

Latin America won't abide treatment U.S. autoworkers accept
by Phillip Bannowsky

If DaimlerChrysler's projected closing of the Newark Assembly plant makes this Chrysler retiree doubt the promises of capitalism, I am not alone. Half of Latin America has opted out.

Since capitalism toppled the barons and bishops of old Europe, it promised both abundance and freedom through liberal democracy. New Deal capitalism proposed to seal the bond between free enterprise and broad-based abundance with such instruments as government intervention and the right to join a union.

Indeed, an affluent middle class blossomed in post war America, this time including workers, who were guaranteed a place at the table of abundance by industrial expansion and a union membership that hung near thirty percent until the late seventies.

This New Deal promise was extended to Latin America through FDR's Good Neighbors Policy and JFK's Alliance for Progress. By the 1980's, unfortunately for workers in both the U.S. and Latin America, liberal capitalism had morphed into "neo-liberalism," a renewal of nineteenth century predatory capitalism, and the deal was off. The International Monetary Fund imposed "structural adjustment" programs on Latin American debtor nations and mandated open markets, reduced social spending, privatization of public enterprises, and crippling debt repayments.

As a result, according to Mark Weisbrot in *The International Journal of Health Services*, Latin American growth in per capita income plummeted from 83 percent during the 1960 to 1980 period down to 4 percent in the last half-decade. Multitudes of hungry and jobless Latin Americans have abandoned the countryside for ramshackle city *favelas* or trekked north to work the chicken farms and big box retailers in the U.S.A.

After decades of foot-dragging in developing a fuel-efficient product, DaimlerChrysler will permanently furlough thirteen thousand workers and sell made-in-China Chery Motors subcompacts in the U.S. under a Dodge brand.

Meanwhile, Latin America has challenged neo-liberalism with a peaceful but earthshaking revolution. In Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, where I taught for three years, democratically-elected governments are breaking free in various degrees from neo-liberalism and building what they call "socialism in the twenty-first century." Leftists nearly won elections recently in Peru, Mexico, and Costa Rica. and popular resistance to neo-liberalism south of the border is ubiquitous.

Back in the U.S., the word neo-liberalism is scarcely acknowledged and the mention of socialism elicits a spit-take. The Employee Free Choice Act, passed in the House and just introduced in the Senate, would make it easier for workers to start unions without company intimidation, but the President has promised to veto it. The call for universal, not-for-profit health care has been hijacked by mandates in Massachusetts and California that force everyone to buy health insurance from private—read capitalist—insurers. That the war in Iraq is an imperialist adventure on behalf of oil barons and the military-industrial complex is a sermon heard only among the choirs of lefty blogs.

When workers do get angry over this attack on their middle-class American Dream, they get harangued by Fox News, Lou Dobbs, Pat Robertson, and other capitalist shills who insist their real enemies are homosexuals, immigrants, Jesse Jackson, or—

especially—“liberals,” meaning capitalists who would still link free enterprise to widespread abundance and human rights.

So, can we Americans renew our New Deal, the promise that capitalism can still benefit its workers? Can we mix this economy a little, regulate it, humanize it, trim the feathers of capitalist vultures like Exxon-Mobil and Halliburton, so to speak? Or do we succumb to its darker genius, to a heartless, frightened egoism that scuttles human rights and the American Dream?

The United Automobile Workers hymn “Solidarity Forever,” adopted when the union was organized by socialists, could well describe both Newark Assembly workers today and those of Latin America under neo-liberal capitalism:

It is we who plowed the prairies; built the cities where they trade;
Dug the mines and built the workshops; endless miles of railroad laid.
Now we stand outcast and starving, midst the wonders we have made;
But the Union makes us strong.

After decades of struggle, frustration, violent repression, self-education, and organization, the peoples of Latin America are showing what can be done, much to the surprise and dismay of the current administration in Washington. Surely we the American people, with our superior resources, our belief in fair play, our ability to work hard, and our love of freedom, can do as well.