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NATIVE PEOPLE IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON:

THE IMPACT OF 'DEVELOPMENT'

Latin American Working Group

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The opening of the Amazon to economic exploitation by transnational corporations constitutes a serious threat to the survival of Brazil's native people. Given the type of development in Brazil which is aimed at the maximization of corporate profit and the benefit of an elite, and which guarantees the marginalization of a large percentage of the population, it is apparent that native rights will not be respected. General Bandeira de Mello, former head of FUNAI, the government agency responsible for Indian affairs, confirmed "the Indians cannot be allowed to impede national development."¹

The extent of the planned Amazon development has dire implications for native people. In the past, periods of economic boom in the region have been accompanied by massive Indian extermination. Since the arrival of the Portuguese four centuries ago, native people have been regarded either as slave labour to be exploited or as savages that must be pacified or killed. During the rubber booms at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present, Indians were subjected at gunpoint to provide labour. Thousands died, unable to adjust to the conditions of slavery, contaminated by the non-Indian diseases to which they had no immunity, or simply murdered. It has only been in periods of economic bust, in periods of decline in rubber production when capitalist development retreated from the Amazon, that the native people have been able to live without immediate threat to their existence.

1. O Estado de Sao Paulo, Oct. 26, 1971.

The native population has experienced steady decline. It is estimated that of 3 or 4 million in the mid-1500's, only 100,000 have survived. Of the 200 Indian nations existing in 1900, 87 have been annihilated. Many are nearly extinct: "Of 19,000 Munducus believed to have existed in the 30's, only 1200 were left (in 1968). The strength of the Guaranis had been reduced from 5000 to 300. There were 400 Carajas left out of 4,000. Of the Cintas Largas who had been attacked by air and driven into the mountains, possibly 500 had survived out of 10,000. The proud and noble nation of the Kudiweus had shrunk to a pitiful scrounging band of about 200."² In 1972, it was estimated that the Cacaas Novas who in 1950 numbered 30,000 had been reduced to 400,³ the Xerentes were limited to 320,⁴ there were only 60 members of the Juruna.⁵ Today many tribes are represented by a single family or several individuals. A Brazilian social historian has predicted that by 1980 not a single Indian will be alive.

End of Isolation

This prediction is not without some basis. In the past the survival of native people has rested, to some extent,

2. Norman Lewis, "Genocide" Supysaua: A Documentary Report on the Conditions of Indian Peoples in Brazil (Indigena and the American Friends of Brazil) Nov 1974.

3. Toronto Star June 28, 1972.

4. Seven Days, London, November 10, 1971.

5. Survival International News, London, August 1972.

on the fact that it was possible to retreat to remote areas of the Amazon where contact with non-Indians was minimal. Penetration of the region followed the natural course of the river and remained localised in areas like Manaus where the rubber boom was centred. This situation however is in the process of change. Due to the type and the scale of development that is now underway, contact between native people and national 'development' will not remain sporadic. Interaction on a regular and continuous basis must now be expected.

The plan for the Amazon is on a massive scale. It includes:

1) Mineral extraction.

2) The trans-amazonic highway system -- 3500 miles of road which crisscross and surround the region. It provides access and means of transportation to and from the new mining sites as well as a route to move troops across the Amazon to surrounding borders. Not accidentally, it runs through the lands of thirty Indian nations.

3) Colonization. The government announced plans to resettle half a million people along the highway. To relieve the pressure on land in the North East, it claimed it would give landless peasants 250 acre lots to cultivate. This however is not occurring. Colonization is taking the form of grants of huge landholdings to powerful individuals and agribusiness. The people of the North East who are lured to the area are forced either to squat, or work as slaves on the estates. (It is thought they will eventually be driven to

compete with native people for both land and work.) Huge cattle ranches are being encouraged. Large areas of the jungle are being burned down to create land for pasture. Land speculation is massive.

As early as 1957, Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro suggested that 'rapid integration' would lead to the death of native culture and native people.⁶ Unless change is allowed to come gradually, it is likely that native people will not live long enough to make any choices on how to reconcile the society that is being imposed on them, with their own. Today however, the invasion of the Amazon is gathering momentum. Corporate surveyors and mineral exploitation teams, mining crews and construction workers, cattle ranchers and land speculators, the kind of adventurers that 'frontier development' attracts and the government are arriving in hordes.

'Development' vs Native People

The massive penetration of transnational corporations in the Amazon comes in conflict with native way of life. The collective culture of the Indians, their self-sufficient economy, the subsistence existence gained through hunting and fishing and small scale cultivation, cannot be reconciled with the corporate drive for growth and profit. Practices such as the use and ownership of land collectively rather than individually, productive activity based on need not profit, the organization of society to guarantee the survival of all

6. Supysaua, p. 6.

rather than the privilege of a few, sharing power equally, living in harmony with nature, are regarded as characteristics of 'primitive' society which are not valid in the twentieth century. In every instance where capitalist development has contacted native people, in North America, Australia and Latin America, it has attempted to impose its system on native ways of life.

In Brazil, the government accepts the corporate ideology. Within the form of integrated and dependent capitalism it has adopted, all marginal groups are subjected to the goals of national 'development' even though the benefits go only to the ruling elite and the investing trans-national corporations. The native rights to land, the preservation of culture and to self-determination are disregarded in the same manner as is the plight of Brazil's 50,000,000 poor.

Pacification and Integration

The Brazilian government has asserted that the pacification of the native population in the Amazon is crucial in order to create conditions acceptable to foreign investors for resource exploitation, and to large agriculture enterprises involved in ranching and cultivation. The former Minister of the Interior, Costa Cavalcanti has said the "Indians cannot hold up the road to progress."

Pacification is geared to the 'integration' of the native population into capitalist society. As the head of

FUNAI claimed, "We want to integrate the Indians into Brazilian society, to make them Brazilians like we are."⁷ The method used is one aimed at breaking down the self-sufficient native economy. Material goods such as metal tools are given as gifts, repeatedly over a period of time, until the Indian nation discovers their usefulness and becomes dependent on them. It is then forced to participate in the market economy, to buy them, if it wants to continue their use. To do this, it must acquire a cash income either by selling goods or labour.

(The native people potentially form a supply of cheap labour for exploitation by the corporate developers. However, because a large percentage of the Brazilian population -- particularly in areas like the North East -- are now unemployed and constitute a huge labour reserve, the native people are not considered crucial to the work force. This however could change slightly. Recently it has been recognized that the native people have skills related to the environment that could be useful to corporate developers who are unused to the region.)

The government strategy is to pacify native people, then remove them from their lands. It is this stage that is referred to as 'integration' though in the Amazon this is simply a euphemism for land theft and exploitation. This policy is dictated by the needs of the corporations. In

7. Akwasasne Notes, March 1974.

many instances, the lands where subsoil deposits are found or which are desired for ranching, constitute the aboriginal lands of an Indian nation. The Indians however are given no consideration. The rights to their land are denied in the name of 'development'.

The task of 'integration' has fallen to FUNAI, the state agency in charge of Native affairs. FUNAI was set up in 1967 after its precursor, the Society for the Protection of Indians (SPI) was discredited by the conviction of 134 of its agents on more than a thousand charges ranging from murder to the theft of land from native people. It was reportedly designed to protect native rights. In the first several years of its operations, it seemed at least to give verbal recognition to the needs of native peoples -- the necessity of protecting tribal land from encroachment, of better health care, of protection from assault, and of some technical assistance and training to enable them to participate, to the extent they desire, in the economic activity of the region. It took some positive steps to provide a buffer between native people and national 'development'.

In 1970 however, the policy changed. With massive contracts for mineral exploration and land development in the works, a hard new line was adopted on the question of Indian rights. The appointment of General Oscar Bandeiro de Mello to the position of director of FUNAI signalled the change. As a conservative, who had come from the position of

military Chief of Intelligence and Interrogation, he stated the new attitude simply: "I am tired of this strange love affair with Indians."⁸

FUNAI today, like Indian agencies elsewhere, plays a dual role. On one hand it is supposed to protect native people until they are integrated into national society, while on the other hand, as an agency of the Ministry of the Interior it is involved in the promotion of Amazon 'development' -- the thing the Indians need protection from. The emphasis is on the latter. Protection of Indians and their lands becomes protection of others from Indians. Promoting Amazon 'development' becomes the removal of Indians from lands to make way for corporations. FUNAI serves simply as a front runner for construction teams, settlers and large transnational companies.⁹

FUNAI has used various tactics to free native lands for commercialization. Laws have been passed which give the government the right to areas which are 'occupied'. 'Grimpeiros' have been hired to drive the indigenous people from their lands and settlers have been sent in to colonize or squat on them.

It has attempted to relocate native people in eighteen reserves and four parks, claiming these will provide some protection. Some native people have moved to them. Others

8. Sunday Times (London) Jan. 7, 1974.

9. Brazilian Information Bulletin Winter 1975.

have chosen to defend traditional areas. Generally the experiences on the reserves have not been positive. In some areas, the reserves have proven unsuitable for traditional pursuits and it has been impossible to find means of support. For those involved in hunting and fishing, traditional practices have been upset by the fact that construction projects and damming of rivers for the new 'development' have altered the patterns of animals and fish. The land masses of the reserves in some cases have not been large enough to support the whole tribe; the Yanomami nation of 10,000 was given a reserve in which only 300 could survive.¹⁰

Most importantly, reserve land is not secure against further intrusion. The government recently constructed the trans-amazonic highway to crisscross all four parks and seventeen reserves. The natives do not own the land or have subsoil rights. They have no say in how the land will be utilized. Since the passage of the Brazilian Indian Statute in December 1973, FUNAI has had the legal option to lease Indian reserves to large mineral extraction companies as long as it is in the 'national interest'. Given the government's definition of 'national interest', it means it has a free hand.

Rondonia

It is clear that government policy is geared to serve corporate interest. Consequently transnational corporations

10. Brazilian Information Bulletin Winter 1975.

are implicated in the impact of the type of 'development' that is taking place. The case of Aripuana Park provides the best illustration of how this collusion effects native people.

For the Cintas Largas and Surui, the discovery of minerals on their lands virtually sealed their fate. It set off a chain of events which has left them decimated as a nation.

Until the last decade, they lived in relative isolation at the headwaters of the Aripuana River on the border between Mato Grosso and Rondonia, very much as they had lived for centuries. They hunted, fished, cultivated their land and occasionally had to defend themselves against the rubber tappers who invaded their territory in search of rubber trees. The mineral finds however created new interest in their lands. Transnational corporations began exploration for tin. There was no deliberation about how the finds would be reconciled with the rights of the native people; it was simply taken for granted that the native people would be driven away.

Strategies were devised to eliminate them. David St. Clair in his book The Mighty Mighty Amazon mentions that companies existed for the purpose of dealing with Indians who stood in the way of corporate development. They would attack native villages with dogs that had not been fed for days and shoot anyone who tried to escape. In Rondonia many attacks were made. Money was given by local officials to another group of Indians, the Kayabis, -- who had been driven off

their lands -- to attack the Cintas Largas. (They took the money and disappeared.) Bombings of native villages occurred. Gifts of sugar laced with arsenic were given to native children. Diseases were intentionally introduced. Massacres took place.¹¹

By 1971 both the Surui and the Cintas Largas were weakened considerably. They accepted FUNAI's offer to move to the Aripuana Park which they were assured would give them some protection. There had been a massive influx into the area of teams involved in the production and exploration of tin and as many as a thousand settlers attracted by the government's colonization incentives. Land speculation was occurring and companies involved in coffee, maize and wood had begun operations. The impact of contact with non-Indians here as in other areas, was taking its toll.

The park however guaranteed no protection. Within months, FUNAI had begun to sell land parcels in the park to settlers and had granted permission to several transnational corporations to continue exploration on park land. A rebellion by the Cintas Largas was quelled with force. The highway was then constructed to run through the park, despite protest. Though this was obviously done to facilitate the transportation of minerals from the area by corporations, it has also been suggested that security was a consideration. The road ensures that the park is easily accessible to troops in the case of native protest. The final blow was dealt in 1973 when

11. Supysaua, p. 17.

it was announced that the park would be reduced to one third its present size. Ten mining companies received subsoil rights in the confiscated area.

It is in Rondonia that BRASCAN's subsidiary Promisa has a controlling interest in the tin producing Jacunda operation.

King Ranch

The case of Aripuana is not the only case that illustrates the complete subjection of native rights to the operations of the transnational corporations. Brascan is implicated in another area.

In 1972 a World Council of Churches' memo brought attention to the fact that the King Ranch in the State of Maranhao was sitting on the lands of the Kaapore (Urubu) and Tembe.¹² The details soon emerged. In 1971 DELTEC through its subsidiary Swift had made a bid to purchase 180,000 acres for the King Ranch. However it found the deal complicated by the fact that most of the land was designated for a reservation for native people. Only after the Minister of the Interior, Costa Cavalcanti, intervened and suppressed the objections of FUNAI, evaded national law and transferred the property from federal to state jurisdiction, was the purchase completed. When he was asked to explain his intervention, he simply said that large ranches were important to Brazil to

12. "Deltec", Brazilian Information Bulletin Winter 1974, p. 18.

to raise its level of beef exports.¹³ No mention was made of the fate of the Kaapore or Tembe or how they would survive without their lands.

Today the ranch is controlled by BRASCAN. In 1972 it bought a 92% interest in the meat packing operations and ranches of Swift-Armour from Deltec.

Clearly native rights are subjected by the government to the demands of the corporations. This is assuring the increasing deterioration of the position of native peoples. With so many transnational corporations now moving into the Amazon, how many incidents like Aripuana are occurring which are blacked out by press censorship? While companies like Alcan claim there are no Indians in the area of its Amazon operation, what is really happening? The recent government declaration that no foreign anthropologists or journalists will be allowed on native reserves is a bad sign. Since the ban does not apply to corporations, one can only guess this is an attempt to hide further atrocities.¹⁴

Even if corporations are not involved in direct conflict with specific Indian nations, their collusion with the government implicates them to some extent in the horrors that

13. The Brazilian plan is to rival Argentina as the major beef exporter. According to the Minister of Agriculture, Alysson Paulinelli "in order to keep economic growth at a rate of 10%, it is necessary that agriculture grow at least 3% more than the average rate of recent years." See "Amazon End of the Road" Brazilian Information Bulletin, Summer 1974.

14. Latin America, Feb. 27, 1976.

occur. The fact that native policy is geared to remove native people from their lands to make room for their operations, means that transnational corporations must take some responsibility for what in fact that policy implies.

The Impact of Amazon Development on Native Peoples

The impact of capitalist development in the Amazon, as it is now being carried out, for native people is nothing short of genocide. A FUNAI worker recently resigned saying he was tired of being a "grave digger for Indians." He criticized the attempts at 'integration' concluding the "Indians would lose when so-called progress reaches them."¹⁵

Physical Survival

Their physical survival is threatened from disease, from starvation and from cultural change as well as from direct attack.

1. Disease. Increased contact with the non-Indian always brings threat of death from colds, TB or flu -- sicknesses with which native people have traditionally not been in contact and to which they have built up no immunity. French MD Jean Chiappino who visited Aripuana Park in November 1972 reported that the state of the Surui "is extremely grave and they are practically decimated by TB, infections and above all chronic starvation. Twenty Indians have already died since June ... All the tribe is now scattered in the jungle. More

15. Akwesasne Notes August 1972.

that 40% are sick with pulmonary infections and are malnourished as a result of diseases."¹⁶ In other areas it is reported that diseases are following the construction of the highway and simply wiping out indigenous people along its route. As more people move into the Amazon the situation can only be expected to get worse.

2. Starvation. The forced removal of native peoples from their lands and the invasion of their territories, in some cases, has destroyed the basis of their self-sufficient economic systems. Amongst the Cintas Largas this has led to starvation. Previously semi-nomadic hunters and cultivators the Cintas Largas were used to a rich diet of game, nuts and honey as well as the maize, manioc, yams, peanuts, sweet potatoes, bananas and papayas they grew. Today however they cannot feed themselves. Hunting and planting are limited not only due to the loss of land but also because the group is decimated and immobilized by sickness. They depend on the government for handouts for a large proportion of their food. Malnutrition and starvation are widespread.¹⁷

3. Cultural Change. Cultural change, though more subtle, can be as lethal as other forms of murder. In some regions of heavy tropical rains, the forced wearing of clothes has been key in the spreading of disease as well as the introduction

16. Brazilian Information Bulletin Spring 1974.

17. Jean Chiappino, The Brazilian Indigenous Problem and Policy: The Example of the Aripuana Park (IWGIA Pamphlet No. 19) p. 13.

of notions of sin and guilt. Banning of certain traditions and certain foods has resulted in nutritional deficiencies.¹⁸

Destruction of Native Culture

For the transnational corporations, the removal of native people from their traditional lands is essential to free those lands for exploitation. But this assures the destruction of native culture. For Indians, the relationship with the land is not simply an economic one. For centuries native people have existed in equilibrium with nature, and land is considered inalienable from them. To separate native people from their land is to deny their being, to destroy their way of life and to disrupt the social, cultural, spiritual economic and political relationships to their society.¹⁹

The process of pacification leads to dependency. The way in which manufactured goods are introduced tends to promote the breakdown of tribal self sufficiency. In 1972 it was observed that the "Surui who now come regularly (to the FUNAI post near Aripuana Park) to stay for days or weeks in the base, have clearly an all-too-innocent belief that anything they ask for will immediately be handed over for nothing. It is not surprising ... bearing in mind that they were originally tempted from isolation by an apparently inexhaustible supply

18. Marie Helene Laraque, "The Human Cost of Development: The Indians of Brazil," Third World Women, 1972.

19. First Indian Congress of the Southern Hemisphere held at Asuncion, Paraguay as reported in Accion October 1974; also Conference of Native Peoples held in Washington, Nov. 8, 1974 as reported in Indigena Winter 1974.

of free and marvelous gifts."²⁰ Many are totally dependent on the new goods. It was reported that "the Surui no longer made fire with firesticks since the introduction of matches, even when they had run out of matches; nor would they make resin torches, even when the batteries of their electric torches went dead ..."²¹ A visit was made to "a Nambikuara camp where everyone was going hungry; they had guns but no bullets, and made bows and arrows not for use but for barter."²² The pacification process has proven it saps the Indians' ability to sustain their culture or their pride.

Once native people are separated from their land they must either move further into the jungle or try and survive within an alien culture which has been imposed on them. In the latter case, as they are unused to the system of wage labour, they are easy victims of the exploitative practices of the colonizers; some are forced into slavery, others become beggars or exotic tourist attractions, others move to Brazil's cities where they become part of the massive urban poor. Individually it is true they may survive but as a people they cannot. Tururin, chief of the Pataxo nation, put it this way: "We Indians are like plants; when changed from one place to another, we don't die but we never fully recover."²³

20. Tribes of the Amazon Basin in Brazil 1972: Report for the Aborigines Protection Society (Charles Knight and Co. London) 1973, p. 49.

21. Ibid., p. 120.

22. Ibid., p. 120.

23. "The Progress of Genocide in Brazil," Akwesasne Notes, Late Summer 1975.

The effect on the Cintas Largas has been devastating. Meireles, an Indian agent first involved in their pacification claimed, "There is today a dangerous reality in the Aripuana Park. It is the loneliness, the anxious incomprehension of the people. It is an illogical moment in their history. In less than four years, their lands have begun to be divested. Epidemics will now leave their mark and many more of them will take the first kilometers down the long road where they will find misery, hunger, prostitution for their women and the end of their dreams."²⁴

Resistance

The Indians of the Amazon have not suffered the invasion of their lands without resistance. Numerous cases of armed struggle have been reported:

- the attempted settlement of the lands of the Xavante nation, 200 miles north of Cuiaba in Mato Grosso led to an armed confrontation between the settlers and 300 native people.²⁵
- the Waimiri-Atroari through armed struggle brought a halt to the construction of the highway from Manaus to Caracaraí. An 80 man government team has recently been sent in to try and pacify them -- 30 with gifts and 50 with arms.²⁶

24. Brazilian Information Bulletin Spring 1974.

25. ISLA Oct. 1975, p. 282.

26. "Indians Halt Amazon Road" Brazilian Information Bulletin Winter 1975 and Indigena Winter 1974-1975.

- the Muruba Indians have driven FUNAI scouts from the Indian post along the Peruvian border.²⁷
- the Surui Indians drove settlers from the Aripuana Park for a short while.²⁸

However armed struggle between the native people and the Brazilian military is an uneven struggle. Native people are virtually unarmed. While they can carry out minor skirmishes with small groups of settlers, if the government decided to move in with determination, they would fall quickly. It is unlikely that the government will tolerate interference to its development scheme much longer. The report of the existence of Crenaque, a concentration camp for the 're-education' of dissident Indians, and the stories of torture and murder which come from it, can be taken as evidence.²⁹

In face of this repression, native people are beginning to articulate a sense of national Indian consciousness. They have come to the realization that unity of action offers the greatest hope for winning concessions from the government. In April of 1974, nine tribes set aside century old conflicts to meet and strategize on their common problems -- namely the invasion and seizure of land and the consequent destruction of their culture and self-sufficient way of life. Six months

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Interview with Antonio Cotrim, ex-FUNAI worker, in Jornal do Brasil, Aug. 27, 1972.

later, representatives of native people in Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Venezuela and Bolivia came together in Asuncion, Paraguay in the first 'American Indian Parliament in the Southern Hemisphere.' After much debate, they issued a statement denouncing the "white man's negative actions" and demanding the return of their lands. They decided they would seek a permanent voice at the UN.³⁰

Native people see their struggle against capitalist development as a common struggle. At a conference in Washington on November 8, 1974, which was attended by representatives of native groups in Canada and the US, as well as individuals like Ralph Nader and representatives of scientific and humanitarian organizations, the native people from the US and Canada expressed their solidarity with the Indians in the Amazon.

Oren Lyons, an Onondaga said, "We have experienced what is going on in South America. This is a rerun. They're experiencing what has devastated us." The conference reaffirmed the call for the rights of Indian nations in Brazil "to determine their own destinies and fates, in opposition to the present policies of integration and assimilation ... In contrast to the individualistic philosophy we call for the affirmation of Indian collective values and the rights of Indian peoples in Brazil to maintain themselves as politically sovereign, and spiritually based, tribal groups. We particularly

30. Latin America Feb 14, 1975.

wish to emphasize the rights of Indian peoples to exist as distinct social and cultural entities, to be provided with the material base to continue (if they so determine) with their traditional modes of economic subsistence, and to decide for themselves their own futures and fates."³¹

Conclusion

With the influx of foreign corporations into the Amazon, it can be predicted that both native culture and physical survival will be threatened. One can deduce that since the corporations want the lands of native peoples for mineral extraction and land development, and since corporations can direct government policy, government policy will be to the detriment of native peoples.

The native policy is understandable when development of the Amazon is seen as part of the national development scheme. The Brazilian model does not aim at 'true development', where all regions and all peoples benefit; its concern is simply corporate profit and the enrichment of a few. Capitalist development in general allows no room for independent way of life, preservation of culture or self-determination. In the North as in the Amazon, it has demonstrated both native people and ecology³² are expendable

31. Indigena Winter 1974

32. The present mode of development may pose a serious threat to the environment. The Amazon, like the North has a delicate ecological equilibrium, about which there are still many questions. Today many acres of forest are

to growth. In Brazil, its impact is more extreme for Brazil's government is openly repressive and its policies are not constrained by a liberal facade.

Native people in Brazil will not survive unless there is a radical change in the direction of development of the country as a whole. Their hope lies in the possibility of instituting a mode of development that puts the interests of all people before the interests of corporations and allows for 'integration' in a way they determine themselves. Given the strength of the junta and the corporations in Brazil presently, their future does not look bright.

being burned to open lands for ranching and mineral extraction. Given the supposition that the Amazon provides a large percentage of the world's oxygen supply, it is not known what consequences this will have.

Questions concerning agriculture in the Amazon are many. Several soil specialists have said the methods of cultivation being introduced are totally unsuited to the area. The experiment at Lata, in the heart of the Basin, has shown that their statements are not without some foundation. "What had appeared to be rich soil (at Lata) with a promising cover of humus, disintegrated after the first or second planting. Under the equatorial sun, the iron-rich soil began to bake into brick. In less than five years, the cleared fields became virtually pavements of rock." Though the native people have always practiced shifting cultivation, which has been both productive and seems to leave the forest undamaged, the corporations and government seem determined to impose European methods of farming on the area, though the impact is unknown. Akwesasne Notes Late Summer 1975, page 29.

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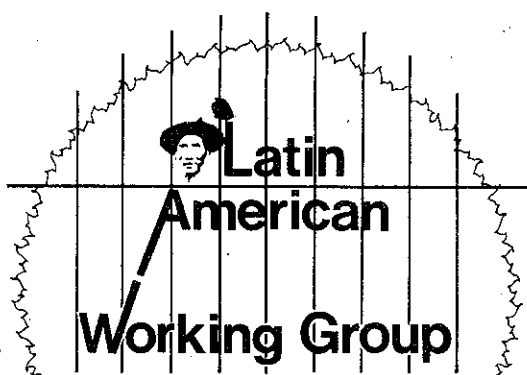
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