

Peru: veteran guerilla fighter Hugo Blanco speaks on Amazon struggle

By Bill Weinberg

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In the early 1960s, Hugo Blanco launched Peru's first agrarian reform, as an initiative of self-organized campesinos in the valleys of La Convención and Lares in Cuzco department, where an oppressive feudalistic share-cropping system had been in place for generations. When this movement to take back the land was met with repression, he formed a campesino self-defense militia which was the first armed struggle of the radical left in Peru. Captured and sentenced to life in prison in 1962, he was released and exiled following the populist military coup of Gen. Juan Velasco eight years later. He returned to Peru to participate in crafting the new constitution when civilian rule was restored in 1978. In 1980, he was a presidential candidate, and was serving as a senator with the United Left party when he again had to flee the country with Alberto Fujimori's suspension of democratic rule in 1992. He today publishes the journal [Lucha Indigena](#) [1], and is a leading voice in support of the indigenous movement in Peru's Amazon.

World War 4 Report spoke with Hugo Blanco Aug. 28 in Arequipa, the day after he had given a presentation at a conference entitled "40 Años de la Reforma Agraria" at the city's Universidad Nacional de San Agustín.

You said last night that today the indigenous peoples of the Amazon are in the vanguard of the struggle in Peru. Can you say more about this?

The struggle is no longer just to free the land, but to defend the land against the poisoning taking place at the hands of the mining companies in the Sierra [mountains], and the oil and gas operations in the Selva [rainforest]— poisoning the rivers, killing the fish, killing the birds, and killing the people too. There are still many struggles in the Sierra—in Cajamarca, in Piura. Just yesterday there was a struggle in this department [Arequipa] at [Islay](#) [2], where several people were hurt. But these struggles are scattered, dispersed. In turn, the *amazonicos*, despite having 50 different nationalities and languages, have united—the *amazonicos* of the north, the center the south. They have united to coordinate a democratic and peaceful struggle. Last year, they had a struggle and [won concessions from the government](#) [3]. Now they are waging another struggle, and the government has [responded with arms](#) [4]. But again, the government was forced to retreat and [overturn these two laws](#) [5]. They have gained another triumph.

This was a peaceful struggle that was treasonously attacked by the government, but the *indigenas* captured arms from the police and defended themselves. So I think this is a lesson—and not just for Peru, but for the world. Throughout the world, many people are concerned about the environment—and with good reason, because as the United Nations

has recognized, in another 100 years there could be no humanity. [See London Times, Oct. 26, 2007 via [Democratic Underground](#) [6]] Due to global warming, provoked by the big corporations, whose only imperative is to make as much money as possible in as little time as possible. We can protest, publish articles, but the big corporations keep doing what they want, defended by the world's governments. The way to resist this is the path taken by the *amazonicos*.

And this struggle is not over. Their leaders are meeting this month to evaluate the next step. Probably they will not return to the road blockades they have been carrying for the past months. But they will not allow the companies to enter their territories. So I say the *amazonicos* are teaching the Peruvians and all the world how to defend nature and defend the survival of the human species.

But your own heritage is as a leader of the campesino struggle...

Yes, we had to struggle. The Spanish came here looking for spices, but they didn't find spices, they found gold and silver. But in agrarian question, they applied the feudal system of Europe—where the feudal lords had the best lands, and they were worked by the serfs in exchange for a little piece of land to work for themselves. And this survived the revolution for independence; nothing changed for the *indios*. It was done away with in Mexico with the uprising of Zapata. It was done away with in [the *altiplano* of] Bolivia in 1952, with the Bolivian uprising that year. But here it persisted. In 1962, we began a struggle to recuperate the land for those who work it. And when the government violently attacked us we were obliged to take up arms. But finally the government was forced to pass an agrarian reform law recognizing that the land belongs to the campesinos.

I was in prison for eight years. They wanted to give me the death penalty, but thanks to the international solidarity I won, they were not able to kill me. And it was thanks to that international solidarity that after eight years I was liberated. So now I feel that my obligation is to struggle for those who are imprisoned in the struggle for the Amazon—to fight for them as others fought for me.

Until now, the Amazonian peoples have been very isolated, and have not been involved in the class struggle in Peru. Do you think now, with the process of globalization, they are becoming a part of the broader social struggle in the nation?

Their struggle is not about class. Their struggle is to defend the natural environment where they have lived for millennia. But now this nature—which they regard as their mother—is under attack. The timber companies cutting the trees, the oil companies poisoning the rivers—this is what their uprising is against. They do not understand it as a class struggle. But nonetheless, it is a struggle against the multinational corporations which are defended by the government. So we understand that it is related to the class struggle.

In your 1968 book [Tierra o Muerte](#) [7], there is a lot of the ideology of Trotsky. Are you still a Trotskyist?

This book is a polemical work that I wrote, because we were in debate against Stalinism, which then took the line of only working within the law, struggling through the judicial process and so on. Whereas we took the position that a guerilla movement was necessary for revolution. So it was a debate between these two positions—the reformist position and the *guerillista* position, which holds that the *people* must organize themselves, and when the people decide that there is no other option but to take up arms, they should take up arms. But it is the *people* who must decide, not any group or party...

So I defended Trotsky because the struggle was against Stalinism. Am I still a Trotskyist? I'm not sure. In certain senses I am, and in others I am not. Trotsky believed in defending the revolutionary ideas of Marx and Lenin against bureaucratic tendencies. He defended world revolution against the ideas of "socialism in one country" and a "progressive bourgeoisie" and "revolution by stages" and the other Stalinist ideas promoted in the name of Marxism-Leninism. So I was right to be a Trotskyist in this epoch.

One thing Trotsky said which has been vindicated is that if the working class doesn't take power from the bureaucracy, the bureaucracy will be displaced by capitalism. This is what has happened. Today the principal directors of the Soviet Communist Party are the big neoliberals in Russia. Trotsky said that either the working class will triumph, or the bourgeoisie will, that the bureaucracy is not a social class and has no historical future. Unfortunately, its power was not broken by the working class, so it was broken by the bourgeoisie.

But now that there is no Stalinism, why do I have to be a Trotskyist? I don't feel the same imperative. Of course, there are things I have learned from Marx, things I have learned from Lenin, things I have learned from Trotsky—and from other revolutionaries, from Rosa Luxemburg, from Gramsci, from Che Guevara. But now I do not feel it is logical to form a Trotskyist party.

The youth who organized the conference yesterday—they want answers to the questions of *today*. We don't have to resuscitate old debates from the last century. It is enough to still believe that another world is possible. I am old, and if I can teach something about Marx, Lenin and Trotsky and so on, this is something I can contribute. I still believe in standing up and struggling and not pleading with the government, so in this sense I am still a Trotskyist. But I don't feel the need to say, "Listen everybody, this Trotskyism is the answer!"

And when I speak of the *indigenas* of the Amazon as a the vanguard, I do not mean it in the Marxist-Leninist sense, that others should copy their methods. And when I speak to indigenous peoples, I speak of "collectivism," not "communism."

You are perhaps best remembered in Peru as a guerilla fighter, although this was just one brief period of your life. What is your view of armed struggle in the current situation?

I think the *amazonicos* are teaching us that struggles need to be massive and peaceful—but if we are attacked, we have the right to defend ourselves. At the blockades, the

amazonicos are armed with their spears and bows and arrows and blowguns. But they only use them to defend themselves and their territory from those who invade their territory. If you are attacked with arms, you have the right to defend yourself with arms.

For instance, I do not agree with Sendero Luminoso—and neither with those who believe in taking power by elections. Whether by arms or by elections, both are struggling to take power. In this sense, I am a Zapatista. I do not believe in struggling to *take* power, but to *build* it... The villages in the Sierra that are standing up to the mining companies are *building* power. The *indigenas* in the Selva who are now controlling their own territory are *building* power.

But when the people feel they have to defend themselves with arms, they have the right to take this decision. The rightists in Santa Cruz, in Bolivia, do not want to let the people govern, and meet their peaceful struggle with bullets; so the people have the right to meet this force with bullets, to defend democracy with bullets.

Can you describe the feudal system known as *arrendire* that existed in the La Convención Valley of Cuzco when you began the struggle there in the early '60s?

Each family was given a little piece of land to work, but in exchange for this had to work 12 or 15 days a month for the *hacendado* [landlord], and therefore didn't have time to work their own land. The women and children had to work for the *hacendado* too. So finally in some *haciendas*, the decision was taken to start a strike, and refuse to work for the *patrón*. We said that the land belongs to those who work it. And this was the beginning of the agrarian reform in Peru.

What year was this?

1959. And the sons of these illiterate campesinos, who grew coca and coffee, grew up to be doctors, engineers, et cetera...

And how was this strike met by the hired gunmen of the *hacendados*?

Earlier, they had killed and terrorized the campesinos. But once we began to organize, they would only fire into the air and try to intimidate us. They didn't kill a single campesino leader. It was the police who were called in who began to use force against our movement, killing our leaders and terrorizing the people.

But that wasn't until 1962, which prompted you to start arming yourselves that year. So for several months, La Convención was under the control of your campesino union, without resorting to arms. How did you manage it?

It was a mixture of organizational power and luck. Once I was arrested and charged by a tribunal of made up of police generals with "subversion"—declaring laws without authority. This was the Agrarian Reform Law. I had been named the agrarian reform secretary by the Departmental Campesino Federation of Cuzco. And we drew up a law, with all the formalities of the laws of Peru—"Considering that this and that, et cetera, Therefore it is resolved, et cetera." It was signed by me as agrarian reform secretary. So

when the movement began to spread, and campesinos started taking back the land in the *sierra* of Cuzco, the authorities said, "They are breaking the law!" But we said, "No, it isn't illegal, here, we have the law!"

You mentioned last night that the national agrarian reform law declared in 1969 by Gen. Juan Velasco was actually a fruit of campesino struggle.

Of course. The first agrarian reform law the government declared in 1962 said that some lands could be left as property of the *hacendado*. But we in Chaupimayo [hacienda] didn't recognize even one square centimeter as belonging to the *hacendado*. And when other campesinos saw what we were doing in the valleys of La Convención and Lares, they saw what was possible, and soon there were land seizures throughout the country. The government of Fernando Belaúnde responded with bullets, and there were massacres, but the people kept taking the lands. And the guerilla movements emerged—the MIR [Revolutionary Left Movement] and the ELN [National Liberation Army]. And Velasco realized that soon the whole country would be in flames, so he took power and declared the agrarian reform.

It was impossible that a parliament would have instated an agrarian reform. The parliament was dominated by the *hacendados* and their allies, and they never would have done this. So a coup d'etat was the only alternative to a state of revolution in the country.

You were still in prison at the time of the coup.

Yes, and Velasco sent me a message. He said if I would agree to work for the agrarian reform, the next day I would be free. But I said "No thank you, I've gotten used to living in prison." [Laughs] I could not place myself at the service of a government, because this would be to say that everything this government was doing was good. It is different from being a councilman or a mayor or a congressman or senator, where you can say what you think. If you are working directly for a government, you can't do this. Some of my comrades in prison agreed to work for the government and were released, but I couldn't do it. Later, Velasco instated an amnesty law and we were all freed—in December of 1970.

What were your disagreements with the Velasco government?

Well, he broke up the *haciendas*, which was good. But he had a tendency to reorganize the lands as gigantic cooperatives, which were very bureaucratized. So the people were often working for bureaucrats instead of *hacendados*.

I said the people needed to be consulted on how they wanted the lands organized—communities, cooperatives, parcels, what do they want? But a military government didn't want to work democratically. And for this reason, I was deported after being liberated. First, I was prohibited from leaving Lima, and a little while later I was deported to Mexico.

How long were you in Mexico?

I was there just a few months, and then I went to Argentina—where I was again imprisoned, under what would become known as [Operation Condor](#) [8]. It was a terrible moment for Argentina. But I was released to Chile when I was granted asylum there, and I was there until the fall of Allende in the *pinochetazo*. I escaped again, but there was nowhere for me left to go in Latin America. So I went to Sweden.

When [Francisco] Morales Bermúdez took power in Peru [in 1975], he said all the exiles could return, but after nine months I was deported back to Sweden. Then in 1978 there were powerful strikes [demanding a return to democracy], and a constituent assembly was elected to draw up a new constitution. My *compañeros* placed me on the list as a candidate, and I returned to Peru to participate in the assembly.

I had to flee Peru again after [Alberto] Fujimori declared his *auto-golpe*, and the National Intelligence Service was trying to kill me. And at the same time, Sendero Luminoso also wanted to kill me. So I was forced to exile myself to Mexico once again. When things became more or less calm a few years later, I returned to Peru—again to participate in the mobilizations for the return to democracy.

Why was Sendero trying to kill you?

They accused me of betraying the campesinos because I was open to forms of struggle other than the armed struggle. For this same reason, they killed leaders of land take-overs in Puno.

What is your view of Sendero Luminoso today?

Sendero has been reduced to a few isolated bands working with narcotraffickers in the [VRAE](#) [9] [Apurímac and Ene River Valley]. Sendero is not a significant political force in Peru today.

Do these remnant factions in the VRAE still have a Maoist ideology?

Well, it is partly ideology, and partly economic. [Laughs]

How has the agrarian reform fared since the fall of Velasco in your view?

In some cases, the people have improved on the Velasco reforms. In Puno in the 1980s, over 1 million hectares were redistributed to local communities from the bureaucratized collectives by campesino land take-overs. But with low prices for agricultural products, campesinos were in many cases forced to sell their lands. New land empires were consolidated, especially on coast, where big companies grow asparagus and artichoke for export to the US.

You say that there is a new "industrial latifundio" emerging today.

That's right. Big companies of industrial scale on the coast, tremendously exploiting the agricultural proletariat, the majority of which is not unionized. They get no vacation, they have no social security. And these industries use agro-chemicals that kill the soil. And it

is all for export to the United States, it is not for internal consumption.

So this new new "industrial latifundio" is of both agriculture and mining?

Of course—agriculture, mining, oil, timber. All of this is preying on the natural environment. A new agrarian reform is needed to do away with these predatory corporations.

Now nearly every government in South America except Peru and Colombia has gone over to the left to one degree or another. What is your perspective on this phenomenon?

Well, the struggle must continue, no? Like the struggle against the coup in Honduras, the struggle against the mining companies in the Sierra, the oil companies in the Amazon. Probably in the next elections here in Peru, another servant of neoliberalism will win. But what interests me are the social struggles, which must continue under any government.

What do you think of the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador? You said last night that you consider these to be "governments of transition."

Yes, of course. Chávez and Correa and Morales are very good sometimes, with their discourse against the empire. But we still cannot say that these are governments of the people of below [*gente de abajo*]. For example, Chávez wants the entire workers' movement to be an instrument of his government. But the movement must remain independent and take its own positions. So in this I am not in agreement with him. And for this reason, I have not been invited to Venezuela! [Laughs]

I do not like the compromises that were made in the referendum following the constituent assembly in Bolivia, where they decided that 5,000 hectares constitutes a latifundio. To speak of this in Peru would be considered scandalous. This was a compromise with the reactionary governments of the Media Luna. [See [Diariocritica de Bolivia](#) [10], Jan. 26, 2009]

And when Santa Cruz held its referendum on independence, Morales said, All the the people of Bolivia should mobilize to Santa Cruz and block this illegality. The Bolivian people were advancing, but then Morales said, Oh no, better not to go. The campesinos were ready to block the roads; Morales said, No, please don't block the roads.

These breaks on the social movements remind me of the breaks applied by Allende in Chile that facilitated the *pinochetazo*. These breaks indicate counter-revolutionary attitudes. I oppose this. But these attitudes do not mean the government of Bolivia is counter-revolutionary—no! The indigenous councils that are being organized and so on—these are advances. But it is still not a full manifestation.

So when you say "governments of transition," you mean transition towards what?

A government of all the people. Towards "Good Government Juntas" in Bolivia and Ecuador and Venezuela!

This is a reference to the governing bodies of the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas. So you see the Zapatista movement as a model?

I completely support the Zapatista movement; that appears to me the correct path. They represent an example of the kind of society that we want to build in the future. They represent an example of government that is accountable to the people. If one of the indigenous leaders in the Good Government Juntas is not functioning well, he can be recalled at any time. And the Zapatista National Liberation Army doesn't *govern* in their territory. It assures that the Mexican national army doesn't molest the people. The Good Government Juntas govern, providing education and so on, without one *centavo* from the government.

And they wanted this system constitutionally recognized through the San Andres Accords, and when this was rejected by the Mexican congress in favor of the government's proposal, they declared all the political parties of Mexico to be traitors, and they participate in no elections. Instead, during the presidential race [in 2006], they held the Other Campaign, and traveled throughout the country asking people what problems they had, and how can we confront them. Not putting forth a line, but coordinating with the people.

And they are also doing this at the international level. For example, the people from New York who are trying to save their homes, also participated in the Other Campaign. This year, at the [Festival of Dignified Rage](#) [11] that was held in Zapatista territory, they showed a video from this group.

Yes, the Movement for Justice in El Barrio. You went to Mexico for this meeting?

Yes. This appears to me the correct way of building power.

Well, there have been criticisms on the Mexican left that the Zapatistas' ethic of refusing to participate in elections has allowed the right to win.

Yes, but all the parties are trying to trick the people. Elections are not the way to build power. The communities in the Sierra that are confronting the mining companies, and the peoples in the Amazon who are standing up to the oil companies—they are building power, like the Zapatistas.

You said last night that in the '60s you were struggling for a more just society, but today it is a more grave issue—the survival of the human race.

That's right. The *amazonicos* are struggling against global warming. If you ask them, they will say they are struggling to defend their territories. But in effect, they are struggling against global warming too. Indigenous peoples have been fighting for eco-socialism for 500 years.

See our last post on the [Peru and the struggle for the Amazon](#) [12].

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