

American Union (AU): An Alternative to Neoliberal Globalization?

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Introduction by R.D. Vogel

Neoliberal globalization, which began after World War II and has expanded exponentially since the 1980s, has produced dramatic inequality between and within nations, fostered continuing militarism, and contributed the lion's share to the looming crisis of climate change. The very idea of somehow combating what appeared to be an irresistible force has been a daunting enterprise, to say the least. Until now...

It is now clear that neoliberal globalization does not serve the needs of a majority of the world's population, and, as economic metapolicy, is simply not sustainable. The question of combating globalization is rapidly becoming the question of what will follow the meltdown of the neoliberal global economic system.

From the Left is committed to looking at possible alternatives to the present world economic order and ways out of the ongoing economic crisis. In that vein, Ruben Botello has submitted the following article about the possibility of an American Union based on the model of the European Union (EU) -- it deserves careful consideration. His concept of an American Union is not to be confused with the neoliberal scheme of a North American Union that lurked behind the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP). The SPP, negotiated behind closed doors, appears to be nothing more than an expansion of NAFTA for those who benefited from NAFTA -- SPPM if you will -- a Security and Prosperity Partnership for the Multinationals. The American Union, on the other hand, attempts to resolve national contradictions rather than just profit the executives and stockholders of the multinationals and their government brokers.

Read Ruben's article closely -- the debate about the future of the Americas after the meltdown of neoliberal globalization must begin now.

AMERICAN UNION (AU)

by Ruben Botello

The European Union (EU) was established after ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. This economic and political union evolved out of the European Coal and Steel Community formed by Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands in 1950, to revive heavy industry in the aftermath of World War II. (See http://europa.eu/abc/history/index_en.htm)

Today, the EU is comprised of 27 European countries working toward peace, prosperity and freedom in a fairer and safer world. Its member-nations have set up three main bodies to run the EU, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission. Other EU bodies are the Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, the European Central Bank and the European Investment Bank. (See http://europa.eu/abc/panorama/index_en.htm)

Since 9/11, the United States and other American nations have been struggling with new economic and political crises, while having to combat terrorism in and outside our respective borders. An American Union similar to the European Union could unite us with our neighboring nations and outlying territories, to work together toward more effective solutions to these complex problems.

For example, a major problem facing the United States and other American nations and outlying territories today is immigration. EU citizens are generally able to live, work, study and travel freely in any nation of the European Union. The EU ensures equal treatment for EU workers in every EU nation, and an American Union could provide similar freedoms and protections for its workers in AU nations or member states, too.

Another major problem-area is trade relations. The European Commission maintains a strong partnership with its nations and businesses to deliver market access throughout the EU, and established regulations in 1995 for EU businesses to tackle trade barriers in export markets. (See <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/tackling-unfair-trade/trade-barriers/>)

As declared on the official website of the European Union: *"The EU is firmly committed to the promotion of open and fair trade with all its trading partners. In addition to the WTO's multilateral negotiations, the EU concludes bilateral agreements and devises specific trading policies with third countries and regional areas. Bilateral agreements are agreements between two political entities, thus legally binding these two territories only. Bilateral trade relations are about agreement on custom unions, free-trade, association, co-operation and partnership."* (See <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/>)

The American Union could similarly protect AU businesses from unfair trade barriers in and outside the Union, while protecting its AU workers from unfair treatment in the labor markets of every AU nation. The American Union does not have to be a "carbon-copy" of the European Union. Still, imagine that the following 2009 overview of the European Union found at www.europa.eu is describing an American Union of the near future:

Fewer frontiers, more opportunities

You can travel across most of the EU without a passport and without border checks.

You can shop in another country where goods are cheaper without restrictions or additional taxes, as long as what you buy is for your own use. The single currency, the euro, allows you to compare prices directly in all the countries that use it. Travel between euro countries is easier because the costs and inconvenience of changing money have disappeared.

Competition introduced by the frontier-free single market has driven quality up and prices down. Phone calls, Internet access and air travel are cheaper. As consumers, EU rules protect you from faulty or substandard products whether you buy locally or in another country. The EU also sets the highest standards for food safety.

EU citizens can live, work, study and retire in another EU country. Temporary restrictions for workers from the 12 newest member states are gradually being removed.

Going abroad to learn

More than two million young people have already used EU programmes to study or train in another European country. As a result, the EU schemes for educational exchanges and trans-border partnerships like Erasmus and Leonardo are bywords among students and other learners.

The EU does not decide what you learn in school, but it does work to ensure that your educational and professional qualifications are properly recognised in other EU countries.

A greener Europe

A healthy environment is a big issue for Europeans and their governments. This is why the EU is spearheading world efforts to protect the environment and fight climate change.

As pollution knows no borders, EU member states have taken joint action in many areas. It is not surprising then that Europe's rivers and beaches are cleaner, vehicles pollute less, and there are strict rules for waste disposal. Dangerous waste from Europe can no longer be dumped in poor countries. There are also tough EU rules to ensure that chemicals used by companies are safe for people and the environment.

The EU wants key activities like transport, industry, agriculture and tourism to be organised in such a way that they can be developed without destroying our

natural resources — in short ‘sustainable development’.

Fighting climate change

In an effort to put an end to climate change, EU leaders have agreed on tough measures to reduce greenhouse gas emission by 20 % by 2020.

Energy represents the cornerstone of the EU’s long-term climate change policy and the EU has set binding targets to increase the use of clean, renewable energy sources such as wind, hydropower or solar energy. This will not only help fight climate change, but will also boost the economy and ensure a more stable supply of energy, making Europe less reliant on foreign oil and gas imports.

The EU has already put into place an innovative ‘emission trading scheme’, whereby energy-intensive companies which cut their emissions are rewarded and those who exceed the given limits are penalised.

Euros in your pocket

The euro (€) is probably the EU’s most tangible achievement. The single currency is shared by 16 countries (2009), representing over two thirds of the EU population. Others will follow once their economies are ready.

All euro notes and coins can be used in the countries where the euro is accepted. Each note is the same, while the coins have a common design on one side and a national emblem of their country of origin on the other side.

These EU countries use the euro: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

Equal chances

Our society is fairer and more efficient when we do not discriminate against fellow human beings because of their nationality, gender, handicap, race or other factors. That is why EU law bans discrimination.

As long ago as the 1950s, the first EU treaties contained a clear-cut rule that men and women must have equal pay for equal work. This has given the EU a pioneering role in the fight for women’s rights, which are now an integral part of all EU policies.

Freedom, security and justice for all

To tackle cross-border crime and terrorism, EU countries have taken steps to

ensure full cooperation between their police and customs officers, immigration services and law courts.

One practical step has been to introduce a European arrest warrant, to make it easier to transfer suspected criminals from the country where they have been arrested to the country where they are wanted for questioning or to stand trial. EU countries are also coordinating asylum policies and tightening controls at the EU's external frontiers.

Since EU citizens are free to live in any member country, they must have equal access to justice everywhere in the EU. Member governments have to ensure that they all apply EU laws in the same way, and that court rulings in one country can be enforced in another. The EU has done a lot to make it easier to solve cross-border legal problems involving marriage, separation, divorce and the custody of children, as well as other kinds of civil disputes.

Jobs and growth

The European Union has contributed to our prosperity over the years by creating a single market and single currency, and by removing other obstacles to trade and mobility.

This helped limit the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis on Europe. EU leaders worked together to stabilise banks and other financial institutions in Europe, as well as to develop a strategy for renewed economic growth.

In today's competitive world, Europe needs new jobs and a skilled workforce. New jobs can come from research and development. EU leaders plan to increase research spending substantially, the goal being 3 % of gross national product by 2010. New skills are needed too, and we must all spend more time learning throughout our lives.

One third of the EU's €130-billion-a-year budget is spent on attracting investment and creating jobs in disadvantaged regions, and training unemployed or under-qualified workers.

Thanks to EU support, people in countries like Ireland and Spain are much better off than they were 25 years ago. Now growth is highest in the new member countries in the eastern part of the EU.

Exporting peace and stability

War between EU countries is now unthinkable, thanks to the unity that has been built up between them over the last 50 years. Given this success, the EU is now working to spread peace and stability beyond its borders.

The best way to prevent conflicts from arising in the first place is to create greater prosperity worldwide. As the world's largest trading power, the EU is using its influence to establish fair rules for world trade. It wants to make sure that globalisation also benefits the poorest countries. The EU already provides more humanitarian assistance and development aid than anyone else.

The EU sends military and police missions as peacekeepers to trouble-spots such as the Balkans, for example. This is part of the defence aspect of the EU's common foreign and security policy.

The European Union shows how democratic countries can successfully pool economic and political resources in the common interest, serving as a possible model to be followed in other parts of the world.

A place in the Union

Since its creation by six founding members over 50 years ago, the European Union has attracted a constant stream of newcomers, culminating in its historic expansion from 15 to 27 in 2004 and 2007, which united a continent split by the Cold War for 45 years.

Any European country can join, provided it has a stable democracy that guarantees the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities. It must also have a functioning market economy and a civil service capable of applying EU laws in practice.

Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey are candidates to join. The EU gives substantial economic and practical assistance to candidate countries to help prepare for membership.

Up to 10 years or more can pass from the time a country submits an application to its actual date of entry. Once a membership treaty is agreed, it must be ratified by the European Parliament and by the national parliaments of the candidate country and of all EU member states.

Embracing a continent

EU members:

1952 Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands

1973 Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom

1981 Greece

1986 Portugal, Spain

1995 Austria, Finland, Sweden

2004 Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia

2007 Bulgaria, Romania

The following describes how the European Union works:

The European Parliament

"Voice of the people"

The European Parliament is elected every five years by the people of Europe to represent their interests.

The main job of Parliament is to pass European laws on the basis of proposals presented by the European Commission. Parliament shares this responsibility with the Council of the European Union. Parliament and Council also share joint authority for approving the EU's €130 billion annual budget.

Parliament has the power to dismiss the European Commission.

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) do not sit in national blocks, but in Europe-wide political groups. These include parties such as the European People's Party (Christian Democrats), socialists, liberals, greens and others. Between them, MEPs represent all views on European integration, from the strongly pro-federalist to the openly Eurosceptic.

The main meetings of the Parliament are held in Strasbourg (France), others in Brussels (Belgium). Like all other EU institutions, the Parliament works in all the 23 official EU languages. (See www.europarl.europa.eu)

The Parliament elects the European Ombudsman, who investigates citizens' complaints about maladministration by the EU institutions (See www.ombudsman.europa.eu).

The Council of the European Union

"Voice of the member states"

The Council of the European Union — formerly known as the Council of Ministers — is the EU's principal decision-taking body. It shares with Parliament the responsibility for passing EU laws. It is also in charge of the EU's foreign, security and defence policies, and is responsible for key decisions on justice and

freedom issues.

The Council consists of ministers from the national governments of all the EU countries. Meetings are attended by whichever ministers are responsible for the items to be discussed: foreign ministers, ministers of the economy and finance, ministers for agriculture and so on, as appropriate. Every six months, a different member state assumes the so-called Presidency of the EU, meaning that it chairs these meetings and sets the overall political agenda.

Each country has a number of votes in the Council broadly reflecting the size of its population, but weighted in favour of smaller countries. Most decisions are taken by majority vote, although sensitive issues in areas like taxation, asylum and immigration, or foreign policy, require unanimity.

Several times a year the presidents and/or prime ministers of the member states meet as the European Council. These ‘summit’ meetings set overall EU policy. (See www.consilium.europa.eu)

The European Commission

“Promoting the common interest”

The European Commission is the EU’s executive organ. It represents and upholds the interests of Europe as a whole.

It drafts proposals for new European laws, which it presents to the European Parliament and the Council. It manages the day-to-day business of implementing EU policies and spending EU funds. The Commission also makes sure that everyone abides by the European treaties and laws. It can act against rule-breakers, taking them to the European Court of Justice if necessary.

The Commission consists of 27 men and women — one from each EU country. They are assisted by about 24 000 civil servants, most of whom work in Brussels.

The president of the Commission is chosen by EU governments and endorsed by the European Parliament. The other commissioners are nominated by their national governments in consultation with the incoming president, and must be approved by the European Parliament. They do not represent the governments of their home countries. Instead, each of them has responsibility for a particular EU policy area.

The president and members of the Commission are appointed for a period of five years, coinciding with the period for which the European Parliament is elected. (See www.ec.europa.eu)

The Court of Justice

“The rule of law”

The job of the Court of Justice is to make sure that EU law is interpreted and applied in the same way in all EU countries, thereby ensuring that the law is equal for everyone. It ensures, for example, that national courts do not give different rulings on the same issue. The Court also makes sure that EU member states and institutions do what the law requires them to do. The Court is located in Luxembourg and has one judge from each member country. (See www.curia.europa.eu)

The Court of Auditors

“Getting value for your money”

The Court of Auditors checks that the EU’s funds, which come from the taxpayers, are spent legally, economically and for the intended purpose. The Court is based in Luxembourg and has the right to audit any organisation, body or company which handles EU funds. (See www.eca.europa.eu)

The European Economic and Social Committee

“Voice of civil society”

The 344 members of the European Economic and Social Committee represent a wide range of interests: from employers to trade unionists, from consumers to ecologists. The Committee is an advisory body which must be consulted on proposed EU decisions about employment, social spending, vocational training, etc. (See www.eesc.europa.eu)

The Committee of the Regions

“The local perspective”

The Committee of the Regions is consulted on upcoming EU decisions with a direct impact at the local or regional level in fields such as transport, health, employment or education. Its 344 members are often leaders of regional governments or mayors of cities. (See www.cor.europa.eu)

The European Central Bank

“A stable currency”

Based in Frankfurt (Germany), the European Central Bank is responsible for managing the euro, principally by setting interest rates. Its prime concern is ensuring price stability so that the European economy is not harmed by inflation. The Bank takes its decisions independently of governments and other bodies. (See www.ecb.eu)

The European Investment Bank

“Lending a helping hand”

The Bank lends money for projects of European interest, particularly in the less well-off regions. It finances infrastructure projects, such as rail and road links or environmental schemes. It also provides credit for investments by small businesses and lends to candidate states and developing countries. Because it is owned by EU governments, the bank can raise capital and provide loans and credit at favourable rates. (See www.eib.org)

There is really no human concern the European Union does not attempt to address on behalf of its diverse citizenry. EU does not claim or pretend to be perfect, but there are several major accomplishments it should be commended for despite its imperfections.

The same could be said of an American Union established to tackle the enormous problems facing our Americas today. Hatred and hostilities between our nations and outlying islands are making life increasingly more difficult, especially for the hundreds of millions of men, women and children living in poverty and despair throughout our Americas.

Millions are working for low wages, while millions more are unable to find jobs in or outside their native lands. Working together, economically and politically, the nations and territories of our Americas could make major strides against high unemployment, crime, illiteracy, hunger, homelessness, sickness and disease, so that the overall standard of living can be raised substantially throughout our Americas.

There are numerous other benefits that can be derived from an international union like the EU described at www.europa.eu . Such a union is in essence good neighbors working together for a better world.

Ruben Botello has been a human rights activist since 1970. Born and raised in Texas, Ruben joined the Marines after graduating from high school in 1965. The activist went to college on the G.I. Bill after returning from Vietnam in 1969, and earned California degrees in journalism, political science and jurisprudence. Ruben founded the American Homeless Society in 1987, and is its director today. To learn more about Ruben Botello, visit <http://home.comcast.net/~earthbeat/site/?/home/>.