

Alliance for Global Justice Expands Mission

By Chuck Kaufman

In 1998, the Nicaragua Network created a new organization, the Alliance for Global Justice, as a non-profit umbrella to help grow the progressive movement in the United States.

As many will remember, in 1995 we had formed the Campaign for Labor Rights to fight global sweatshop abuses. A couple of years later, when the big environmental and development groups were ready to close down the 50 Years Is Enough Campaign to change World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies, we took financial and organizational responsibility for it and converted it into a grassroots organizing campaign.

Some funders and donors were confused as to why two global campaigns were under the single country solidarity organization, the Nicaragua Network. So, we created the Alliance for Global Justice (AfGJ), dissolved our own tax-exempt status, and placed Nicanet under AfGJ. A number of other groups such as Mexico Solidarity Network were forming at the time or looking to grow by sharing resources. We launched the AfGJ with seven projects which operated autonomous programs and fundraising and shared resources, infrastructure and analysis.

By 2003 most of the projects had reached self-sufficiency and incorporated independently with their own tax exempt status.

Currently there are four campaigns under the AfGJ: Nicanet, Campaign for Labor Rights, Venezuela Solidarity Campaign, and Respect for Democracy Campaign. The last is a campaign to promote participatory democracy and to oppose US democracy manipulation programs such as the mis-named National Endowment for Democracy. The AfGJ also acts as fiscal sponsor for about two dozen local, national, and international progressive groups enabling them to offer tax deductible contributions through the AfGJ's tax exempt status and to enjoy other benefits such as our payroll service and group health insurance.



Chuck Kaufman (center), with Donna Leist (right), AfGJ board chair and Hannah Frisch, AfGJ supporter

In its March 2009 meeting, the AfGJ board (which is composed of the same people who serve as the Nicaragua Network Executive Committee) decided to raise the profile of the Alliance for Global Justice, expand our mission, and transition into doing most of our work as the Alliance for Global Justice rather than in the names of the several campaigns.

The exception to this will be the 30 year old Nicaragua Network, which will join AfGJ campaigns on labor rights, trade, democracy, and environmental issues, but will also continue the Nicaragua specific programs such as the Hotline, News Service, Monitor, brigades and delegations, and speaking tours that have made it the dominant source of reliable, balanced information about Nicaragua and US solidarity.

Part of the motivation for combining the work of Campaign for Labor Rights, Venezuela Solidarity Campaign, and Respect for Democracy Campaign, as well as future campaigns that become necessary to build that better world we all know is possible, is the financial pressure that all progressive non-profits have been under since 2007 when the presidential primaries began and which are now exacerbated by the worst crisis in capitalism since the Great Depression.

But, the other motivation for the change in organizing strategy is the amazing and positive changes that are sweeping Latin America. We have understood, since the 1990 electoral defeat of the revolutionary Sandinista government, that virtually all issues are intertwined and have causes and effects that expand well beyond any country's borders. There is so much overlap between labor rights, trade issues, sovereignty and self-determination, sustainable development and respect for the environment, that it only makes sense to reflect those commonalities in our work.

The change allows us to expand our mission to include education and mobilization on cross-border issues such as participatory democracy, Latin America integration, and ALBA-style cooperative trade. It continues to be in the vital interest of the Latin America solidarity movement, for instance, to demand that the US government respect the sovereignty and right to self-determination of the Venezuelan people. It continues to be a priority to educate the people and policy makers of the United States. And it continues to be important to support the Bolivarian Revolution and work to apply the positive examples from there in our own country.

But Venezuela no longer stands alone on these issues which it pioneered and still leads by example. An organization that focuses only on Venezuela (or Nicaragua) is ignoring Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Honduras, Cuba, and other countries where positive change is sweeping the hemisphere.



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Adding Campaign for Labor Rights (CLR) into the mix allows us to address the critical support of workers for economic and social justice across the hemisphere (and beyond) both in countries that are improving worker rights and those, like Colombia, where labor organizing and demands for worker rights is a life-threatening activity.

CLR's work focuses on US transnational corporations' responsibility for worker exploitation in other countries, how so-called "free trade" agreements contribute to that exploitation and also put pressure on workers to emigrate, and directs solidarity support for front-line unions that don't receive support from

the big US labor federations. These foci improve our ability to educate and mobilize people in the US on big picture, root cause issues.

The Respect for Democracy Campaign also enables us to not only challenge the US government's attempts to manipulate elections in Nicaragua and Venezuela, but also Bolivia, Haiti, Mexico, and every country where the US attacks democracy under the guise of building it. It also enables us to build the beginning of a Democracy Movement in the United States by learning and educating US activists about the advances in participatory democracy in Latin America.

The Vision and Mission statements adopted by the Alliance for Global Justice's at its founding in 1998 continue to be as important today as they were eleven years ago:

"We envision societies which explore and implement alternatives to the unjust domination of governments, global financial institutions and multinational corporations which denigrate the world's peoples and devastate ecosystems. We envision the development of a unified domestic and international movement of transformational grassroots organizations that promote a socially, ecologically and economically just world.

"It is the mission of the Alliance for Global Justice to achieve social change and economic justice by helping to build a stronger more unified grassroots movement. We recognize that the concentration of wealth and power is the root cause of oppression requiring us to work together across ideologies, issues and communities. The Alliance nurtures organizations seeking fundamental change in international and national conditions that disempower people, create disparities in access to wealth and power, poison the earth, and plunder its resources.

"We support locally-based grassroots organizing by sharing political analysis, mobilizing for direct action, monitoring the centers of corporate and government power, expanding channels of communication, and sharing skills and infrastructure. Our commitment to solidarity and to non-hierarchical democratic process enables us to respectfully listen and respond to each other within the movement."

Venezuela stands out as the hemispheric pioneer and leader in the effort to build a multi-polar world through greater political and economic integration in Latin America and to base trade on cooperation through ALBA-type agreements rather than competition as the US-backed free trade agreements do. So a continued focus on US relations with Venezuela will be a natural priority. There is major momentum to improve US-Cuba relations right now. If US elites can improve relations with Cuba, then surely it is stupid for them to retain a hostile posture toward Venezuela.

We need to work hard right now to pressure the US government to normalize relations with Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia and to end the occupation of Haiti, especially during this period when there are opportunities for the US to begin acting as a responsible neighbor and better world citizen.

Those changes are not going to happen without our continued, active pressure. They aren't going to be the changes we want if we sit back while groups like the Chamber of Commerce define what those changes will be. We are balanced on the knife edge of epochal change. It is our responsibility to make sure that we jump to the Left, not to the Right!

The priority of the Alliance for Global Justice campaigns will always be focused on changing US government and corporate behavior and educating and mobilizing US residents to force positive change. We will follow the solidarity model, which to us means that we take our cues from the people and groups in the Global South who best articulate and represent the aspirations of the great majority of people who have been excluded and marginalized by corporate globalization and neo-liberal "democracy." Our job is to amplify their voices, not to tell them what their message should be.

For instance, workers in Venezuela are engaged in a vigorous debate about their role in the Bolivarian process. That is not a discussion we will be joining, although we follow it with great interest. Our view of solidarity is that questions about the role of labor in Venezuela are issues for Venezuelan workers to resolve without outside interference. Our role is to keep the US from intervening. The same can be said for the debates within Sandinismo in Nicaragua.

In that context the following are our major objectives:

1) Support efforts in Latin America to expand direct, participatory democracy to those closest to the problems and the solutions at the community level such as is being pioneered by Venezuela's Community Councils and experimented with by Nicaragua's Councils of Citizen Power.

2) Expose and oppose US efforts to restrict democracy to its own deformed style of corporate-owned representative democracy. To accomplish this we will work to abolish the falsely-named National Endowment for Democracy and to return the US Agency for International Development to its original disaster relief and development roles and to abandon its democracy manipulation projects.

3) Support Latin American economic and political integration initiatives such as the cooperative trade Bolivarian Alternative for Our Americas (ALBA) agreements, the Bank of the South development bank, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and other regional integration bodies that enable a united Latin America to counter-balance what Bolivar called "the Colossus of the North."

4) Oppose neoliberal Free Trade Agreements that destroy small farmers and businesses, increase corporate domination, and force wage earners to abandon their families to try to find work in other countries, including the US.

5) Provide solidarity support for unions such as the Colombian farmers and farm workers union, FENSUAGRO, which bears the brunt of attacks by Colombia's death squad government, the Confederation of Haitian Workers (CTH) union which continues to be repressed for opposing the US-led coup against President Aristide, and the Palestinian Farmers Union which is struggling to organize farmers in the midst of a brutal occupation.



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6) Oppose military solutions such as the failed "war on drugs" including Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative as well as the re-christening of the Fourth Fleet and expansion of US military bases in an effort to surround Venezuela's oil producing region.

7) Support just negotiated peace efforts in Colombia and Haiti.

8) Oppose US disinformation campaigns by the government and corporate media.

This is an ambitious agenda but the Alliance for Global Justice is already working on all these issues within the many coalitions we help lead such as the Latin America Solidarity Coalition, Justice in the Maquiladoras, Stop CAFTA Coalition and others. Let's continue the work together!