

Five Centuries of Resistance in Argentina

BY KENDRA FEHRER AND BRAD WILL

In a dim, musty room on the second floor of a squatted synagogue, we sit on mattresses, eating homemade pizza and drinking cheap wine; the date is May 28 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. A grandmother shows us her necklace, made of old coins strung together. The necklace is a relic from a culture where silver is worn as an adornment, not used by capitalism to buy and sell. Pictured on the head of the coin is General San Martín, "The Liberator" of Peru, Chile and Argentina. Horacio points to the coin and says, "He didn't liberate us. The army came, they kicked the Spanish out, but nothing changed for us. So we will continue to fight."

Tomorrow, half of the Ava Guarani community will return home to Salta, a northern province of Argentina, after almost a month of campaigning and coalition-building in the capital. They are fighting for their ancestral land, which is now in the hands of Tabacal Sugar, a subsidiary of the two-billion-dollar multinational Seaboard Corporation.

The land where the Ava Guarani once lived, La Loma, stands out amidst the vast, monotonous fields of sugar cane and genetically modified soy. This hilly, wild stretch of subtropical cloud forest is all that remains of what was once the largest contiguous forest in northern Argentina. The provincial government is planning to develop La Loma into a recreational area for tourists.

Haydee recounts, "For years our brothers and sisters have suffered so that the sugar refinery could profit ... Why don't they leave just a little piece of land to those who have given their lives to the refinery? Why have they pushed us aside?"

Reclaiming the Land

Under cover of night in September, 150 Ava Guarani families returned to their ancestral homeland. Despite their displacement almost five decades ago, members of the community have continued to discretely visit their land to harvest native fruits and medicinal herbs and to cultivate small plots of yucca, corn, potatoes, beans and squash. "The land is like family to us," says Haydee, whose grandparents are buried in the small, Guarani cemetery in La Loma. "My mother always told me the Earth is our mother. So we have to respect the Earth. Each time when we visited La Loma, we asked permission from the Earth."

Two days into the occupation, the community was awakened at gunpoint by local police. Everyone, including pregnant women and the elderly, was violently evicted, as ordered by Tabacal Sugar. Twenty-one community members were arrested and detained.

The provincial government pretended that nothing happened. Conscious of the old political refrain, "*Dios está en todos lados, pero atiende en Buenos Aires*" (God is everywhere, but his office is in Buenos Aires), several dozen community members began the 500-mile trek to the nation's capital to officially report the human rights violation and pursue the legal process of reclaiming the land.

In the capital, they met with various public officials who

feigned sympathy, promised support and showed them the door. To Haydee, the government is just as misguided as the sugar refinery, speaking in a foreign language of papers and regulations. "In the time of our grandparents, we didn't need papers. We didn't need titles. When they came and colonized us, they imposed papers and titles."

The Ava Guarani are fighting on all fronts. They have appeared in national media and



Members of the Ava Guarani community in Buenos Aires

have led numerous marches and *escraches* (a public shaming tactic used to defame military officers responsible for genocide and torture during the dictatorship of 1976-83). They have also joined forces with *piquetero* groups, linking two populations marginalized by global capitalism: indigenous peoples and the poor, urban unemployed.

Allied Resistance

While coalitions of indigenous rights groups, unemployed workers movements, neighborhood assemblies, cultural centers and environmental organizations organized against Tabacal Sugar in Buenos Aires, North American activists simultaneously kicked off a campaign to pressure Seaboard at the shiny glass doors of its Boston, Massachusetts, headquarters.

Seaboard claims that it has nothing to do with the actions of Tabacal Sugar in Argentina, but when activists crashed the corporation's annual shareholders meeting outside of Boston on April 26, the corporation was forced to account for the actions of the sugar refinery.

Amid stunned looks by Seaboard Chief Executive Officer Harry Bresky and other executives, four activists dressed as waiters burst into the Sheraton conference

room. They unraveled a scroll above Bresky's head declaring him guilty of repression and displacement of indigenous peoples in Salta. The action was coordinated by Worcester Global Action Network (WoGAN). Two "waiters" were arrested for trespassing and disorderly conduct.

The action shattered business as usual as the meeting was redirected to the issue of indigenous rights. Bresky had to admit that Seaboard's land holdings in Salta span an area larger than the state of Rhode Island, and that only a small part is used for sugar production. Following the disruption, one concerned shareholder asked, "Well, if it's only a question of land, and we have so much, why can't we just give part of it back?" Another shareholder stated, "This looks like an important issue we should look into. If this is true, it could risk our financial investments."

Bresky made a desperate attempt to save face in front of the shareholders. "What do [the activists] want? For us to abandon our land? They've never been down there, they don't know the real story," Bresky complained. But it was Bresky who did not know the real story. In fact, for the last three years WoGAN has been working on the ground with movements in Argentina. Bresky tried to blame the provincial government, but it is generally recognized that the province is run by sugar barons like Ingenio San Martín de Tabacal.



Drummers at a march against Tabacal

Sigue la Lucha

Latin American politicians and feudal *caudillos* (landlords) who repressed indigenous peoples and exploited the Earth for 500 years have grown into transnational corporate alliances. The names have changed, but the game is the same.

Not only have communities been displaced, but they are facing constant threats and harassment. Following a march against Seaboard in Buenos Aires, community leader Horacio Guzmán and journalist Pablo Badano were arrested while networking with other indigenous communities in Salta. On another occasion, community leaders were awakened at 3 a.m. and interrogated about their organizing meetings by a group of large men driving clearly marked company vehicles. Organizing meetings were later crashed by more hired goons.

Although the violence against the Ava Guarani has escalated, so has the resistance. The Ava Guarani are ready to re-occupy the land. Their alliances with groups in Salta and Buenos Aires are deepening. US activists are helping to organize a Fall speaking tour in cities where Seaboard has assets or offices and in places where other communities are fighting environmental racism.

For more information, contact saltasolidarity@wildmail.com or visit www.alerta-salta.org.ar; www.argentina.indymedia.org; www.wogan.org.

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