

ROCLA UPDATE ON THE AMERICAS

A PUBLICATION OF THE ROCHESTER COMMITTEE ON LATIN AMERICA

ROCLA

MISSION STATEMENT

Founded in 1973, the Rochester Committee on Latin America (ROCLA) seeks to build bridges between the Rochester, NY, community and the people of Latin America. Through its monthly presentations, speakers, films, and quarterly newsletters, ROCLA educates local residents about the culture, economics and politics of the countries of Central and South America, Mexico and the Caribbean and the ways globalization, US trade and drug-war policies impact the lives of their people. ROCLA also supports the work of frontline organizations involved in working for justice and democracy in the global south, including the Latin America Solidarity Committee (LASC), Nicanet, Committee in Solidarity with the people of El Salvador (CISPES), Network In Solidarity with the people of Guatemala (NISGUA), Rights Action and the Pastors for Peace Cuba Friendshipment. We also encourage our members and others to advocate for US policies that support human rights and reverse the often oppressive history of US involvement in Latin America. Annually, ROCLA presents its international and local White Dove Awards for outstanding leadership and service in the cause of human rights in Latin America.

Steering Committee

Marilyn Anderson, Peg Gefell, Bob and Marilyn Kaiser, Grania Marcus, Arnie Matlin, Lew Montemaggi, Sandy Morales, Peter and Gail Mott, Gloria Osborne, Callie Rabe, Vic Vinkey, Tom Ward

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25th Cuba **Coming Soon!** Friendshipment Caravan

By Vic Vinkey

The dates have been set. And this year ROCLA will continue its long history of participation in the IFCO/Pastors for Peace Friendshipment to Cuba. Steering Committee member Callie Rabe has agreed to head up our efforts this year.

We will welcome the 25th Cuba Caravan to Rochester on July 10th with a party and loading of collected aid. (Details to be announced.) Caravan vehicles will travel across the U.S. and Canada, converging at McAllen, Texas, on July 19th, and will cross into Mexico on the 24th. The program in Cuba, July 25th to August 2nd, will be followed by a return to the U.S. on August 4th.

As always, the mission will be to provide aid and friend-

ship to the Cuban people and protest the more than 50-year-old unjust and illegal U.S. embargo of Cuba. A history of the Caravan Campaign, posted on the ROCLA web site, illustrates that "with each Friendshipment caravan, with each successive effort to challenge the U.S. economic blockade of Cuba, the U.S. government has been compelled to back down, to relent, to soften its enforcement of the blockade. Active nonviolence has been a winning strategy."

There are many opportunities to participate in this event. You can assist with donations of money, material aid or help load the Caravan truck when it comes to Rochester. Watch for a letter in your mail with details about the Caravan and where



to send your check. In addition to medicines and medical supplies, IFCO/Pastors for Peace will again be giving priority to construction supplies to support Cuba's efforts to tackle its housing shortage, which is exacerbated every time a hurricane hits the island.

We welcome your donations of the following items prior to July 10:

Roofing materials: roofing shingles, plywood and flashing;

Construction materials and tools: nails, hammers, screws, power drills, wall anchors, saws and saw
(*Caravan continues page 2*)

The Story of Venezuela's Protests May Be Different From What You Are Told

By Mark Weisbrot, Center for Economic and Policy Research

This article is reprinted with permission of the author. It was originally published in *Folha de São Paulo (Brazil)* on April 13th, 2014, and in *The Huffington Post* on April 28, 2014. [Ed. Note]

In reacting to the protests in Venezuela, the biggest Western media outlets have drafted a charmingly simple narrative of the situation there. According to this story, peaceful protesters have risen up against a government because of shortages,

(*Venezuela continues pg. 6*)

URGENT ACTION

Oppose Bills That Impose Sanctions on Venezuela

This information comes to ROCLA from the Alliance for Global Justice:

As we feared, advocates of "regime change" in Venezuela, buoyed by the nearly unanimous passage of anti-Venezuela resolutions in both houses of Congress, are now pushing two bills, introduced on March 13,

2013, that would require sanctions to be placed against the democratically-elected government of President Nicolas Maduro.

Brief information on each is below. Currently, both bills are in committee.

Please call your Senators and Representative to let
(*Urgent continued page 2*)

(Continued from Page 1)

blades, banding tools, door hanging tools, ladders, jacks, plaster, sandpaper, levels, tape measures; grouts, sealants, masonry admixtures, concrete, masonry hand tools (floats, trowels), chisels (wood and

masonry);

Medical supplies: wheel-chairs, crutches, walkers, etc.

Bicycles

For information about where to donate supplies and other questions, contact Callie Rabe, crabe@allendalecolumbia.org. ■

URGENT ACTION

(Continued from Page 1)

them know that you oppose sanctions and continuing efforts funded by US "democracy promotion" funds to break the constitutional order in order to overthrow the democratically-elected government in Venezuela. Make clear that you expect an answer, and particularly with Democrats, say that your support for them in the next election will be strongly influenced by their position on this issue.

S. 2142, Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014, sponsored by Senator Robert Menendez, D-NJ, would impose targeted sanctions on persons responsible for violations of the human rights of anti-government protesters in Venezuela; it has 4 co-sponsors and has been referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations.

H.R. 4229, Venezuelan Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, sponsored by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-FL, seeks international sanctions against the Government of Venezuela with respect to foreign persons responsible for or complicit in ordering, controlling, or otherwise directing, the commission of serious human rights abuses against citizens of Venezuela, and for other purposes; it has 17 co-sponsors and has been referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security.

Call the United States Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121 to be connected to your Senators and Congressional Representative. ■

HELP ROCLA PLAN FOR THE FUTURE!

In the wake of ROCLA's 40th Anniversary, we think it's time to intentionally examine our mission and where we are going. On Saturday, June 7, 2014, from 9 AM - 12 PM, you are invited to help the ROCLA Steering Committee shape ROCLA's future. We need your ideas and energy to define and grow ROCLA's continued mission of education, advocacy and support on behalf of the people of Latin America. We will meet at the home of Peter and Gail Mott, 288 Melrose Street, Rochester, NY, and refreshments will be provided. Please let Gail Mott know if you're coming: interconnect_mott@frontier-net.net or (585) 464-0878. We look forward to seeing you! ■



ROCLA members at the Rice & Beans dinner show their unanimous support for the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke.

2014 Rice and Beans Dinner a Great Success!

By Bob Kaiser

More than 100 ROCLA members and guests enjoyed the 26th annual Rice and Beans dinner at Gates Presbyterian Church on March 14th. Auctioneer Tom Ward presided over a live auction during the meal, and many bid on the unusually large number of items in the silent auction. The auctions were the most successful ever!

The Campaign To Stop Killer Coke received ROCLA's International White Dove Award for its work in Latin America to stop The Coca-Cola Company's union-busting activities. Ray Rogers, Director, spoke of Coke's efforts to crush any union organizing in its plants in Guatemala and Colombia, and 57 people signed a letter to Coca-Cola CEO Muhtar Kent demanding an end to Coke's anti-union violence.

The Local White Dove award honored the Rochester Labor Council, AFL-CIO. President Jim Bertolone talked about the Council's long history of standing behind the rights of all workers.

Thirty-three dinner-goers

signed a petition to President Obama and U.S. Trade Representative Michael Froman opposing the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement the AFL-CIO has actively opposed because of its infringement on the rights of U.S. and other workers and its negative impact on U.S. environmental, health, banking and other laws. Those present were also asked to contact their New York State leaders to support the NYS Dream Act.

The Rice & Beans dinner raised a total of \$5,146 through ticket sales, auction proceeds and revenue from ads that will directly benefit the organizations and initiatives that ROCLA supports.

We especially thank Gates Presbyterian Church for hosting the dinner, Tom Ward, our host extraordinaire at the church and dinner emcee, Peg Gefell and Savory-Thyme Catering for the wonderful food, Jim Anderson Designs for the dinner program booklet and all those who generously donated items for the live and silent auctions. ■

Spotlight on ROCLA Cuba Caravan leader Vic Vinkey

This interview is the third of an ongoing newsletter series spotlighting ROCLA members. [Ed. Note]

By Gail Mott

In July, 2014, the 25th IFCO/Pastors for Peace Friendship Caravan will make its way across the border with Mexico and on to Cuba. Eighteen years ago, Vic Vinkey joined the Caravan. He has visited Cuba as an ordinary citizen since, and last year he traveled with the Cuba Friendship again. Here are some of his observations:

Q: When and why did you join ROCLA?

Vic: In the mid-80s because of my opposition to Reagan's funding of the Contra war and U.S. involvement in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Joining ROCLA gave me an opportunity to learn more and do something about it. I went to Nicaragua in 1993

Q: Did the U.S. Embargo prompt your interest in Cuba?

Vic: Yes, definitely.

Q: How did you learn about Pastors for Peace and the Cuba Caravan?

Vic: Through ROCLA's participation. I went on my first Friendship in 1996.

Q: Why did you decide to participate?

Vic: First, I thought it was a way to protest the embargo and to emphasize the immorality of the embargo. Secondly, I wanted to help the Cuban people's situation and show them that there are friendly and supportive people in the U.S.

Q: Did official U.S. reaction to the Caravan change over the years?

Vic: Yes - to some degree. It seemed to me that in the latter part of 90's the attitude of the U.S. government changed from

one of strong resistance to tolerance and record-keeping - identifying people involved. Earlier, the government showed their total opposition by resisting the passage of the Caravan into Mexico. In 1995, they impounded 390 computers. The Reverend Lucius Walker and others started a Fast for Life protest in Texas that moved to D.C. - outside the Treasury Building. With the help of Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-NY) and other Congresspeople, the U.S. Treasury Department released the computers on the 94th day of the Fast. In 1996, we took those computers to Cuba. That's one reason Cuban President Fidel Castro held a reception for us.

Q: Did the Cuban government and/or the Cuban people's response/reaction to the Caravan change over the years?

Vic: No. They were always very thankful. Just being on the street when wearing Pastors for Peace (PfP) T-shirts, or were otherwise identified as PfP folks, we always got a very supportive reception. In 1998, I went to Cuba as a private citizen and hired a guide. When he learned I had been with Pastors for Peace he was very grateful. Also, last year when Ream Kidane and I were wearing PfP T-shirts we were stopped and thanked. There is a plaque now in Havana as part of a memorial to Cuban patriots that also honors the Rev. Walker.

Q: Participation in the Caravan is considered civil disobedience by the U.S. government and could lead to large fines or imprisonment. Did you take



President Raul Castro of Cuba speaks to thousands at a 2013 celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution.

that into account when you made your decisions to go?

Vic: Definitely. I knew there was a certain amount of risk and knew also that the U.S. government had followed up on getting information about people who had traveled with PfP. But I also knew no fines or penalties had been imposed over the years.

Q: Do you have any reflections you'd like to share about Rev. Lucius Walker?

Vic: Lucius was a very kind, quiet, and deliberate person who just kept going in the calmest and nicest way. Fidel? He was a big man in every way. When he hugged you knew you were being hugged. He loved to talk. He stayed around that evening in 1996 and talked with us. When he listened he would tilt his head back, raise his eyebrows and lift his eyes. Then he pointed his finger at the questioner to make his point. He listened intently and responded enthusiastically and was always very expressive.

Q: Do you have any thoughts about Cuba after the embargo is lifted?

Vic: We asked Fidel if the two nations could be friends and he said that would be their desire. It would be wonderful to have normal relations

and important to stop U.S. interference with the travel of U.S. citizens. Every individual should be free to travel to every country. Now visitors have to take authorized tours. Someone who did do that got a very slanted view of what's happening in Cuba from the U.S. Embassy. We, on the other hand, go to the US/Cuba Friendship Society and get a different picture. If U.S.-sent travelers went there, they would get another point of view. ■

THANK YOU!

The ROCLA Steering Committee greatly appreciates the members who have already sent in their 2013-2014 membership contributions! We thank you for the \$2,325 ROCLA has already received. Remember, ROCLA is supported exclusively by its members and 100% of your donation goes to the projects and organizations that work to bring about social and economic justice and protect human rights in Latin America. If you have not yet sent in your membership dues, it's not too late! Please make checks payable to ROCLA/Metro Justice and send them to: Marilyn Kaiser, 150 Attridge Rd., Churchville, NY, 14428. ■

New York Dairy Farmworkers Win OSHA Victory!

By Carly Fox, Organizer, Worker Justice Center of New York and Rebecca Fuentes, Lead Organizer, Workers Center of Central New York

In May 2014, dairy farmworkers in NYS won a victory seldom achieved by workers in agriculture: farmworker leaders completed a 14-day speaking tour across the state, harnessing diverse and enthusiastic support for their health and safety campaign from students, churches, unions and elected officials. The tour built upon their previous win-- NYS dairy farmworker leaders fought for and gained a Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration Local Emphasis Program (OSHA/LEP) to monitor and address the dangerous working conditions on New York State's dairy farms.

The workers, many of them Mexican and Central American immigrants, argued that if special attention isn't given to improving health and safety standards in the dairy industry, the number of workplace-related injuries and fatalities among New York's approximately

10,000 dairy farmworkers, would likely continue to increase. Since 2006, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there have been 55 work-related deaths in NYS on dairies. Workers know that if there is no effective enforcement strategy in place, growers will continue to operate without accountability for such dangerous working conditions.

In their appeal to OSHA to increase its attention in the dairy industry, workers spoke of their experiences, injuries and hopes for better working conditions. Eliceo shared his story of being attacked by a bull on a farm in Livingston County. Rather than get help from his employer to get medical attention, he was pressured to prematurely return to work. When



he chose to follow the doctor's orders, he was fired and kicked out of his employer-provided housing in the middle of winter and continues to suffer from his injury, limiting his ability to work. Jesus, a farmworker from Greene County, also

was charged by a bull, and nearly lost his eye. He was made to sit and wait to get to the hospital, bleeding profusely, while the owner of the farm milked the rest of the cows.

Felipe worked on one of the largest dairies in NYS, and in his two-week tenure at that location, he was splashed with and nearly blinded by formaldehyde

used to clean cows' hooves, slipped and fell on manure-covered floors while rushing to herd the cows on time, and was crushed by a cow against a wall. He quit, saying he wasn't going to die for \$7.25 an hour. Fortunately, Felipe was able to take the risk to look for another job. Many others, as sole breadwinners for their families in their home countries, don't have that luxury and that is why they stay under such onerous conditions. How is it possible that employers in an industry known for workplace dangers are free to expose their workers to extreme

dangers without repercussions?

And workplace safety isn't the only hazard dairy farmworkers face. They often live in sub-standard housing and in fear of leaving the farm because immigration officers may pick them up. They are routinely robbed of their wages and suffer isolation, prejudice from the community, and constant worry about their families so many thousands of miles away. Most NYS dairy farmworkers work 72-hour weeks – 6 days a week, 12 hour shifts. Farmworkers are also excluded from the coveted right to a day of rest, overtime wages after 40 hours of work a week and protection from retaliation when workers organize in groups. Most dairy farmworkers still make minimum wage, often

spending years making minimum wage or only a little bit over that.

Yet, according to the *Albany Times Union* (4/28/14), these workers are responsible for the

18% increase in profits on NYS dairy farms in 2013, and their hard work is why NYS is the third largest producer of dairy in the country and why New York ranks first in making trendy Greek yogurt, a booming industry. In 1970, NYS had 28,000 dairy farms, but by 2007, the number of dairies had shrunk to 5,600, despite an almost 20% increase in the quantity of milk produced since 1970. This means that economy-of-scale large farms are squeezing out smaller dairies.

But for dairy farmworkers on small farms, there is an ad-

"I CAN'T LOSE MY LIFE FOR THE \$7.25 I'M MAKING HERE."

– FELIPE, 23 YEARS OLD, FROM MEXICO



Dairy farmworkers meet in Syracuse with Kim Bobo, Director of Interfaith Worker Justice, based in Chicago, IL.



Dairy farmworker José Cañas speaks with Congressman Dan Maffei and Rebecca Fuentes of the Workers' Center of Central New York.

ditional challenge. Every year Congress passes a rider on the appropriations bill that exempts so-called "small farms" from OSHA jurisdiction—dairy farms with 10 or fewer workers are not monitored or investigated. And six NYS Congressional Representatives, Richard Hanna (R-22), Christopher Gibson (R-19), Sean Maloney (D-18), Tom Reed (R-23), William Owens (D-21) and Chris Collins (R-27), have demanded that OSHA *not* do its job and indefinitely delay the planned emphasis program in the dairy industry. Thanks to the effective organizing of the farmworkers, OSHA denied their request and is moving forward with the surprise inspections for three months from July to September 2014.

We still have a long way to go until farmworkers get access to dignity and human rights in the workplace. If you want to support the dairy farmworker justice campaign, ask your Congressional representative to:

1. Support the efforts of OSHA to ensure farms are safer and extend the emphasis program for at least another year of enforcement;

2. Remove Congress' farming appropriations bill rider, which excludes thousands of U.S. farmworkers from basic workplace health and safety protections if they work on farms that have 10 or fewer employees.

For more information and to learn about how to get involved, visit our websites: Workers Center of Central NY (www.workerscentercn.org) or Worker Justice Center of NY (www.wjcny.org). ■

"I INVITE THE POLITICIANS TO COME AND WALK AMONGST THE COWS AND THE CONDITIONS, SO THAT THEY LIVE IT LIKE WE DO. IF THEY DID THAT, THEY WOULD COME TO SEE OUR POINT OF VIEW."

— JESUS, 39 YEARS OLD, FROM MEXICO

Pastors for Peace Leader Gail Walker to Speak at ROCLA June 4



Gail Walker, Co-Director of Pastors for Peace (left), speaks with the mother of one of the Cuban Five prisoners still being held in the United States.

On June 4, 2014, 7 PM, at Downtown United Presbyterian Church, Gail Walker, co-Executive Director of IFCO/ Pastors for Peace will join ROCLA for "The 2014 Cuba Caravan - Celebrating 25 Years of Friendshipments and Cuban Progress." For many years, Pastors for Peace has consistently stood against the U.S. embargo of Cuba and has organized yearly caravans to Cuba to deliver critical supplies. Walker will talk about present conditions in Cuba and the history of the Friendshipment caravan. Her presentation will set the stage for the next big ROCLA project, the Cuba Caravan coming to Rochester on July 10, 2014. (See Page 1, "25th Cuba Friendshipment Caravan Coming Soon!" for details.)

Ms. Walker is an award-win-

ning radio producer, on-air host and journalist, who holds an MA in Media Studies from the New School in New York City. With over 15 years of involvement with IFCO, including as Communications Director in the 1990's, she has staffed more than 15 caravans of humanitarian aid to Cuba and Central America and worked extensively with marginalized communities including the Garifuna in Honduras and Nicaragua.

ROCLA members will also provide attendees with more detailed information about participating in our local Friendshipment event.

Downtown United Presbyterian Church is located at 121 N. Fitzhugh Street and is accessible to the handicapped and looped for the hearing impaired. ■

Keep ROCLA's Website Current!

ROCLA has a lively website (see: <http://rocla.us/>) where webmaster Jim Bearden posts current information about Latin America on an ongoing basis, as well as announcements of programs and other news. If you have information, articles or action opportunities about Latin America that you believe may be of interest to ROCLA members, please email the link or content to Jim at: jeb.bearden@gmail.com.

We thank Mauricio Morales for providing the information and narrative for this article. [Ed. Note.]

Mauricio Morales Recounts Harrowing Salvadoran History and Recent Progress

Mauricio Morales, a former refugee of the 1980s Salvadoran civil war, presented an inside view of El Salvador's recent history at ROCLA's April Program. He had traveled to El Salvador to vote in the recent election. Morales discussed the many changes he has observed in his home country between 1987, when he fled for his life to the U.S., until today, when the ex-rebel leader of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), was just elected and the right-wing ARENA party is finally loosening its hold on the people of El Salvador. A progressive government led by the FMLN triumphed in the elections.

Morales grew up in El Salvador in the 1960's and 1970's. In 1979, a civil war broke out initiating a long period of suffering for many Salvadorans. During the civil war, the Salvadoran Army recruited young people to fight and kill their own people. A lot of young people fled the country. Those who stayed and spoke out against the violence committed by the military were often detained, tortured or disappeared. Poverty and hunger also plagued the country during that time and Morales recalled that his next-door neighbors died of hunger—first the parents, then about one week later their two young sons (about 4 and 6 years old) died. For many kids, trying to go to school was very difficult, if not impossible, because of the lack of food, shoes, clothing and supplies.

In 1987, when Morales fled El Salvador as a teenager after

his parents died, the army had been trying to forcefully recruit him and his brother. After spending four years in Sanctuary on Long Island sheltered by various churches, Mr. Morales was given permission to stay in the U.S. in 1992, and he became a U.S. citizen in 2011.

The war finally ended when the Peace Accords were signed in 1992 between the military and guerrilla fighters who were members of the FMLN. After that, the FMLN was able to organize into a political party, eventually becoming a strong political force, winning the majority in the National Assembly in 2007, and finally the presidency in 2009. This was a very exciting time for many Salvadorans, because they knew that things were about to get much better for the Salvadoran people, especially the working poor.

Since then, El Salvador has established a national health care system and children eat a free lunch at school. All children receive free school uniforms and one pair of shoes per year. El Salvador has also created safe shelters for abused women and women's hospitals so that women no longer have to give birth at home or in churches.

These are only a few examples of the recent changes in El Salvador. Although many many aspects of life are improving, the Salvadoran people still have a difficult road ahead. Powerful corporate interests and their far-right allies continue trying to destroy the gains made by the people. ■

(Venezuela from page 1)

high inflation, and crime. They have taken to the streets and been met with brutal repression from a government that also controls the media.

It doesn't take much digging to take down this narrative. First, while there have been some peaceful opposition marches, the daily protests are anything but peaceful. In fact, about half of the daily death toll from Venezuela that we see in the media – now at 41 – are actually civilians and security forces apparently killed by protesters. A much smaller fraction are protesters alleged to have been killed by security forces. As for the media, state TV in Venezuela has only about 10 percent of the TV audience; the *New York Times* recently had to run a correction for falsely reporting that opposition voices are not regularly heard on Venezuelan TV. They are on TV, even calling for the overthrow of the government – which has been the announced goal of the protest leaders from the beginning. These are not like the protests last year in Brazil, or the student protests from 2011-13 in Chile, which were organized around specific demands.

Of course the increased shortages and rising inflation over the past year have had a political impact on Venezuela, but it is striking that the people who are most hurt by shortages are decidedly not joining the protests. Instead, the protests are joined and led by the upper classes, who are least affected.

In fact, the protests really got going largely as a result of a split within the Venezuelan opposition. Henrique Capriles, who lost to Chávez and then Maduro in the last

two presidential elections, was considered too conciliatory by the more extreme right, led by Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado. They decided that the time was ripe to topple the government through street protests. Both were involved in the 2002 military coup against then President Chávez; María Corina Machado even signed the decree of the coup government that abolished the elected National Assembly (AN), the Constitution, and the Supreme Court.

Don't get me wrong: I am not defending the jailing of López or the Venezuelan AN decision to expel Machado, just as I would not defend the French government's prosecution of far-right politicians for Holocaust denial, or the proposed banning of the fascist Golden Dawn party in Greece. But we should be honest about who these Venezuelan opposition leaders are and what they are trying to do.

The strategy of Venezuela's extreme right is to make the country ungovernable, so as to gain by force what they have been unable to win in 18 elections over the past 15 years. It is clear from the statements of Brazil's former president Lula da Silva and current president Dilma Rousseff that they have no illusions about what is going on in Venezuela. It is now 50 years since Brazil's coup brought in the military dictatorship that put them in prison, but they can remember what a coup looks like. So, too, can the other governments of South America, who have made similar statements. But they have also offered to mediate between the government and any opposition leaders who are willing to participate in a dialogue. This process looks encouraging so far. Let's hope so; that is the only way forward in Venezuela. ■

Paola Macas Betchart speaks on environmental action in Ecuador

By *Grania Marcus*

At this time of widespread discussion of climate change and environmental activism, on May 7, 2014, ROCLA welcomed Paola Macas Betchart as its speaker on "Politics, Environment and the Continuing Challenges for Indigenous Communities." As an environmental anthropologist who was born and raised in Ecuador, Macas Betchart has been researching natural resources management for more than 10 years, focusing on conservation and development issues in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and organizing volunteer community projects and educational workshops in various towns in Ecuador. Recently, this effort became the Ecuadorian Support Network (RAE in Spanish).

Ecuador is a largely mestizo (65%) and indigenous (13%) country, whose history is punctuated by resource booms in rubber, cacao, and after 1970, oil. In 1920, only 20 families owned the productive land. Through slides and video, Macas Betchart reviewed Ecuador's political history and its relationship to resource exploitation in the 19th and 20th centuries, often perpetrated by U.S. and European companies that had little regard for the negative health and environmental impacts on the indigenous peoples.

Indigenous groups, however, began to fight back in the 1930s and the Ecuadorian environmental movement persisted throughout the 20th century, spearheaded by indigenous leaders and environmental groups, and supported by the socialist and



Paola Macas Betchart

communist parties and Catholic priests motivated by liberation theology. By 1998, indigenous Ecuadorians had achieved territorial protections, the right to free and informed prior consultation, self-determination for nationalities, and decentralized and sovereign territories.

These notable achievements culminated in the Constitution of 2008, which was the first constitution in the world that enshrined indigenous rights and the rights of nature in it, passed after President Rafael Correa Delgado was elected. It incorporated Sumak Kawsay (Kichwa for well-being), a model of development that reflects the indigenous cosmivision of using only what is necessary, as opposed to the notion of straightforward "progress." Unfortunately, the government of President Correa has backed off from enforcing these protections and there are new environmental challenges.

Two important cases illustrate the difficulties that indigenous people in Ecuador face in protecting themselves and their environment. In 2007, the Yasuní people sought to keep in the ground the large reserve of oil in the Yasuní National Park located in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Although they originally succeeded in limiting oil exploitation and a Yasuní Biosphere Reserve was created, in 2013 President

Correa liquidated the Trust that funded it and ended the initiative, partly because of U.S. pressure to exploit the oil. The fight goes on. The *Collectivo Yasunidos*, a citizens' movement of environmentalist and indigenous groups, is currently supporting a national referendum to decide whether or not Ecuadorian citizens want the government to extract oil in Yasuní National Park. Although environmentalists originally succeeded in getting the required number of signatures for the referendum, the government has actively promoted oil exploitation as a way to fight poverty in Ecuador, especially in the Amazon.

The second case concerns a years-long effort to hold Texaco, now Chevron, accountable for environmental degradation and human suffering in the Amazon. The groups suing Texaco lost their case in the U.S., but won in Ecuador, thanks in part to the organizing work there of environmentalists and indigenous people. Presently, Chevron is appealing rather than paying the fine.

Macas Betchart described the work of the Ecuadorian Support Network (RAE) that she helped organize and with whom she continues to work. Recognizing that community is a key factor in development, RAE is working in three small communities, including Tisaleo in the Andes of Ecuador, San Luis de Iniminkis in the South Amazon and Llamchama in the Yasuní National Park, focusing on cultural revitalization, education and community organizing. RAE works directly with communities and designs workshops with them. These workshops include: creating art with recycled materials, communications and use of media and technology, building community radios, appreciation of cultural and community heritage, positive treatment of the elderly, participation and appreciation of women's role in the community, and conservation of the environment. RAE seeks to expand its work into 15 communities in Ecuador.

For more information about RAE, and to learn how you can support its work, see: <https://www.facebook.com/redapoyoecuador>, or email Paola Betchart at paola.macas.betchart@gmail.com. ■



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REMINDER! REMINDER!

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