

Social Justice & Human Rights in Latin America Students Put Learning into Action By Participating in the Annual School of the Americas Protest



Students studying U.S. involvement in the Central American civil wars in Donna Chollett's Social Justice & Human Rights in Latin America course decided to take action. While examining the role of Ft. Benning Georgia's SOA (today renamed "Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation") in training Latin American military personnel who returned to carry out torture and genocide against people demanding social justice, Chollett suggested that students travel to the November 2010 annual protest. Seven students, plus 10 student members of MPIRG organized the trip. They joined thousands of others demanding closing down the SOA, resisting militarization, and promoting a culture of peace. Their testimonies follow:



"The School of the Americas protest in Fort Benning, Georgia is one of the most electrifying experiences I have had in a long while. From the labor caucus all the way to the final workshop on Killer Coke, it was a passionate experience. A large group of people, all chanting and working toward one goal.... Perhaps one of the most powerful moments was singing 'Solidarity Forever' as a group. The vigil itself was one of the most amazing events I have ever witnessed. Thousands of people were all in one place, every one of them (other than the police) supporting closing the School of the

Americas.... Everything had the emphasis of 'Somos una America,' We are one America. Hanging beside the stage at the vigil was a large banner with a picture of Rufina Amaya. She is honored every year at the SOA vigil for her courage during and after the El Mozote massacre." [students in the class had just read Leigh Binford's text *The El Mozote Massacre: Anthropology and Human Rights*] "Overall, the trip to Georgia was a wonderful experience that has resulted in an increase in political and social awareness. Many of the topics discussed in class were brought to life in the SOA vigil, particularly the El Mozote massacre. It is definitely an experience I would like to return to, and I'm already making plans to do so next year."

Another student wrote, "The School of the Americas protest was an extremely rewarding experience for me. I felt challenged physically, mentally, and emotionally...in the tough realities I was forced to confront... I could not have been more proud of the University of Minnesota Morris as I was when we went around and said who we were, where we were from, and the number of times we had attended. The students from Morris definitely represented the biggest group from any one area at the labor caucus. We impressed quite a few union members in attendance with our commitment to the School of the Americas protest.



...the best part of the *whole* rally was the puppetista pageant. This was where the real rally began for me. There were several large and beautiful puppetistas, representing different Latin American nations, values, and one 3-headed capitalism monster. They began a coordinated dance and led the way down the road of the protest toward the open intersection. We all followed, chanting in protest. It was very exhilarating to feel like one body of people joined in protest of the School of the Americas... There were more police in the area than I had seen in my entire life put together. We stopped at the intersection, unsure how to proceed, but continually chanting. Then, the puppetistas began to cross the street at the sidewalk and were consequently arrested. I could not believe that the puppetistas and protestors in the fore of the rally were being arrested for basically crossing the street... I have never felt so under surveillance, with police taking pictures of the people in the crowd and a helicopter equipped with a machine gun constantly hovering over the rally... I decided to attend a showing of a film where torture survivors told their stories. I felt that, even though it had been a trying and long day, if torture survivors had the courage to actually relive their experience, I owed it to them to listen. Their experiences were very hard to listen to; by the end, I could not keep it together. What kept reverberating in my head was the fact that people are actually capable of doing these things to another human being... To this day, I cannot wrap my head around what it would take to debase someone to such a degree... However, what was also conveyed to me was the sheer strength of character of these survivors... I came to realize that police oppression exists even in the United States, something I only vaguely conceived of beforehand. I also was privileged to meet some incredibly inspirational people... I also was forced to confront some really hard truths that strengthened my resolve to become a part of the action."



Reflecting on the experience, one student wrote, "The trip that us seventeen Minnesotan students set out on a couple of weeks ago was a powerful experience for me in that it opened my eyes to some of the good that people are trying to accomplish towards gaining social justice in the Americas, but it also showed me a very ugly, ominous side of our government that I had only heard of before. When we first arrived at the rally on Saturday morning, there was a certain energy flowing through the crowd; everyone was so excited to see such a large support network that was all aimed at the same

goal—shut down the SOA/WHINSEC to start rebuilding human rights in Latin America. There was...everything from groups promoting nonviolent forms of protest to Minnesotans against the SOA. We managed to make it to the main stage just in time to hear the tail end of Father Roy's introductory

speech to open the rally, and he truly is one of the greatest humanitarians of our time.... There was a disturbing noise that played as a backdrop to Father Roy, though—a helicopter. For the entire duration of the rally, there was a helicopter flying very low over the crowd that had a soldier leaning out of the side aiming a machine gun at the crowd. The crowd was made up of mostly college-aged adults, elderly ex-hippies, young parents with their toddlers, and religious figures such as a group of Franciscan monks—it was hardly a group that would be likely to violently riot and storm the gates of the base. While I did walk away from this weekend with a greater understanding...how the SOA is working...I think that the most powerful message I took away from the experience was that I should be wary of our government for more than I had previously thought."

One student took a more critical view: "Speakers at the rally effectively addressed our society's current ills and the problems with how the government of the United States deals with Latin American nations; mainly that we are a spiritually and morally empty consumerist dystopia and an imperialist power. The poor quality of modern American culture, and the moral shortcomings of those in power are problems that have been well documented; however solutions seem to be few and far between. And because of the size of the problems we are facing, perhaps this should not come as a surprise. So, I was highly interested in what solution the activists at the event would have, or if different people would preach differing messages. However, they seemed to have all been in agreement, and their stance on action rather typical. The consensus was that resistance must be non-violent, and was accompanied by various choices such as 'it takes more courage to be peaceful than violent,' and 'you don't want to become like the oppressor.'Their views on non-violence, which are typical within leftist groups, have never really seemed to ring true—of course non-violence is necessary, but it is not one's only tool. Saying that is just as foolish as saying that direct action is one's only option, all the time.... If we are to attempt to address the problems in our world, we must first view the situation as it is, and eschew the restrictive bounds of political ideology, an intellectual drug that the west...is addicted to. And if we do this, we will realize that results, not the moral purity that dogmatic pacifists trumpet, are important."



"What I learned at Fort Benning" gives another take on the protest: "I learned that I legitimately still thought we lived in a democracy. While it certainly appears that we do, I have a hard time believing this is true due to what I have learned this semester, and not just during this class. ...the government toots its own horn—about how it believes in democracy for all, and for completely altruistic and logical reasons, but it proceeds to keep places such as WHINSEC open and keep it a 'secret' from the American public. ...it takes organizations such as the SOA Watch to properly expose and educate people about the entire impact of the school.... I learned that I used to be significantly more ignorant about the world than I am, and that I was completely okay with ignorance. Now that I have learned so

much about United States relations with Latin America, I understand now that I cannot be ignorant. It makes me angry that I used to be happy with ignorance. However, it was the impact of the things I have learned about the US government and the governments in Latin America that have made me unsatisfied with ignorance. I guess I always had the capacity to care, but I needed a reason to do so.... I was always taught, until I came to college, that the government is on our side, that we can put our faith in the government because it's a democracy, and a democracy is the best way to run a country. I feel like I've just found out I'd been adopted and that my adoptive parents are actually serial killers."

Another commentary described the scene and elaborated on the puppetistas: "The day of the protest was beautiful. I was excited and ready to go. We noticed a strong police presence when we neared the site of the protest. The site was a closed off street leading to a barbed wire fence at the far end. Behind that fence was Fort Benning.... A stage for speeches and music was set up in front of the fence.... There were displays covering information from the El Mozote massacre to the continuing repression of agricultural workers.... There was a drum line which began the show known as puppetismo. We watched as giant puppets symbolically reenacted scenes depicting western imperialism. In the end, the puppets representing hope, joy, and justice defeated the Western war machine. Some protesters then carried a sign to the street which read, 'This is the end of the Road for the SOA.'

