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Venezuela

# The pro-Maduro left abandons the workers and people of Venezuela

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**Unlike what had happened for the last 25 years in Venezuelan elections – and there have been dozens since Hugo Chávez's victory in 1998 – this time, after the presidential vote on 28 July, the broad Latin American left, including the entire body of supporters of 'progressivism', has split from top to bottom.**

An ever smaller, but still numerous, sector, full of intellectuals, echoes the argument of the São Paulo Forum [1], according to which, in order to save Venezuela and the region from US imperialism, it is necessary to support the government of Nicolás Maduro at any cost. This cost, of course, includes the possibility that, unlike in previous times, Maduro may not have won the elections because, after all, he has so far refused to prove his victory.

According to this logic, based more on classical geopolitics than Marxism, anything is justified, and indeed necessary, in order to 'not hand over' power in Venezuela (and its oil) 'to the right'. According to this geopolitical logic, the fact that Nicolás Maduro won or lost the election is secondary to the 'progressive nationalist' imperative of preventing US imperialism, embodied by opposition candidate Edmundo González, from taking up residence in Miraflores Palace and thereby jeopardising state ownership of PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela SA), which owns one of the largest oil and gas reserves on the planet. Another section of these neo-madurists, it's true, focuses less on oil and more on the tragedy it would be to recognise the defeat of Maduro, seen as a leftist, against a backdrop of the advance of the extreme right in the world and in the region. For both groups, however, there is no option but to stick with Maduro – not even a negotiation between the two sides of the Venezuelan dispute, as Lula and Gustavo Petro propose, probably with the aim of agreeing a division of powers between the two parties, including some guarantee of democratic rights and the integrity of PDVSA.

History, facts don't matter

As a reminder, what is the dividing line between right and left - discourse and action? Maduro certainly maintains a form of rhetoric with a lot of left-wing verbiage. He says that his government is a 'military-police-people's alliance' that is anti-imperialist and for socialism. He needs to legitimise himself internally and externally as Chávez's successor, when all he has done is roll back the achievements and legacy of the years of progress of the Bolivarian process. Beyond appearances, the fact is that his policy since 2013 has been to encourage the enrichment of a new business sector in the country and, like a Bonaparte, to negotiate between the different fractions of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie, new and old (with the exception of the one most closely linked to the Yankee far right, which is Maria Corina Machado and Edmundo González) in order to remain in government.

Taking an openly authoritarian path, Maduro has always favoured business sectors, in particular oil industry contractors and services, whose profits feed the new bourgeoisie, and many of which have been handed out to the upper echelons of his armed forces and police. (Hence the alliance...) More than 800 luxury cars were confiscated from the 100 odd people involved in the PDVSA-crypto mega corruption case in 2023, which was symptomatic of the moral decline among government leaders. [2] Even under the intense fire of Western imperialist sanctions against Venezuela – which started with the Obama administration, passed through Trump and became more flexible with Biden – he has never taken any measures to confront the globalised financial system and its domestic supporters. He has allocated a substantial part of the dwindling national budget to private banks to guarantee the sale of foreign currency to private companies and rentiers, which has become a policy for subsidising and favouring the rich. [3]

At the same time (since decree 2792 of 2018), the government has banned strikes, the presentation of demands, the right of the working class to mobilise, the organisation and legalisation of new unions, while prosecuting and sending

to prison union leaders who question internal practices in companies, or simply ask for a pay rise and health insurance. This was the case at Siderúrgica del Orinoco (Sidor), the largest concentration of the proletariat in Venezuela: after mobilising for wages and benefits between June and July 2023, they were victims of intense repression. Leonardo Azócar and Daniel Romero, union delegates, have been imprisoned ever since. [4]

The 'anti-imperialism' of Maduro and his entourage doesn't stop him from now delivering the oil that the US needs through Chevron and other big foreign companies (like Repsol), in a context where the US Treasury authorises them to extract Venezuela's black gold, while prohibiting the companies from paying taxes and royalties to Venezuela. [5] The acceptance of these neo-colonial conditions shows the limits of Maduro's anti-imperialism.

The sanctions against Venezuela have become more flexible under Biden (facing pressure because of the war in Ukraine), but Maduro continues to maintain the discourse that everything is the fault of the sanctions, as a pretext to move forward with a structural adjustment that fundamentally affects working people. In political terms, within Venezuela, the discourse on US sanctions (which are real, concrete and detestable) has lost its political effectiveness in the face of the ostentatious, luxurious lifestyle of those who now rule the country.

### The working class as an accessory element

Analysing the situation of the Venezuelan working class as the basis of left-wing analysis has been replaced by the fashion for the 'geopolitics of oil'. This binary geopolitics only sees the contradiction between imperialism and the Venezuelan state (undoubtedly an important contradiction in reality). It doesn't have enough dialectic to take into account, in a scenario of multiple contradictions, the material and political situation of working class people, their aspirations and options. It's as if this were an ancillary issue, or a secondary contradiction. The 'mantra' of Maduro supporters, to justify their omission of class analysis, is the need to prevent the right from coming to power, ignoring the fact that Venezuela has a government that applies the structural economic recipes of the right, only with left-wing rhetoric. It would be enough to talk to the workers themselves (not to the pro-bosses bureaucracy of the CBST), at Sidor or PDVSA, among teachers and university professors, to see the terrible material situation in which they live (minimum wage of US\$4 a month, average salary of US\$130 a month, 80% of which is made up of bonuses), amid the worst loss of democratic freedoms in decades for their organisation, mobilisation and struggle.

The new geopoliticians of progressivism are putting the issue of the 28J elections on the agenda of the international mainstream media (CNN, CBS and others), only from the other side of the road. They are not defending the interests of María Corina Machado and Edmundo González, but those of Maduro and the new bourgeoisie, with the false axiom that Maduro is equal to the working class, without analysing what Maduro's anti-worker and anti-popular policies have been. They fall into the trap of 'legal fetishism' by limiting their analysis of the situation to the results of the elections, but they also do so without class criteria. The issue is not just that Maduro and the CNE have not shown how they did the sums to give the president victory in the 28 July elections, but also how this situation affects the structure of the concrete democratic freedoms in which the working class operates and survives.

If there is no transparency and legitimacy in the national elections, in which the registered candidates represented different shades of bourgeois programmes, it is difficult to think about restoring the minimum democratic freedoms that the working class needs to defend itself against capital's offensive on its labour (the right to decent wages, the right to strike, freedom of association, freedom to mobilise, express opinions and organise in political parties). The working class is fundamentally interested in how the situation after the 28J allows or restricts, in the short term, the freedoms it needs to express itself as an exploited class. But this contradiction does not enter into the logic and discourse of the new progressive geopolitics.

### Compromising omissions and silences

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These 'progressives' are not concerned about the repression of the trade union and political organisation of the workers and the people [6], nor that Maduro prevented any left-wing sector of the PSUV from taking part in the country's most recent elections - even at the cost of infiltrating, judicialising and attacking the leadership of the Popular Electoral Movement (MEP), the Fatherland for All Party (PPT), the Tupamaros and the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) itself, in order to intervene in it! [7] Maduro's supporters fail to mention that, after 28 July, the government intensified repression, no longer against the middle class, but fundamentally against the working class, sending around 2,500 young people to prison with the discourse of re-education, which means subjecting them to vexatious public rituals of brainwashing.

They are silent on the construction of two maximum security prisons for those caught protesting or inciting protests on social media. They ignore the imprisonment of several opposition politicians and the direct threats made on television to others – for example by the minister of the 'hammer', Diosdado Cabello, against the former mayor of Caracas Juan Barreto, or Vladimir Villegas, the brother of the Minister of Culture. [8] If the threat to public figures is like this, it is worse in the territories of ordinary people who are not media figures. Recently, we've seen the deployment of plainclothes security forces to threaten activists - as happened on Saturday, 10 August, against Koddy Campos and Leandro Villoria, leaders of the LGBTQI community in Caracas. As we saw in the following days in the traditional Chavista stronghold of 23 February in Caracas, where activists' houses were marked with an X of Herod by government officials to scare them against the possibility of demonstrations.

The geopolitical left is silent about the death toll after 28J (around 25, according to estimates by human rights organisations and social movements), spreading the narrative that it was only right-wingers. This is not only untrue, but constitutes a step backwards in the human rights gains made in the post-dictatorship periods in the region.

Geopolitical progressivism replicates the mirage of a popular government that no longer exists, which has been erased by Maduro's transformation and anti-labour policies. They seem to be asking the Venezuelan working class to fight for their rights only within the framework that Maduro allows, so that they can feed, from afar, the utopia that they can't build in their own countries. This progressivism doesn't see that the growing popularity of the right-wing candidate has been a result of the banning of any possible left-wing alternatives. The electoral success of the Machado-Gonzalez ticket has been largely a result of mistakes by Maduro and his supporters.

What about oil?

All the serious facts mentioned above are considered by the supporters of Maduro's 'victory' to be secondary 'democratic-formal' details in the face of the danger of having the 'squalid' right once again in government in Venezuela. The reasoning is as devoid of class criteria as it is devoid of basic observation of the country's reality.

Since November 2022, as part of the war in Ukraine, the US Treasury Secretary has authorised Chevron to exploit and export Venezuelan oil, on the condition that it pays no taxes or royalties to the Venezuelan government, which constitutes neo-colonial conditions that were not even known in the governments prior to Chávez and which have been accepted by Maduro. Since then, Venezuela has once again been a stable supplier of oil to North America. This explains Biden's delicate balancing act and U.S.'s long wait for the efforts of the progressive triad of Lula, Petro, AMLO (from which AMLO withdrew last week).

You have to be careful when talking about the U.S. embargo on Venezuela. There are embargoes and embargoes. The sanctions that have affected food, medicine and spare parts for buses and cars that move the people have contributed decisively to the exodus of four to five million workers. But Venezuela has managed to become the sixth largest supplier of oil to the US, overtaking countries like the UK and Nigeria [9], without the new revenues from this 'oil opening' improving the material living standards of the people at all.

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What is at stake in Venezuela is which sector of the ruling classes – be it the old, ‘squalid’ oligarchic bourgeoisie or the new business sectors linked to the ‘Bolivarian’ military, enriched under Maduro – controls the oil business. So it's a dispute over who gets the lion's share of the oil revenue. Any one of them will guarantee the geostrategic supply of oil to the Western capitalist powers and will increasingly restrict the distribution of oil income to the people - because this is in the nature of capitalist, bourgeois sectors, and because the nature of the fossil-exporting mono-extractivist state has not been touched by the Bolivarian process. Because Maduro, despite his rhetoric, is neither a socialist nor an anti-imperialist. It is naive and ill-informed to imagine a Maduro with a programme and enough courage to confront the imperialist plans to put the oil that Venezuela can produce back on the world market. It is a huge mistake, in the name of supposed sovereignty that Maduro is defending, to turn a blind eye to the growing authoritarian tendency of the regime against the disgruntled workers and people.

It is also tragic, it should be said, that the geopolitical Madurists continue to believe that Venezuela's salvation will come from what is, in reality, its historical curse: its oil wealth. Something that even the great Brazilian developmentalist Celso Furtado, without being a socialist or ecologist, already pointed out as a major problem for the country he lived in in the 1950s.

Is there a way out?

It's clear that the strength acquired by the right-wing opposition, which has already been defeated at the ballot box several times by Chávez and once by Maduro, and which now has its most extremist wing, the oligarch Maria Corina Machado, at its head, is a tragedy. An even greater tragedy is the fact that this extreme right wing may have won or come very close to winning the elections - there is no other reason for Maduro's insistence on refusing to publish the results and repressing the people so harshly. Precisely for this reason, because a peaceful solution is difficult and simply handing over the government to this sector is hard to swallow, the way to avoid the ‘bloodbath’ with which both sides threaten Venezuela may be the one indicated by the governments of Brazil and Colombia: presentation of the results, negotiations between both sides, first of all with Maduro himself (the group of governments has refused to have talks with the opposition and review the results it presented). While it is possible to expect minimum democratic freedoms to be guaranteed, the release of political prisoners, a halt to repression, broad trade union and party political freedom, it is also possible to negotiate clauses protecting PDVSA.

At the moment, supporting the negotiated solution proposed by Colombia and Brazil – which has the support of Chile and the repudiation, of course, of dictator Daniel Ortega – is the right policy, because it is much more prudent, more timely and much more favourable to the workers and people of the country. This policy is at odds with an increasingly authoritarian regime, which represses young people, trade unionists and left-wing opponents, and is less naive and bureaucratically biased than simply endorsing the government's irregularities and arbitrariness. On the one hand, it makes it possible to argue that the extreme right should not carve up PDVSA and slash the few remaining social achievements. On the other hand, it doesn't start from the mistaken premise that Maduro and his bureaucratic-bourgeois military entourage will guarantee Venezuelan ‘sovereignty’ over anything.

National sovereignty and popular sovereignty

Latin American progressivism, like third-worldism and the Stalinist-influenced left, uses the term sovereignty by confusing two different meanings: national sovereignty and popular sovereignty. Of course, national sovereignty is usually a condition for the full exercise of popular sovereignty. The problem is that the very different regimes (and currents of opinion), both progressive and reactionary, appropriate the defence of national sovereignty in the face of pressure from the world market and imperialism.

National sovereignty was at the centre of the anti-colonial and national independence movements, as well as the national-developmental populisms of the 20th century. But it has also been at the heart of military dictatorships

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(like those of the Latin American Southern Cone in the 1960s and 1970s), theocratic dictatorships (like Iran), state bureaucracies and, as we see with Modi and Trump, extreme right-wing governments. Yes, the defence of national sovereignty and even confrontations with imperialism can be carried out under very regressive regimes. For us, the defence of national sovereignty makes sense in conjunction with the defence of popular sovereignty, the democratic self-organisation of the masses, the conquest of freedoms and rights that strengthen the historic bloc of the working classes, which can build alternatives to global capitalism and the imperialisms that structure it.

In the same way, after the Stalinist experiences of the 20th century, we cannot mechanically identify peoples with their political leaders, who may or may not represent them, in a relationship that is always dynamic. When this relationship breaks down – as it has or is breaking down in Venezuela – democratic freedoms become a fundamental element in any struggle for sovereignty, both popular and, incidentally, national. Therefore, there will be no forces to guarantee Venezuela's sovereignty over its territory and its wealth without the recovery of popular sovereignty.

Isn't democracy important?

Bourgeois-democratic regimes are not the regime to which we socialists strategically aspire: we dream of and fight to build grassroots democratic organisations, direct democracy, popular power - as embryos of a new and more vital form of democracy, exercised by the workers and popular sectors - in the processes of the revolutionary offensive. But is formal democracy so despicable that we don't care about elections, or about rigged results?

In a world increasingly threatened by a constellation of extreme right-wing forces, the fight is and will be, for a long time, in defence of freedoms and democratic rights, even of institutions of bourgeois-democratic regimes against the onslaught of the extreme right - as we have already experienced with Trump, Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Orbán and so on. Where does that leave a left that despises democracy to the point of endorsing the manipulation of elections for the peoples and workers of the world and in countries (more and more of them) where the fight against the far right is vital?

Those who call themselves left-wing and endorse repressive regimes also do a very ill service, from a strategic point of view, to the necessary process of political, theoretical and practical construction of a new anti-capitalist utopia - capable of once again enthusing broad layers of youth, women and working people. A new mass anti-capitalist left must be democratic, independent and confront authoritarian 'models', or it won't be anything at all.

However, there is still one question that should be more important than any other for all socialist activists and organisations in Latin America and the world: how do we look in the eyes and expectations of the workers, the people and what remains of the non-bureaucratic left in Venezuela? Will all those sectors to the left of the PSUV and covertly critical within the PSUV itself, today fragmented, persecuted, some imprisoned, many in full activity against government repression, be abandoned to their fate? [\[10\]](#) For us, supporting their struggles, encouraging their unity to resist, helping them to survive and breathe is the priority internationalist task. Everything else, that doesn't take them into account, may be geopolitics, but internationalism it is not. After all, the only strategic guarantee of a sovereign Venezuela, of better living and working conditions, of reorganisation and popular power in the medium term, is in the hands of those social and political forces who were the protagonists of the golden years of the Bolivarian process and not in the hands of the gravediggers of the process.

18 August 2024

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[1] A broad union of left-wing parties, created by Brazilian PT in 1990 and today made up of more than 100 organisations, including the Communist Party of Cuba, Ortega's party in Nicaragua, Evo Morales and his MAS party in Bolivia. Uruguay's Frente Amplio has been distancing itself from Maduro for over a year. Now, Lula, Petro and López Obrador have definitively 'split' the bloc, although the latter has left the negotiations.

[2] The embezzlement of an estimated US\$15 billion from PDVSA funds led to the fall of president of the company and former oil minister, Tareck El Aissami, last April. See: <https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2024/04/09/ex-vice-presidente-de-nicolas-maduro-na-venezuela-e-presos.html>

[3] On Maduro's economic policy and his relationship with the country's business sectors, see: <https://nuso.org/articulo/venezuela-elites-Maduro-fedecamaras/>

[4] <https://www.aporrea.org/trabajadores/n393080.html>

[5] These are the conditions established by the so-called Licence 44, with which the Biden administration, in October 2023, once again allowed the legal sale of Venezuelan oil to US and foreign private companies.

[6] See Bonilla's article on the subject at: <https://luisbonillamolina.com/2024/07/25/las-elecciones-prespresidenciales-en-venezuela-del-28-j-2024-una-situacion-inedita/> 'The decree 2792 of 2018 that eliminates collective bargaining and the right to strike, the ONAPRE instructions that disregards the acquired rights of an important part of public employees, workers in education, health and other sectors, is part of a natural measure of containment and a display of coincidences between the new and the old bourgeoisie, to advance in agreements with broad sectors of national capital and its political representations.

[7] The Communist Party of Venezuela was intervened, preventing it from launching candidacies in August 2023.

[8] Diosdado Cabello presents a TV program in which he condemns the disloyal as traitors and executes them with an enormous hammer. No, this is not a tale of Latin American fantasy realism.

[9] <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2024/06/03/eua-compram-cada-vez-mais-petroleo-de-caracas-enquanto-enquanto-dificultam-vendas-venezuelanas-para-outros-paises>

[10] Here are three of the sectors that make up this left outside the PSUV: [https://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n395391.html#google\\_vignette](https://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n395391.html#google_vignette)  
<https://prensapcv.wordpress.com/2024/08/01/organizaciones-politicas-sociales-y-sindicales-exigen-auditoria-y-proponen-creacion-de-un-frente-de-mocratico-popular/>

<https://movimentorevista.com.br/2024/06/venezuela-manifesto-por-uma-outra-campanha/>