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Venezuela

Move to form new party

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Several hundred people packed into the Imperial Theatre in the centre of Caracas on Saturday 9 July to launch a movement for a new revolutionary socialist party in Venezuela. The meeting was called by the Revolutionary Left Option (OIR), an existing regroupment of revolutionary socialists, along with three radical trade union currents, a student organisation and a number of independents.

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

Inside the Imperial Theatre

The mood was serious but enthusiastic as an overflowing auditorium listened to national leaders of the union confederation, the UNT, to leaders of the oil workers in Puerto La Cruz and the steel workers in Puerto Ordaz, and to representatives of student organisations and the alternative media, explain why they thought a new party was needed.

There were differences of emphasis but the general drift was the same: the revolutionary process in Venezuela is at a crossroads, it must either go forwards or backwards; there is resistance from some within the government and the Bolivarian movement; in order to deepen and radicalise the process it is indispensable to build a mass revolutionary party with a clear socialist perspective.

In the words of the draft theses drawn up by the organisers of the meeting, “the moment is ripe”. The Venezuelan people have definitively broken with the old bourgeois parties of the IVth Republic, and “they are beginning to distance themselves from the new, corrupt, clientelistic and bureaucratic parties of the Vth Republic. ...To all these fellow Venezuelans we say: let us build our own political organisation, just as we are consolidating other organisations of great importance for our struggle, like the UNT, the co-operatives, the land committees and the UBEs , in order to confront the enemies of this revolutionary process. Now we urgently need to build a party of our own, of the workers and of the people, in order to struggle for socialism.”

Although not formally sponsoring the movement for a new party, the meeting received important support from the legendary guerrilla leader, Carlos Lanz, who was appointed earlier this year by President Chavez to head up the introduction of “revolutionary co-management” in the basic industries of the south-eastern state of Guayana. This experience, unfolding first in the ALCASA aluminium plant and now spreading to other state-owned factories in the area, has many of the characteristics of workers' control and even full-blown self-management. It is undoubtedly one of the most advanced expressions of the Bolivarian revolution. It is also bringing together in the factories union activists and revolutionary militants from several different traditions, including those of the mainly Trotskyist OIR and those of Carlos Lanz' own 13 April current. He told the meeting that what they were doing at ALCASA “prefigures the socialism of the 21st century” which President Chavez has begun in recent months to identify as the goal of his Bolivarian revolution. But he also pointed out that there were some in the government deliberately trying to derail these plans for revolutionary co-management.

A leader of the electricity workers, Joaquin Osorio, described how supposedly pro-Chavez managers in the state electricity company were persecuting the trade unionists struggling to introduce co-management there.

There was also polite criticism of some of Hugo Chavez' own apparent confusions. Referring to the president's claim last Mayday that in Venezuela there was already a government of the workers, Gonzalo Gomez, a founder of the Aporrea alternative news service, asked: if that is what he thinks, then he has to tell us where the mechanisms are, that allow Venezuelan workers to discuss and decide whether or not to pay the foreign debt, or whether or not to

devalue the currency.

It was announced that an organising committee from the sponsoring groups would begin meeting to draw up a calendar of activities, as well as proposals for an action plan, a programmatic platform and statutes. The aim would be to hold a founding conference for the new party in January, at the time of the Americas and World Social Forum in Caracas. The movement for the new party is provisionally called UNIR, and the name currently proposed for the party itself is the PTRS, the Workers Party for the Socialist Revolution.

This movement for a new party has quite a bit going for it. Its significant roots in Venezuela's industrial workplaces - clear from the very 'proletarian' turn-out for Saturday's launch - is an important start. So is its commitment to building a mass workers' party with a profoundly democratic internal life, including the rights of minorities to organise and be represented. The participation of diverse currents, as well as the draft theses themselves, show that the movement's ideological identity, and therefore its potential appeal, is also broader than that of the more narrowly Trotskyist character of its main promoters.

But there is still a long way to go before this promising start can hope to provide the kind of democratically-organised leadership the Venezuelan process clearly needs. The movement's comparatively weak presence in Venezuela's poor urban communities is a real problem. (In a country where those in formal employment make up a minority of the workforce, it not surprising that the epicentre of the Bolivarian revolution has been in the communities and not in the workplaces.) So too is the low proportion of women - several protested when the platform for Saturday's launch at first sported only one woman and more than a dozen men - and the still limited involvement of young people.

There are also big strategic and tactical challenges ahead. What exactly should be the relationship of this new party to Chavez himself ? And if Chavez and those close to him were to succeed in their apparent plans to relaunch the Vth Republic Movement as a genuine mass party of the Bolivarian revolution (with tendency rights and all), would a future PTRS join up, or stand aside? Most fundamentally of all, what kind of strategic vision is needed to try to build the current revolutionary process into one of workers' power and socialist democracy?

This movement for a new party has big responsibilities. And those of us following the process from afar have a big responsibility to support them in every way we can.

Saturday's launch meeting heard international greetings given by representatives from the MST and the MAS in Argentina, from the ISO in the United States, and from the French LCR and the Fourth International. Other organisations sent written greetings, including the MES/PSol in Brazil and the PST in Colombia.