

Venezuela and the International Struggle for Socialism



A *Socialist Voice* Pamphlet by
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Socialist Voice

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Venezuela Shakes the Empire: Why Socialists Support the Bolivarian Struggle for Sovereignty and Latin American Unity

(*Socialist Voice*, February 28, 2007)

By John Riddell

Why do socialists in Canada support the Venezuelan revolution?

There is much to admire about Venezuela today: impressive mass mobilizations, community and labour activism, significant social gains, an inspiring commitment to a socialist future.

But Venezuela's importance today to the workers' movement lies above all in the leading role it is playing in a new upsurge of anti-imperialist struggles internationally.

This is not always easy for socialists in advanced capitalist countries to understand. We tend to interpret Venezuela in terms of our own experience of workers' struggle against exploitative bosses and corrupt, repressive governments. We are often less sensitive to the aspects of Venezuela that are different, particularly its oppression by world imperialism, the impact this has on Venezuelan society, and how Venezuela is fighting back against the Empire.

Consider what Venezuela's revolutionary government has accomplished in the 12 weeks since the Bolivarian movement led by Hugo Chávez won an overwhelming victory in its presidential election. (See *Socialist Voice* #108) A brief selection:

- Venezuela has reached agreements with newly elected anti-imperialist presidents Rafael Correa (Ecuador) and Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua) for assistance to these countries.

- Nicaragua and three Caribbean nations (Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and St. Vincent) have joined the Venezuelan-initiated Bolivarian Agreement for the Americas (ALBA), a framework for resistance to imperialist domination, which also includes Cuba and Bolivia. Ecuador has also signaled its intention to join the alliance.

- Significantly, Venezuelan and Cuban aid to Nicaragua includes significant projects in its autonomous Caribbean coast regions, home to most of its indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. Hugo Chávez has stressed that Venezuela's vision of socialism is "indigenous," stressing the leading role of indigenous peoples in popular resistance across much of Latin America.

- Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad strengthened their countries' alliance against the threatened U.S. attack on Iran during Ahmadinejad's January 14 visit to Caracas. The two presidents promised to spend billions of dollars to aid peoples "resisting U.S. domination."

- Venezuela utilized a U.S.-sponsored resolution in the United Nations condemning denial of the Holocaust, intended to isolate Iran, to reaffirm its

solidarity with the embattled peoples of the Middle East. Venezuelan delegate Marco Palavicini declared that Israel's excesses have "led to a new holocaust against the Palestinian people," while "hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis" also "are victims of a holocaust." (See *Socialist Voice* #94)

■ On January 22, at a meeting of Latin American presidents, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Bolivia's Evo Morales called for transformation of the Brazilian-led Mercosur trade bloc. Chávez declared his intent to "decontaminate it of neoliberalism."

The sustained efforts of Venezuelan and allied popular movements have struck major blows to neoliberalism, the attempt by the U.S. and allied imperialist governments to qualitatively increase their economic domination and exploitation of Latin America. The U.S.-sponsored Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) has been rebuffed; the grip of the International Monetary Fund on national budgets has been weakened and in some cases broken. The upsurge of mass struggles has strengthened the sovereignty and unity of Latin American peoples.

Bolivarian goal

The Venezuelans call this vision of Latin America emancipation "Bolivarianism," after Simon Bolívar (1783-1830), leader of South America's struggle for independence from Spain. In 1995, long before his election to the Venezuelan presidency, Chávez referred to Bolívar's "notion of uniting all these balkanized territories of Latin America in order to confront the imperial power to the north." (Gott, 183-84. Full references are at end of article.)

Since the days of José Martí (1853-1895), Cuban revolutionaries have been inspired by this Bolivarian ideal. In 1961, Fidel Castro gave it renewed expression in the Second Declaration of Havana:

"Today Latin America lies beneath an imperialism, much more fierce, much more powerful, and more cruel than the Spanish colonial empire," the declaration stated. "This great humanity has said, 'Enough!' and has begun to march. And their giant march will not be halted until they conquer true independence."

Cuba has never retreated from that stand. Thirty-nine years later, Fidel Castro, warning against the FTAA, said "We must revive Bolívar's dignity and his dreams." Rather than being "devoured by the decadent empire," Latin America and the Caribbean "must integrate and unite in search of a greater and more dignified destiny." (Castro, 106)

Oppressed and oppressor nations

The same goal of unity against imperialist domination has been central to Marxism for a century. In 1920, the Communist International proclaimed the slogan, "Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!"

Lenin explained the thinking behind that slogan to the International's sec-

ond congress that year:

“The characteristic feature of imperialism consists in the whole world, as we now see, being divided into a large number of oppressed nations and an insignificant number of oppressor nations, the latter possessing colossal wealth and powerful armed forces.”

Lenin included among the oppressed nations not only direct colonial dependencies but also “semi-colonies as, for example, Persia, Turkey, and China” and also countries that had become dependent on imperialist powers through conquest. (Riddell, page 212)

Since Lenin’s time, many Latin American countries have undergone considerable industrial development. For example, a Brazilian corporation, Embraer, is now the main aerospace competitor of Canada’s Bombardier. A huge Brazilian mining concern, PVRD — once state-owned but privatized in 1997 — bought Canadian nickel-mining giant Inco in 2006. Mexican telecommunications tycoon Carlos Slim is rated the world’s third-richest man.

Brazilian capitalists have regional ambitions, expressed in their hostility to Bolivia’s measures to reclaim its natural resources from foreign control. Brazil is a lead player in the brutal United Nations occupation of Haiti, in which Bolivian and Canadian forces have also participated.

Reactionary forces in Latin America appeal to nationalism — for example, in denouncing Venezuela’s international aid programs as squandering resources that ought to be spent within the country.

For socialists in Canada, all this has a familiar ring. Many socialists here, especially in Quebec, view Canadian nationalism with suspicion. As a political force, it has served mainly to build support for Canadian imperialism, its oppression over Quebecois and indigenous peoples at home, and its wars and interventions abroad.

This concern leads many Marxists in this country to view the national and anti-imperialist dimension of the current Latin American upsurge with reserve. Is nationalism in Latin America really any different?

There is a danger here of applying to Latin American and Caribbean societies an analysis appropriate to developed, imperialist countries like Canada. In fact, “development” in Latin American countries has followed a very different course, and the contrast has not diminished in recent decades. This is shown by the very different impact neoliberalism has had in Latin America and in the imperialist heartlands.

Mexican example

Nowhere has the contrast been so clear as in the course of neoliberalism in Canada and Mexico, both of whose economies have been yoked together with that of the U.S. since 1994 in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In both countries, the neoliberal capitalist offensive has shifted wealth from poor to rich, cut back government social programs,

and cost many workers their livelihood. But after two decades of struggle, Canada's economic and social structure has not changed significantly, while Mexico has been severely damaged.

The advent of neoliberalism in Mexico began with an economic crisis in the early 1980s that led its government to appeal to Washington and the International Monetary Fund for financial aid. The U.S. demanded, and obtained, the gutting of the Mexico's substantial nationalized sector and government economic controls. Real wages fell 30% in the 1980s.

The advent of NAFTA devastated Mexican peasant agriculture and manufacturing for the local market. The proportion of working people with formal jobs fell. Workers' living standards declined sharply and have continued to slide. The migration of a desperate population into the U.S. reached massive proportions. And in recent years, the pride of neoliberalism—the “maquiladores” sector producing exclusively for export — is also in trouble.

The deep wounds suffered by Mexico's working population found expression in massive uprisings in 2006, including demonstrations of millions against electoral fraud organized by the country's ruling oligarchy.

The line is still drawn

Not even the weakest imperialist countries were crippled by the neoliberal offensive, but economies across Latin America suffered severe damage. This outcome made it clear that the line between oppressed and oppressor nations is still sharply drawn at Mexico's northern frontier.

Gross Domestic Product per capita in major Latin American countries ranges from only 15% (Venezuela) to 25% (Mexico) of U.S. levels, with the now gravely damaged Argentinian economy showing higher at 35%. Economic inequality is greater than almost anywhere else in the world. Many countries are marked by vast rural poverty. A high proportion of the working class subsists in the “informal economy.” The oppressed and marginalized indigenous population is a majority in several countries and a powerful force in many more.

Even the most “developed” Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, suffer from structural deformations that are a product of imperialist domination of their economies and their particular insertion in the world market. Brazil's notorious social polarization, dividing the opulent rich from the impoverished masses in rural areas and urban slums, is evidence of this problem.

It's true that reactionary governments in Latin America, as in Canada, often clothe themselves in nationalist demagogy to justify class rule. But progressive and popular movements in Latin America are also frequently national, in a different sense — in seeking liberation from imperialist domination. It is vital that socialist and working class forces seek to lead such movements and strive to win them to a program in the interests of working people — and that their allies in imperialist countries support them in this challenge.

Resistance to Imperialism

Popular resistance movements in Latin America typically begin as struggles against the local oligarchy and for democracy and the rights of working people, and for access to basic services such as water, schools, and health clinics. But to the degree that these movements have won influence over segments of the government, such as national presidencies, the focus has changed toward using governmental power to win back the ground lost to neoliberalism and toward regional alliances to provide a firmer basis to resist imperialist pressure. A recent increase in the prices of many Latin American exports, particularly oil, has aided this process.

Mass movements marked by a clear class polarization have given rise to governments that preside over a capitalist state and take measures for structural reform within capitalism. Such governments vary enormously in character. Some are prone to cave in to the pressures of imperialism and local pro-imperialist sectors. To some degree, and in some countries, there has been a shift in the locus of action from the streets to government.

But the development as a whole is not a step backward. Rather, the counterattack against neoliberalism is profoundly progressive—a struggle to realize of the goals for which tens of thousands demonstrated in Quebec City in 2001. Above all, Latin American countries are asserting and realizing their sovereignty against foreign domination. The Empire has been forced into retreat. Improved conditions are being won for national economic development. Even if this process does not yet go beyond capitalism, it creates better conditions of life and struggle for working people and deserves wholehearted support by socialists everywhere.

But the mass upsurge in Latin America has the potential to go beyond the capitalist framework. Tens of millions of working people are gaining in confidence, recapturing hope for a better future, and setting higher goals for social change. And in the process, socialism is being once again discussed not merely by narrow radical circles but by millions of working people.

Latin American working people deserve our support in their efforts to win all the gains possible within capitalism. But history warns against any reliance on capitalism's ability to provide durable economic development in a manner favorable to working people. Economic dependency plagued the region long before the advent of neoliberalism. Previous attempts to encourage economic development in Latin America through energetic government intervention have collapsed under pressure of world capitalist markets or have been cut short by U.S.-orchestrated military coups.

Capitalism in Latin America cannot escape the trends toward increased exploitation, environmental degradation, and war that characterize this brutal system in every sector of the world. Indeed, the Latin American mass movements are part of the worldwide test of strength with imperialism, whose main focus, at present, is the U.S.-led wars and occupations in the Middle East.

It is thus significant that the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela has gone beyond the vision of Latin American integration and sovereignty to embrace the goal of 21st century socialism. A broad discussion has opened up on the nature of socialism and the road to its realization, which socialists internationally welcome and participate in.

As mass movements strengthen, they pose the possibility of establishing a revolutionary popular government, based on mobilized workers, farmers, indigenous peoples, and other oppressed sectors, and acting in their interests. Such governments can enable the masses to overcome major obstacles in their advance towards overturning capitalist power and establishing socialism.

But while socialism represents the Latin American movement's future, its present focus remains resistance to imperialism, Latin American and indigenous unity, and associated demands for democratic and grassroots participatory rights and indigenous empowerment.

These struggles deserve the understanding and strong support of progressive activists around the world.

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Venezuela and the International Struggle for Socialism

(*Socialist Voice*, June 25, 2007)

By Roger Annis and John Riddell

The dramatic advances of the Venezuelan revolution, and the alliances it has forged with other insurgent peoples and governments resisting imperialism, are creating an historic opportunity to strengthen international anti-imperialist collaboration and rebuild the revolutionary socialist movement worldwide.

Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution is still in its early stages. Yet as it moves forward, it will—like the Russian revolution of 1917 and other great revolutions of the 20th century—become a test for all tendencies in the workers movement, dividing those who identify with and defend real-world revolutions from those who remain in sectarian isolation.

Venezuela's presidential elections in December 2006 delivered a solid

mandate for the country's advance toward socialism, in the form of a 63% majority for President Hugo Chávez. A mass movement of workers and farmers has set the goal of socialism and is using governmental power to take decisive steps in that direction. This is creating the most favourable conditions in several decades for socialist advance on a world scale. *Socialist Voice* aims to link up with other forces internationally to support this development and learn from it.

During the past year, the Venezuelan people and government have moved on many fronts to secure democratic rights and national sovereignty. They have nationalized basic utilities and energy resources that were privatized under preceding regimes. They have implemented measures that enable small farmers to gain secure access to the land. They have created new popular institutions, including "communal councils," projected as the first step toward a new state structure based on popular and working-class movements. On the directly political level, the United Venezuelan Socialist Party (PSUV) is being formed with the goal of enabling rank-and-file activists to take part in controlling and directing the struggle for socialism on a national level. Millions have responded to the call of this new party to join it, and they are pressing to make this party their own.

Venezuela's revolution has been internationalist to its very core, devoting great energy and resources to reinforcing movements for sovereignty in the entire Global South, while winning the acclaim of tens of millions across Latin America. It has allied with socialist Cuba. It has moved energetically to aid and defend the indigenous-based government in Bolivia. It has brought urgently needed aid to the Haitian and Nicaraguan peoples. And it has extended its solidarity with countries in the Mideast that are victims of imperialist war and occupation.

The Bolivarian movement in Venezuela explicitly counterposes its concept of socialism, based on grassroots initiatives and leadership, to the bureaucratic system that led to the downfall of the Soviet Union.

A breakthrough in anti-imperialist leadership

It is important not to exaggerate the gains of the Venezuelan process or to project onto it our own hopes and goals. The revolution is now unfolding within the framework of a struggle against imperialism and for national sovereignty and democratic rights. Capitalism still dominates the Venezuelan economy, shaping the daily existence of working people. Capitalism is now balanced against the growing power of working people, and this uneasy co-existence could continue for some time.

The decisive battleground in the world democratic and anti-imperialist struggle remains the Middle East. The imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan intertwine with the confrontation with Iran, the escalating war against the Palestinian people, and the increasingly explosive conflicts in Lebanon. The imperialists feel growing pressure either to carry out retreats they can

ill afford or to undertake new military adventures that could be ruinous for them as well as humanity. Opposition to the war against Mideast peoples is the most urgent task of world solidarity. The course of this great battle will largely determine how far Venezuela's working people can advance before they must confront decisive conflicts with imperialism.

In many regions of the world, including in parts of the Mideast, we see encouraging progress toward new or stronger anti-imperialist organizations and leadership. By far the most important gains in this respect have been registered in Venezuela. It is therefore no surprise that Venezuela's bold stand against the Empire and neoliberalism won acclaim from anti-imperialist activists in the Mideast who were gathered at the March 2007 antiwar and anti-imperialist conference in Cairo, Egypt. Venezuela, in alliance with Cuba, is providing leadership to the world struggle against imperialism and is reawakening hopes for socialism among the world's oppressed.

Reshaping the socialist movement

The initial steps toward formation of the new party, the PSUV, have provoked a heated debate among socialists in Venezuela. Divisions have appeared in every major political current in the Bolivarian movement, separating those who favor support for the new party and those who wish to abstain from it. The founding of the new party offers revolutionary forces the possibility to unite against bureaucratic and patronage-ridden political machines and against left sectarianism. It is a creative process that deserves support. The advance in Venezuela will put socialist currents internationally to the test in similar fashion.

Venezuela is an economically dependent and relatively poor country. It has not yet achieved a political and economic transformation in favour of workers and farmers as fundamental as what was achieved by the Russian and Cuban revolutions of the last century. Yet the Venezuelan process is marked by high vision and solid achievement. And its impact is magnified by the fact that it reverses a long downturn of struggles and follows the shattering of Stalinism on a world scale.

For many years, working-class and progressive movements internationally have been on the defensive. The movement in Venezuela provides an opportunity to link up with the power of a living revolution and to win a new generation of fighters inspired by its example. It confirms the need for movements of working people and the oppressed to struggle for political power.

The example of Venezuela, combined with the rise of struggles in other regions dominated by imperialism and the emergence of new anti-imperialist leadership forces across Latin America, the Middle East, and elsewhere, provides an impetus for anti-imperialist unity everywhere. New forces inspired by Venezuela will move into action, both in defense of the Bolivarian revolution and in heightening anti-capitalist resistance in their countries. Currents that are able to learn from Venezuela will find that they share a broadening

area of agreement as well as an effective banner for recruitment.

Socialist forces internationally, now divided into many weak and isolated currents, will have a chance to gain new energy and find new areas of agreement with each other and with forces from broader resistance movements. Those that identify with the advancing revolution will find a basis for growing collaboration and fraternal ties.

The role of *Socialist Voice*

When *Socialist Voice* was launched in 2004, its editors sought to provide a vehicle for “Marxists and other working-class fighters to forge new links across longstanding organizational barriers and rediscuss their tasks in a dynamic and changing context.” We quickly defined a focus: solidarity with the resistance in the Middle East and with the Venezuelan and Cuban revolutions. *Socialist Voice* supporters have sought to expand our understanding through sharing in responsibility to build these and other solidarity movements.

In the present process of anti-capitalist discussion and regroupment, *Socialist Voice* is guided by three central ideas:

1. The example of Cuba and Venezuela. Revolutionary socialist politics today rests on a body of working-class experience going back to the time of Marx and Engels and including, as its central element, the Russian Revolution and the early Soviet republic. Today we are witness to two revolutions that demonstrate what working people can achieve through the exercise of political power: Cuba and Venezuela. These two peoples, acting in concert, are now the vanguard of a popular upsurge across much of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Cuban socialist revolution, now half a century old and struggling to recover from the blows of Soviet collapse and the U.S. blockade, continues as an outpost of militant opposition to imperialism and of solidarity with the world’s oppressed peoples. The Cuban communists provide Marxist leadership for the world struggle for liberation and human survival. Socialists have an elementary duty to defend Cuba—actively and militantly—against the ongoing U.S.-led blockade and subversion. This entails defending the institutional framework that has enabled Cuba to survive—including its government, armed forces, and instruments of state economic control and planning.

It is no accident that the Cuban communists were the first to perceive the potential of the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela and offer it effective support. Many socialists elsewhere responded skeptically, emphasizing the ways in which this movement deviated from traditional models. Among socialists, fraternal criticism is always in order. But the leadership around Hugo Chávez has so far shown more wisdom than its left critics internationally. Revolutionary socialists, like all anti-capitalist fighters, must study and learn from the lessons of the Venezuelan experience and the experience of Cuba with which Venezuela is so closely allied.

2. Mass action—the only road forward. In imperialist countries such as the U.S., UK, and Canada, the last 25 years have been a period of retreat for most working-class and social movements. Capitalism still appears buoyant and revolution seems a distant prospect. Conditions are far removed from the type of acute social crisis that led to the Bolivarian upsurge in Venezuela.

Yet world capitalist development is marked by increasing political and economic instability and growing class antagonisms, thus hastening conditions for working-class upsurge in imperialist countries. The main lessons of the Venezuelan process are fully applicable to workers' struggles in imperialist countries.

As Venezuela and Bolivia have shown, electoral victories based on deep-going popular upsurges can advance a revolutionary process. However, lasting political and social change happens only when massive mobilizations of the exploited and oppressed are the driving force.

Fundamental social change cannot be enacted by capitalist state bureaucracies. Popular movements themselves must take the lead in their implementation. The struggle must uplift all sectors of the oppressed and strengthen their capacity to participate and lead.

The advance of the anti-capitalist movement requires not just a national strategy but international solidarity and collaboration, support for national liberation struggles, and support for the liberation struggles of indigenous peoples at home and abroad.

Far-reaching challenges to capitalist power will invariably lead the ruling-class minority to use force, to subvert democratic rights, and to use such abhorrent practices as torture to maintain its control. This can only be parried by the concerted power of mass movements.

A rising anti-capitalist mass movement will require the building of unified revolutionary parties in each country to lead the struggle to establish and defend a workers' and farmers' government.

3. For inclusive, non-sectarian action. The long period of downturn in working-class struggles in Canada, the U.S., and UK has strengthened tendencies among many socialist currents to give their narrow organizational needs priority over the needs of common struggle. Attempts are often made to impose on united fronts an "advanced" program that would in fact narrow their political breadth. Too often, solidarity committees become limited to the group exercising control and its immediate friends.

Against this trend, the socialist principle of united front requires that all currents that support a progressive goal unite around the common interests of the broader struggle.

Such movements can not only strengthen progressive social struggles; they can also give leadership in their field of activity to the working-class movement as a whole and help clear the road to revolutionary unity.

Socialist Voice argues for labour unity in militant action. *Socialist Voice* supports all movements through which working people begin to assert their

existence as a social class independent of the bourgeoisie and imperialism. Based on this common activity, *Socialist Voice* seeks to expand fraternal discussion and collaboration with other currents in the resistance, with the ultimate goal of a unification of revolutionary socialist forces.

Tasks and objectives

The goals outlined here are not unique to *Socialist Voice* — they are shared in whole or in part by other currents and activists in Canada and elsewhere. By placing these goals at the centre of its activity, *Socialist Voice* seeks to help lay the basis for unification of forces that are marching down this road and for the building of an effective and broadly based revolutionary organization.

Socialist Voice views other anti-capitalist currents not as opponents but as allies, real or potential, that can contribute materially to building a revolutionary socialist movement. *Socialist Voice* seeks to take advantage of the unifying logic of Venezuela's revolution to build bridges to currents from which we are divided by differences in political history, practice, culture, and theory, and to join forces with the many activists in labour and anti-imperialist movements inspired by Venezuela's example of popular revolution.

We invite those who agree with the concepts outlined here to join us in the discussions and preparation and circulation of publications that make up *Socialist Voice*.

Should Marxists Support Venezuela's New Socialist Party?

(Socialist Voice, September 5, 2007)

By Ian Angus

President Hugo Chávez's call for a new socialist party in Venezuela has provoked widespread discussion and debate among socialists in Venezuela, across Latin America, and around the world.

The liveliest discussion in the English-speaking left has been a public debate among supporters of the International Socialist Tendency (IST), a loose affiliation of groups in about 25 countries. Identified historically with the view that the post-1928 Soviet Union was a state-capitalist society, this current has recently been among the most consistent and effective builders of the international movement against the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

The IST discussion deserves careful attention from partisans of socialism around the world, because it focuses on fundamental issues about our attitude towards the new wave of struggles now being waged in Latin America.

The IST's affiliates have defended Venezuela and the Chávez government from imperialist attack and have helped to expose Washington's efforts to

destabilize the Bolivarian government. But they are not unanimous on what policy socialists in Venezuela and internationally should adopt towards the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), which is now being organized.

Venezuela's new socialist party

Chávez called for a new mass party in December 2006, as a means of breaking through the bureaucracy, cronyism and corruption that have long characterized Venezuelan politics. He described it as “a political instrument at the service not of blocs or groupings but of the people and the Revolution, at the service of socialism.”

Socialist Voice was enthusiastic about the proposal:

“If built as Chávez advocates, the new party could solve the central challenge facing the Bolivarian movement: that of linking the worker and farmer base together with their chosen leadership in a cohesive, democratic political movement.”

The British Socialist Workers Party, the most prominent organization in the International Socialist Tendency, had a different view. Writing in *Socialist Worker*, SWP leader Chris Harman said the Venezuelan workers need to fight for socialism, but “Chávez merely decreeing from above that all the political forces that have defended him should unite into a single party will not make this happen.”

In a subsequent article, Harman described the PSUV as Chávez’s “from above” attempt to overcome “the chaos” in Venezuela. The PSUV includes, he wrote, three political currents: those who want to stop any further social changes, those who want “a Cuban-style authoritarian regime,” and those who want “the destruction of capitalism and genuine revolutionary democracy.”

“A party, in the real meaning of the term, is an organized current of people committed to a single political orientation. ... The attempt to combine in a single organization what are effectively three different parties cannot overcome the chaos.”

Harman was particularly critical of the plan to base the new party on the thousands of communal councils that have been formed in neighbourhoods, towns and cities across Venezuela. Community-based structures, he wrote, are “open to manipulation from above.” Rather, Venezuela needs “class movements arising from the point of production ... a central focus based on those connected to the means of production” and “rank and file soldiers’ councils” in the military.

It was not clear whether Harman was arguing that socialists should call for workers’ and soldiers’ soviets in Venezuela now, or should simply criticize

the PSUV for not being based on such organizations.

Another view

On May Day, 2007, the New Zealand affiliate of the IST issued a statement that expressed a quite different view. Describing the Bolivarian revolution as “the most important leap forward for the workers’ cause since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution,” they urged “all revolutionaries inside Venezuela ... to join this mass socialist party” and called on “revolutionary groups in other countries ... to establish comradely relations with the PSUV.”

Their statement was unequivocal in its endorsement of the new party:

“Socialist Worker-New Zealand believes the PSUV is vital to educate, unite and organise the grassroots masses in Venezuela so they can push forward the socialist revolution.”

The statement rejected the idea that the presence of multiple political viewpoints is a barrier to building the PSUV:

“It would be utopian to think that the PSUV could be an instantly homogenous party of revolutionaries. It will, however, be a mass socialist party with organic connections to grassroots people who support the unfolding revolution. The process of building the PSUV will challenge the reformist wing of the Bolivarian movement and precipitate a ‘battle of ideas’ in which the masses will participate.”

The New Zealand statement called on the IST to begin “facilitating this global debate among all Marxist groups.”

“The forward movement of the Venezuelan revolution and the wider Latin American uprisings look likely to provide the essential material foundations for a positive regroupment of the socialist and radical left on every continent, and the parallel emergence of a mass socialist international.”

The SWP replies

UK SWP leader Alex Callinicos responded to the New Zealand statement on May 24. He repeated the SWP’s commitment to “defending Chávez and giving solidarity to the movement in Venezuela,” but added a qualification: “the most important single internationalist task of revolutionaries today is to build the international movement against the ‘war on terrorism.’”

As for Chávez:

“He presides over a bureaucratic state machine that continues to sustain capitalist social relations against the mass movements on which any real revolutionary breakthrough depends.”

Chávez, in Callinicos’s view, is engaged in a “constant balancing act be-

tween the state and the mass movements that he is constantly forced into.” The PSUV is a “forced merger” that is in danger of becoming “a bureaucratic transmission belt for the government.”

Callinicos approvingly referred to Chris Harman’s assertion that the PSUV “cannot provide an answer ... cannot overcome the chaos.”

Similarly, the International Socialist Organization, Australian affiliate of the IST, wrote that “the PSUV cannot in any sense be conceived as a revolutionary party,” and that “it is a mistake to uncritically support Chávez’s confused and eclectic strategy.”

Proceed from Reality

Socialist Worker-New Zealand had called for a global debate that extended beyond the ranks of the IST, offering to publish contributions on their website, UNITYblog. About a dozen groups and individuals from various countries have responded to date.

One insightful contributor is Stuart Munckton, a member of the Australia-based Democratic Socialist Perspective, and a frequent writer for *Green Left Weekly*. He wrote:

“The Callinicos/ISO position says, we support the gains and the advances, BUT the most important thing is all the problems and contradictions. The NZ comrades have turned this on its head and said, we recognise the limitations and contradictions BUT the most important thing is the advances for the class struggle, that we recognise, support and seek to relate to this. ...

“From what I can see, the NZ Socialist Worker has sought to proceed from the reality of the socialist revolution in Venezuela, not from an abstract measurement of a socialist revolution that demands any revolution has to score enough points on a scorecard to be recognised.”

Strengthen Anti-Imperialist Collaboration

Socialist Voice editors Roger Annis and John Riddell contributed their views in an article that was also published in *Socialist Voice* #128.

Agreeing with Callinicos that “opposition to the war against Mideast peoples is the most urgent task of world solidarity,” they nevertheless insisted that the Venezuelan revolution is “creating an historic opportunity to strengthen international anti-imperialist collaboration and rebuild the revolutionary socialist movement worldwide.”

They warned against the temptation to “exaggerate the gains of the Venezuelan process or to project onto it our own hopes and goals.”

“The revolution is now unfolding within the framework of a struggle against imperialism and for national sovereignty and democratic rights. Capitalism still dominates the Venezuelan economy,

shaping the daily existence of working people. Capitalism is now balanced against the growing power of working people, and this uneasy coexistence could continue for some time.”

“Venezuela’s Bolivarian revolution is still in its early stages. Yet as it moves forward, it will — like the Russian revolution of 1917 and other great revolutions of the 20th century — become a test for all tendencies in the workers movement, dividing those who identify with and defend real-world revolutions from those who remain in sectarian isolation....

“The founding of the new party offers revolutionary forces the possibility to unite against bureaucratic and patronage-ridden political machines and against left sectarianism. It is a creative process that deserves support.”

Annis and Riddell placed particular stress on the importance of Venezuela’s close relationship with Cuba. “These two peoples, acting in concert, are now the vanguard of a popular upsurge across much of Latin America and the Caribbean.”

Second Statement

On July 7, Socialist Worker-New Zealand issued a *Second Statement on the Venezuelan Revolution*, which took up the relationship between leadership and mass movement in Venezuela.

“For some socialists, only the mass movement is propelling the revolution forward, while Chávez merely responds to pressures ‘from below.’ This analysis essentially characterizes Chávez as someone unwillingly pushed along by the movement, whose main interest is trying to cling to power in the same way a reformist leadership might do.

“Socialist Worker-New Zealand rejects this view, which we see as one-dimensional and non-dialectical. We believe that Chávez, through what he says, and more importantly through the chain reaction of events he is able to set in motion, is advancing the confidence, awareness and organization of the masses. Rather than having to be pushed forward by the movement, Chávez has grown into a huge motivational and practical initiator of the socialist cause....

“A socialist leadership based on the masses and promoting their self-emancipation transcends the reformist dichotomy of ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’ “

They reiterated their view that “serious revolutionaries must be inside the PSUV, helping the party to integrate Marxist theory with the often unique practice of a real-life revolution.”

“Sadly, some ‘revolutionaries’ inside and outside Venezuela seem to believe an alternative ‘pole of attraction’ to the PSUV must be built. Yet standing outside the mass socialist party would be to invite sectarian isolation from the masses.”

They also rejected Callinicos’s argument that organizing against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is more important than supporting the Venezuelan struggle. Socialists must do both:

“Anti-war activism and Venezuelan solidarity are two sides of one coin. Each needs the other. That’s why Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution are an inspiration to freedom fighters across the Middle East. By refusing to prioritise one struggle over the other we don’t buy into imperialism’s bid to divide-and-rule the global grassroots.”

The Discussion Continues

While this discussion was taking place, over five million Venezuelans formally declared their desire to join the PSUV. SWP leader Mike Gonzalez commented:

“The ‘socialist battalions’ of Venezuela’s new political party met last week in open assembly in various districts of the capital Caracas....

“There were debates throughout the movement as to whether to register. The problem was, and is, that none of the structures or aims of the PSUV have yet been defined. ...

“Chávez has announced that the PSUV will not be a Marxist party nor will it be based on class. The base units of the new organization are to be geographical. This points to an electoral machine based on constituencies.”

In Gonzalez’s view, the mass movement must remain independent of the PSUV if it is the party of government.

“If, on the other hand, it becomes the political expression of that movement, challenging and questioning the government of Hugo Chávez, it will be a very different party from the one that is being built today.”

Daphne Lawless, a leader of Socialist Worker-New Zealand, responded that Gonzalez’s article was “one long missed opportunity.”

“His report seems to begin from a fixed idea — that a workers’ revolutionary movement can only grow in opposition to the government of Hugo Chávez. This is a regrettably short-sighted attitude that neglects the mutually reinforcing dialectic between

Chávez's government and the mass movement....

"The pessimistic scenarios envisioned in Mike's report can be prevented if Venezuelan revolutionaries join and help build the PSUV — and if those of us overseas seriously engage with it."

'With the mass struggle against imperialism'

The Canadian affiliate of the IST, the International Socialists, has not participated in the public debate, but one of its best-known leaders, Paul Kellogg, recently published his views on the PSUV, describing it as "an enormous step forward in the advancement of the Bolivarian process in Venezuela."

"The first job of socialists in an oppressed country is to be with the mass struggle against imperialism and for sovereignty. Clearly the new vehicle which will express this struggle will be the PSUV.

"In fact, the stronger the left wing is inside the PSUV, the more the movement will be well placed to deal with the inevitable careerism and opportunism that will accompany an initiative on this scale.

"The second — and equally difficult job — is to make the links, in theory and in practice, between the fight against imperialism and for sovereignty with the need for a complete break from capitalism, and a new state of democratic socialism.

"A left current with that perspective that enthusiastically joins the PSUV will be able to begin that work.

"The job of the left in Canada and the Global North is to publicize this process inside our social movements, and to be prepared to move quickly to oppose any attempt by imperialist governments to intervene and crush the mass movement in Venezuela and elsewhere in Latin America."

Participants and Partisans

One of the most important lessons of the revolutionary struggles of the past century is that every mass social upheaval has new and unexpected characteristics. Revolutions are complex events that evolve in unpredictable ways, making use of the human and social raw material that is at hand when the struggle breaks out.

That lesson is being taught again today by the social upheavals in Latin America and the Middle East. The challenge before Marxists is to understand and relate to new forms of struggle, new issues, and new leaderships. The lessons of these events cannot be learned from the sidelines: to understand them, we must be participants and partisans, actively engaged in the struggle.

The IST's discussion of Venezuela is a concrete example of how a real revolution promotes engagement, rethinking, and debate among socialist

and anti-imperialist forces internationally. It's a vitally important process, one that all Marxists are challenged to join.

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Venezuela We Are With You Coalition Coalición Venezuela Estamos Contigo

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‘The PSUV is born, destined to make history’

(Green Left Weekly, March 14, 2008)

By Federico Fuentes

(CARACAS) Addressing the founding congress of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) on March 2, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez proclaimed the new party to be “a party for the social battle, for the defense of the homeland.”

“If the homeland, the revolution were ... attacked in a direct manner by the empire or its lackeys, each militant of this party should become a revolutionary soldier...”

“The PSUV is born, destined to make history,” Chavez said of the party whose creation he called for in December 2006 to unite the various groups and mass base among the poor that support the revolution. “Its fundamental role is to be ... the biggest guarantee of [the revolution’s] permanence.”

That same weekend, 1,600 delegates at the founding congress approved the program and declaration of principles of the new party. The previous weekend Chavez was elected president of the party, and the congress granted him the power to appoint five vice-presidents, the first of which is retired General Alberto Muller Rojas.

Then on March 9, over 90,000 spokespeople, alternate spokespeople and the five heads of commissions elected from each of the more than 12,000 battalions (branches) participated in the election for the 15-person national directorate, as well as 15 alternative delegates to that body.

Political necessity

Speaking to *Green Left Weekly*, Muller Rojas explained that “the party was a political necessity” for Venezuela’s revolutionary process.

A veteran revolutionary, Muller Rojas headed Chavez’s successful 1998 presidential campaign. Muller Rojas was appointed to the technical commission to help create the PSUV when it was first initiated.

Describing Chavez’s old party, the Movement of the Fifth Republic (MVR), as an “electoral club with diverse interests,” Muller stated that until now “no structured force, with clearly marked out political objectives [and] which united” all pro-Chavez forces had existed in the revolution.

Between April and June of 2007, some 5.7 million people signed up to join the new party, an expression of popular enthusiasm for a political instrument to serve the revolution. Local battalions were created, with delegates from every 7-12 battalions coming together to form socialist circumscriptions (districts). From these circumscriptions the delegates to the founding congress were elected.

Expressing satisfaction with the founding congress, Muller Rojas remarked that “you cannot construct a party in one year — we have a multitude of 5.7 million people who enrolled in the party and it will take years to

build such a party, particularly due to the lack of political culture, after 40 or 50 years of the exclusion of the majority from politics.”

Debates and tensions

The congress, which began on January 12, was marked by a number of debates and tensions. Chavez, citing Fidel Castro, stated in his March 2 speech that the party was “the revolution within the revolution.”

The party has become a central battleground for the future of the revolution, as the grassroots attempts to impose its will on bureaucratic and right-wing sectors it feels are holding back the revolution.

Regarding the debate at the congress that occurred over whether to explicitly define the party as not only anti-imperialist (as the right wing attempted to limit the program to) but also anti-capitalist, Muller Rojas expressed his satisfaction that the congress had adopted a “definitive position against capitalism.”

Other debates flared up over the supposed expulsion from the PSUV of National Assembly deputy Luis Tascon after he publicly raised allegations of corruption in the infrastructure ministry.

Although the congress never voted on his expulsion, two central leaders of the congress organising committee, Jorge Rodriguez and Diosdado Cabello (governor of Miranda, a leader of the Chavista right and brother of the former infrastructure minister implicated in Tascon’s allegations) announced on state television he had been expelled.

Discontent among delegates forced a backdown, with the question of Tascon’s expulsion deferred until after the congress.

There were also widespread concerns raised over the conduct of the congress, specifically the election process for the leadership of the party.

A letter to Chavez signed by a significant number of congress delegates argued it was necessary to “profoundly revise the internal processes that during the founding congress have unfolded and which we feel makes vulnerable democratic participation, transparency, internal unity, the confidence of militants, the image of the party in the country and the international community.”

Gonzalo Gomez, a delegate from Caracas working-class barrio Catia and member of Socialist Tide (a collection of left militants in the PSUV) argued that although these issues were problematic, they were understandable in the context of the short time available to found the party and the urgency of the task.

These criticisms, he explained, need to be taken into consideration for bettering the internal processes of the party in the future.

Regarding the Tascon dispute, Gomez argued that besides the need to have first established the program and principles as a basis for who can and can’t be a member, as well statutes to define a democratic procedure for expulsions, the real question is: “What is the biggest danger for the revolution? That people carry out actions outside of the framework of the discipline

of the organization, or is the biggest danger that of the violations of the principles and ethics of the party, and the existence of corruption within the revolution, the state and the government?"

Battling bureaucracy

Following a strong campaign by delegates, the declaration of principles was amended to include the following paragraph: "The inefficiency in the exercise of public power, bureaucratism, the low level of participation of the people in the control and management of government, corruption and a widening gap between the people and government, threaten [to undermine] the trust that the people have placed in the Bolivarian revolution."

Drawing on the lessons of Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky — a bitter opponent of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalin — Muller Rojas added that the biggest danger the party faced was bureaucratism.

He argued this "tends to create a new class, make party life much more rigid, where the party loses flexibility and where what happens is what happened to the party in the USSR."

This is more dangerous than the attacks from imperialism and the counter-revolution, Muller Rojas argued.

Asked about differences within the party, Muller Rojas said: "I personally see tendencies as something very positive. I don't believe in the idea of single thought nor dogmatic thought." He added that given the great majority of aspiring PSUV members don't come from the old parties of the left, there has not yet been the creation of organised currents or factions.

The great diversity of the party was reflected in the election of the national leadership, he added. "There we have everything — afro-descendents, indigenous, whites, youth with different ideological positions."

In the elections "people did not follow the slates that had been circulating supposedly representing different tendencies," Gonzalo said. "In regards to the national leadership, we could say that neither the most radical sectors nor the most conservative sectors were elected."

Forged in the midst of a revolutionary process, the PSUV has some enormous tasks ahead.

"We are the government and the government is the party," said Muller Rojas. "It is an intimate relationship. It is not just an external support to the government, we have to commit ourselves to finding the greatest efficiency in public policies, cooperating with the government in implementing these policies ... particularly the development of popular power with is an extraordinary task."

Gomez argued that "the party should be the promoter, the driving force of the policies of the government, so that it is not the government dictating to the party, but rather the government constructing its policies together with the party and with the social movements."

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