

20 Years of NO to FTAA: For the Sovereignty, Social Justice and Unity of Nuestra América



Luis Felipe Noé (Argentina), *Introducción a la esperanza* (Introduction to Hope), 1963.

Greetings from the Nuestra América Office of the Tricontinental Institute for Social Research,

As we approach the 20th anniversary of the Summit that said NO to the FTAA in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 2005, we believe it is important to reflect on some aspects of this sovereign achievement that marked a turning point in the struggle for regional unity.

In the context in which the idea of the FTAA was developing in the United States, Europe was taking important steps to form the European Union, and Japan was reemerging from the ashes as an economic power with strong technological development. Both territories, rebuilt with US support after World War II, were beginning to cast a shadow over US hegemony.

The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was the most ambitious project of the United States to materialize the Monroe Doctrine on our continent. This treaty began to take shape in 1994 during the first Summit of the Americas organized by the OAS, at the height of the Washington Consensus. That same year, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the United States, and Canada was entering into effect, and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation emerged publicly in opposition to it.

The extension of NAFTA to the rest of the Americas was presented as a perfect strategy to reinforce imperial power: it guaranteed approximately 800 million consumers for US companies, control over natural resources, and political control over 34 countries, with the exclusion of Cuba.

At that first Summit, a work agenda was established, which included technical team commissions, meetings between economy ministers, and presidential meetings over ten years, with the specific goal of finalizing and approving the treaty at the 2005 Summit.



Túlio Carapiá and Clara Cerqueira (Brazil), *O Imperialista* (The Imperialist), 2020.

The FTAA proposal consisted of creating a free trade zone throughout the continent. This implied opening up borders for the commercialization of goods and services, without taxes or tariffs, as recommended by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Countries were also urged to modify their laws to liberalize the entry of foreign investment, eliminate subsidies and anti-dumping barriers, and establish common rules for intellectual property and rules of origin. This, amidst many soothing words that advocated the need for —institutional— consensus for the signing of the agreement, with arguments about improving jobs for the supposed egalitarian development of countries and the pursuit of poverty abolishment in the region—which were no more than euphemisms that sought to conceal the true neocolonial nature of the agreement.

However, as the agenda of presidential and ministerial meetings scheduled for the constitution of the FTAA advanced, the history of the nations and peoples of Nuestra América unfolded.



Comando Creativo (Venezuela), *El Morral del comandante Chávez* (Commander Chavez's Backpack), 2015.

Between 1994 and 2005, we lived through the takeoff and the forced landing that the application of the neoliberal model in our countries entailed. We experienced the destruction of our productive apparatuses, the disintegration of the idea of the welfare state, the loss of labor rights, the privatization of national strategic resources, external debt and the conditionalities of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and, above all, the deepening of inequality, unemployment, and poverty.

During these years, a multiplicity of social explosions took place in most countries of the region; popular organizations took over universities, unions, barracks, streets, highways, and in some cases, governments.

The discussion about the consequences of signing the FTAA treaty became real in the voice of intellectuals and politicians critical of the model, but also in the assemblies of social movements, Bolivarian circles, unions, and political parties throughout the region. The mirror of NAFTA's consequences for Mexico was the clearest reflection to look at. There was no more development, there was more dependence. There was no greater added value, there were *maquiladoras*. There were no better wages, but worse ones. There was no free circulation of people, there was deportation.

By 2005, we arrived in a state of alert and mobilization. George W. Bush was the President of the United States and had the task of successfully concluding the treaty. Meanwhile, as the influence of the United States weighed like an oppressive yoke on each of the presidents gathered at the IV Summit of the Americas, Néstor Kirchner, Lula da Silva, and Commander Hugo Chávez spoke of sovereignty, democracy, and decent work for the peoples.

On the other side was the People's Summit. The ALBA Train, the internationally confederated trade unions, the São Paulo Forum, social movements, and political parties mobilized to exert popular pressure. The panorama was diverse: recognized artists heading the march for the NO to the FTAA, the Cuban delegation was present with its sports teams, Diego Maradona with the "Bush War Criminal" t-shirt, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo with the "Bush Out" banner, the flag with Fidel, Chávez, Kirchner, Lula, and Tabaré Vázquez that spoke of a new unity, and Chávez rallying the masses in the Mar del Plata World Cup stadium.



Discurso del Comandante Chávez en Mar del Plata (Speech by Commander Chávez in Mar del Plata), 2005. Photo: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Association (Argentina). Visual intervention carried out by the Art Department, Tricontinental Nuestra América.

The NO to the FTAA was the seed for the creation of Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), for Argentina to cut ties with the IMF, for Evo Morales to expel the United States ambassador, for the birth of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America – People’s Treaty of Commerce (ALBA-TCP) and ALBA Movements, for the creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), for the regional pronouncement against the coup in Honduras in 2009, against the attempted coup against Correa in 2010, against the institutional coup against Lugo in 2013, and the strength of a region that in those years, working together, was able to regain a sovereign position, reduce poverty and inequality.

Today, looking back, with an Argentinian president who speaks of free trade with the United States, who returns to adopting a subservient position before Trump, a few days before the signing of a treaty that will undoubtedly compromise Argentine sovereignty, that November 5, 2005, when we said NO to the FTAA, seems more than distant.

With that spirit, we want to remember this feat and bring our history to the present: to know where we come from and where we arrived, to know that the history of the peoples’ struggle cannot be erased.

Just as Venezuela and Cuba resist the US blockade, as Brazil jailed Bolsonaro for the attempted coup against Lula, as Mexico and Colombia rebelled against US political domination and are now the spearhead of regional resistance, just as Maradona continues to dribble past war criminals across the Mediterranean Sea, from Tricontinental we continue to combat *hyper-imperialism* and work for a new development project from and for the peoples of the Global South.

Greetings to all,

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Lucía Converte

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