

'CONFIDENCE IN THE PEOPLE, CONFIDENCE IN THE GRASSROOTS'
Venezuela fights for socialism in the 21st century

by Federico Fuentes and Kiraz Janicke

CONTENTS

New Moves to Build Workers' Power	3
ALBA Vows to Fight Climate Change with System Change.....	7
The Revolution Faces Crucial Battles.....	10
Chavez's Historic Call for International Socialist Unity	14

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Federico Fuentes is an associate of the Centro Internacional Miranda, an independent agency in Caracas funded by Venezuela's Ministry of Popular Power for Higher Education. He and Marta Harnecker lead two CIM study projects: "Political Instruments for the 21st Century" and "Popular Participation in Public Management." Federico's articles on Venezuela have been widely published, including by *Green Left Weekly*, *Socialist Voice*, and *Venezuelanalysis*.

Kiraz Janicke is a journalist for *Venezuelanalysis.com*, the foremost independent English-language source of news on Venezuela. She is editor of the *Peru en Movimiento* website and is part of the *Green Left Weekly* Caracas bureau.

Federico and Kiraz are members of Socialist Alliance in Australia.

Copyright 2010 by Socialist Voice
 Published by South Branch Publications.
 ISBN 978-1-897578-11-7
 Printed in Canada

Socialist Voice

Marxist Perspectives for the 21st Century

A forum for discussion of today's struggles of the workers and oppressed from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism, based in Canada but international in scope.

For a free email subscription send a blank email to
Socialist-Voice-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

www.socialistvoice.com

New Moves to Build Workers' Power

By Federico Fuentes

(Socialist Voice, April 6, 2010)

“The free, sovereign and independent homeland of our dreams will only come true if we radicalize the process and speed up the transition to socialism,” Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez wrote in his March 14 weekly column, “Chavez Lines.”

The Venezuelan government has launched a number of initiatives in recent weeks aimed to tackle threats to the revolutionary process — including from elements within the pro-Chavez camp that seek to undermine plans to deepen the revolution.

Central to this are new measures aimed at speeding up the transfer of power to organized communities.

Chavez wrote in his February 21 column: “The time has come for communities to assume the powers of state, which will lead administratively to the total transformation of the Venezuelan state and socially to the real exercise of sovereignty by society through communal powers.”

Participatory democracy

The previous day, Chavez announced the creation of the Federal Government Council in front of thousands of armed peasants that are part of the newly created peasant battalions in the Bolivarian militia.

As well as the vice-president, government ministers, state governors and mayors, the council includes representatives of communal councils, communes and other representatives directly elected by the people.

The communal councils are grassroots bodies that bring together existing community organizations that have sprung up in Venezuela’s poor neighbourhood, around issues such as access to health, education, water and electricity.

The councils encompass 200-400 families in urban areas and 20-50 families in rural areas. Decisions on which problems to prioritize and how to tackle them are made in citizen assemblies open to the entire community.

Funding for the councils comes from the government, but a strong emphasis is placed on relying on local cooperatives, volunteer labour and local expertise to bypass private contractors and empower the community.

Communes bring together various local communal councils and other social organizations in order to tackle problems on a larger scale. There are 187 communes in the process of being created nationally.

Communes are being encouraged to play a direct economic role, such as creating cooperatives, taking over idle factories to be reopened under

worker-community control, and setting up communal markets to sell produce from other communes.

The federal government council brings together representatives of the old state structures with the new, emerging communal state. The council aims to help transfer various powers now held by the national government, state governorships and mayoralties to these emerging organs of peoples' power.

Such organs include workers' and peasants' councils, which will also be represented on the council.

Workers' control

There are also indications the government is moving to transfer control over the running of important state industries to their workers.

One example is Plan Guayana Socialista, which involves tens of thousands of workers in the industrial complex in Bolivar state.

Workers, backed by Chavez, have been discussing, and in some cases implementing, a radical transformation in the running of local aluminum, iron ore, steel and mining companies.

There are also important moves in the electrical sector, which has been plagued with problems. Hydroelectric dams that are at critically low levels due to ongoing droughts generate some 70% of Venezuela's electricity.

The sector also suffers from years of under-investment by pre-Chavez governments that were preparing to privatize the state-owned industry.

Declaring a state of emergency in the electrical sector, Chavez has called on the workers to actively participate in management.

This has long been a demand of the workers themselves, who finally won this year an important 15-month-long battle against state management for a new collective contract.

The new contract not only equalizes pay and conditions across the electricity sector (as part of integrating newly nationalized companies with the pre-existing state industry), it also enshrines worker and community participation in management.

Since then, the Federation of Electrical Workers (Fetraelec) and new electricity minister Ali Araque Rodriguez have been removing managers who have operated against the interests of the workers and sabotaged the industry.

In some places, workers have begun to take control over local affiliates of Corpoelec, the national state-owned power company.

Chavez also named Raul Arocha as president of CADAFE, a key component of Corpoelec. Arocha is an engineer who was elected by workers as manager of the Merida zone of CADAFE and helped develop workers' participation there.

Fetraelec proposed Arocha's appointment due to his proven commitment to promoting worker participation. Fetraelec is organizing nationwide workers' assemblies to develop a plan for how workers can run the sector. The assemblies will culminate with a mass meeting with Chavez where workers will present their proposals to restructure Corpoelec.

In a March 18 press conference with Fetraelec leaders, Jaua said: "Chavez wants the workers to convert themselves in protagonist subject ... via the creation of socialist companies, with the decisive and active participation of the workers."

In response to allegations by the right-wing opposition that Chavez is seeking to concentrate power in his own hands, Vice-President Elias Juau told the February 20 gathering of armed peasants: "We did not come here to concentrate power but rather to dismantle the national oligarchy.

"For us, the only way to avoid the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the oligarchy is to return power to the people."

This encroachment on the economic and political power of local and Western capitalist interests has provoked a violent reaction.

One example is the response of large landowners to the government's land reform program, in which 2.5 million hectares have been redistributed to poor peasants since 2001. In that time, more than 250 peasant leaders have been killed at the hands of paramilitaries hired by large landowners.

In response to this violence, and as part of preparing for a potential foreign military attack, peasant battalions of the Bolivarian militia have been formed this year.

Chavez has also argued for the creation of worker battalions organized in factories. He said: "The Bolivarian Militia, as well as community councils, are expressions of the new communal state, an integral part of the new structure of the communal power we are building."

A new state

Chavez said creating a new state was needed "to demolish the old perverse vestiges and new threats of bureaucratism." He said, "The best and most radically democratic of the options for defeating bureaucracy and corruption is the construction of a communal state."

A recent example of government moves to tackle corruption was the arrest of a number of bankers. Many of the arrested claimed to support the revolutionary process. But through deals signed with government ministries and other state institutions, they had created a network of corruption with state funds. More than 30 bankers face charges. The state intervened into eight banks (of which six are now run by the state), and several dozen companies owned by the bankers were nationalized.

Reformist and corrupt practices within state companies and the govern-

ment have set back past attempts to move towards workers' control.

The push by electricity workers between 2004 and 2006 for workers' participation in management was rolled back by reformist sectors within the company and the government. The workers are confronting some of these same forces in the renewed battle for workers' control.

In Guayana, aluminum workers have denounced a number of attempts by management, and national and state officials, to sabotage workers' participation — which has increased discontent and disillusionment among workers toward the government.

One recent example is a contract signed by management to sell semi-finished materials to the multinational Glencore for the next six years, with no consultation with the workers.

Such corrupt deals with multinationals remove the possibility of workers deciding where production should be geared.

Venezuela is an underdeveloped nation heavily reliant on its oil industry. One of the key aims of the revolution is to overcome this through national development. Production for foreign markets on behalf of multinationals undermines this goal.

It contradicts Chavez's January 24 announcement that all state firms should hand their products to a state entity to distribute them according to the needs of the people at cheaper prices.

The aluminum workers are demanding such contracts be rescinded.

Revolution, not reform

On February 20, Chavez again called on the people to continue to "prepare themselves for the transference and redistribution of political, economic, social and military power."

Chavez said on March 5: "We are not here to carry out a reform, no!

"This is a revolution, and if we are not clear about what we are dealing with, we could end up carrying out a simple reform so that nothing changes in the end."

Chavez quoted Polish-born revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg's famous 1900 pamphlet *Reform or Revolution*: "Only when the great mass of workers take the keen and dependable weapons of scientific socialism in their own hands, will all the petty-bourgeois inclinations, all the opportunistic currents, come to naught."

Chavez argued that ideological weakness and ties to business interests were behind the defection in February by Lara governor Henri Falcon, who left the Chavez-led United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) to join the Homeland For All (PPT) party.

On March 13, Chavez said: "He couldn't take it any more because he is not a real revolutionary.... A special fibre is required in order to confront

the oligarchy.”

He said the “regional bourgeoisie” surrounded Falcon. Chavez urged the pre-candidates, running in the internal PSUV elections to determine the candidates for September national elections, to strengthen themselves ideologically by reading Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Che Guevara. “We have a clear target for the next elections: an overwhelming triumph so that the National Assembly continues being a space to strengthen and deepen the socialist dynamic.”

Rather than simply facing a question of the number of PSUV candidates elected, “what we are dealing with is a qualitative revolutionary challenge,” Chavez said. “If we want that the parliament to dismantle the old capitalist state and open the doors to the socialist state, we have to increase our revolutionary conscience and our real socialist praxis [practice].”

Chavez said the aim was moving beyond simple representation to a situation where the people themselves will govern.

“This is about legislating in accordance with the socialist praxis and obeying the people. Those who do not understand it must choose another path.”

ALBA Vows to Fight Climate Change with System Change

By Kiraz Janicke

(Venezuelanalysis, April 20, 2010)

During the Ninth Summit of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) held in Caracas, Venezuela, April 18-19, member countries of the regional fair-trade bloc, founded in 2004, signed an agreement to consolidate regional integration and sovereignty with the aim of building socialism.

The heads of states and governments of Ecuador (Rafael Correa), Cuba (Raul Castro), Bolivia (Evo Morales), Nicaragua (Daniel Ortega), and Venezuela (Hugo Chavez), and the prime ministers of Antigua and Barbuda (Winston Baldwin), Dominica (Roosevelt Skerrit), and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Ralph Gonsalves), ratified these objectives in the text of a document entitled the “Caracas Manifesto Consolidating the New Independence.”

A central theme of the summit was the global climate crisis, which, according to the leaders of the ALBA member countries, is a product of the capitalist economic model.

Speaking to his ALBA counterparts, Bolivian President Evo Morales, who this week is hosting the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, said, "The hour to combat the capitalist economic model and system, which has caused so much damage to life and humanity, has arrived."

The "crisis of world capitalism" was demonstrated by the failure of the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen last year, Morales said. "They did not approve the documents from our countries due to the pressure of North American imperialism," he explained.

"We have a commitment. Our responsibility is not only to save Latin America, but care for humanity which inhabits our lands."

The key banner of struggle against capitalism and unbridled industrialization "is the defense of mother earth" because "each and every one of us are children of our mother earth," Morales argued.

He castigated the capitalist model because this system "does not take into account the serious damage it does to humanity and...the plunder of natural resources."

Cuban President Raul Castro emphasized the need to raise awareness about the implications of climate change and in particular the need to reduce carbon emissions and other environmental pollutants. Otherwise the planet will begin to "make us pay" for all the ecological damage we are causing. "Every day we get closer to the point of no return" he warned.

The summit affirmed the "firmest support" for the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Bolivia.

Anti-imperialist unity

The summit also dealt with issues such as defense, the negative impacts of capitalism, the threat of U.S. imperialism towards ALBA countries and the need to strengthen the process of independence in the region.

Castro stressed the importance of unity among ALBA countries, and also more broadly in the region, in the context of an increased "imperialist campaign that aims to put an end to the progressive governments."

In particular the statement called for "concerted political action" to expose the hypocrisy and double standards in international relations shown by the United States and expressed "preoccupation over the excessive presence of foreign military forces in Haiti."

Also adopted was a condemnation of the United States unilateral economic blockade of Cuba and an appeal for increased efforts to free the Cuban Five.

The statement also declared support for the unanimous decision of the Rio Group summit in Mexico earlier this year to hold the founding summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, a hemispheric-wide or-

ganization without the United States or Canada, in Venezuela in June 2011.

The ALBA summit also affirmed the continued struggle to promote social justice, human rights and economic independence the across the region through strengthening cooperation over health, education and poverty reduction programs and facilitating fair trade through the Sucre – a virtual currency system – amongst other projects.

Chavez outlined some of the achievements of the ALBA process in the field of assistance programs for people with disabilities, saying, “A total of 897,883 people with disabilities have been seen in six of the countries that comprise the ALBA”

He also reported that some 2,052,931 homes have been visited on activities undertaken by groups of specialists who visit house to house in order to comprehensively address the living conditions of persons with disabilities among other things.

“We’re showing what we can do by joining together and breaking with the capitalist model,” he said.

Social movements

The declaration also outlined the necessity to promote the development of social movements and the formation of the ALBA Council of Social Movements, following the creation of a national council of social movements in each country.

ALBA will only achieve real unity by promoting unity from the grassroots, of the peoples, not from above, Chavez argued.

In addition, the Caracas Manifesto agreed to convene a summit of indigenous and afro-descendent movements June 3 to 4 in the town of Otavalo, Ecuador.

The closing ceremony of the summit, which included the participation of representatives from communal councils and social organisations from around the country, concluded a week of activities celebrating the bicentenary of the establishment of Venezuela’s first government independent of Spanish colonial rule, on April 19, 1810, which sparked a broader independence struggle across the continent.

The Revolution Faces Crucial Battles

By Federico Fuentes

(Socialist Voice, February 22, 2010)

Decisive battles between the forces of revolution and counter-revolution loom on the horizon in Venezuela. The campaign for the September 26 National Assembly elections will be a crucial battle between the supporters of socialist President Hugo Chavez and the U.S.-backed right-wing opposition.

But these battles, part of the class struggle between the poor majority and the capitalist elite, will be fought more in the streets than at the ballot box.

So far this year, there has been an escalation of fascist demonstrations by violent opposition student groups; the continued selective assassination of union and peasant leaders by right-wing paramilitaries; and an intensified private media campaign presenting a picture of a debilitated government in crisis — and on its way out.

Chavez warned on January 29: “If they initiate an extremely violent offensive, that obliges us to take firm action — something I do not recommend they do — our response will wipe them out.” The comment came the day after two students were killed and 21 police suffered bullet wounds in confrontations that rocked the city of Merida.

Chavez challenged the opposition to follow the constitutional road and a recall referendum on his presidential mandate if they truly believe people no longer support him. Under the democratic constitution adopted in 1999, a recall referendum can be called on any elected official if 20% of the electorate sign a petition calling for one. He said if the capitalists continued down the road of confrontation, he would “accelerate the revolution,” which has declared “21st century socialism” as its goal.

Offensive

The stepped-up campaign of destabilization is part of the regional offensive launched by the opposition’s masters in Washington.

Last year, the U.S. installed new military bases in Colombia and Panama, reactivated the U.S. Navy Fourth Fleet to patrol Latin American waters, and helped organize a military coup that toppled the left-wing Manuel Zelaya government in Honduras. This year, the U.S. has occupied Haiti with 15,000 soldiers after the January 12 earthquake and U.S. warplanes have been caught violating Venezuela’s airspace.

A February 2 report from U.S. National Director of Intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair, labeled Venezuela the “leading anti-U.S. regional force”

— placing the Chavez government in Washington’s crosshairs.

A U.S. military invasion cannot be ruled out, but the main aim of the U.S. military build-up and provocations is to apply pressure on those sections of Venezuela’s Armed Forces, and others in the pro-Chavez camp, that would prefer to put the brakes on the revolutionary process to avoid a confrontation.

This is occurring hand-in-hand with a campaign of media lies, combining claims that Chavez’s popularity is rapidly declining with rumors of dissent in the military and government.

The U.S. and Venezuelan elite hope to isolate and ultimately remove Chavez.

The campaign is similar to the one unleashed in 2007 to defeat Chavez’s proposed constitutional reforms, which would have created a legal framework for greater attacks on capital to the benefit of the poor majority but were narrowly defeated in a referendum.

The opposition hopes to fracture Chavez’s support base — the poor majority and the armed forces — and win a majority in the National Assembly (with which it is likely to move to impeach Chavez).

At the very least, the opposition is seeking to stop pro-revolution forces from winning a two-thirds majority in the assembly, which would restrict the ease with which the Chavistas could pass legislation. The current assembly has a large pro-Chavez majority as a result of the opposition boycotting the 2005 poll.

Revolution advances

The global economic crisis is hitting Venezuela harder than the government initially hoped. Problems in the electricity sector, among others, are also causing strain.

The government’s campaign to raise awareness about the effects of climate change and wasteful usage has minimized the impact of the opposition and private media campaign to blame the government for the problems in the electricity and water sectors.

Far from fulfilling right-wing predictions that falling oil prices would result in a fall of the government’s fortunes, Chavez has continued his push to redistribute wealth to the poor — and increased moves against capital and corruption.

This is occurring alongside important street mobilizations supporting the government (ignored by the international media, which gave prominent coverage to small opposition student riots).

There are new steps to increase the transfer of power to the people, such as incorporating the grassroots communal councils further into governing structures.

In November, Chavez announced interventions into eight banks found to be involved in corrupt dealings. A majority were nationalized and merged with a state bank to form the Bicentenary Bank. Together with the Bank of Venezuela, nationalized in 2007, the state now controls 25% of the banking sector — the largest single bloc.

Nearly 30 bankers were charged and face trial over the corruption allegations. Significantly, a number of these had been closely aligned with the government. One of them, Ricardo Fernandez Barrueco, was a relatively unknown entrepreneur in the food sector who rose up the ranks of the business elite to own four banks and 29 Venezuelan companies. Much of this meteoric rise was due to his ties with a section of the Chavez government, which provided him with generous contracts to supply government-subsidized Mercal food stores with produce and transportation. This earned Fernandez the nickname the “Czar of Mercal”.

The arrest of another banker over corruption allegations, Arne Chacon, led to the resignation of his brother Jessie Chacon as Chavez’s science minister.

State institutions, militants of the Chavez-led United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), and the National Guard have also moved to tackle price speculation following the January 8 decision to devalue the local currency, the bolivar. More than 1,000 shops were temporarily shutdown for price speculation in the first week after the announcement.

On February 13, Chavez announced that the government had come to an agreement with French company Casino to buy out 80% of its shares in the CADA supermarket chain, which has 35 outlets across the country.

Together with the recently nationalized Exito supermarket chain and the mass importation of various essential goods, the government is moving to take up a much larger share of the retail and distribution sector.

The bolivar devaluation means imported goods have become more expensive, lowering workers’ purchasing power. To compensate, the government decreed in January a 25% increase in the minimum wage (10% to be implemented in March and 15% in September).

Government sources told *Green Left Weekly* it is also studying a further wage increase and steps towards establishing a state monopoly over foreign trade.

Grassroots organizing

Despite the violent protests and slander campaign, a January poll by the Venezuelan Institute of Data Analysis (IVAD — generally accepted as one of Venezuela’s least biased polling companies) found more than 58% of Venezuelans continue to approve of Chavez’s presidency.

The same poll also found 41.5% believed the opposition should have a

National Assembly majority, compared to 49.5% who didn't. Some 32.6% said they would vote for pro-revolution candidates, 20.8% for the opposition and an important 33.1% for "independents".

That 33.1% will undoubtedly shrink by September. The question is whether this section will abstain (as in the 2007 constitutional referendum) or whether the revolutionary forces can organize themselves to win them over and deal a decisive blow to the right.

Three massive pro-revolution demonstrations have been held already this year, dwarfing the small but violent opposition protests.

A new grouping of revolutionary youth organizations, the Bicentenary National Youth Front, has also been created to organize the pro-revolution majority of youth and students. The injection of organized youth into the revolution is vital for its future. This is needed, as Chavez noted in his February 12 speech to a mass demonstration of students in Caracas, to tackle the serious problems of reformism and bureaucratism that hamper the revolution.

Chavez has argued against those sectors of the revolutionary camp that insist it is possible to advance by strengthening the private sector and wooing capitalists. Chavez has repeatedly said the "national bourgeoisie" has no interest in advancing the process of change.

Chavez has emphasized the "class struggle" is at the heart of this process.

He said it was vital to combat the inefficiency and bureaucracy of the state structures inherited from previous governments that hold back and sabotage the process. "We have to finish off demolishing the old structures of the bourgeois state and create the new structures of the proletarian state."

To help achieve this, the government has encouraged the creation of 184 communes across Venezuela. Communes are made up of a number of communal councils and other social organizations, bodies directly run and controlled by local communities. Chavez has referred to the communes as the "building blocks" of the new state, in which power is intended to be progressively transferred to the organized people.

The recent creation of peasant militias, organized for self-defense by poor farmers against large landowner violence, is also important.

However, the biggest challenge is the continued construction of the PSUV, a mass party with millions of still largely passive members, as a revolutionary instrument of the masses.

In its extraordinary congress, which began in November and continues meeting on weekends until April, debates are occurring among the 772 elected delegates. Differences have arisen between those who support a more moderate reformist approach and those arguing for a revolutionary

path. An important debate is taking place on whether to back Chavez's call for a new international organization to unite revolutionary forces globally to strengthen the fight for "socialism of the 21th century."

The debates also included whether party members will elect National Assembly candidates, or whether this important decision would be left in the hands of a select committee, as more conservative forces preferred.

After the decision to hold primary elections for candidates was announced, Chavez said on February 11: "I have confidence in the people, I have confidence in the grassroots, they will not defraud us."

Chavez's Historic Call for International Socialist Unity

By Federico Fuentes

(Socialist Voice, November 29, 2009)

(Federico Fuentes and Kiraz Janicke represented Australia's Socialist Alliance at the International Encounter of Left Parties.)

Addressing delegates at the International Encounter of Left Parties held in Caracas, November 19-21, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said that with the capitalist crisis and threat of war risking the future of humanity, "the people are clamoring" for greater unity of those willing to fight for socialism.

Chavez used his speech on November 20 to the conference, which involved delegates from 55 left groups from 31 countries, to call for a new international socialist organization to unite left groups and social movements. "The time has come for us to organize the Fifth International," he said.

This call is historic. It follows Chavez's call in 2005 that the only response to the barbarism of the capitalist system was to create "a new socialism of the 21st century."

In 2006, Chavez made the historic call for the creation in Venezuela of a new, mass revolutionary party in order to unite all who were part of the struggle to transform Venezuela into one party. This led to the launch in 2007 of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

The call for a new International is historic because of Chavez's authority: the head of a government leading a revolutionary movement to build socialism. And it is a revolution that sees itself as international. Chavez has repeatedly said either socialism will be built globally or there will be no 22nd century for humanity.

The call for a new international organization builds on the history of the socialist movement.

There have been four previous socialist “Internationals,” the first created by Karl Marx in 1864, which was dissolved in 1876. The Second International was formed in 1889, but fell apart when representative parties sided with their own governments in the bloodshed of World War I. The Third International was founded in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. However, Chavez said, it “degenerated” under Stalinism and “betrayed” struggles for socialism around the world.

Leon Trotsky founded the Fourth International in 1938. However, Trotsky died in 1940 and his followers never succeeded in building mass support.

A majority of delegates at the Caracas conference adopted a special resolution in support of founding the “Fifth Socialist International as a space for socialist-oriented parties, movements and currents in which we can harmonize a common strategy for the struggle against imperialism, the overthrow of capitalism by socialism.”

April next year has been set as the date for a conference to launch the new International.

Chavez repeated his call in his speech the next day to the congress of the PSUUV, which began on November 21. He asked the congress “to include in its agenda for debate, the proposal to convene political parties and currents to create the Fifth Socialist International as a new organization that fits the time and the challenge in which we live, and that can become an instrument of unification and coordination of the struggle of peoples to save this planet.”

Chavez said the discussion “must go out to the people, to the social organizations and other forms of popular power in the country.”

The PSUUV, a mass revolutionary party in formation, will no doubt take up this discussion with full vigour. Likewise, left parties around the world will need to take a position on this extremely important proposal with the potential to significantly advance the international socialist movement.

Unity against imperialism

The Encounter of Left Parties conference involved representatives of the old and new left. It included a number of old communist and social democratic parties from Asia and Europe, national liberation forces from Africa and the Middle East, and new left parties such as Die Linke (Germany), Left Bloc (Portugal) and Left Party (France).

It involved radical and left groups from across Latin America. Some of these are older, such as the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) from Nicaragua, and some newer, such as the Movement Towards Social-

ism (MAS) from Bolivia and the PSUV.

The first day discussed the new imperialist offensive in the region. This is exemplified by the plan for new U.S. military bases in Latin America and the military coup against the left-leaning Honduran government, which was in alliance with revolutionary Venezuela.

Venezuelan foreign minister and PSUV leader Nicolas Maduro said that imperialism managed to destroy almost all attempts to create a new model of society in the 20th century.

“There was only one experience that had the sufficient political, military and popular force, together with a revolutionary leadership, which was able to overcome all of imperialism’s plans: the Cuban Revolution.”

Maduro said new revolutionary movements and political leaderships have emerged this century, changing the face of the region.

The election of U.S. President Barack Obama created hope and expectations across the world that new relations with the U.S. based on dialogue would be possible. But Maduro said this illusion was quickly shattered by the actions of the new administration.

Maduro said the U.S. government sought to undermine the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), an anti-imperialist political and trading bloc that this year expanded to nine countries.

The coup in Honduras, a member country, was aimed at ALBA and carried out with U.S. support, he said.

Shortly afterwards there was the U.S.-Colombia military agreement for seven new U.S. military bases in Colombia, “a powerful threat against the revolutionary movements in our continent.”

In light of this, Maduro said unity of progressive and left forces is necessary to create a movement for peace and justice with the power to make Latin America a “territory free of U.S. bases”.

Jorge Marti, head of the international relations department of the Communist Party of Cuba, said that today, “the left is not up to the challenge it faces.” He said this was why it was necessary to develop a strategy for united struggle.

Nidia Diaz, a veteran leader of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) of El Salvador, said it was possible right-wing forces could win coming elections in Chile and Brazil. But, she said, “if we only think about electoral victories and not in the accumulation of social forces for change, it is easy to paint a negative picture.”

She said it is essential that the left promote Chavez’s proposal for “peace bases” as focal points for agitation and mobilization of the people.

Patricia Rodas, the legitimate Honduran foreign minister in the government of President Manuel Zelaya overthrown in the coup, said: “We are merely spokespeople for our people who today are resisting.”

She said it was the responsibility of those at the meeting to build a common space for left groups to unite “and make possible the creation of a never-before-seen, diverse force.”

Venezuelan education minister Hector Navarro said: “The problem [we face] is the structural crisis of capital ... We are confronting the question of the survival of humanity.”

Therefore, he said, the conference must be seen as a theatre of operations from which to unleash a struggle in defense of humanity.

‘International of the 21st century’

The second day started with a discussion on what sort of international coordination of the left was needed.

Valtar Pomar, international relations secretary of the Brazilian Workers’ Party (PT), outlined the position of his party, currently in government. He put forward a strategy focused on unity around regional integration and a broad-based “anti-imperialism.”

He said if socialism became our lowest common denominator for unity, this would inevitably lead to division. Pomar said the PT would prioritize the Sao Paulo Forum (FSP).

The FSP was formed in the 1990s as an initiative of the PT to regroup the Latin American left after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The FSP, like the PT, has drifted from its radical roots and become dominated by more moderate forces.

However, PSUV leader Aristobulo Isturiz said the left needs more dynamic and active spaces than the FSP.

Chavez’s speech that night marked a dividing line: “Yankee imperialism is preparing a war in Latin America.... it has almost always been the case that the U.S. has pulled itself out of a situation of crisis via war.”

The conditions to build socialism are ripe, he said.

“That is why I ask that you allow me continue to go forward, together with those who want to accompany me, to create the Fifth Socialist International.”

Chavez said it would be a new body without manuals and impositions, where differences were welcome.

He criticized the practices of the old Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which imposed its dogmas such as “socialism in one country” on its satellite parties internationally.

Chavez said this led many Latin American CPs to turn their backs on Argentinean-born revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara, when Che, who rejected Soviet dogmatism, tried to spread the Cuban Revolution in the 1960s.

Chavez said the new International should reject the failed projects of

“real socialism” and social democracy. It should embody the spirit and heritage left to humanity by the founders of the first four Internationals. It should also incorporate the ideas of past Latin American revolutionaries.

It has to be an International to confront imperialism and defeat capitalism, said Chavez.

He said it was also necessary to work together to create a manifesto to spell out the content of “socialism of the 21st century.”

Chavez gave a swift and sharp response to a delegate’s interjection that there already exist organizations for left coordination. There exist many spaces for discussion, said Chavez, but none for concrete action.

“We have wasted a lot of time, we continue to waste time, looking for excuses to justify our inactivity,” Chavez said. “I consider such behavior to be a betrayal of the hope of our peoples.”

The unity of left parties is needed, “but parties that are truly left.”

Some delegates expressed their reservations the following day, arguing that at such a meeting it was only possible to agree on specific points. A deep programmatic debate was necessary before any deeper unity was possible.

However, support for the proposal was very strong overall.

Speaking in favour of the proposal, El Salvadorean Vice-President and FMLN leader Salvador Sanchez Ceren said: “We cannot continue simply debating ... we need to clearly define what it is that we want, and the alternative project for Latin America is socialism.”

Sanchez’s comments provoked a reaction from El Salvadorean President Mauricio Funes, who was elected with the FMLN’s support. Funes distanced himself from the comments and said his government did not support 21st century socialism.

The delegation from the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia told the conference they had contacted the MAS leadership, including Bolivian President Evo Morales, who agreed the MAS should back the new International.

Ecuadorian minister of government and Country Alliance leader, Ricardo Patino, said his party had also agreed to participate.

Rodas pledged the active support of the Honduran “resistance” for the proposal.

The Cuban Communist Party (PCC) did not express a formal position in the meeting.

If the PCC backs the call, it would mean all the most important organizations at the head of the Latin American revolution expressed their will to create the new International.

The adopted resolution pledged to create a “working group comprised of those socialist parties, currents and social movements who endorse the

initiative, to prepare an agenda which defines the objectives, contents and mechanisms of this global revolutionary body.”

A main document, called the Caracas Commitment, was also approved.

The document said that faced with “structural crisis of capital, which combines the economic crisis, with an ecological crisis, a food crisis, and an energy crisis, and which together represents a mortal threat to humanity and mother earth, the only alternative possible is socialism of the 21st century.”

Speaking to the PSUV Congress, Chavez said the previous four socialist Internationals had originated in Europe, “where the thesis of scientific socialism emerged with force in the heat of the great popular workers struggles.”

Today, however, “the epicentre of revolutionary struggle is in our America. And Venezuela is the epicenter of this battle.

“It is up to us to assume the role of the vanguard, and we have to assume it, so that we realize and become aware of the huge responsibility we have on our shoulders.”

Socialist Voice Pamphlets

Food Crisis: World Hunger, Agribusiness and the Food Sovereignty Alternative.

by Ian Angus. A Marxist analysis of the worldwide food and farm crisis.

Includes statements by Fidel Castro, La Via Campesina and the Nyeleni Food Sovereignty Conference



Fidel Castro on Global Warming, Biofuels and World Hunger

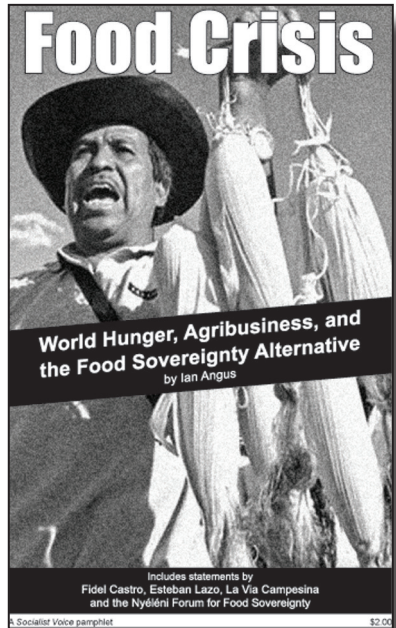
A Socialist Voice Pamphlet
\$2.00

Venezuela Eyewitness

by Suzanne Weiss and John Riddell.

Canadian socialists report on Venezuela's achievements and the challenges facing the Bolivarian Revolution.

These pamphlets and more are available online at
readingfromtheleft.com



Food Crisis

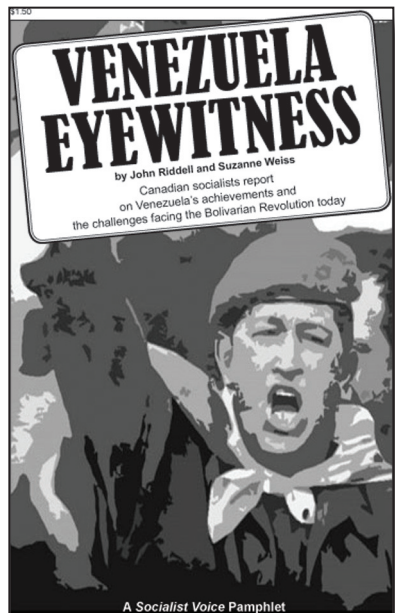
World Hunger, Agribusiness, and the Food Sovereignty Alternative by Ian Angus

Includes statements by
Fidel Castro, Esteban Lazo, La Via Campesina
and the Nyeleni Forum for Food Sovereignty

A Socialist Voice Pamphlet

\$2.00

Fidel Castro on Global Warming, Biofuels and World Hunger. "It hurts to think that 10 billion tons of fossil fuel is consumed every year. This means that each year we waste what it took nature one million years to create."



\$2.00

VENEZUELA EYEWITNESS

by John Riddell and Suzanne Weiss

Canadian socialists report
on Venezuela's achievements and
the challenges facing the Bolivarian Revolution today

A Socialist Voice Pamphlet