

Argentina-Uruguay: The Paper War

By Raúl Zibechi | March 15, 2006

Roadblocks on the international bridges connecting Argentina and Uruguay, carried out by the Argentine environmental movement to protest the construction of two large cellulose factories, demonstrates the social limitations of the neoliberal model and is jeopardizing the regional alliance between two governments that possess, fundamentally, the same political and ideological orientations.

“As long as we have people to take part, we will continue blocking the bridges,” said one of the members of the Environmental Assembly of Gualeguaychú midway through January. On that day, roadblocks on the three bridges linking Argentina to Uruguay—some of them lasting up to 24 hours—had managed to cripple the flow of goods and tourists, but above all, had created a climate of “war” between the governments of Tabaré Vázquez and Néstor Kirchner.

The roadblocks seek to pressure Uruguay during its summer tourist season to halt construction of paper factories, set to begin production by the middle of this year. The *Tupamaro* José Mujica, Uruguayan Minister of Cattle Breeding, Fishing, and Agriculture, denounced what he considers a “sabotage of the tourist season,” demonstrating that the international bridge blockages—a novel form of action for social movements—is capable of eroding the Uruguayan economy, which depends on Argentine tourism during the months of January and February.

On January 17, the conflict intensified when a dozen Greenpeace activists took over “the dock the Finnish corporation Botnia had illegally constructed on the Uruguay River,” and set up camp to halt the construction of the paper factory.¹ The environmentalists believe—and not without reason—that the plant construction is illegal, since the binational organization overseeing the river channel was never consulted. For Vázquez’s government, the climax of an already unbearable situation was reached when the roadblocks impeding international traffic converged with the denouncement of an organization of Greenpeace’s stature, whose actions have repercussions on a global scale.

Social Movements

The Environmental Assembly of Gualeguaychú (the closest Argentine city to the Finnish Botnia and Spanish Ence paper factories) is an organization that brings together environmentalists, social groups, retailers, and rural and urban sectors. It receives support from the Argentine province of Entre Ríos (“Between Rivers,” which borders Uruguay). A quick trip through the city reveals a large number of businesses and cars displaying signs in opposition to the cellulose factories. A journalist from the weekly *Brecha de Uruguay* maintains that almost everyone he has spoken to in the streets of Gualeguaychú has participated in some part of the activities sponsored by the Assembly: marches, protests, the “clinching” of the bridge, or the roadblocks, which are the most controversial and dangerous acts.

Through 2005, the Assembly and others blocked routes on the San Martín Bridge, which connects the cities of Fray Bentos (Uruguay) and Puerto Unzué (Argentina)—the closest to the cellulose plants and the most traveled of the three bridges that cross the Uruguay River. When the tourist season began midway through December, the Assembly decided to declare a boycott on Uruguay’s tourism: not only did the number and duration of roadblocks increase, but the blocks were extended to all three bridges simultaneously, causing interruption of ground communication between the countries on numerous occasions. One out of every three passengers traveling between Argentina and Uruguay uses the San Martín Bridge, and more than 40% do so by land on one of the three bridges. The number of passengers fell 15% this December, but the San Martín Bridge experienced a drop of 32%.



These numbers reveal the success of the roadblocks and the abrupt decline in the number of people as well as goods crossing the border. This is the achievement of the environmental movement (supported by the provincial government of Entre Ríos) as well as being a reflection of the difficulties the two countries face in their relationship with each other.

The Environmental Assembly of Gualeguaychú has a list of 2,000 people willing to picket in groups of 300 to 350, considered the minimum number necessary for blocking a bridge. The information collected and distributed widely by the assembly illustrates the environmental damage the factories will create, producing 1.5 million tons per year of cellulose to be exported to the first world. Argentina has 10 cellulose factories that produce only half of what the two Uruguayan Fray Bentos plants will produce, which gives an idea of the magnitude of pollution the river will suffer. Juan Carlos Villalonga of Greenpeace anticipates “the destruction of the ecosystems of the Uruguay River, high mortality rates for fish, and high-impact pollution in the surrounding communities.”²

**Miguel Angel Fernández,
mayor of Pontevedra, has been
interviewed frequently by the
Argentina press. He always
repeats the same thing:
“Water pollution, acid rain,
diseases, job loss, and
the smell of rotten eggs
permanently envelops the area.”**

One of the most compelling arguments put forth by environmentalists, other than the dry studies on environmental impact that few read or understand, is the experience of the Galician city of Pontevedra, where one of Ence’s factories operates the same type of factory that will be installed in Fray Bentos. Miguel Angel Fernández, mayor of Pontevedra, has been interviewed frequently by the Argentina press. He always repeats the same thing:

“Water pollution, acid rain, diseases, job loss, and the smell of rotten eggs permanently envelops the area.”³ The Galician city managed to pass a law requiring Ence to withdraw by the year 2018, after proving the environmental and social damages. “Once something like this has been established, it is very hard to get rid of. You could wait 30, 40, or 50 years, because it’s a huge investment,” warns Fernández.

These convincing arguments have deeply affected the citizens of Entre Ríos, who have extended protests to the nation’s capital, Buenos Aires. They see the protests as a way of preventing the construction of more cellulose plants in the area. In Uruguay, the construction of a third factory has already been approved for the Swedish company Stora Enso, which also operates in Brazil. According to the National Director of Forest Management in Uruguay, Andrés Berterreche, “there will surely be more than three,” since the American company Weyerhaeuser is proposing five plants (not all cellulose, but all related to forestry), and there are other proposals that authorities are keeping under wraps.⁴ It is believed that in the following years, a small country like Uruguay could be home to up to seven large cellulose factories.

In Brazil, the logging and cellulose industries are in full expansion. Aracruz, the world’s largest producer of eucalyptus-based cellulose, already has several factories and plans to open a new one in the state bordering Uruguay—Rio Grande do Sul—where it will invest 1.2 billion dollars. The business is making huge profits in Brazil and in 2005 alone it declared a profit of US\$485 million, a 9% increase from 2004.⁵ For this reason, environmentalists feel the urgency of halting the factories in Fray Bentos. “What we see happening in the future is an expansion of these activities in both countries, and as such, we demand a production plan that is clean and prevents the transfer of dirty and polluting technology to developing countries,” states Greenpeace.

Political Crisis

The intensity of the movement against paper mills is creating a veritable maelstrom in relations between Argentina and Uruguay, which is becoming a danger to Mercosur. The Uruguayan government is accusing Argentina of not stopping the bridge blockades, thus violating binational treaties set up to prevent “irrevocable” economic damage from taking place. But the Kirchner administration has confirmed that it will not interfere

with the roadblocks as long as they remain peaceful, and it will opt for dialogue with the environmentalists, since, given the force of the movement, attempting to repress it would result in considerable political damage.

In reality, the construction of the paper mills has been fraught with problems. Uruguay failed to present the issue to the proper binational authority governing the Uruguay River Channel,⁶ which is why environmentalists now speak of the “illegality” of the factories. But on the other hand, Argentina has not defended its rights with the necessary resolve, which has allowed both countries to avoid the issues and let time pass without taking initiative so that now environmentalists have begun pressuring both governments. No one imagined that the social movement of Entre Ríos (Argentina), but above all, of Gualeguaychú, would gain the momentum it has demonstrated in the recent past. Government officials, from Uruguay in particular, made an abysmal assessment of the social situation: they believed the demonstrations were the work of Entre Ríos Governor Jorge Busti, seeking reelection in October of 2005, and that once the elections were over everything would return to normalcy. When they came down from the clouds, it was already too late.

Major Uruguayan political leaders have responded by directing insults toward Argentina. Minister José Mujica and his colleague, Senator Eleuterio Fernández, have brought attention to themselves with their grave complaints about environmentalists. A climate of “national unity” has been built up that is transcending political parties and ideological families, with the purpose of “defending the national interest.” Uruguayan officials maintain there is “no environmental risk at all,” and the Minister of Environment, Mariano Arana, has gone so far as to claim that the paper mills return the water to the river cleaner than when they retrieved it. It is an attitude that will cost them politically when the first effects of pollution from the paper mills are felt.

But Mercosur also appears to be affected by the crisis between the governments of Kirchner and Vázquez, whose personal relations worsen everyday. The latter chose not to attend the inauguration of Evo Morales in Bolivia on January 22, an event that brought together most of the region’s presidents. Every day more are asking what purpose Mercosur can serve if it is incapable of addressing problems such as the “Paper War” among its member countries.

At its root, the social movement challenges the current paradigm of globalization, in particular what Andrés Barreda calls “the processes of conformity of factories worldwide, organized like a giant global machine.”⁷ In effect, the surge in cellulose factories in the southern part of the country forms part of a worldwide plan designed by the “global machine,” which entails the creation of a “network of physical transport that is the intermodal network.” In this sense, paper mills and environmental pollution are only the most visible and reprehensible aspects of a model that is redesigning the continent based on the creation of “intermodal terrestrial corridors” that unify the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Linking up transportation routes is also part of the formation of “a machine of global scale,” according to Barreda, in which “global factories” are integrated in a gigantic web encompassing the entire planet.

Linking up transportation routes is also part of the formation of “a machine of global scale,” according to Barreda, in which “global factories” are integrated in a gigantic web encompassing the entire planet.

If this is the future we face, the road and bridge blockades carried out by environmentalists are perhaps one of the few options for slowing down this truly monstrous machine from consuming the planet’s resources and turning our lives into a real-life nightmare.

Raúl Zibechi, a member of the editorial board of the weekly Brecha de Montevideo, is a professor and researcher on social movements at the Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina and adviser to several grassroots organizations. He is a monthly contributor to the IRC Americas Program (www.americaspolicy.org). Translated by Nick Henry, from the Spanish “La guerra del papel,” at <http://www.ircamericas.org/esp/3077>.

RESOURCES

Andrés Barreda, "Geopolítica, recursos estratégicos y multinacionales," en www.alainet.org.

Greenpeace: www.greenpeaceuruguay.com

"Papeleras uruguayas: las protestas llegan a Buenos Aires," en www.lavaca.org.

"El piquete fatal del progreso," Mariana Contreras, 5/1/06, www.brecha.com.uy.

"Los puentes bloqueados en el recambio," Laura Vales, 14/1/06, www.pagina12.com.ar.

END NOTES

¹ Greenpeace Uruguay press release, 17 Jan. 2006.

² Ibid.

³ "Papeleras uruguayas. Las protestas llegan a Buenos Aires," www.lavaca.org.

⁴ From www.brecha.com.uy.

⁵ Newspaper *Zero Hora*, 13 Jan. 2005.

⁶ Comisión Administradora del Río Uruguay, the binational organization that administers the river because it is a shared entity between the two countries.

⁷ Andrés Barreda from www.alainet.org.

Published by the Americas Program of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

The Americas Program

"A New World of Citizen Action, Analysis, and Policy Options"

Founded in 1979, the IRC is a nonprofit policy studies center whose overarching goal is to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and people—one that makes the United States a more responsible global leader and partner. For more information, visit www.americaspolicy.org or email americas@irc-online.org.

Recommended citation:

Raúl Zibechi, "Argentina-Uruguay: The Paper War," (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, March 15, 2006).

Web location:

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3155>

Production Information:

Writer: Raúl Zibechi

Editor: Laura Carlsen, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC