
The clash of two worlds in the Peruvian Amazon

The Peruvian government chose the symbolic date of World Environment Day to launch a bloody attack on the peoples of the Amazon. The reason for this repression? The steadfast opposition of Amazonian communities to the invasion of their territory by socially and environmentally destructive industries such as mining, oil drilling, and monoculture plantations of trees and agrofuel crops.

On 9 April local communities throughout the Peruvian Amazon had begun what they called an “indefinite strike” to protest the failure of the Peruvian Congress to review a series of legislative decrees that endanger the rights of indigenous peoples. These decrees were issued by the executive branch in the framework of the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement signed with the United States.

By unleashing this massacre on World Environment Day, the Alan García government clearly showed the world how little concern it has for environmental protection and how highly it values the large corporations that hope to exploit – and simultaneously destroy – the country’s natural resources. Even worse, it publicly declared its contempt for the lives of the indigenous peoples struggling to defend what little has been left to them by the advance of a “development” model that has more than proven to be socially and environmentally destructive.

As a result of this bloody repression and the public attention it attracted worldwide, the Peruvian Amazon became a symbol of the clash between two different conceptions of the present and future of humanity, played out on the international stage.

On one side of this conflict there is the world of economic interest, which signifies social and environmental destruction, imposition by force, violation of rights. Obviously, this world is not represented by the Peruvian president, who is merely a temporary and disposable assistant to the corporations – a fact now evidenced by the fate of the once all-powerful president Fujimori. Nevertheless, the role played by these assistants is very important, since they are the ones who lend the necessary trappings of “legality” to actions that clearly violate the most basic human rights.

On the other side there is the world of those who aspire to a future of solidarity and respect for nature. In this case, they were symbolized by the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, but they can also be found in similar struggles around the world, confronting other governments who are also at the service of the economic interests of big corporations. To mention just a few examples, we could point to the current struggle in Southeast Asian countries to defend the Mekong River – which provides sustenance for millions of people – from destruction by giant hydroelectric dams; the struggle of the peoples of Africa against oil drilling and logging; the struggle of the tribal peoples of India to protect their forests from mining; and far too many others.

In this confrontation, the hypocrisy of those striving to impose the destructive model is seemingly unbounded. In the case of Peru, President Alan García, the same man who now wants to open up the Amazon to extractive industries, declared just over a year ago that he wanted “to prevent this basic wealth that God has given us from being degraded by the works of man, by the incompetence

of those who work the land or exploit it economically, and that is why we created this Ministry of the Environment.”

This kind of government hypocrisy is blatantly evident all around the world, especially with regard to climate change. During an endless international process that began in 1992, the governments of the world agreed that climate change is the worst threat facing humankind. They also agreed that the two main causes of climate change are greenhouse gas emissions created by the use of fossil fuels and deforestation. Finally, they agreed that something must be done about it. And after signing the corresponding agreements and flying back to their countries, they have done everything in their power to promote oil drilling and/or deforestation.

Without needing to create ministries of the environment or participate in international processes to combat climate change, peoples around the world are taking action to defend the environment and climate from the threats looming over them. In almost all cases, their actions are criminalized or repressed – in both the South and the North – by those who should be encouraging and supporting them: their governments.

In the now symbolic case of Peru, the peoples of the Amazon – with the support of thousands of citizens around the world – have won an important battle in this clash between two worlds. Obviously, no one believes that this is the end of the struggle. But it is a victory that provides hope for many other peoples fighting for similar goals, and ultimately for the whole world, because the final outcome of this confrontation between two worlds will determine the fate of all of humanity.