

# **Dispatch from Ecuador**

**Prairie Struggle members reporting in**

Prairie Struggle

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I have been living in the Andean mountains of Ecuador for about eight months. I live just outside the city of Azogues, about twenty minutes away from the city of Cuenca, which is an incredibly metropolitan city of about half a million people. I have also had the privilege of travelling the country, to the ocean city of Salinas, to Guayaquil (the largest city in Ecuador and center of business), to Quito (the capital of Ecuador), and many places in between. I think I was unprepared for how beautiful a mega-biodiverse country as small as Ecuador truly is. I also tried to arrive in this country with as few preconceived notions as possible, while at the same time researching as much as I could before arriving. The purpose of this article is not to crap on Ecuador, a country I have come to love, nor to purvey that I speak for the people of Ecuador, because that's not the case either. I want to dispel the idea that political leftism is more prominent here in South America than in the North.

Of course, president Rafael Correa does belong to an alliance in South America of 'leftist leaders', but after living here for almost a year, I'm just not sure what that means – aside from the rhetoric used to piss off the United States in particular. Now, to be sure, immense progress has been made in Ecuador in a relatively short period of time. If you want to give yourself nightmares for a month, Google "Ecuador and Chevron" to see how this oil company nearly destroyed a country, not to mention one of the most important rainforests in the world. About 20 years ago, people were still leaving Ecuador in droves, culminating in the currency being so devalued that Ecuador switched to the U.S. dollar. My partner, a citizen of Ecuador, remembers a large piece of tear-inducing graffiti in the central plaza of our city, reading "last person to leave, please turn out the lights". This has changed immensely. Infrastructure has improved by leaps and bounds, creating a lot of jobs. For example, from our location it used to take fifteen to eighteen hours to drive to the capital of Quito; it now takes only six to eight hours. The abject poverty that was a reality for so many, has also improved drastically. The road stops that were manned by either corrupt police looking for bribes, or just straight-up thieves in uniforms, are now abandoned. Many of these changes are a result of president Correa's policies.

However, one need only to travel outside the areas of tourism and U.N. World Heritage Sites to see how the working poor still suffer. As with the rest of the world, these improvements have widened the gap between the wealthy and the working class. In Guayaquil, the center of business in Ecuador, the poverty is stark and in your face no matter which part of the city you are in. In the capital of Quito, the disparity between the classes is marked by disturbing differences. Once you leave the areas marked by the glittering temples of consumerism, government, and tourism you will see that the roads in the neighbourhoods of the poor are not even paved. Will this change as improvements continue? Only time will tell; certainly many of the statements made by Correa are encouraging. He speaks often and specifically of ending discrimination against the marginalized communities of Ecuador; of being firmly against American imperialism; of protecting the environment; and improving the lives of all the citizens of Ecuador.

It's just that a lot of Correa's recent actions are so damn scary. When I say recent, I'm talking in my time living here. It's incredibly difficult to take the good stuff seriously when the president's actions are so bizarrely the opposite. Let's look at a couple of examples of what is happening in Ecuador under president Correa, and see if we can't infuse some reality into the preconceived notions of institutionalized leftism we in the North seem to hold about the South.

## **“PIMP MY RAINFOREST” (A.R.)**

In 2007, president Correa went before the General Assembly of the United Nations and announced that he had taken the Yasuni portion of the Amazon rainforest hostage. I stand against capitalism and for the environment, he seemed to say... but pay up or we start choppin' limbs! Tree limbs, that is...

Dubbed the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, Correa said that in exchange for half the value of the oil under this portion of the Amazon, he would leave it untouched, halting all plans to drill for the crude beneath. In perhaps the most expensive hostage taking of all time, he gave the rest of the world six years to 'donate' \$3.6 billion to save the rainforest. Correa made this announcement with all the altruistic pomp he could muster, speaking persuasively about saving the culture of isolated Indigenous tribes, preventing insane levels of CO2 from being released, not to mention that it's just straight up repugnant (for lack of a better phrase) to picture an oil slick running through the pristine Amazon. However, this deadline has come and gone, putting Ecuador in a seriously tough position because the country really, really needs the money from extracting this oil.

I'd like to be very clear about the vital importance and unique nature of Yasuni National Park. This part of the Amazon is one of the most biologically diverse areas on earth. Scientists have discovered 655 species of trees in one hectare of land in the park, more than the total recorded in the U.S and Canada combined. It has been declared a world biosphere reserve by UNESCO. Some 4,000 plant species, 173 species of mammals, and 610 bird species live inside the Park. It contains more documented insect species than any other forest in the world, and is among the most diverse forests in the world for different species of birds, bats, amphibians, epiphytes, and lianas. Yasuni is a critical habitat for 23 globally threatened mammal species, including the giant otter, the Amazonian manatee, pink river dolphin, giant anteater, and Amazonian tapir... Ten primate species live in the Yasuni, including the threatened white-bellied spider monkey. (Wikipedia, UNESCO, Journal Nature) But back to the hostage taking.

Anarchist groups like Prairie Struggle incorporate environmental concerns into their campaigns and platforms not only to protect the global commons, but also because these issues are always part of the struggle against capitalism and the commodification of our environment. This figures particularly into Correa's treatment of oil extraction in the Amazon region of Yasuni, for Ecuador needs the money anticipated from the hostage taking to pay back considerable loans from China. When the international community paid only about \$100 million of the demanded ransom, Correa scrapped the Yasuní-ITT Initiative on August 15<sup>th</sup> of this year. Some drilling has already commenced, predictably leading to the same old language (utilized by Correa in an act of supreme irony given his original speech to the U.N.) of colonization of Indigenous tribes, not to mention over-hunting and deforestation.

Oh yes, Correa's a real socialist enemy of the state, huh?

## **ANARCHISTS ARE THE ENEMY**

I would like to metaphorically introduce you to a cool dude named Jaime Guevara. He is an active, very well known anarchist and musician (the two often overlap) based out of Quito, Ecuador. After Guevara gave what Correa interpreted to be an 'obscene gesture' on August 31<sup>st</sup> of this

year, the president of Ecuador declared him an alcoholic and drug addict that was not to be trusted. Correa began a swift smear campaign against this known anarchist that did not go well. You see, what Correa ignorantly assumed were the effects of alcohol and drugs, were actually the effects of the medications that Guevara takes for his epilepsy.

As soon as people who know Guevara started jumping to his defense, clarifying that he has a neurological disorder, not to mention that he never drinks or does drugs both out of personal choice as well as needing to take medications that make it dangerous to consume either, you'd think that Correa would simply have apologized and the two men would have returned to their respective corners of our antiquated political spectrum. But the president's first response was quite preposterous. "How are we to know the brat has a neurological problem?", Correa said. No apology would ever come. Of course, there was widespread support for Guevara, some of which, ironically, would not have come if not for Correa's actions. And it got worse... much worse. As if to counter the support that Guevara was receiving, Correa continued his misguided smear campaign. The president clarified in response to the backlash that Guevara was a spoiled liar, is a dangerous anarchist with left-leaning militancy, and that his disease causes him to be violently aggressive especially against those who disagree with his views.

Correa, who often touts his dedication to eradicate discrimination in Ecuador, essentially vilified all those suffering from epilepsy, which is pretty damn low. Also interesting is that Correa has enacted a law in Ecuador that states that journalists who lie in their publications can be prosecuted and be sent to jail. Most recently, this law has been extended to social media in Ecuador, including Facebook and Twitter. But what of Correa lying in the media? While I doubt that there exists a government in the world that is a big fan of the anarchists seeking to topple their system, Correa's actions increasingly (and disturbingly) reflect the type of bubble he rules from. Watch out if you don't agree with the president, as there will be consequences. Oh, and it's well worth noting that Guevara is opposed to the exploitation of the Yasuni National Park and has been actively engaged in the organizing against this government action.

Many that consider themselves part of the institutionalized left in North America look to South America as a political haven of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism; but what makes the president of Ecuador any better than the president of America? We are anarcho-communists, and a government is a government. None are better than the other under capitalism, though some can surely be worse. Just as in most of the world, in Ecuador the environment is still exploited (despite the fact that the environment is constitutionally protected), and anarchists are still vilified. These are merely two examples demonstrating how our current system really makes one country no better than another.

What unites us is that the working class is universally exploited by the few that hold the power, sometimes more violently, sometimes more latently. Let us not be divided, nor misled, by the borders we seek to abolish.

**By Stacey and Michael (Regina Branch)**

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