

THE RIGHT TO DIGNIFIED HOUSING: A CONTINENTAL CONCERN

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The search for solutions to problems such as democracy, the foreign debt, commercial relations or peace, demands global proposals, international forums and multilateral agreements. But this international effort has involved only governments, very rarely have organizations from civil society been included. These groups make demands on their respective governments for participation in national decisions. For a decade now, poor squatters and tenants have sought to join forces in the Continental Front of Communal Organizations. Therefore, the international scene includes this new spokesman, which cannot be ignored if the governments of the American Continent seek authentic solutions to problems as severe as the foreign debt, lack of housing and the imposition of political and economic decisions by strong countries on weak ones. This report is an exploration of the points of view and the internal dynamics of this continental front.

At first, it seemed to be a meeting of the Wretched of the Earth. Poor people who live on the edges of the great cities, who live in areas which lack water, drainage, electricity, people who have suffered evictions by police forces, arbitrary detentions and persecutions, only because some day they had the courage to protest and demand their rights to a dignified shelter. But a closer look showed that these people were proud, cheerful, self-assured.

On April 15, 1990, hundreds of representatives of settlers' organizations from all over Mexico, as well as a similar number of inhabitants of poor colonies in the state of Guanajuato, waited for the arrival of international delegates to the Second Continental Encounter of Communal Organiza-

tions. They were gathered in a huge shed in the city of Dolores Hidalgo, where the priest Miguel Hidalgo began the 1810 War of Independence, and the delegates and other people were impatient for the delay.

Some took the opportunity to eat some beans and tortillas with chile sauce which were provided; others unfolded their huge banners, painted by hand, and hung them on the walls of the big shed. The children watched and played with the pennants and emblems of the Encounter. Youths dressed in red and white uniforms acted as aides to the popular urban movement and attended all those who arrived, offering them food, storing their luggage and making them feel at home.

The longer the wait, curiosity grew among the Mexicans about the foreign delegates due to arrive. What would the representatives from Chile

be like, after living 17 years under Pinochet's dictatorship? Who would come in the name of the North American homeless, those marginalized numbers who proliferate in the streets with their homes contained in super-market trolleys? What about the Cubans, what would they have to say about the U.S. attempts to transmit Radio Martí? And the Salvadorans, whose homes are frequently bombed by military planes?

At last, someone announced on the microphone that the international delegates had arrived. Everyone turned towards the entrance to the shed and the 56 representatives from all over the continent were received with applause, shouts, songs. And finally, those delegates also had the same pride, the same self-assurance of the wretched of the earth who are organized in the popular urban movement.

Journalist.

A Slow Process

Over the last two decades, the organized movement of settlers, tenants, homeless, poor inhabitants of the big cities, have slowly occupied the social and political spaces which workers' organizations have lost as a result of governmental repression and also due to the limitations of their union structures.

The governments of Latin America, as well as that of the United States, are now confronting the pressure exercised by strong colonists' organizations, which are distanced from structural official controls, with greater independence and less vulnerability than the traditional organizations of workers and peasants. These urban organizations which demand basic fundamental rights such as dignified housing, water, health and education services, etc, are organized internationally in the Continental Front of Communal Organizations (FCOC).

The idea of unifying the urban movement on a continental level was first discussed in 1981, when the Bolivian National Confederation of Neighborhood Committees and the Peruvian General Confederation of Settlers, proposed a Latin American meeting of similar organizations. The following year, the idea was considered in an exchange of opinions with the Mexican National Co-ordinator of the Popular Urban Movement.

Due to their particular situation in the marginated urban zones, Mexican women have managed to overcome their domestic isolation and have moved into public arenas in the demand for urban health services, provision of milk and other basic food supplies, expropriation of vacant lots for the construction of housing for the homeless, and at the same time they demand an end to the speculation with urban land and respect from government authorities. In contrast with the workers' movement, where organizations made up of and led by women are rare, Mexico's popular urban movement is characterized by the dominance of women in its membership.

Thus it was the women of the National Co-ordinator of Popular Urban Movement (CONAMUP) who continued working on the idea of a Latin American event for urban settlers, and

who took it to Nicaragua in 1983. Together, Mexican and Nicaraguan women contagiated the Sandinista government with their enthusiasm and this offered support so that Nicaragua be the meeting place. That same year, Mexican and Peruvian delegates held a preparatory meeting in Managua and formed an organizing committee.

If these facts indicate something, it is that the formation of a continental front of urban settlers has been, from the beginning, a slow process, always carried out through consultation with grass-roots members and national representatives, and usually through a system of agreements and accords, rather than through a simple victory of majorities over minorities. This demonstrates the presence of a strong democratic life in the popular urban movement, and its close adherence to the grass-roots members of each organization. For this reason, each Mexican settler who welcomed the foreign delegates, knew that she or he was a member of a truly continental sized front.

The Continental Front

The preparatory meeting was held in Managua in 1984, and was attended by representatives of the Peruvian General Confederation of Settlers, the Bolivian National Confederation of Neighborhood Committees, the San-

dinista Defense Committees, the Federation of Settlers' Associations from Río de Janeiro, Brazil, and the Mexican National Co-ordinator of the Popular Urban Movement. They convoked the First Latin American Encounter of Settlers which was held in February 1987 in Nicaragua, with delegations from Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Uruguay.

These representatives concluded that "the large urban masses of the majority of the Latin American and Caribbean nations suffer unjust and poor quality living conditions, because of oppression and exploitation, and the chaotic and anarchic urban growth propitiated by capitalist urbanization. This situation means that we are more than tens of millions of people who live without a safe and stable shelter, lacking education and medical attention, marginated from the most elementary public services, and the great majority live without any information or democratic participation in the lives of our communities".

The Latin American delegations, accompanied by observers from U. S. tenants and homeless organizations, agree to "create the Continental Front of Communal Organizations, which would have an anti-imperialist and democratic nature, and would represent the interests of colonists who live in the cities of our continent".



Slum dwellers, squatters, tenants and homeless people have formed the Continental Front of Communal Organizations. Photo by Katia Jiménez/Imagen Errante



Housing Yes, Evictions No. Members of Mexico's Popular Urban Movement marching in the rain.
Photo by Heriberto Rodríguez.

Organized Hospitality

Hundred of colonists from organized settlers and squatters groups from Guanajuato helped carry out the Second Continental Encounter. They shared the same general excitement of the official delegates. During the inauguration ceremony, there was no face, no hands or voices that did not express enthusiasm and cheerfulness. The drivers of a local taxi union shouted that together they would never be defeated, the women of various parts of the country declared their presence in the struggle, while the children, just as excited as the adults, shouted FCOC! FCOC!

The atmosphere became calmer during the transportation to León, Guanajuato, where the Encounter's first plenary sessions and workshops were to be held. Outside the big shed in Dolores Hidalgo, a fleet of some 300 vehicles of the Taxi Drivers Union "Emiliano Zapata" waited to drive the delegates and others to León. The taxi drivers related that their union, a member of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), (the organization which was host to the first part of the Encounter), had been victim of various aggressions: "Members of the MIR have been very badly beaten.

We had all the necessary permissions for our taxis, but the owners of other taxi associations, close to the government, protested against us. So they took away our permission to work and we replied with a demonstration. The police attacked us, and several members of our group were arrested, but later the government could not stand our pressuring and freed all those who had been jailed. But now we have to work without the authorization papers and we have to put up with abuses from the police".

For those attending the Encounter, the taxi service was entirely free. The drivers worked their normal shifts, in the morning or the afternoon, and then worked a double shift to attend to any transport need of the delegates.

Women from the township of Morelos, formed after a squatters' invasion organized by the MIR, prepared a thousand breakfasts, lunches and suppers, and gave hospitality in their homes to the delegates. Later, when the second part of the Encounter was held in Durango, the members of the Popular Defense Committee once again organized all the necessary services of food, transport and lodging, as well as the spaces for plenary meetings and smaller workshops, medical services, dances etcetera.

Principles and Experiences

The Second Continental Encounter of Communal Organizations confirmed the basic principles agreed upon in Managua. However, the simple re-affirmation was not easy. On various occasions, the delegates suspended the exchange of experiences and discussed the problem of principles as a priority issue. Sometimes it seemed that a hostile discussion dominated the workshops. Some proposed that the FCOC proclaim itself a socialist front. The Cuban delegates, although they ardently defended socialism, maintained themselves outside the debate and only intervened to demand solidarity. The Argentine delegation was against the use of the expressions socialist and anti-imperialist because - they argued - the abusive use of these terms frightened many people. "It is more important that we be socialist and anti-imperialist in action and not just in words", was the point of view of the

Argentiniens. A woman delegate from the Dominican Republic said that divisions and sectarianism in left-wing socialist parties in her country had weakened the popular urban movement. She gave her opinion that the organization of tenants and settlers had grown in the Dominican Republic in spite of the left, and has declared itself independent of any party and of the government. She also opposed the use of the word socialist in the Declaration of Principles of the FCOC. "If we want to make a general front", a Mexican delegate said, "we must attract all the movements of colonists, even if they don't declare themselves socialist, just democratic".

The Problem of Unity

Guillermo Filoso, President of the National Judicial Department and executive member of the Metropolitan Coordinating Committee of the Chilean Colonists, is no more than thirty years old. He is part of a grass-roots movement that is mostly made up of young people. "For me," he says, "the principal obstacle for unity is that no one wants to accept the participation of political sectors of the center or Social Democrats that are influential with the people. I think that this can cause the loss of important tactical allies at a moment when the most serious problems of the housing question, those of the neighborhood, must be solved. If here in the FCOC we are not capable of forming a proposal of integration, a coherent plan of action with all the countries of Latin America, building a single representation of settlers and tenants, we will not be able to obtain continental integration. We will not be able to persuade the Latin American governments that they must develop policies that solve the main problem of Latin America.

"The Metropolitan Coordinating Committee of Colonists", states the young Chilean leader, "was born in 1983 when the movement was rebuilding itself after a number of years of strong repression, in the midst of the rise of the workers' movement in Chile. Our Coordinating Committee tried to provide a space of national expression for youth, promote greater national participation and also promote participation in the fall of the dictator Pinochet. We have cultural, recreation and neighborhood defense boards. We have used



Delegates to the Second Continental Encounter of Communal Organizations.

different forms of fighting: taking over land to build homes, taking over embassies, demonstrations of 20,000 to 300,000 persons, stopping traffic or putting up barricades in the southern part of Santiago to protect the neighborhoods. At present, our forms of struggle include organized marches, carnivals, interviews with the Housing Ministry. We can now take advantage of mass communication in a much more efficacious way. We believe that the neighborhood movement should have a high level of technical development and that it should be representative and democratic.

"I am taking home a clearer and more precise understanding of what the problems of Latin America are and of the need for a constant exchange of information with the rest of the continent. I am also taking with me the idea of the need to continue with more global proposals for solutions that not only incorporate the rest of the country but all of Latin America."

The Foreign Debt

The Continental Front of Communal Organizations holds that the payment of the foreign debt leads to the self destruction of society, that the foreign debt is unpayable. Roberto Rivera, representative of the Associations for Integral Development of Costa Rica states the following: "We have not begun to pay even the interest. And now there is interest on the interest.

We will never be able to pay the debt. So, the only possible proposal is that of no payment."

Guillermo Filoso from Chile says the following: "We say that the foreign debt should not be paid with the sacrifice of the people of Latin America. It should not be paid by the people but by those who contracted the debt. I think it is important to establish agreements and pacts in Latin America that permit it to confront the problem of the debt as a continent and force a new international economic order on the United States and European empires. Such an order would be founded on the solidarity among peoples and on the equality of

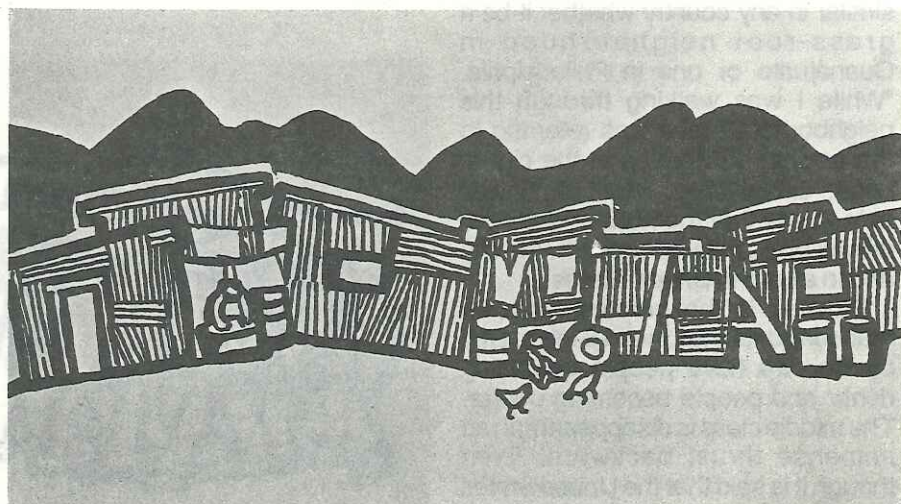
conditions in the buying and selling of products between north and south.

The Lack of Housing

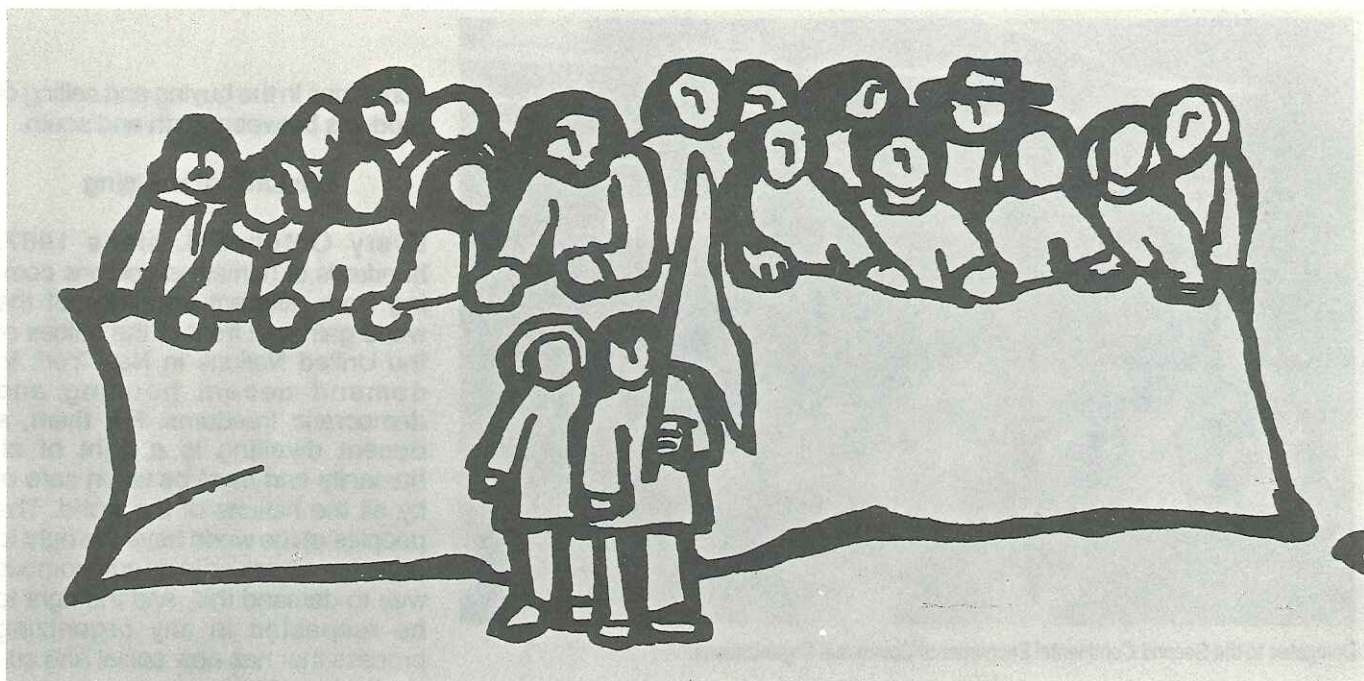
Every October 6, since 1987, hundreds of homeless persons coming from different countries of the world gather in front of the offices of the United Nations in New York to demand decent housing and democratic freedoms. For them, a decent dwelling is a right of all humanity and must be taken care of by all the nations of the world. The peoples of the world have the right to organize ourselves in an autonomous way to demand this, and the right to be respected in any organizing process that has new social and cultural expressions.

In the demonstrations of the homeless, the United States government has been asked to use funds from its military budget to provide housing and permanent social services. This group has also asked that billions of dollars spent by the Third World on the payment of the foreign debt be used for social programs and housing programs that would benefit millions of poor in the world.

Very high military budgets and cut-back budget policies used by Latin American governments all hurt the persons who lack access to social services and housing. Perhaps this is the reason for the enormous growth in number and strength of urban grass-root organizations. Such organizations exist within the heart of



Artwork by Rini Templeton. Reproduction by Rosa María Torres.



Artwork by Rini Templeton. Reproduction by Rosa María Torres.

development, inside the most powerful economies of the world, amidst luxury and urban richness.

Priscilla Curett, delegate of tenant organizations in Philadelphia in the United States, talks about the experience of the urban grass-roots movement in her country: "It's said that the United States is an exemplary model of democracy, but we have no active participation in making the important decisions of the country. As long as the government does not recognize the participation of the grass-roots people, then it cannot speak about democracy."

Delegates such as Priscilla Curett talked about conditions of life, of housing and of needs which are similar in any country whether it be a grass-root neighborhood in Guanajuato or one in Philadelphia. "While I was walking through this neighborhood" (she was referring to the section of Morelos in the city of León, Guanajuato, Mexico), "I was able to see that the houses and conditions are similar to those in my city and in all of the United States.

"Poverty is the greatest problem that confronts the United States. Day by day we have people becoming richer and people becoming poorer. The middle class is disappearing in an immense thrust backward. Even though it is said that the United States is a developed country we can see that more than 20% of the population

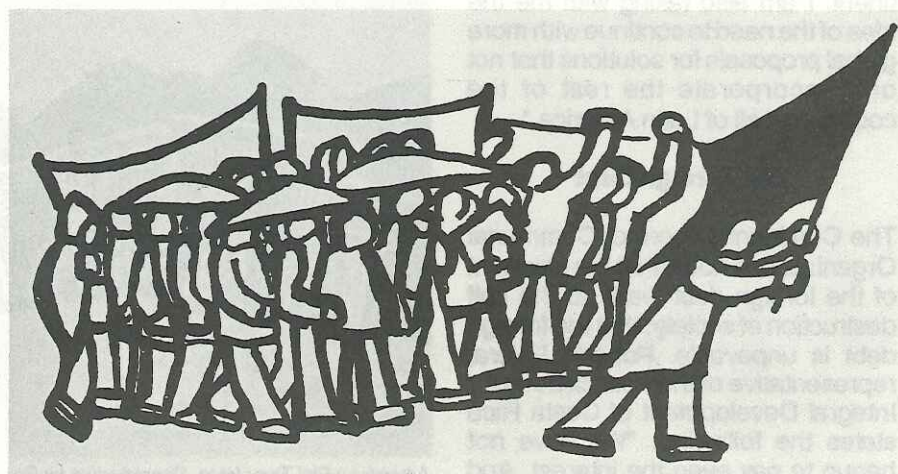
is unemployed and that the infant mortality rate is as high as in any country of Latin America. With respect to the lack of housing it has been projected that at the end of this decade there will be more than 17 million people in the United States without a home."

Future Tasks

The Third Continental Encounter of Communal Organizations will be held in the Dominican Republic in 1992. By that time the Front will have demonstrated again in New York and will have organized solidarity campaigns with Latin America, especially with Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador,

Grenada and Puerto Rico. It will also have launched battles for the defense of ecology, sovereignty and democracy, and established relations with worker and peasant movements of the continent. It will have recognized that the participation of women is a *sine qua non* condition of the urban grass-roots movement.

At that time, it will be the Dominicans who wait for the arrival of the international delegates with the same passion and happiness that the Mexicans had on the arrival of the representatives this year. In the end, for the members of the FCOC, the lack of a home and the struggle for it is a condition that erases any border - it is a situation the size of a continent. ■



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