

## POST-NAFTA POLITICS: LEARNING FROM ASIA

by MARTIN HART-LANDSBERG

The recent passage of NAFTA marks another advance in the ongoing TNC (transnational corporate)-led process of North American economic integration, a process which has already shown itself to be destructive of community, the environment, and equality. While the North American corporate community clearly favors this integration, the many anti-NAFTA rallies and demonstrations in Canada, Mexico, and the United States gives strong indication that most working people do not.

Hoping to strengthen and deepen this largely unorganized but strongly felt opposition, progressive activists in all three countries worked hard to take advantage of the NAFTA debate, not only to document the costs associated with this capitalist-led regionalization process, but also to build a popular mass movement capable of defining and struggling for an alternative vision of political, social, and economic life in North America. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, we were far better at the former than the latter.

So, what next? If we are to effectively build on our recent efforts to create a more democratic and just North America we must, in my opinion, do two things: increase our understanding of this regionalization process and sharpen our strategic thinking concerning movement building. One im-

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portant way to do both is to critically study the experiences of people in other regions who are actively confronting their own TNC-led regionalization process. While activists in this country often take Europe as a point of reference, I have been particularly impressed by the organizing work of Japanese activists, and it is their efforts that I highlight below. A focus on Japan is especially relevant for our work here, since many NAFTA supporters defended the treaty as necessary to keep “ruthless” Japanese competition from destroying our economy.

### The Japanese Experience

Transnational corporations have, according to the *UN World Investment Report*, become the “central organizers of economic activities in an increasingly integrated world economy.”<sup>1</sup> Most TNC production and investment takes place within the advanced capitalist world, primarily the United States, Japan, and the European Community—what the United Nations calls the Triad—as the world’s most powerful corporations fight to establish themselves in each other’s home markets.

However, despite this focus on core markets, TNC power has also grown in the Third World.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most significantly, flows of foreign direct investment into any given Third World (or Central and Eastern European) county are increasingly coming from a single investing country. The result: countries receiving foreign direct investment are being drawn into one of three tightly drawn clusters, each tied to a different Triad power. In short, competition has driven TNCs from each of the three Triad powers to try to build their own “regionally-integrated, independently sustainable networks of overseas affiliates.”<sup>3</sup> Corporate survival in the global economy is thus coming to depend upon the relative efficiency of competing regionally-organized production systems.

In many ways, Japanese corporate efforts in this regard have been the most successful. Japan has become Asia’s most important investor, trading partner, source of technology,

and provider of foreign aid. More relevant to our discussion here, between 1984 and 1989, Japanese foreign direct investment in East Asia grew five-fold.<sup>4</sup> Even more importantly, the nature of this investment has changed, from raw material extraction to manufacturing and, within manufacturing, from low-technology production to high-technology production. As part of this process, Japanese firms operating in Asia have now been joined by their traditional suppliers, thus reproducing in Asia the same corporate alliance system that dominates the Japanese economy. One consequence of this new, highly-structured regional division of labor is the gradual detachment of Japanese corporations from the Japanese economy.

By the end of the decade, many Japanese activists had come to believe that as a result of this Japanese corporate strategy it was no longer possible to make significant strides towards the creation of a truly democratic, egalitarian, and peaceful Japan (or any other country in the region for that matter), through national struggle alone. Any attempt to shape or restrict corporate activity for purposes of creating better jobs, higher wages, protecting the environment, or securing greater community control over daily life could be blocked by the ability of Japanese corporations to shift their production and wealth from one country to another. Political struggles were, as a result, becoming increasingly defensive in nature, defined more by what seemed possible, than guided by any strategic vision of radical transformation.

What was needed according to this understanding, was the establishment of a regional alliance of workers, farmers, women, the urban poor, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, and peace activists (to mention just some of the key groups), for the purpose of creating both a new vision of the future (built on principles of regional solidarity) and a common struggle for realizing it. And, for such an alliance to succeed, those who were suffering the most from the logic of existing regional and national economic and political structures had to be assured a leading role in the process of creating new ones. Taking up the challenge, a group of Japanese

activists issued a call for a People's Plan for the Twenty-First Century (PP21).<sup>5</sup>

### The People's Plan for the Twenty-First Century

In 1989, approximately 120,000 Japanese and 280 activists and people's movements leaders from thirty-three other countries (the overwhelming majority from the Asia-Pacific region) met in Japan to participate in the first PP21 gathering. Nineteen different programs, each with a different focus, were held in thirteen different locations over a one month period. There were, for example, separate meetings for workers, farmers, women, indigenous people, and migrant workers, as well as for those concerned with cultural issues, peace and disarmament, and education and human rights. Those attending each meeting were responsible for developing their own statement of purpose, and the gathering as a whole issued a final declaration which attempted to integrate the various concerns and hopes expressed in the individual meetings. This first gathering was judged a success by most participants for many reasons, one of the most basic being that it was the first time that the various regional and national movements and organizations had ever met together to share experiences.

A second PP21 gathering was held in Thailand in 1992, with over 500 people from forty-six different countries in attendance representing various national, regional, and international movements, networks, and NGOs. Once again, there were numerous forums and many workshops. And, as at the first gathering each forum and workshop issued a report, the principles of which were integrated into a final statement. Planning is now underway for the third gathering, scheduled to take place in South Asia sometime in 1995.

These gatherings are not intended to produce either a PP21 organization with its own leaders or a detailed blueprint for an alternative future. Rather, the organizers hope that they will serve as periodic "culminating points," at which time those groups committed to the PP21 process can meet to re-evaluate

and refocus their efforts. Such moments create opportunities for those involved to reconcile differences, strengthen connections, and develop collective responses to problems facing the people of the region.

The PP21 approach to organizing—giving recognition to the ongoing efforts and struggles of already existing groups and giving them primary responsibility for debating, structuring, and organizing their own agenda—has enabled the PP21 process to take shape quickly and democratically. Moreover, it is an honest response to the fact that no one organization can or should create a vision of the future for all people. Those who issued the call for the PP21 hope that by offering activists a broader and trans-border structure within which to work, the end result will be a qualitatively new kind of political movement—one that is decentralized, democratic, and regionally integrated.<sup>6</sup>

In keeping with this thinking, one of the most important concepts being advanced by the PP21 process is that of “trans-border participatory democracy,” by which is meant both a goal and a process. In terms of a goal it refers to the creation of a new kind of global democracy. In terms of a process it refers to the rights of people in any one country to directly intervene in the affairs of another country to oppose any actions that might negatively affect them. Such trans-border political action is seen as providing the starting point for creating “trans-border alliances” and eventually a “trans-border people.”

Some successes have already been achieved. For example, a PP21 South Asian gathering in late 1993 provided an opportunity for a number of popular groups from Nepal, India, and Bangladesh to meet in Calcutta to discuss common concerns related to the Ganges. The result was an agreement to form “a trans-border people’s alliance” to respond to the economic and ecological problems arising from deforestation.

### Japan PP21 Activities

To provide a more complete basis for evaluating the political nature and significance of the PP21, I offer the following brief overview of some recent Japan PP21 activities. Japanese PP21 activists appear to give special attention and support to the struggles of Japanese family farmers and indigenous people. My impression is that this is because they believe that the values expressed by members of these two groups—the importance of community, spirituality, self-sufficiency, respect for nature, etc.—should be at the heart of any new social movement or vision of the future.

More specifically, PP21 activists have helped Japanese organic family farmers strengthen their own networks as well as their ties with several large and progressive Japanese consumer cooperatives. Activists have also organized meetings between women who are part of farming households and women from the urban women's movement to discuss issues related to gender relations in farming communities.

PP21-sponsored activities have also encouraged greater regional contacts among Asian family farmers. Japanese organic farmers have hosted farmers from Thailand and South Korea to discuss organic farming techniques, producer-consumer links, and strategies to defend family farming. Japanese farmers have also visited and worked on farms in Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Several Japanese consumer coops are also working with agricultural workers in Negros in the Philippines to create a new trade relationship. The coops purchase bananas at higher than market prices to support new initiatives in Negros which involve the picking, packing, and shipping of bananas by worker-controlled enterprises.

The 1989 PP21 gathering helped to expose many Japanese to the struggle being waged by the Ainu people for legal recognition of their indigenous rights (the Ainu are the original natives of Japan). Since then, Japan PP21 activists have worked with Ainu leaders to organize two national speak-

ing tours and played a leading role in the formation of a new citizen's group, "*Sisamu*" (meaning neighbors in the Ainu language), which is dedicated to working with the Ainu to restore Ainu rights and create a non-racist Japan.

The PP21 has also inspired a number of new women's initiatives, including the Asian Feminist Art Association which brings together more than 100 feminist artists and movement activists. The Association has sponsored various presentations which often include women from other Asian countries. For example, programs have been developed on the situation of Thai women in Japan which have been shown in both Japan and Thailand. More generally, Japan PP21 activists have given considerable attention to the situation of migrant women in Japan (especially those who are forced to work in Japan's growing sex industry) and to the issue of "women in development" (challenging the logic of Japan's official foreign aid program). This work is seen as part of the larger struggle to build ties between women in Japan and in other Asian countries as well as to challenge patriarchy in Japan.

Another major Japan PP21 initiative involves organizing a common trans-border struggle against the construction of golf courses and other resort facilities on agricultural lands. Many Japanese corporations are buying farm land in Japan to build resorts and golf courses. This has produced local anti-golf course movements led by farmers and environmentalists. Similarly, Japanese corporations are displacing local farmers and fisherpeople in many Southeast Asian countries for the purpose of building tourist facilities. These people are also engaged in resistance. Activists associated with the PP21 movement have organized meetings of members from both campaigns so that the people involved can come to appreciate the common roots of their respective struggles and hopefully develop a more radical and common strategy of resistance.

A final example of PP21-inspired activity: Korean workers have come to Japan several times to press for their rights in struggles against Japanese-owned companies operating in Korea. Japanese workers and PP21 activists have organized

solidarity activities with these workers, producing several victories and greater solidarity between workers in both countries.<sup>7</sup>

### PP21: A Critical Assessment

The PP21 represents a notable effort to promote a popular and democratic movement for social transformation. And, in spite of significant differences in the culture, history, and economic forces shaping Asian and North American regional relationships, there is, I believe, much that we can learn from a careful study of its practice.

In my opinion, the PP21's strengths include:

- its recognition that organizing for change must be carried out through a process that renews our belief in and commitment to creating new ways of living.
- its recognition that, given the nature of global capitalism, this new vision can best be formed as part of a regional dialogue and given expression through coordinated regional action.
- its recognition that Asian activists do not need a new organization but rather a broad structure to help coordinate, integrate, and focus the activities of already existing organizations.

There are also potential weaknesses, however:

- while the decision to create a PP21 structure that draws upon and is in turn shaped by the activities of existing grassroots organizations is very attractive, there is a danger that PP21 gatherings will end up producing a collection of separate demands for change—each generated by and reflecting the interests of different social groups (farmers, workers, women, environmentalists, etc.)—rather than an integrated overall vision of social transformation.

- while Japan PP21's focus on the activities of groups which model new social relations—alternative farming communities, consumer and worker cooperatives, etc.—is understandable given the high priority activists place on encouraging new social visions, such activities do not necessarily form the basis for a strategy of transformation. It is unclear, for example, whether they point the way to the kind of movements we need to strengthen if we are to engage in a direct struggle against existing capitalist organizations and institutions. In fact, there is a danger that such a focus will lead activists to underestimate the importance of encouraging and supporting more innovative forms of traditional class-based political activity, including worker organizing and political education.

- while the PP21's commitment to regional or trans-border organizing is praiseworthy, there is a danger that this commitment may come at the expense of national organizing to challenge national power relations. Trans-border concerns and struggles should not be pitted against national concerns and struggles. Rather, a trans-border vision should inspire and inform national movements for social transformation, which should, in turn, strengthen and be strengthened by trans-border political action. Thus, while national strategies should be developed and refined as part of a trans-border process, national power and national interests continue to be meaningful and the struggle to organize people to challenge and change social systems must still primarily be waged within that framework.

The PP21 provides a challenging reference point for evaluating our own past anti-NAFTA organizing efforts. Among the most important questions still facing our movement: how can we further our own and others' understanding of possible alternatives to the ongoing capitalist-directed regionalization process? To what extent should our own national organizing be informed by regional concerns and

struggles? What organizational structure is most appropriate for coordinating and integrating our own national efforts as well as those of activists through out the region? Unfortunately NAFTA has passed; our work continues.

## NOTES

1. UN Center on Transnational Corporations, *World Investment Report 1992: Transnational Corporations as Engines of Growth*, (New York: United Nations, 1992), p. 1.
2. For example, foreign direct investment accounted for approximately 75 percent of all private long term capital flows to the Third World in the 1986-1990 period, compared with only 30 percent in the 1981-1985 period. *Ibid.*, p. 57
3. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
4. "Japan ties up the Asian market," *The Economist*, April 24, 1993, p. 33.
5. The Pacific-Asia Resource Center in Tokyo was one of the initiators of and continues to play a leading role in the PP21. One can learn more about the PP21 and Japan PP21 activities by reading the Center's English language periodical, *AMPO: Japan-Asia Quarterly Review*.
6. The São Paulo Forum, founded in 1990 at a meeting organized by the Workers Party of Brazil, represents an interesting contrast to the gatherings of the PP21. The Forum, which meets annually, brings together a number of left parties and movements from around the Americas, including the Brazilian Workers Party, The Sandinista National Liberation Front of Nicaragua, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front of El Salvador, the Cuban Communist Party, the Lavalas movement of Haiti, and the Democratic Party of the Revolution of Mexico, to discuss ways of building regional unity and developing collective economic and political strategies for social transformation. The fourth round of the Forum, held in Cuba in July 1993, focused on electoral strategies. For more on the São Paulo Forum see "The Sao Paulo Forum: Is There a New Latin American Left?," by William I. Robinson, *Monthly Review*, December 1992.
7. South Korean workers carried out a similar action in the United States. In 1990, three South Korean union leaders came to the United States to demand justice from Pico Products, a Syracuse, New York, cable TV components manufacturer. The company had shut down its Korean subsidiary, Pico Korea, and fled the country without paying its three hundred workers their back wages and severance pay. After a long and unsuccessful campaign to force the company to pay, the workers tried to use the U.S. legal system to sue the company for violating South Korean labor law. The case was lost, largely because Pico Products was able to convince the court that it was not responsible for the actions of its subsidiary.