

The Soldiers of Solidarity & Lessons from Venezuela

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As the important struggle of the rank and file "Soldiers of Solidarity" at Delphi continues, we can learn much from the experiences of working people across Latin America, a continent in the throes of a revolutionary process. The struggles of our brothers and sisters in Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, and Mexico are rich in lessons for the US labor movement. As things come to a head at Delphi, we should look in particular to the experience of Venezuela's National Union of Workers (UNT) and how this militant, democratic, and rank-and-file controlled union emerged and is winning important gains for working people.

Before the UNT was founded in 2003, the labor movement in Venezuela was dominated by the Venezuelan Confederation of Workers (CTV). This was a completely undemocratic and corrupt union, and its leadership was deeply connected with the ruling oligarchy, the bosses' federation (FEDECAMARAS), and Washington DC. Workers in construction and transport had to pay union bosses for work on top of dues, while the top leadership skimmed from the treasury and received stipends from the National Endowment for Democracy, a CIA front organization.

After decades of betrayals, mass pressure from below led to the first democratic elections in the CTV in November 2001, called by a referendum of the membership. However, they were wracked by fraud and the records from some 9,000 polling stations went "missing". The old leadership was "reelected" with only 48 percent of the votes counted, even though the election was not even recognized by the National Electoral Commission. Pro-democracy union activists were beaten by thugs and fired

from their jobs with the complicity of their own "union." Then in April 2002, Carlos Ortega, head of the CTV, openly supported a military coup which removed the overwhelmingly popular and democratically-elected government of Hugo Chavez. Within 2 days, however, the masses of workers and the poor came out on the streets and the bosses' government collapsed like a house of cards, returning Chavez to the presidency.

The final straw came at the end of 2002, when, in an effort to wreck the country's economy in order to foment discontent against Chavez, FEDECAMARAS and the CTV jointly called a "strike" of the oil industry. But the majority of the rank-and-file oil workers occupied the oil fields and restarted production, thus ending the sabotage.

A mass rally in April 2003 prepared the way for the founding congress of the UNT which took place in Caracas on August 1, 2003, with the participation of more than 1,500 delegates from across the country, representing over 120 unions and 25 regional union bodies. The vast majority of the unions affiliated to the CTV left it and joined the UNT, leaving the old federation an empty shell representing practically no one.

From the very beginning, the UNT has stressed that it is an "autonomous, democratic, internationalist, class struggle, independent and united movement with equality for men and women." The demands of the UNT are clear and include a call for the nationalization of closed factories under workers' co-management and a 36-hour work week. It has launched a broad organization drive with the aim of unionizing 80 percent of Venezuelan workers, from its current level of about 18 percent. It is building "social trade unionism", integrated with society as a whole, and is organizing those in the informal

sector, housewives, indigenous peoples' movements, and others long neglected by traditional unions.

The bosses' lockout of the oil industry also affected other sectors; thousands of companies went bankrupt and many closed down operations. The bosses' ran their own companies right into the dirt and skipped town. The workers of many of these companies responded by reopening the factory gates and restarting production on their own. In late 2004 UNT-affiliated activists began a campaign calling for the nationalization under workers' control of the massive VENEPAL paper mill. In January 2005, President Chavez signed a decree nationalizing the company, to be managed jointly by worker's delegates, members of the local community, and government representatives. Since then, several other nationalizations have taken place.

Workers from several factories recently formed the Revolutionary Workers Front of Occupied and Co-managed Factories. This campaign works to encourage the workers themselves to occupy and bring back under production over 800 companies listed as bankrupt or inoperative, which have been slated for possible nationalization by the government. Instead of lying idle, these plants will be put to use again; only this time for the benefit of the workers and the community, rather than for a boss laying on the beach in Miami.

These struggles for workers' control began as a simple matter of putting bread on the table. When the Venezuelan bosses' sabotaged the economy, they not only bankrupted their own companies - they destroyed the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of workers. The workers from some of these companies decided not to give up without a fight: they went back to the factories and resumed production. The money that used to go in profits to a small group of bosses and investors is now used for health care, education, and housing for the workers and the community as a whole.

If working people can fight back so effectively in a poor 'third-world' country, then why can't it be done in the richest and most technologically-advanced country on earth? Let alone in the country where the sit-down strike, the 8-hour day, and the weekend itself were invented? We can never forget that the high standard of living enjoyed for many years by many unionized workers in the US was the result of bitter struggles in the past. The situation faced by the Venezuelan workers in



“We are all VENEPAL”

2002 is not too different from that faced by our brothers and sisters at Delphi today.

Both groups of workers are fighting against bankruptcy - whether or not the “bankruptcy” is genuine! The bosses have shown time and time again that they will “pull out all the stops” in order to maximize profits at the expense of working people - even if it means driving their own company into the ground. We need to fight back just as hard and be prepared to take things to their logical conclusion. This is only possible with an active rank-and-file, genuine trade union democracy, and a leadership that is accountable to the needs and views of the membership. The Soldiers of Solidarity have already declared that they are prepared to wage an all-out struggle to defend their jobs and return the Labor Movement to the militant traditions it was founded upon. In this growing movement we should look to the example and experiences of our brothers and sisters in Latin America.

Every worker a Soldier of Solidarity!

(By David May in St. Louis)

**Contact the Workers International
League for more information and to get
involved: wil@socialistappeal.org**

