos Mariátegui (see Rupture issue 9) who championed their cause. From 1958-63, Blanco helped kick the struggle up a gear, with strikes, sabotage, land occupations, and ultimately a mass armed uprising to defend their gains under the slogan 'tierra o muerte' (land or death), earning the admiration of many, including Che Guevara.

Blanco was finally captured in 1963 and sentenced to 25 years imprisonment. Despite this, the campaign in La Convención was largely successful, resulting in significant land gains for the campesinos and the restoration of some measure of dignity. After an international campaign, Blanco was granted amnesty in December 1970 by the more left-wing military government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado. He was still on rocky ground, however, with his movements and actions restricted. Within months, the regime deported him.

The seventies was a period of mass repression and turbulence throughout Latin America. Blanco endured exile in several countries, narrowly escaped from Chile during the coup in September 1973, and was briefly imprisoned under the Argentine military junta. He returned to Peru following his election to its Constituent Assembly in 1978 and was later elected to parliament and the senate. He even ran for President in 1980. He went into exile again following Fujimori's self-coup in 1992, with his life under threat from both the state and the Maoist insurgents Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path). He spent five years in Mexico and was profoundly inspired by the Zapatistas and their focus on building their own power, rather than just trying to capture it from the state.

In the decades following his return to Peru in 1997, Blanco became more involved in environmental struggles, joining in the resistance of indigenous peoples against mining corporations in the Amazon and elsewhere. He put their struggle at the heart of ecosocialism, and championed them through a monthly newspaper he founded in 2006, *Lucha Indígena*. He leaves us a legacy of solidarity, compassion, love and respect for people and nature, and an inspiring model for our continuing struggles to change the world.

David Convery

Further reading

Hugo Blanco, *Land or Death: The Peasant Struggle in Peru* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972)

We the Indians: The indigenous peoples of Peru and the struggle for land (London: Merlin Press, 2018).

Derek Wall, *Hugo Blanco: A revolutionary for life* (London: Merlin Press, 2018).

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