

# Against the Infrastructure of Colonialism

## *A Strategic Latin American Solidarity Model*

Latin America solidarity activists have long been aware of initiatives such as the Plan Puebla Panamá (PPP), an infrastructure expansion megaproject introduced in 2001. These plans have rightly drawn opposition for their severe impacts on local communities — from dislocation to flooding, landslides and disease.

Yet there is another important reason to organize against infrastructure expansion, especially that linked to global trade: these projects are critical to facilitating increased corporate and First World power over the people and lands of Latin America. If we can help shut these projects down, we seriously hamper the ability of this colonialist economic system to maintain its control over our neighbors to the south.

### **Infrastructure Expansion in America**

The word “infrastructure” describes the physical basis of an economy — the transportation, electrical and communications networks required for the extraction and movement of resources. Specific examples of infrastructure include highways, railways, ports, dams, mines, oil and gas pipelines, power plants, power lines and telecommunications cables. Until this groundwork is laid, industrial production is simply impossible.

A great deal of money and political will is going into infrastructure expansion in the Americas. Originally, the PPP included a variety of highways, ports, dams and other projects throughout southern Mexico and Central America. Widespread popular resistance, however, forced the region’s governments to backtrack on their rhetoric. The most controversial projects, including all dams, were officially removed from the plan. But this was a change on paper only, as none of the “removed” projects actually lost their funding or government endorsement. In 2003, Mexican officials were instructed to stop making public statements about the PPP, and the projects continue in relative secrecy.

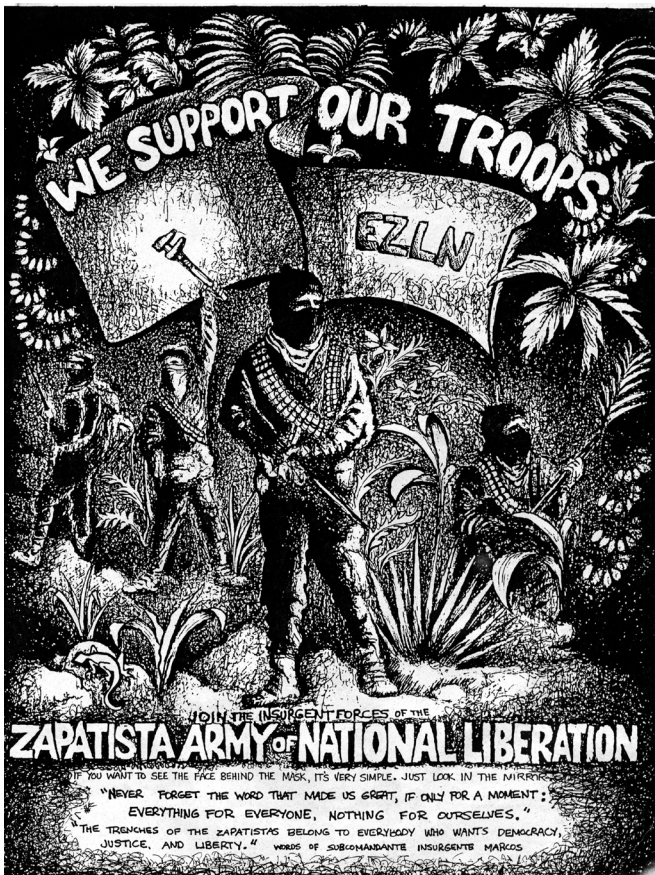
In South America, every country is involved in the South American Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative (IIRSA), nearly identical to the PPP in concept and design. In North America, infrastructure initiatives like Atlantica, Pacifica, the CANAMEX Corridor and the Corridors of the Future Program aim to patch up the gaps in that region’s far more extensive infrastructure network.

Throughout the Americas, similar projects are under way, and not necessarily under the umbrella of a megaproject like the PPP or Corridors of the Future. No matter how individual projects are classified, they are all part of an explicitly stated plan to integrate the Americas into one massive transportation, electrical and communications network. When taken together, these projects are meant to provide the infrastructure necessary for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

### **Infrastructure as Colonialism**

These globalized infrastructure projects are colonialism, plain and simple, designed to guarantee a supply of cheap materials and labor to the wealthy North at the expense of local communities. By no coincidence, they are overwhelmingly slated for territories of indigenous or *campesino* and *campesina* (subsistence farmer) peoples. Even in North America, indigenous and rural communities continue to bear the brunt of infrastructure expansion.

These territories hold two powerful attractions for modern colonialists, just as they always have. First of all, Earth-



based cultures tend to live in highly biodiverse areas, where there are still “resources” to be exploited (intact forests for lumber; intact land above oil or minerals; intact, undammed rivers). The second advantage is just as important: If members of traditional societies can be forced off their land by highways, dams or other such projects, they instantly become a cheap work force.

The PPP is explicit in this second goal, incorporating a massive belt of *maquiladoras* (export-oriented sweatshops) in southern Mexico, in order to “exploit the competitive advantage” offered by the region’s crushing poverty. The IIRSA likewise encourages the creation of industrial and agricultural zones dependent on cheap labor.

Of course, none of the benefits of these projects will flow to local communities. To give just one example, the power generated by PPP-associated dams is to be integrated into a massive Mexican/Central American grid and then sold to the southwestern US.

Some have argued that certain infrastructure projects initiated by leftist governments are less colonialist than projects like the PPP. But ultimately, all major infrastructure is designed with a globalized economy in mind. While some governments may seek to negotiate “better” terms in their trade with wealthy countries, or to funnel more money to local rather than foreign elites, the model remains inherently colonial. We have seen the results of this logic before, as when the original *independistas* — members of the white, colonial ruling class who were tired of paying taxes to Spain — replaced Spanish rule with similarly racist, home-grown governments. The colonialism switched from external to internal and the native people were forced to labor for the benefit of a local elite, rather than a foreign one.



### **Decolonizing America**

A truly fair development model for Latin America would focus on self-sufficiency, not increased dependence on the products and technologies of historically wealthier, more powerful nations.

The need for such a model has become more urgent as it becomes increasingly clear that it is simply impossible for “less developed” countries to ever reach the consumption standard of the First World; there are simply not enough resources left on Earth to support this.

This does not mean that Latin America and other Third World regions are simply “out of luck,” or that they should just accept their subservient status. Instead, it means that such regions have an opportunity to find new models of development. First World economies, in contrast, need to be more thoroughly dismantled and reconstructed on more sustainable models.

That’s where those of us who live in the First World come in: By shutting down infrastructure expansion, we can support Latin American aspirations for sovereignty and justice even as we exploit the weak points in the US economy and hasten its collapse.

### **Demolishing Colonialism at Its Foundations**

The US economy is dependent upon imports that originate in or pass through Latin America; without a constant influx of cheap labor and raw materials, the lights would go out, the factories would shut down and the system would collapse. Likewise, these imports depend upon infrastructure.

The good news is, existing infrastructure is simply insufficient for the massive trade volume anticipated from new free trade agreements, increased resource extraction and ever-increasing consumption — hence the massive push behind projects like the PPP, IIRSA and Corridors of the Future. One of the Corridors of the Future, I-69, has even been referred to as the “NAFTA Superhighway” in recognition of its critical role in moving NAFTA trade from Mexico into the interior US and beyond.

All of this means that if we prevent the expansion of trade infrastructure, we also cut off the US’s access to the resources of Latin America. Deprived of one of its most critical sources of cheap materials and products, the US economy would be forced to contract its reach.

In this way, we can not only show direct solidarity with the communities and ecologies that would be damaged by these projects — we can decrease the US’s ability to dominate other nations. And with decreasing foreign control comes increasing local control — and the ability to build ways of living based on our highest values, rather than the values of power and greed.

# **Root Force**

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## **demolishing colonialism at its foundations**