

Would the last one to leave please turn off the lights

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Uruguay produces intelligent people who leave, to triumph and never to return, a garden of geniuses who get tired of colonial rules and emigrate to places where they can succeed. The lack of opportunity and future perspectives mean that more and more young people choose to live elsewhere. In the first half of the 20th century, Uruguay received mainly European-immigrants. In the early sixties, it became a country of emigration.

“Where will we end up?”

This question is posed by singer Jaime Roos and the popular musical group, *Murga Falta y Resto*¹ in a song that describes the unique situation of Uruguayans who wish to pursue their frustrated dreams elsewhere. This drama has grown in the last few years along with the economic recession and a sense of national despair.

According to the national immigration office,² nearly 5,000 passports were issued in the first six months of 2000, compared with 7,561 in all of 1999, an increase of about 30%. In the first seven months of 2000, 43,300 people emigrated, more than in the whole of 1999.

From 1 January 1995 to 25 June 2000, 260,975 Uruguayans left the country and did not return. These were not tourists eager to travel abroad, but people who emigrated to other countries in search of secure jobs and dignified lives. From 1963 to 1975, 218,000 Uruguayans abandoned the country. In 1974, during the dictatorship, nearly 65,000 people were exiled.

According to Ernesto Murro, who represents workers at the Social Security Bank (BPS), “almost 60 Uruguayans leave the country every day, ranging from young people to people in their fifties”.

Opportune electoral reform³

In December 1996, Uruguayan citizens approved by plebiscite a constitutional reform that includes important changes in the political and electoral system. The main reforms introduced a second round of balloting in presidential elections when no candidate gains more than 50% of the vote, mandatory internal election of presidential candidates within their parties, and chronological separation of national elections from departmental and municipal elections.

In the last national election, in October 1999—the first elections to put these reforms into practice—the results forced a second round between the progressive party, which obtained 40% of the votes, and the Colorado Party, with 32%. Thanks to a coalition between the two traditional parties (Colorado and National), and thanks to the reform, the presidency remained in the hands of Dr. Jorge Batlle of the Colorado Party.

The brand-new president

In contrast to previous governments, the new government, which assumed power on 1 March 2000, supports a solution to the problem of people who were “disappeared” by the dictatorship. The government demonstrated this support by collaborating with investigations to identify missing persons⁴ and with creation of a mechanism to carry forward the investigations, which resulted in August 2000 in the formation of the Commission for Peace. According to the Peace and Justice Service – Uruguay (SERPAJ), while creation of the Commission was essential, it is unlikely to help solve the root problem of the disappeared.

Recently President Batlle inaugurated the International Seminar “Toward free trade in the Americas: legal and regulatory barriers”. Batlle said “...many people now speak of globalisation, but globalisation has existed since Rome. Only now there is no globalisation, it is a great lie, because Europe and the United States have closed markets.” The president added: “One looks at these people who protest globalisation and fight the police. But if one asks them if they favour exports they answer yes. They are against globalisation but in favour of exports. In reality they are insane.” This provoked the first laughter of the evening. Batlle gave his total support to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and said he believed that “free commerce generates prosperity.” Later, the president announced his intention of hiring a Mexican expert to negotiate bilaterally with the US.

At the Panamerican Seed Meeting, held in Punta del Este, Batlle firmly supported the production of genetically modified food. On this occasion, he stated that the future of the world’s food is in transgenics. By opening Uruguay’s doors to genetically modified food, “Latin America is telling the world that it is willing to assume the challenges of knowledge.” Batlle said nothing about the environmental risks of genetic manipulation.

The reproduction of poverty

Unlike other Latin American countries, Uruguay has a shortage of children and teenagers. As a result, biological reproduction is left to the extremely poor sectors. Over half the children born in Uruguay are born into poverty, which strengthens the process of exclusion. The disparities in inter-generational poverty deepened slightly in the period from 1996 to 2000. According to recent studies, 51.54% of the children aged 0 - 4 have at least one unsatisfied basic need.

Infant mortality has decreased, but there are alarming differences by zone. On the east coast of Montevideo, infant mortality is four per thousand live births; on the outskirts of Montevideo, it grows to between 34 and 40 deaths for each thousand births.

1 Jaime Roos is a popular Uruguayan singer with international fame. The *Murga Falta y Resto* is representative of the Carnival groups.

2 Data extracted from different press articles quoted by Comcosur: Participative Communication Southern Cone–Europe e-mail: comcosur@chasque.apc.org. Comcosur is part of AMARC (Worldwide Association of Community Radios) and RECOSUR (Southern Cone Informative Communications Network). Comcosur is supported by the Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland (EMW).

3 This section is based on the report *Human Rights in Uruguay, 2000 Report*, Peace and Justice Service–Uruguay (SERPAJ), Montevideo, 2000. <http://www.serpaj.org.uy>

4 For example, the investigation into the identity of the granddaughter of Juan Gelman, a renowned Argentinian whose child and daughter-in-law were victims of repression during the military dictatorship. His daughter, conceived in the hardest of times, had been given to a Uruguayan family. The government also participated in the search to clarify the presumption that a young man could be the disappeared child, Simón Riquelo.

In the last two years, spending has increased for targeted childhood policies carried out by the National Children's Institute (INAME). This means wider coverage and more services. Coverage also increased within the educational system, which was financed by external funds from multilateral organisations. The systematic progress in schooling at an early age is an achievement that must be sustained and cared for. The agreements made with civil society organisations, who work with the majority of boys and girls in the INAME programs, constitute another achievement.

Despite this progress, the country is behind in the area of child and youth rights, since these are still ruled by the Children's Code of 1934. Uruguay has not adopted the International Convention of Children's Rights.

Contraction of the labour market

With less production, businesses need fewer employees, and business-people have negative expectations regarding a possible reactivation of the economy. An evaluation by the Cuesta Duarte Institute (PIT-CNT)⁵ in 2000 found fewer jobs in almost every sector of the economy. The total employment rate for the country averaged 51.9%⁶ for the first six months of 2000. It was 52.6% in 1999.

The unemployment rate for the last quarter of 2000 was 14.2%, 11.1% for men and 17.7% for women. The rate for the same quarter in 1999 was 11.3%, 8.9% for men and 14.2% for women.

The concentration of sales in the hands of large supermarket chains,⁷ the subsequent disappearance of small businesses and the economic strangling of suppliers is not a new or recent phenomenon. What is peculiar is the ability of the supermarket chains to expand despite the widespread and powerful resistance they generate. There is practically no political actor capable of uttering a favourable opinion on the oligopoly that sustains the chains of the French group Casino (Disco, Devoto and Géant). There is no business entity that, to a greater or lesser degree, does not feel negatively affected by the massive power of supermarketism. The problem is that political resistance came late. The issue nevertheless reveals the worst consequences of free trade, and—at the pinnacle of liberalising discourse—has generated strong support among business corporations for greater market regulation.

The latest study on household income⁸ revealed that 23% of Uruguayan households earn less than PU 5,000 monthly (approx. USD 416).⁹ At least 3,000 households subsist on less than PU 1,000 monthly (approx. USD 83.3). On the other extreme, only 8.4% of households (81,000 households) have incomes of PU 20,000 – 30,000 (USD 1,700 – 2,500), and 7% collect even higher incomes. In all, 74% of the country's households earn less than PU 15,000 (USD 1,250/month).

Forty per cent of the EAP has no social security¹⁰

A recent report found that 41% of the economically active population (EAP), approx. 500,000 people, has no real social security coverage.¹¹ Fifty-four per cent (658,000

Uruguayans) suffer employment problems. Both the number of people who lack social security and of those with employment problems increased four points in the last decade. The number of people with no social security coverage grew by almost 100,000. According to Ernesto Murro,¹² “these are alarming figures, and in our opinion they are conservative figures. The real numbers are much greater.”

The report concludes that the problem is not temporary but structural and permanent. Workers who are in the informal sector do not pass into the formal sector. A culture of informality is being created. The average age of informal workers is greater than that of formal workers. Three groups are more likely to be in the informal sector: young people in general, women, and people over 45 years of age.

The general director of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Juan Somavía,¹³ declared that “economic growth and price stability has not translated into significant improvements in employment or wages. The modernisation of the economy is taking place at the expense of increasing precariousness in labour relations, which often has disastrous consequences for workers.” He also stated that present reforms “do not extend protection to all workers, but rather, in some cases, reduce it.”

Eighty-five per cent of unemployed workers (115,000) have no unemployment insurance. Among vulnerable workers,¹⁴ 90% have no social security (151,000). Ten per cent of workers are family workers without pay—children and women who help in the family for no pay. Sixty-six per cent of domestic workers (61,500 women) have no pension or insurance coverage and 77% have no health coverage.

Uruguay is the only country in the world that requires 35 years of registered employment to qualify for a retirement pension. People never make it. It costs PU 1,900 to register a one-person company, an amount that favours informality. There has been a serious cutback in pensions for disabled persons. Failure to extend the family subsidies system leaves almost 200,000 poor children without these benefits.

Violence takes a woman's life every nine days¹⁵

Annually, 40 women die violently in Uruguay. There is little awareness of the high level of domestic violence against women. “If there was, the population would not be surprised by such alarming statistics,” said Graciela Dufau,¹⁶ who revealed this data in the framework of the “International No to Violence Against Women Day”, 24 November 2000.

Dufau's investigation also revealed that almost half of the women living with a partner in Montevideo have suffered threats, insults or the destruction of some property, at least twice annually, by their partners. Uruguay is one of the few countries that does not yet have a law against domestic violence.

Fertility patterns have changed drastically. From 1985 to present, there has been a rise in teenage pregnancies (poor adolescents), while women 20 to 30 years old have fallen behind in this area (middle/high income sector, where a professional formation is the priority). Pregnancies have increased among women aged 30-34.

According to data from the Ministry of Public Health, 32% of mothers receiving public healthcare services (2,700/year) come back for their second pregnancy, and of these, 48% are single. Only 13% are married and 27% are in a free relationship. Among these mothers, only 15% have finished high school. ■

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5 PIT-CNT: Central Workers Union. Evaluation made by the Peace and Justice Service (SERPAJ), for the 2000 report *Human Rights in Uruguay*.

6 This rate refers to population of 14-years and over, urban households in cities of 5,000 or more inhabitants, whole country, since 1998. National Institute of Statistics (INE), <http://www.ine.gub.uy/>

7 An article by Nelson Cesin in Weekly *Brecha*, 25 November 2000, entitled *All power to the (super)market?* <http://www.brecha.com.uy/>

8 National Institute of Statistics (INE), quoted in article by Comcosur: Participative Communication Southern Cone–Europe, comcosur@chasque.apc.org

9 In December 2000, USD 1 = PU 12 (Uruguayan Pesos).

10 This section is based on El Espectador Radio. EN PERSPECTIVA, 3 April 2001. Interview by Emiliano Cotelo of Ernesto Murro, representative of the workers on the board of the Social Security Bank. <http://www.espectador.com>

11 A report entitled “Informality and social security in Uruguay” elaborated by request of the ILO of Geneva and Lima and produced by the workers on the Board of the Social Security Bank, in collaboration with the departments of Social Sciences and Economy of the state university, and financed by the Friedrich Eberhart Foundation.

12 Interview on El Espectador Radio with Emiliano Cotelo. <http://www.espectador.com>.

13 “Decent work and protection for all”, 1999.

14 Workers who depend on industry or commerce and have no social security.

15 Article quoted by Comcosur, *op. cit.* *Violence against women: 40 killed each year*, by Eduardo Curuchet, Uruguay, 21 November, 2000.

16 Graciela Dufau. *A matter of life: regional balance and women's challenges for a violence-free life*.