

No deal in Argentina

Americas summit ends in debacle for Bush

By Bill Van Auken
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President Bush left Argentina Saturday after failing to achieve an agreement on reopening talks on forming a hemisphere-wide Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The Fourth Summit of the Americas turned into a debacle for the US administration, with rioting in the streets of Mar del Plata, mass repudiation of Bush by the Argentine people and open defiance of US policies on the part of South America's principal economic powers.

"I am a bit surprised," Bush told Argentine President Néstor Kirchner as he departed the country, the Argentine daily *Página 12* reported. "Something happened here that I hadn't foreseen."

Perhaps the US president was not adequately briefed by his handlers or the White House as a whole had deluded itself into thinking that a bit of arm-twisting and diplomatic pressure could overcome the profound tensions that have built up over the past five years between Washington and Latin America.

Bilateral meetings, sessions with Central American heads of state who have signed a free-trade pact with Washington and interventions on Washington's behalf by Mexico's President Vicente Fox, all proved to be of no avail.

US officials indicated that they were taken aback by Kirchner's speech, which denounced the role of the International Monetary Fund and US-backed policies in provoking the catastrophic economic collapse of December 2001 from which millions of Argentines have yet to recover.

"Kirchner's speech was very disappointing," a US diplomat told the Argentine daily *Clarín*. "He kept talking to his people. The truth is his harshness surprised me."

The "harshness" of the Argentine president, however, was a pale reflection of the mass hatred exhibited by the Argentine people towards Bush, whose presence in the country provoked not only the demonstrations and rioting in Mar del Plata, but strikes by teachers and public employees throughout the country.

Bush stayed several hours longer than planned Saturday in a vain attempt to broker a consensus on the trade pact that has represented the principal US goal in the region for the

past decade. In the end, however, the summit came to a near breakdown over differences on trade. Faced with the threat that the meeting would be unable to issue any joint statement, diplomats ended up crafting a document that put forward two mutually opposed positions.

The first part consisted of four paragraphs introduced by the government of Panama, acting as a spokesman for Washington's aims, calling for the resumption of free trade talks. This, however, is followed by a second section inserted at the demand of the four full members of Mercosur—Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay—and Venezuela, that declares, "The conditions do not exist to attain a hemispheric free trade accord that is balanced and fair with access to markets that is free of subsidies and distorting practices."

The rest of the statement consisted of empty promises on the summit's theme of "creating work to confront poverty and strengthen democratic governability."

The self-contradictory document was issued after most of the region's 34 heads of state had left Mar del Plata, precluding the reading of a joint declaration that is the standard protocol at such gatherings.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who voiced the most intransigent opposition to the trade pact and participated in a mass anti-Bush rally held during the summit, gloated over the US administration's defeat. "The great loser today was George W. Bush," Chavez told the press after Bush's departure. "The man went away wounded. You could see defeat on his face."

A measure of this defeat was the attempt by top US aides to put a good face on the debacle in Argentina. Among them was Bush's National Security Advisor Steven Hadley who said there had been "real progress." He added, "We went from a summit which was supposed to bury FTAA to a summit in which all 34 countries actually talk in terms of enhanced trade...recognizing there are challenges."

The phrase about burying FTAA was introduced by Chavez, who told supporters that he had brought a shovel. For the top US security official to present the Venezuelan

populist president as the one setting the agenda for the Americas summit is an indication of the isolation that Washington felt at the gathering.

From Mar del Plata, Bush flew to Brazil, where the presence of the US president provoked protests throughout that country as well. Thousands marched down Avenida Paulista in the commercial capital of Sao Paulo Saturday, confronting military police who unleashed barrages of tear gas and rubber bullets after protesters pelted the Bank of Boston building with rocks and eggs.

Protest also erupted outside the US Embassy in Brasilia—which warned US citizens in the country to avoid coming to because of hostile demonstrations—and in Rio de Janeiro. In the northern city of Recife protesters covered the side of the US Consulate in red paint.

When Bush's convoy reached the home of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva outside Brasilia Saturday, the line of armored-plated limousines was forced to speed past the front entrance, where hundreds of demonstrators had gathered, and go through a side gate. The protest was then broken up by military police.

As in Mar del Plata, security for the US president was intense, provoking further animosity from the Brazilian people. In addition to the small army of secret service and FBI agents as well as US military personnel accompanying Bush, the Brazilian government deployed 1,800 troops and police to protect him. Cellular telephone communications were jammed in a three-mile radius surrounding the US president, and surrounding Brazilian airspace was closed.

In deference to Bush's deepening political crisis, the Brazilian president organized a press conference in which the two heads of state delivered statements, but accepted no questions from reporters. In Argentina, Bush was confronted by a White House press corps pressing him about his collapse in the opinion polls and on whether his chief aide Karl Rove would be forced to resign over his role in the CIA leak case.

Standing beside the Brazilian president, Bush made it clear that his 24-hour visit had done nothing to shift the Brazilian government's position on the US trade agenda in Latin America. "He has got to be convinced, just like the people of America must be convinced, that a trade arrangement in our hemisphere is good for jobs, it's good for the quality of life," he said of "Lula."

Da Silva is facing an intense political crisis over a roiling corruption scandal that is inseparably linked to his Workers Party government's pro-capitalist policies. He denied that there had been any "deterioration of relations between Brazil and the US...On the contrary, our relations today are going through one of their best moments ever."

In Brasilia, Bush delivered a right-wing speech to a select

group of business executives, politicians and "youth leaders" in which he again promoted the idea of free market capitalism based upon "faith in the transformative power of freedom in individual lives."

In an obvious attack on the rising opposition to US imperialism in the region, Bush derided what he termed an opposing "vision" that "seeks to roll back the democratic progress of the past two decades by playing to fear, pitting neighbor against neighbor and blaming others for their own failure to provide for their people."

The so-called "democratic progress of the past two decades" came in the wake of a decade of brutal military dictatorships brought to power with the direct aid of the CIA, one of whose directors during that period was the president's father, George H.W. Bush.

The fall of these dictatorships was followed by the Latin American debt crisis and a period of US-backed free market reforms known as the "Washington Consensus." This program involved wholesale privatizations, sharp cuts in social programs and sweeping deregulation of financial markets.

These policies, dictated to indebted governments by the International Monetary Fund and the major international banks, yielded massive profits for foreign investors, while resulting in a sharp growth in poverty and unemployment, stagnating production and an unprecedented increase in social polarization for Latin America. Today, the richest one-tenth of the continent's population earns 48 percent of total income, while the poorest tenth earns only 1.6 percent.

For Bush to accuse Latin Americans of "blaming others for their own failure" in the context of this history—and the century of US imperialist exploitation of the continent that preceded it—is a measure of the arrogance that continues to dominate Washington's relations with the lands south of the US border.

But the charge of "playing to fear," coming from a US president who has for the past four years sought to terrorize the people of the United States and the world into accepting his policies by invoking the specter of terrorism, plumbs the depths of hypocrisy.

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