

Mexico City – Environmental Crisis, Socialist Solutions

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Which of these has the highest population - Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia or Mexico City? You guessed it, Mexico City, with a population about 22 million and growing daily. Almost certainly the world's largest city, it is also a gigantic ecological disaster area. And a laboratory-pure example of how only socialist solutions can deal with the environmental nightmare.

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Mexico DF (Distrito Federal) suffers from the following key problems, although this is far from a comprehensive summary.

- Because of rural poverty, the DF is growing exponentially. Thousands move there every day. This is one case where we can justly speak of 'overpopulation'. How this causes environmental damage is dealt with below.
- Although at an altitude of 7000 feet, the City is on a giant plateau surrounded by mountains - topologically this is like a bowl. The pollution from traffic and factories is captured in the bowl by 'thermal inversion' and cannot escape.
- The water table is sinking, the aquifers beneath the city are being emptied, and a huge water crisis is looming. Further, the drainage system is antiquated and collapsing, leading to flooding and drains overflowing in the rainy season. For a few months every year the water system is polluted by sewage.

Overpopulated megacity

Why do these armies of campesinos abandon the land and come to the cities? Neoliberalism, especially the land (counter) reform by the Salinas government in the late 1980s and the signing of the NAFTA free trade agreement in 1994, have opened up Mexican agriculture to US-dominated agribusiness as never before. Whether the agribusiness companies actually own the land is largely irrelevant. Even progressive peasant co-operatives are dictated to by world market prices. This results in the ruination of the peasantry, and mass unemployment (or only very partial employment) among agricultural labourers.

None of the poor expect a life of luxury in the DF. But being a street peddler, joining the 800,000 or

so 'ambulantes' (street traders), participating in urban crime or even being a beggar offers a route out of starvation. You might get two meals a day and your kids might go to school. If you're extremely lucky you might get a factory job and earn the fantastic sum of US\$70 a week. In any case, it won't be worse than the rural choice of unemployment or backbreaking endless work for almost nothing.

How does the vast influx of the rural poor damage the environment? Most people arriving in the city build their own primitive houses on the hills, either in existing barrios, or in new areas, which quickly attract more migrants and become new barrios in their own right. New barrios have no water, drainage, electricity or other services. Human waste collects in makeshift pools and ditches which outside the rainy season is baked into a soft dust which is then blown by the wind over the whole city.

An inspection by the DF city government found that nearly all the food on outdoor food stalls contained traces of human faeces. More than 80% of Mexicans eat at an outdoor food stall at least once a day; part of the reason for that is that the poor often have no cooking facilities in their homes. The rich would never dream of eating at a food stall, the poor literally eat shit.

As the space around the city becomes ever more tightly crowded, the newcomers have more and more encroached on the ecological protection zones. Some of these zones are close to the aquifers: result - another mechanism for sewage to get into the water supply.

The PRD city government in the late 1990s adopted a 'get tough' attitude to these new encampments - utilising impeccable environmental arguments. They sent the riot police (grenaderos) to forcibly remove them. This resulted in early morning raids, savage beatings, the police destroying the flimsy shacks and stealing any money or valuable possessions that the newcomers had. Human misery heaped on human misery, as any solution within the present system resulted in a bad choice.

Sinking city

Because of the emptying of the aquifers the whole city is sinking. This is taking place at alarming rates. Subsidence is a threat to buildings in many parts of the city (a human made addition to the threat posed by earthquakes and the nearby volcano, Popocatepetl). According to the Mexico Valley Water Authority the net subsidence has been an incredible 7.5 metres since 1900. Several lakes have been formed in areas where the ground has dipped due to water pumping, and these lakes are widening.

Estimates of the amount of water left in the two main subterranean aquifers differ; most agree the total amount is around 200 times the annual water needs of the city. But it would be foolish to imagine that the water can last 200 years. Such calculations leave out the rate of increase of water usage as more people arrive; it also leaves out of account whether the subsidence will make whole areas of the city uninhabitable if the inflow of people is not stemmed.

Without question Mexico City is overcrowded. It should be a conscious part of any socialist policy to stop the inflow of people - how, we come to later. This is not saying that its population growth in and of itself which causes poverty; it is merely saying for one fifth of the population of a vast country to attempt to live in the same city is totally irrational and causes environmental breakdown.

One aspect of it, which we won't dwell on too long, is the Gran Canal del Desague (grand drainage canal) which snakes out past the huge barrio of Indios Verde in the north of the city. Vast amounts of the city's sewage go out through this canal. At various points on the edge of the city and outside,

municipal and water authority workers try to clear the water of large objects - but they always call the police for human body parts. Then the so-called 'black water' heads on out of the city, much of it to be eventually used for agricultural irrigation. That's one of the reasons why the wonderful fruit and vegetables available in the street markets have to be soaked in disinfected water before they can be eaten. Such a vast city consumes too much water and produces too much sewage. And we haven't even talked about pollution yet.

Smog in the bowl ; 'hoy no circular'!

Natural conditions have produced the phenomenon of thermal inversion, in which cold air from the mountains sits as a layer on top of the warm air below, reversing the normal mechanism where warm air rises to the top. The result is that the city's notorious pollution is unable to escape; warm sunshine often produces a petrochemical smog.

While this phenomenon is frequently blamed on the traffic, its main cause is the unregulated factories on the edge of the city. To even begin to address this question, it means taking harsh measures to reduce or eliminate these emissions. The PRD government of the city has never had the bottle to take on the employers on this issue. Regulating traffic, or appealing to, is easier.

One of the PRD-introduced schemes was 'hoy no circular'. All vehicles are not allowed onto the roads for one day a week, according to the colour of their number plates. This has almost nil effect, because a) All rich families have several cars - one or two for the parents and a couple for the kids (who stay at home till 30 and beyond). So they just rotate their cars. This is especially important when you realise that what appears to be a traffic-infested city is one where only the 500,000 richest people have cars. b) Those people who just defy this week's 'no circular' day can generally afford to bribe the cops if they get caught c) The ban doesn't affect the hundreds of antiquated buses and lorries belching out black smoke from leaded petrol.

In short there is nothing effective being done to reduce the level of pollution. It's only on weekends when the number of cars out dips drastically and factories aren't working when the level of pollution notably falls.

Solutions

OK, Mexico City is a pretty polluted place, but what's the big deal? For people who view the situation with equanimity I suggest a simple test: visit the outpatient department of a major public hospital and see the pitiful sight of dozens of poor young children with cancer, deformities and other diseases caused by poverty and the degradation of the environment. Mexico City demonstrates again that environmental destruction has a class bias. The rich areas of Las Lomas and La Bosque are much more pollution free, and anyway the rich can always escape to their luxurious (and heavily guarded) weekend houses in the countryside and by the sea.

The central cause of Mexico City's crisis is rural poverty. Without justice for the campesinos, without making it possible to live and work in the countryside with a minimum degree of human dignity and with basic needs met, the flow into the city will continue. This is a task of revolutionary proportions. It would mean national state support for peasant collectives - support in terms of a minimum price for their products, irrespective of the dictates of the world market. That is impossible within the framework of the North America Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and banned by the WTO. To attempt to do this would mean a major political confrontation with the United States, let alone the Mexican

ruling class.

To stem the human tide of misery towards the DF, means making it just liveable to stay in the countryside, but positively a more attractive a proposition than the upheaval of moving.

It is not just a question of those who will move to the city in the future; it is a question of too many people living there now. There is no rational solution to this other than creating positive incentives for people to move out. Naturally this does not exclude the fight for decent conditions and decent housing within the city now. Saying the city is overpopulated is not a piece of underhand Malthusianism; it is just recording the fact that a certain area of territory can only support, at our present level of technology, a limited number of human beings.

The megacity problem is not at all unique to Mexico City. Karachi, Jakarta, Sao Paulo and a host of other cities, mainly in the third world, suffer the same problems. Talking about reducing the population of megacities could cause images of the Khmer Rouge emptying Phnom Penh at bayonet point to appear in the minds of some people. Isn't this kind of 'social engineering' dangerous, even a return to Stalinism? Not at all. Naturally it should be entirely on a voluntary basis, and could only happen if conditions outside the megacities were as good as, or better than, those inside them.

But socialist answers to environmental questions must involve, in dozens of countries, *an attempt to reorder the skewed relationship between the cities and the countryside*, and the fantastic overcentralisation of many states. In Mexico nothing of much importance from a cultural or business point of view happens outside the DF. That's an irrationality which is repeated all over the world.

If the DF suffers from some acute natural disadvantages in regard to air pollution, this can only mean draconian, dictatorial measures against its perpetrators. Since the main ones are part of the Mexican bourgeoisie, this is almost impossible outside of dramatic transformation of the relationship of social relations - topped off at the level of state power.

Over time the DF may become uninhabitable anyway, if the sinking of the Mexico Valley continues. That kind of thing has happened before in human history, and it can happen again, whatever the social system. To make it habitable for the foreseeable future means making the whole of Mexico more habitable. That means defeating the the narco-saturated bourgeoisie and their sponsors to the north. Environmental crisis means socialist solutions. Let me put it this way: what other solutions could there possibly be?

** To read in detail about the political background and social crisis in Mexico, see "Mexico's Hope" by James D. Cockcroft, Monthly Review Press. This is the best recent book on the topic.*

P.S.

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