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Venezuela

Opportunities and obstacles in Venezuela – revolutionary militants gather in Caracas

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“Huge opportunities, very great dangers!” That’s how one of President Chavez’ closest advisers summed up the current situation facing Venezuela’s Bolivarian revolution.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/stalinperes.jpg>]

Stalin Peres (Marea Socialista) and Tarzia Medeiros (PSOL)

Haiman el Troudi was addressing a seminar organised by the Fourth International in Caracas in August, to discuss the challenge of socialism in the 21st century, both in Venezuela and in the rest of the region. The meeting brought together revolutionaries from a dozen Latin American and European countries, along with a variety of currents and individuals from across the spectrum of the revolutionary left in Venezuela.

It was held in the Miranda International Centre, a government-sponsored think-tank, where Haiman, who was Chavez’ chief of staff in 2005, now directs a research programme on 21st Century Socialism.

In spite of their differing experiences, approaches, and analyses, just about all the Venezuelan participants came out with assessments of the present challenge that were similar to Haiman’s.

Trade union leader and editor of Marea Socialista, Stalin Perez, pointed to grave problems in the newly nationalised telecoms and electricity sectors, as well as the state oil company, where workers are not being given a voice, much less control, or where collective agreements have not been renewed. But he also emphasised the immense possibilities for building a new socialist vanguard in the emerging PSUV united socialist party.

Carlos Lanz of Proyecto Nuestro America, who headed up the most ambitious experiment so far in workers’ control, at the ALCASA aluminium plant, analysed the danger of “Bolivarian entropy”, a dispersion of energy that could lead to a “restorationist counter-revolution”.

Roland Denis and Ricardo Navarro, from two other wings of the divided Proyecto Nuestro America, also argued that the contradictions within the original Bolivarian project, including within the 1999 Constitution, were now coming to a head. Simon Uzcategui, of the Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front, described the emergence of an unusual kind of dual power, which must now either go to the left or to the right.

Margarita Aguinaga, from Socialist Refoundation (Ecuadorean section of the Fourth International) made an eloquent case for giving any new project for socialism a militantly feminist face. And she pointed to a different kind of contradiction facing the revolutionary processes both in her own country and in Venezuela – between the pre-eminent role played by women at the grass roots of these struggles, for example within the indigenous movement in Ecuador or the neighbourhood mobilisations in Venezuela, and their far more marginalised presence within the political leaderships.

This was a theme felt keenly by the Fourth International participants present, not least because of the 14 attending from 9 Latin American countries, 9 were women, and many of these came from a younger generation drawn into political activity around feminist struggles.

It was not difficult to find living examples of the positive possibilities in this moment of the Bolivarian revolution that many of the Venezuelan participants referred to. A visit to the western town of Carora gave a taste of how much further the so-called “explosion of popular power” through Community Councils could go.

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These Councils – which Chavez calls the fifth and most important motor of the transition to socialism – are local bodies of popular power bringing together 200 or more families. They have been springing up in thousands of communities across the country since Chavez' re-election last December.

In most cases the scope of their discussions and the extent of their powers are still limited to very immediate and very local decisions. They agree what their community's most pressing needs are, draw up projects to address these, then oversee their execution. Such projects are usually financed by central government grants of around 10-15 thousand dollars each. As such, the community councils don't necessarily encroach very much on the powers of the existing local state.

The constitutional reform now being discussed in Venezuela should give greater powers to these Communal Councils, including a stipulation that at least 5 per cent of the budget of all local governments should be handed over to the community councils. But the local government in Carora has already gone much further, handing over control of 100 per cent of its investment budget to the organs of popular power through a participatory budget.

Carora is so far a bit of an exception – one of the few local administrations in Venezuela that is clearly committed to the building of a new kind of 'communal' state, to replace the old bourgeois one that still prevails. But it is not entirely alone.

A visit to the industrial town of La Victoria, where the mayor is a highly combative young woman, showed how all of the local government's social service departments, and their budgets, are being transferred out of the town hall and put under the control of a regional network of Communal Councils.

But just a half an hour down the road in Maracay, it was also easy enough to see the kind of dangers Haiman El Troudi and the others were referring to. After nine months of occupation, the exemplary experience of workers control at the Sanitarios de Maracay bathroom factory had just been overturned by something looking like a coup d'etat.

Starved of raw materials, cut off from their natural customers and saddled with bank debts, some of the workers had begun to lose confidence. The Ministry of Labour offered a deal including the payment of outstanding benefits in exchange for an end to the occupation and the handing back of the factory to the absentee owners – then helped to mount a lightning assembly with the white-collar administrative staff who had never supported the occupation, to throw out the factory committee that had been leading it.

This was just the most recent and dramatic example of what has appeared to be at best indifference and at worst outright sabotage by parts of the Bolivarian government in the face of the most radical experiences of co-management or workers' control that have emerged.

A month earlier some of the workers at Sanitarios had visited Carora for a joint celebration of the anniversary of Aporrea, the alternative news web site that has become the virtual home of the left in the Bolivarian revolution. In his contribution to the Caracas seminar, Gonzalo Gomez, founder of Aporrea and also one of the editors of *Marea Clasista y Socialista*, pointed to this as precisely the kind of combination of struggles where the biggest opportunities lie for moving the process forward.

But it is clear that some within the Bolivarian leadership, including, disgracefully, the Minister of Labour, self-styled trotskyist Jose Ramon Rivera, do not want this to happen.

Several of the Venezuelan participants in our meeting pointed to the delicate balance that needs to be struck by

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international supporters of the Bolivarian revolution – at one and the same time defending and energetically supporting the existing achievements and the new struggles underway, with their extraordinary potential; while also speaking out even more clearly than it is sometimes possible for Venezuelan revolutionaries to do, against the abuses and dangers that threaten the revolution from within.