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Cononavirus pandemic in Venezuela

Holding Covid-19 at bay in Venezuela

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As of May 15, Venezuela is reporting 455 coronavirus infections and just 10 Covid-19 deaths. However, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan immigrants in neighboring Columbia and (especially) Brazil are trapped in pandemic hotspots. Thus far, President Nicolás Maduro's government has maintained an effective quarantine regime on the border, preventing the contagion's rapid spread. However, the desperate economic situation, stemming from crippling U.S. sanctions, the collapse in world oil prices, and the regime's economic mismanagement places a question mark over how long the country can fend off the pandemic.[*No Borders News*]

Aurora González: Why has the collapse of international oil prices not yet affected the Venezuelan economy as we might have expected?

Stalin Pérez Borges: The fall in oil production is what is hitting our economy and our international currency income the hardest. Production today is estimated to be 600 million barrels per day. If this is accurate, then the scandalous collapse in oil prices doesn't affect our income all that much. But we will feel the impact three months from now which is when payments for oil sold at current prices will come due. The fall in oil production and refining itself in Venezuela is what is hurting our economy the most and the fact that the government, after so much time has passed, has done little to turn this situation around when they could have done much more.

AG: What will countries like yours – countries that have as many resources as yours does – have to do to find a way out of the current situation.

SPB: Yes, we have a large variety of mineral resources, natural riches, agricultural potential, and a geographic location advantageous to maritime transportation. Given all this, we are in a privileged position. We believe in developing these possibilities and have bet that we will see the results. But what is the point of producing 3 or 5 million barrels of oil if half of it is pillaged between internal market managers and various departments in PDVSA (the national oil company) before it ever reaches the national coffers or the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV)? And why bother refining a quarter of that production if those who run gas stations and the working class don't have sufficient incomes, or if worst of all, the oil workers themselves don't even have dignified salaries? So, as a first step, if we don't punish corruption, we are screwed.

A whole century of oil exploration in Venezuela has passed, and it would cost us enormously to develop the production necessary to make us the "Venezuelan power" that Maduro likes to talk about. Oil isn't the mana from heaven it used to be. And this isn't only because prices today are near zero. But because, as a source of energy, oil is chiefly responsible for the second great cause of today's unprecedented global crisis, that is, environmental pollution and the destruction of nature. Thus, any ventures that rely on oil must be carried out with extreme care and a high degree of environmental consciousness less they be transformed into ecological crimes that merely waste time and cost lives.

AG: You make an eloquent case but will oil and gas production really be reduced? It seems to me you are reflecting on some of the biggest problems facing your country and the increasingly uncertain situation in which our planet finds itself. Would you agree?

SPB: There are no plans for recovery or re-starting and leveraging production, however successful they may be on their own terms, that will serve our purposes if we are not clear about need to fight corruption. Notice that I say fight.

Corruption will be there. But, the heart of the problem is: do you fight and punish those who perpetrate corruption or not? And the answer will determine which direction our lives take. This has not been done in Venezuela. We have not encouraged people's creative powers in work and social life in all sectors of production and in all social strata. If we did that, which is what I insist on and propose we must do, we will see the results.

AG: The world is being hammered by the Covid-19 pandemic. How do you think this will affect the world economy and what social consequences will emerge in terms of jobs, wages, and the population's quality of life?

SPB: This crisis is a threat to the world itself and its consequences raise the potential for still more problems. The coronavirus, whose origins remain to be determined, has accelerated a pre-existing economic and environmental crisis and produced still more damage. The preventative measures taken by various governments to contain the pandemic show that global capitalism is as lethal to human life as Covid-19 itself. This exposes the contradictions facing the Trumps and Bolsonaros who find themselves pushed up against the wall. Will they defend capital, privileging production and profits, or will they preserve and value public health and the lives of their populations? Faced with this dilemma, they prefer to defend capital.

But there are millions of workers have been laid off without salaries, forcing some countries to revert to providing bags of food for families and special subsidies and government payouts. And there are already millions who don't even receive that. Billions are already starving and living in misery. The International Labor Organization has stated that the drop in employment is catastrophic. And predictions by supposed economic experts warn that the next few months will be much worse.

AG: Can you describe what has been done in Venezuela in the fight against the spread of Covid-19?

SPB: I will repeat what I have said many times before. Fortunately, the Venezuelan government has done a good job in combating the spread of the coronavirus. In other words, the President of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro (keeping in mind that he is the only president) has demonstrated how to act in the fight against COVID-19. Thus, our country has not been affected as badly as others. Here there has been a combination of good government action, extraordinary participation by sectors of the social movements, and a majority of the people who have shown how to respect the quarantine and its regulations.

In terms of surveys that ask about potential infections, almost 19 million people are said to have participated. As of May 1, less than 350 coronavirus infections have been reported with fewer than 10 Covid-10 deaths. I acknowledge what Maduro has done in the fight against the spread of the coronavirus because this raises hopes that he will see that this kind of work done in conjunction with the social movements and the people could also be applied to struggles against speculation, in the struggle to improve the economy, to raise industrial and agricultural production, and to improve social conditions.

And I say openly to him that, if you really want to fight those struggles, then don't only listen to, and meet exclusively with, politicians like Delcy and Jorge Rodríguez, with Oil Minister Tareck El Aissami, with National Assembly powerbroker Diosdado Cabellos, and with Defense Minister Padrino López. Listen to your old compañeros who worked beside you as part of the Bolivarian Federation of Workers (FBT), listen to the social movements. Try to sit down and listen patiently to the many people who really want Venezuela to be the country that Hugo Chávez and many others like you have dreamed of.

I don't know that we have a workers' president, although you come from the working class and you know how to defend the interests of that social class and other oppressed peoples. I don't know that we have a socialist president

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either, despite more than 20 years of socialism in speeches but not in tangible reality. Yes, Comrade Nicolás – if you continue to see me as a comrade – what we continue to hope for is a Socialist Venezuela because our grandchildren are facing a future of barbarism. Do your part to get to that Socialist Homeland.

1 May 2020

Source: This interview with Stalin Pérez Borges was conducted by Aurora González, coordinator of the Resisto reporting network on May 1, 2020. It was translated by [No Borders News](#) and abridged for publication.

PS:

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