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Venezuela

Revolution in the revolution?

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The process underway in Venezuela is revolutionary in terms of breadth of social and political transformation, as well as the mobilization and politicization of a very significant fraction of the population. Neither president Hugo Chávez nor the Venezuelan workers have overthrown the state and capitalist social relations. But on two occasions the workers and the people have broken coup attempts where a coalition of bourgeois forces attempted economic sabotage with the support of imperialism and the big media. These victories for popular mobilization have allowed Chávez to deepen social transformation domestically and to make anti-imperialist gestures in foreign policy.

Above all, the workers and the inhabitants of the poor neighbourhoods have become conscious of their strength. They increasingly want to participate actively in the transformation of society. There lies the fundamental basis for the future deepening of the revolution in Venezuela.

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This thirst for active participation manifests itself first and foremost in the popular neighbourhoods of the big cities, inside the activist networks that support and give life to the “missions”, the social campaigns sponsored by the government outside of the state structures. Some tens of thousands of the inhabitants of the poorer neighbourhoods - the “barrios” - devote their time and enthusiasm to furthering the success of the education and health programmes.

It is from the massive and determined support of the people of these neighbourhoods that Chávez draws his main strength.

However, the weaknesses of the process are also apparent here in these neighbourhoods, which account for more than half the population of a town like Caracas. Problems like unemployment, poverty, insanitary housing and lack of resources remain far from being settled.

Everyday there are neighbourhood mobilizations to demand that the parliamentary deputies, for the most part “chavista”, fulfill their electoral promises. Corruption and clientelism have not disappeared and the “missions” sometimes involve those associated with “chavismo” reviving some of the practices of the preceding régime.

What is new, however, is that the people of the neighbourhoods are rebelling against these practices. In the “barrios” it is no longer enough to don a red beret (a Chavista symbol) to be untouchable.

This rise in discontent and demands does not only affect the cities. In July peasants demonstrated in their thousands in Caracas to demand the extension of the agrarian reform and the punishment of the armed bands of the landowners. The Indian communities in the west of the country, threatened with expulsion because of mining development, brandished their banners throughout the world festival of youth in Caracas in August.

The most significant phenomenon of recent months has been the rise in power of the trade union federation, the UNT. [1] The leadership of the old federation, the CTV, has passed bag and baggage to the side of the employers and reaction, so the union movement is in full recomposition.

In many workplaces new union activist networks are organizing, overthrowing by referendum the old bureaucratized union leaderships and mostly affiliating to the UNT. The latter is now the most important union federation in the

country with perhaps more than a million members.

Militants of the revolutionary left, in particular the comrades of the former OIR [2] are at the forefront of this movement. With other currents which support the process, they fight for the structuring of the UNT as a class struggle trade union federation, independent of the government, even if, faced with reaction and imperialism, it is situated clearly in the camp of “Chavismo”.

For tens of thousands of workers in all branches, it is about recovering their unions and, with confidence regained, to struggle for improved rights, wages and working conditions. At the same time that the independent trade union movement is being reborn, conflicts are multiplying: against the bosses, often allied to the former trade union bureaucrats, but sometimes also against local notables.

In these conflicts the workers and union activists call on the governors, “Chavista” ministers, indeed Chávez himself. However, this support is far from being automatic and often remains verbal, which give the new union networks even more incentive to conquer their independence.

The multiplication and impact of the experiences of “co-management” is another sign of the workers' desire to play a greater role in the transformations underway. Behind the word “co-management” there are certainly very different projects and realities. But the companies where the workers have acquired a real power are increasing and the debate on the content and the objectives of co-management has been launched across the country.

It is incontestably in the nationalized aluminium company Alcasa that the experience has been at its broadest. The directorate has been renewed by the vote of the workers and the strategic orientations of the company are subject to the approval of workshop delegates.

Alcasa has become a symbol that disturbs many. The resistance of employers or governmental sectors concerned by any idea of “workers' control” has shown that this does not amount only to a theoretical debate but is about power inside the company. A law on the right to work is in preparation and is fiercely discussed.

These convergent phenomena have led revolutionary activists to throw themselves into the construction of a new political organization, the Revolution and Socialism Party (PRS). It is an initiative originating with Trotskyist militants, but not them alone.

It already has several hundred members, for the most part workers involved in the construction of the new union federation, the UNT. It seeks to rally all those who are not content to support the government of Chávez, but advocate the “revolution in the revolution” and the perspective of a socialist transformation of society.

For these comrades the construction of such an organization is both necessary and opportune.

Necessary because the official parties that support Chávez do not respond to the need for political and class independence which grow among the workers and in the population. Necessary because the contradictions or conflicts inside the “Chavista” camp will profit reaction if they do not find an expression, a programme, which goes in the direction of the deepening of the revolution.

Opportune, because the debate on socialism has been launched by Chávez himself and corresponds to the questions and expectations of thousands of militants involved in the process.

The first steps towards the construction of this organization (a meeting of 450 people in Caracas in July, the publication in August of the political declaration that can be read below) have raised hopes but also fears and

criticisms. Which is not astonishing given what is at stake.

The existing political organizations that support the process in Venezuela do not offer guarantees as to their will to transform society and ensure that power genuinely passes into the hands of the workers. The “Chavista” parties - Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), “Podemos” or “Patria Para Todos” - are primarily electoral machines and suppliers of cadres, while others like the Venezuelan Communist Party show little autonomy in relation to the government.

The comrades of the PRS have begun the difficult task of construction of a new party, a tool for the workers. They have the right to all our solidarity and to all the support we can bring to them.

[1] The National Union of Workers (UNT), created in February 2003 is the new independent union federation, now bigger than the CTV federation which had supported the employers' attempts to overthrow Chávez.

[2] Option of the Revolutionary Left (OIR), a revolutionary Marxist regroupment founded in April 2002, just after the coup.