

Hands Off Venezuela!

Venezuela Two Years After the Coup “Deepen the revolution, advance towards socialism”

Two years after the brief April 2002 coup, Venezuela is still living through an unfinished revolutionary process. The masses of the people and the workers have defeated the counterrevolutionary conspiracies of the local oligarchy and imperialism twice, but the revolution has not been completed and thus the danger of a new reactionary coup is still ever present.

In the last year the Chavez government has implemented a number of social plans which have widened the mass social base of support for the revolution. Three million acres of land have been distributed mainly to peasant co-operatives. The other important reforms have been mainly in the fields of education and health care. Mission Robinson, Mission Rivas and Mission Sucre, aimed at eradicating illiteracy, giving people primary and secondary education and access to university, have been a great success so far. More than 3 million people (out of a population of 27 million) have gone through one or another of these plans. More than 1 million people have been lifted out of illiteracy and the target by June is 1.5 million. The Plan Barrios Adentro (Into the Neighborhood) has given access to primary health care to millions of people (more than 1 million in the Caracas council area alone), with the help of some 3,500 Cuban doctors who have gone into the poorest neighborhoods in the capital and around the country, where no doctors had ever been before.

These plans and “missions”, paid by the national oil company PDVSA, are not without problems (bureaucracy, mismanagement, corruption in both opposition and Bolivarian controlled councils, open sabotage, lack of democracy in some instances of its implementation), but they have undoubtedly reached a wide layer of the masses who can see in them some very concrete benefits of the revolutionary process. Also, the fact that these programmes have been implemented in the popular neighborhoods by the community organizations themselves has, to a certain extent, allowed the government and the revolutionary organizations to by-pass the structures of the state, full of saboteurs and counter-revolutionaries trying to prevent the implementation of any reforms.

The structure of the old capitalist state machinery is largely intact and is acting to stop and frustrate the revolutionary initiative of the masses. One issue which is particularly enraging the masses who defeated the coup is the fact that those who organized and implemented it two years ago are either free or in a comfortable exile in Miami, Costa Rica or Colombia, directing from afar the threads of new reactionary conspiracies. More recently Baruta local police officers caught using firearms in the opposition riots in February (“La Guarimba” as it was known), were released without charges. Carlos Melo, a prominent opposition leader caught during the Guarimba with illegal rifles in the boot of his car, was also released, and so was Baruta mayor Carlos Radonsky, responsible for the assault on the Cuban embassy on April 12, 2002. This is further proof, if any was needed, that the justice system is still a bourgeois system, at the service of the interests of the oligarchy.

The same Supreme Court of Justice which declared that there had never been a coup in April 2002, but rather a “vacuum of power”, is now conspiring to declare valid the fraudulent signatures which the opposition claims it collected to force a presidential recall referendum.

Having been defeated twice, in April 2002 and in December 2002 / January 2003, the opposition is weaker, divided and its social base demoralized. But it is far from having been defeated decisively. As one of the speakers said at the rally in Puente Llaguno, to commemorate those who died defending the revolution on April 11, 2002, “the only way to kill a snake is to cut its head off, we left the snake alive and now it is preparing to bite us again”. Nineteenth century peasant uprising leader Ezequiel Zamora expressed the same idea in these words: “the only way to deal with a wasps’ nest is with fire, if you disturb it but do not destroy it they will come back to sting you”. Through a combination of diplomatic, terrorist and economic means, they are trying to create a situation in which an international intervention could be justified, and one of the main planks of this strategy is to increase tensions along the border with Colombia. In the economic field there has been a certain recovery, after a steep fall in 2003, caused mainly by the oil sabotage in January and the economic sabotage of the ruling class. However, unemployment remains high, and price and exchange controls are reaching their limits in the struggle against price rises and a flight of capital.

The main engine of the economy has been the recovery of production in the oil industry, PDVSA, but even here the workers feel they are losing ground. It was ordinary rank and file oil workers who saved PDVSA faced with the sabotage of the industry on the part of its directors, managers and many engineers in December 2002. In many oil refineries, fields and plants, the workers recovered and maintained production on their own through workers’ control, with the help of revolutionary engineers, the local communities and sections of the National Guard. In some cases, the experience of workers’ control lasted for a period of time even after the oil sabotage and bosses lock-out had been defeated. Workers’ control was particularly strong in the states of Anzoategui and Monagas. After the defeat of the oil sabotage, the government appointed new directors, but the managerial structure of the company remained largely the same. Oil workers, after having learnt in practice that they could run the industry themselves were not at all happy with this situation. During 2003 a number of regional meetings of oil workers, the local communities in the oil rich areas and sections of the army took place to discuss the best way to restructure PDVSA, which was now said to “belong to the people”. One of the main conclusions of these meetings was that the change of directors was not enough. Even if new directors and



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administrators were appointed who were loyal to the revolution, they would still be part of a bureaucratic structure which could not serve the interests of the workers and the people. The only way to guarantee that PDVSA belong to the people was through the democratic participation of the workers in its management.

In the meantime, as the workers movement retreated after the immediate danger of reaction receded, the old bureaucratic and reactionary managers started to slowly creep back into key positions in PDVSA. For months now the oil workers have been denouncing this situation and in some cases, like the Paraguana Refining Centre in Punto Fijo, they have forced the resignation of reactionary directors and managers. In order to deal with this situation, and also to avoid getting the workers caught up in the power struggle between different fractions trying to get control of the company, a few months back the oil workers in different parts of the country started to organize "Guiding Committees". These are meant to generate political discussion amongst the oil workers, raise their political level and come up with proposals for the process of restructuring PDVSA. These committees have no real power within the industry but are playing quite an important role in generalizing the experience and the political discussion amongst oil workers.

Another indication of the militant mood of the workers' movement was the massive meeting which took place in the Teresa Carreño Theatre on Saturday, April 17th, to commemorate the first anniversary of the proclamation of the UNT. Delegations had come from the main factories and oil refineries from all over the country with banners and slogans. The mood was electric as the different trade union speakers addressed the audience. There was an announcement that the smaller, Communist Party dominated, CUTV confederation had decided to fuse with the UNT. The rally also announced the launching of a recruitment drive aimed at increasing trade union membership from around 15-20 percent to 80 percent of the workforce. But the main attraction of the meeting was Chavez's speech. Once again he made a strongly worded anti-imperialist speech, and repeated that capitalism, neo-liberalism and globalization had shown they did not work. He declared that the revolution was entering a new stage in which the key would be socio-economic transformation. Finally he congratulated the trade unionists on their recruitment drive and encouraged them to form "revolutionary, Bolivarian, class struggle unions".

This was in line with a marked radicalization of Chavez's political position in the last few months. After the mass demonstration against imperialism on February 29th, which smashed the attempts of the opposition to create chaos on the streets through the so-called Guarimba, Chavez has been much clearer in denouncing the role of US imperialism in the April 2002 coup and the role of Washington in further coup preparations against him. He has also expressed clearly his view that capitalism does not work. Thus, at the mass rally to celebrate the victory of the people over the coup on April 13, he said that his government was committed to "break with the capitalist schema which has been sown in our country, through which a wealthy minority had concentrated the resources, capital, and means of production, for a long time. We are democratizing the economy in order to transform the socio-economic model and thus raise the living standards of the whole of the people".

He has also spoken openly of the need for "every fisherman, student, worker and person of the people to learn how to use a rifle, since this is the concept of an armed people", as the only guarantee to defend the revolution against imperialism. Also, he

has warned against those who say that the revolution is already irreversible and said that moderation would be fatal. In a number of recent speeches, he has added that moderate tendencies must be purged from the revolution and that he would rather risk another military coup than drive the revolution over a cliff because of moderation. The shift to the left in Chavez's speeches is also, to a certain extent, a reflection of these pressures from below and the tireless conspiracy of the oligarchy and imperialism against his government. However, this is far from being a clear-cut or unidirectional process. For instance, the day after Chavez made the February 29th speech, he signed an agreement with the oil multinationals to exploit the "Plataforma Deltana" gas deposits. More recently the government has hired a very expensive firm of consultants (Patton Boggs) in the US to lobby Washington and improve the image of Venezuela amongst American politicians and businessmen, as if a revolution could ever get a good reception from imperialism. Open criticism of capitalism as a failed system in itself is quite significant, but a clear alternative programme (ie the democratic planning of the economy by the workers themselves) is still missing.

What is clear is that the process of radicalization of the masses and of raising their consciousness is proceeding ahead. All over the country the people are occupying empty buildings if they have nowhere to live, occupying empty cinemas in order to hold weekly political discussions, setting up literacy centres, etc. This is the independent revolutionary activity of the masses which forms the backbone of the Bolivarian revolution. The working class, particularly its key section in Venezuela, the oil workers, has achieved a very advanced level of consciousness and awareness of their own strength and role in the whole process. A leaflet distributed at the April 17th UNT meeting by the Bolivarian Workers Force from the Miranda Heights, and signed by trade unions from 14 different factories and workplaces, dealt with the need for political education "to guarantee the victory of the working class", and ended by saying that "workers historically have done all the labour, but now it is a question of taking power. We are going to educate ourselves so that we can run the country".

What is needed now is, on the one hand, the national unification and coordination of all revolutionary organizations, assemblies, trade unions and Bolivarian circles, through a body of democratically elected and recallable representatives which could be the basis of an alternative power of the workers and the people. On the other hand, the most advanced activists must gather around a clear Marxist perspective which includes workers' management of the oil industry and other nationalized companies, the expropriation of the banks, the big monopolies and all imperialist and multinational interests under workers' control, and the general arming of the people with the formation of democratic workers' militias to fight against reaction and imperialist intervention.

The growing interest in the ideas of Marxism which was clearly shown at the recent 2nd International Solidarity Gathering and the keen reception for the ideas put forward by Alan Woods, Manzoor Ahmed and Miriam Municio, all leading members of the international Marxist tendency, show that the ground is fertile. The comrades of the Venezuelan Revolutionary Marxist Current with the slogan "deepen the revolution, advance towards socialism" are actively participating in the revolutionary process putting forward a clear Marxist case.

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