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Reject imperialist interference in Georgia!

26 August 2008, by **Socialist Resistance**



Damage caused by the conflict

Photo: Archiwum Kancelarii

Socialist Resistance's editorial board published this statement on August 26th.

Truth they say is the first casualty of war. Only a few years ago the world was subjected to the lies about Iraq's so called weapons of mass destruction used to justify the invasion of the country in 2003. The events giving rise to the military conflict between Russia and Georgia are no different.

The truth is somewhat different. The Caucasus has become strategically important to US imperialism both because of its oil reserves and also its geopolitical location, with Russia to the north and Iran to the south. Since President Saakashvili came to power

in 2003 Georgia has increasingly become the key ally for the US in the region. The US and Israel have made substantial arms sales to Georgia and have trained Georgian troops in order to build up its armed forces. The payback from this in part at least has come in Iraq. After the US and Britain, Georgia has more troops in Iraq than any other country, even though it has a population of only five million! Not surprisingly the US has been keen to propose Georgian alongside Ukrainian membership of NATO as part of a strategy to militarily surround Russia on its western flank. The anti ballistic missile agreements of the US with the Czech Republic and more recently Poland are an integral part of this strategy.

In all probability Georgia attacked South Ossetia in early August with the prior knowledge and consent of the US. In any event speeches by George W. Bush as well as our own David Milliband in support of the "territorial

integrity of Georgia" have made clear that the US and Britain at least are 100% behind Georgia. The Ossetes though formed a distinct national minority within the former Soviet Republic of Georgia and though not internationally recognised South Ossetia had functioned as a de facto independent state for the last sixteen years. Georgia started its invasion of South Ossetia by bombing its capital city Tskhinvali. Given that Tskhinvali has no military installations the deliberate bombing by Georgia of a civilian centre was both an act of state terrorism and a war crime. As a terrorist act it was in part successful as many Ossetes fled over the border into Russia. We can only speculate but Georgia might well have been using state terror as a tool to ethnically cleanse South Ossetia of its native population. All this forms the background to Russia's decision to send its troops into Georgia, it was a response to the Georgian bombardment and subsequent

invasion of South Ossetia.

At the time of writing the Russian Parliament has called on President Medvedev to recognise the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the other disputed region in Georgia. Whether such recognition will be given or whether the threat of recognition will be used as a bargaining chip by Russia is unclear. Although we support self determination for South Ossetia and Abkhazia and therefore their recognition as independent states we

give absolutely no support to Russia against Georgia in this conflict. One that clearly forms part of an inter imperialist struggle between Russian and US imperialism where Georgia functions as the proxy of the US.

Russia's ostensible championing of the rights of national minorities within Georgia is merely a cynical and opportunist attempt to extend its power and influence in the Caucasus. In much the same way as the US and Western European imperialists used the national oppression of Kosova by Serbia as a means to extend their

power and influence in the Balkans. Furthermore by its past actions Russia has shown itself to be no respecter of the rights of national minorities within its own borders as shown by the near genocidal war against the Chechen people. Our position is clear. We are both for Georgia out of South Ossetia and for Russia out of Georgia. The total rejection of external imperialist interference by the peoples of the Caucasus is a precondition for any democratic and socialist resolution to the national conflicts and the social and economic problems of the region.

Justice for Luiz Eduardo Merlino (1948-1971)!

11 August 2008, by **Michael Löwy**



Demonstration during Brazil's military dictatorship

Photo: Jorge Henrique Singh

Luckily, Judge Carlos Abrãço took the accusation into consideration; according to Brazilian law, and to international treaties the country has signed, it's impossible for the crime of torture to become proscribed. The court case will start in a couple of weeks. The two accusers neither want the officer condemned nor are they looking for compensation. They simply want the truth; that the judges declare Colonel Ustra responsible for the torture and death of Merlino.

Ustra was the sinister head of the Department of Operations and Information - DOI - of the military dictatorship of Sao Paulo. Hidden under this euphemism was a torture-center with around five hundred victims between 1970 and 1975. About forty of them died, among them our young comrade. According to the official history, verified by two 'juridical doctors' in the service of the military, Merlino committed 'suicide'

by throwing himself in front of a car: A ridiculous explanation and one that has been used several times by the dictatorship to cover up its crimes.

In fact, several witnesses, including other prisoners - among them the sculptor Guido Rocha who shared a cell with him - saw Merlino in agony after 24 hours of uninterrupted torture during which he gave no information to his torturers. Subjected to electrical shocks and 'hung like a parrot', that is hung from shackled feet and hands, he was already in very bad shape and almost paralyzed when his executioners threw him on the concrete floor. He died two days later.

As his partner Angéla put it; 'the end of impunity starts with memory and the re-establishment of the truth. Under the dictatorship, torture was a policy of the Brazilian state but his executioners have names. Colonel Ustra, then commander of the DOI, is responsible. The torture was the work of him and his subordinates: it happened under his command and with his knowledge.'

This is an important process. If the colonel is deemed guilty, it will be the

first time a leading member of the repressive apparatus has been found guilty for a death under torture. Also, the colonel is the object of another juridical procedure, under accusation from the Teles family - a couple, the sister of the wife and two children - who were tortured in the same offices of the DOI in 1972. This procedure is already taking place. In this case as in the one of our comrade Merlino, a favorable sentence would be a symbolic but also highly political victory for justice and truth.

Luiz Eduardo Merlino, also known under his pseudonym 'Nicolau', was one of the leaders of the Communist Workers Party (CWP), an organization from Brazil that sympathized with the Fourth International. In the beginning of 1969 the organization decided to participate in the armed resistance against the military dictatorship that was created in 1964. In 1970-71 he went to Paris in the company of his partner to strengthen the ties with the International, to study the organizational experience of the Ligue Communiste and to establish contact with our organizations in Latin America, in particular in Argentine. During this period I had the chance to

get to know him.

'Nicolau' was a slender young man, wearing glasses and a small mustache, cultivated and full of humor. Calm and determined, he didn't resign himself to remaining in exile and took the decision to return as soon as possible to Brazil, to try and re-organize the CWP - on which the repression had taken a heavy toll - and to insert it in the armed resistance against the dictatorship. We tried to dissuade him from his plans but without success. Once I asked him how he estimated his chances of returning to Brazil without being caught; 'fifty percent' was his answer.

Was the analysis of the period correct or not? Was the chosen tactic the most appropriate one? The strategy the most realist? Thirty seven years on, these questions have lost most of their meaning. What remains is the integrity of an individual, of his decision to risk his life for the cause of democracy, socialism and the emancipation of the workers. For Luiz Eduardo, returning to Brazil was of high moral and political value, a kind of 'categorical imperative', subject to neither concessions or compromises. Certain people who took part in Nicolau's struggle in this period but have since then converted to social-liberalism - I prefer not to mention names - now pretend that those in Brazil and Latin America who risked

and lost their lives in the unequal struggle against the dictatorships in the continent were motivated by a 'suicidal spirit'. Nothing could be more absurd. Merlino loved life, loved his partner and he had not the slightest wish to commit suicide. What drove him to take the decision that cost him his life was simply a feeling of duty, a sense of ethics, a commitment to his comrades in the struggle.

The history of the future can not be without the memories of our martyred friends and comrades.

*This article first appeared in Inprecor.
The translation is by Alex de Jong.*

The Bitter Truth about the Olympics

6 August 2008, by **Phil Hearse**



Paris demonstration for a boycott of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing

Photo: Andreas Praefcke

How many of the two billion or so people who will watch on TV could - before the event - name the world pole vault champion, the world archery champion or the Tai Kondo champion? About 0.0001 per cent.

But never mind the sheer dreary boredom of it all, it's really all about promoting the 'spirit of the Games', isn't it? The international harmony so evident in the opening and closing ceremonies which seamlessly blends national pride with internationalism, the once-in-a-lifetime meeting of thousands of young athletes from around the world and thousands of (mainly well-heeled) spectators from many lands. Who could disapprove of an event that so evidently promotes international harmony and understanding?

Contrary to this fairy story, the truth about every Olympics is that behind the fake internationalism the Games are a vehicle for mobilising officially approved national chauvinism on a mass scale, asserting 'national pride' and above all a mammoth publicity opportunity for transnational corporations, especially 'official partners' of the games (like McDonalds, Omega and Coca Cola) - but also those who are sponsors of national teams.

Part of the cost of the Olympics is paid by the huge fees put up by television companies for the rights and from the sponsorship of the transnational corporations. But a large part is also paid from the local or national taxes of the host country, as Londoners will increasingly experience as we move towards 2012.

In the case of Beijing the whole operation is being conducted in a way that directly victimises and impoverishes large sections of the poor of Beijing and workers from all over China; and is leading to the construction of hyper-expensive

facilities that will after the games be mainly privatised and only ever used by the wealthy elite.

Building the Olympics sports facilities and transport facilities has cost a huge sum. The main stadium, the 'birds nest' designed by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, cost about half a billion dollars. The National Theatre cost \$350 million; the National Swim Centre \$100m and the Beijing Wukeson Cultural and Sport Centre, incorporating a hotel and shopping mall, another \$543million.

Associated with the holding of the Olympics is the Beijing airport third terminal designed by British architect Norman Foster, coming in at a cool \$1.9bn and the new headquarters for China's central television network, CCTV, that cost another \$600 million. And these are just some of the major projects. [1]

The private sector is involved in the building of these facilities, and despite their public funding, the private builders will become the operators of these new facilities for a 30-year

period. In other words, huge amounts of Chinese state funding is being used to guarantee the profits of Chinese companies for years to come.

In order to clear the way for these new prestige projects, that will project Chinese power and influence on a world scale, 1.25 million people have had their neighbourhoods and homes demolished or their land confiscated. The many people who have complained or organised protests about this have been silenced by jail sentences or violence – not surprising in a country that has one of the most corrupt, violent and repressive state apparatuses in the world.

A famous case is that of Ye Guogiang, who on China's National Day in October 2003 tried to kill himself by throwing himself off a bridge in the Forbidden City in front of hundreds of onlookers, in protest at the forced demolition of his family's home and restaurant. But he survived and was sentenced to two years in jail for 'disturbing social order'. His family continued to protest and were continually harassed by the Chinese authorities. There are many similar cases.

While the cost of the Olympic-related construction projects is enormous, outside China it would have been vastly more. What China had at its disposal was huge amounts of cheap labour. Construction workers, typically migrant workers unable to

find work on the land, were usually housed in barracks on the construction site, paid an average of \$4.7 a day and forced to work seven days a week. Many of these workers are employed by subcontractors and late payment or no payment of wages is common. The Chinese government itself estimated unpaid migrant workers' wages in 2003 at more than \$12bn.

This is then the main pattern of the Beijing games. Endemic features of Chinese state capitalism – land evictions with little or no compensation, ruthless exploitation of migrant workers, and mega corruption by party officials to promote their own companies, families or cronies – have been used to create a spectacle of wealth and power that is designed to impress people across the globe.

This plan of course has had some little local difficulties, not least the pro-Tibet demonstrators' attempts to disrupt the carrying of the Olympic torch in London, Paris and San Francisco. But then came the Szechuan earthquake which mobilised international sympathy for the Chinese government, as it appeared to carry out a speedy and efficient response to the earthquake catastrophe – something that obscured the fact that many of the dead perished under poorly constructed buildings, a direct result of the corruption that has allowed cheapskate jerry-building on a mass scale, in return for appropriately large

bribes to local officials from the building companies.

According to Amnesty International human rights in China have got worse because of the Olympics. According to Roseann

Rifea[<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7529453.stm>]deputy programme director for Amnesty International: "We've seen a deterioration in human rights because of the Olympics. Specifically we've seen crackdowns on domestic human rights activists, media censorship and increased use of re-education through labour as a means to clean up Beijing and surrounding areas".

The Olympic Games celebrates not the ascent of a classless abstraction called 'China', but the rise of a vicious and corrupt ruling class that maintains its power by the ruthless use of violence and censorship – and where the state intrudes directly into people's work and family lives on an Orwellian scale.

I won't be watching, I refuse to go to any pub that has it on a TV screen, I don't care how many (actually how few) medals Britain wins and I've never been for a moment glad that the Olympics are coming to London in 2012. Perhaps more than at any time since the 1936 Berlin Olympics, these games are designed to promote the image of a truly despicable regime. The left and the social justice movement shouldn't fall for it for a single moment.

The victory of Fernando Lugo and the new space of struggle for the Left

4 August 2008, by **Hugo Richer**



Fernando Lugo

Image: Wikipedia Commons

The 36 years of the dictatorship of

Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) had in fact as a leitmotiv "the anti-communist struggle". During the "Colorado reign", US imperialism managed to build a solid alliance which for several decades enabled it to set up intelligence operations in the Latin-

American region. From Operation Condor, in the 1970s, to the presence of US troops in the years known as the "transition" in order to conduct "training exercises" with members of the Paraguayan armed forces, these military campaigns and manoeuvres

were justified in all sorts of ways, from the fight against the “sleeping terrorist cells” on the “triple frontier” (the region where there are common borders between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay), to the objective of ending “the cultivation, production and trafficking of drugs”.

After sixty years of an exercise of power marked by clientelism, corruption and the system of emoluments, as well as by the recourse to the fear and terror as a means of acting on the consciousness of the masses, the fall of the Colorado Party represents the end of an important cycle in the political history of the country. That is why it is necessary to recognize the progressive character of this event, both from a strictly democratic point of view and because of the contradictions that it gives rise to, particularly concerning the remarkable mobilization of the social and popular movements which took part in the campaign in support of the candidacy of Fernando Lugo, today president of Paraguay.

The emergence of Lugo, product of the political crisis

The political emergence of this ex-bishop of the Catholic Church can be explained by three factors:

1. The running out of steam of a model of imperialist domination, led by the Colorado Party which, after the fall of the dictatorship, became converted to neo-liberalism, without however taking the risk of endangering the clientelist system on which it had built its political hegemony policy, based on the “state as an employer”. Thus, the Paraguayan state, populated by scarcely six million inhabitants, employs no less than 200,000 civil servants, 90 per cent of whom are members of the party. The economic stagnation of the 1980s and 1990s contributed to eroding this model, so much so that the party’s own social base has been weakened.

2. The crisis of the bourgeois opposition, in particular the Authentic

Radical Liberal Party (PLRA), a party that like the Colorado Party has existed for a hundred years, and which proved to be incapable of working out a credible project in order to consolidate a two-party system, something that was however very much supported by the United States. The economic accumulation of the oligarchy - latifundist, agricultural, commercial and financial - was carried out under the protection and thanks to the intervention, legal and illegal, of the state, controlled by the Colorados. In this context the weak liberal bourgeoisie had only very limited room for manoeuvre.

3. The crisis of political leadership among the popular masses, combined with the weakness and dispersion of the left parties. The left movements and parties had scarcely recovered from the savage persecution suffered by their principal leaders, who were assassinated, went “missing”, were imprisoned or forced into exile during the dictatorship of Stroessner. However the last few years have been marked by the mobilization and the entry into struggle of some popular organizations, in particular peasant organisations, which have made increasingly clear the growing incapacity of the Colorado governments to respond to their aspirations.

Paraguay has at present approximately two million of its nationals living abroad, and the rate of emigration is increasing. Approximately two million people live in a situation of extreme poverty. 35 per cent of the population is unemployed or forced to work part-time. More than 300,000 landless peasants suffer from a structure of land ownership which today allows 3 per cent of the population to monopolize 90 per cent of cultivable land. In this context, social struggles reached several peaks of intensity during the transitional political period.

The inability of the traditional political leaderships to recover from the crisis that they were going through clearly allowed the figure of Fernando Lugo to impose itself within the progressive and popular camp. After having made public his decision to enter political life, Lugo openly defied the Catholic

hierarchy by not recognizing the sanction that the Vatican had inflicted on him. Lugo was bishop in the region of San Pedro, one of the poorest in the country, which has become in the last few years a strategic zone for the development of peasant struggles in Paraguay. On several occasions, Lugo expressed his support for these struggles, and sometimes in fact took part in them. That is why his candidacy threw into a panic the most conservative political sectors, such as the corporations of latifundists, stockbreeders and agro-industrial entrepreneurs. In this context, it took Lugo hardly more than a year to inflict electoral defeat on a party which had exercised power for more than six decades.

The “third way” in the periphery of capitalism

The candidacy of Lugo benefited from the support of the majority of social organizations and left-wing political parties. However, when his candidacy was launched, these sectors alone appeared insufficient to overcome the electoral machine of the Colorado Party. This at first instilled doubt among his supporters. Finally a very broad alliance took shape behind Lugo, extending from social organizations and parties resolutely positioned on the left to certain conservative sectors. Heterogeneous, this alliance is based on a common centre-left project, with an important place given to social programmes.

The desire for change was expressed by three axes which constituted the points of agreement between the various sectors engaged in the campaign. First of all, the need to put a stop to “the unending reign of the Colorado Party”, to corruption and to impunity - an objective which made it possible to bring together sectors coming from various social layers. Secondly, land reform, a historical demand of the workers, the peasants and all the popular sectors, which constituted the central point of a programme that was above all democratic, but which also comprised a series of measures announcing the

intention of a great structural change in terms of the characteristics of Paraguay. Lastly, this programme took up the defence of national sovereignty, by putting forward the need to renegotiate the unjust Treaties of Itaipu and Yacyretá, two big hydroelectric dam built jointly with, respectively, Brazil and Argentina.

The case which undoubtedly gives rise to the most tensions is the Itaipu dam - a symbol of the kind of relations that Brazil maintains with Paraguay. For several decades, in fact, the country has whetted the appetites of the big Brazilian bourgeoisie, which has systematically taken over big latifundia and vast tracts of land devoted to the cultivation of soya, in the process having a strong impact on traditional Paraguayan agriculture, affecting its structure. Thus, thousands of peasants have been driven off the land in recent years, which has led to a whole series of negative consequences on the social, environmental and cultural levels.

The emergence of centre-left governments allied with conservative forces is not an innovation in the region, as the Lula government in Brazil illustrates. These experiences are characterized by a discourse announcing a double rupture with "the neo-liberal Right defending above all its own privileges" and the "traditional Left", but also by a political practice which does not in reality break significantly with the neo-liberal capitalism which has been applied in the region in recent years. We are seeing, in a certain sense, the installation of a "third way" within peripheral capitalism!

A new space for struggle and the re-launch of the transition

It has been becoming obvious for

several years now that the transition which began in 1989 was confined to an exacerbated conservatism: the political and economic mafia had managed to reorganize and re-establish themselves in all the spheres of power. Far from consolidating a bourgeois democracy, the new process that is underway makes it possible to revitalize a space of political and public freedoms. The fall of the Colorado Party opens up the possibility of the existence of a new space of struggle and contradictions, and liberates social forces that were historically placed under the yoke of the Colorado Party.

It is not a process which solves the political crisis of the dominant classes. On the contrary, it could make it possible to deepen the crisis of the Colorados, unflinching supporters of imperialist policies in Paraguay. It is a process which requires a change of social forces at the top of the state. This bourgeoisie looks with distrust on the Authentic Radical Liberal party (PLRA) which comprises the most conservative sectors supporting Lugo, not because of ideological divergences, but because it is afraid the PLRA will not be effective enough if it has to face a rise of social struggles, principally in the countryside.

The left organizations and the social organizations have the possibility of re-launching a process of organization and mobilization. In fact, immediately after the electoral victory of April 20, 2008, and before the government had even taken office, occupations of latifundia and social mobilizations aiming at blocking the advance of the agro-industrial sectors began again with renewed vigour. The Marxist Left, however, is prey to division, and that is how it presented itself to the voters at the last elections. Some groups concluded alliances with the conservative parties which supported Lugo. Others gave their "critical support", but did not join the Patriotic Alliance for Change (APC, the electoral alliance regrouping legally

all the support for Lugo). Another current called for a "protest vote", but without explicitly committing itself to support Lugo. The same tendencies took shape within the social organizations, even though those which decided to join the APC constitute the majority.

The total of the votes obtained by the Left is not negligible. Nevertheless, this Left could only get two members of the National Congress elected, because of the dispersion and the lack of unity. In order to overcome this problem and to build a unified leadership - as far as it is possible to do so -, the Left must face up to a tactical dilemma which could determine the limits of its own possibilities, supposing that the objective is the building of an alternative political project. This is the possibility that a majority of those political and social forces that are members of the APC chooses an accumulation of forces from within the government, as well as the maintenance of its alliances with conservative sectors, in order to guarantee the possibility for Fernando Lugo and his team to govern.

Lugo's own supporters represent a weak force within a Congress that is dominated by the conservative forces, and he will necessarily have to play the card of mobilizations and popular struggles in order to respect some of his engagements. Lugo knows the limits of the support of the PLRA, in particular with regard to social policies and programmes. He also knows that other left organizations and other social sectors are maintaining their critical support, in particular concerning some of the points of his electoral programme. So there exists in fact a re-launching of the transition, a new space for struggle and a crisis of political leadership. To advance towards a new project of radical social change: that is the challenge for the Paraguayan left forces and social sectors, which now have a clear opportunity before them.

The alliance with the employers is putting brakes on the march towards socialism

31 July 2008, by **Stalin Pérez Borges**



How do you evaluate the meeting of President Chavez with the employers?

Stalin Pérez Borges: Scarcely a few months ago, the president reaffirmed that his government was a “workers’” government. He also nationalized the iron and steel company SIDOR [in April 2008, see the article by Fernando Esteban], although he did it by repurchasing it, whereas, in our opinion, it is this multinational which should have paid the Venezuelan state for non-respect of its laws and for punishable acts against the country. Despite everything, we cannot deny that it was a very progressive measure, asked for, demanded and conquered by the struggle of the workers. This reaffirmation of the definition of a “workers’ government”, as well as the dismissal of one of the most anti-working class Ministers of Labour that you can imagine, were steps in the right direction: in the direction of measures that we have been demanding since December 2 (the date of the defeat of the referendum on the constitutional reform).

At the time, we affirmed that the revision, the rectification and the re-launch of the revolutionary process should be centred on the resolution of the problems of the popular sectors. But this June 11, this meeting with the employers, the economic measures announced and especially the political proposal that president Chavez made to them represent a step backwards in relation to the orientation conquered by the workers of SIDOR and by the people for the Bolivarian Revolution.

The proposal of the president, his call for an “alliance” with employers

described by him as “national”, with the “national” bourgeoisie, all that is taking place at the same time as the putting forward of an alliance with the workers and the people. On the very eve of his meeting with the employers, Chavez had signed the incorporation of the first 900 sub-contracting workers into the official workforce of SIDOR. However, these measures are contradictory; they are by no means complementary: one excludes the other.

All the historical experiences of alliances with the aforementioned “national bourgeoisie” show that this road has led to the failure of the popular processes, of processes of national independence, of socialist processes. They lead only to the strengthening of the bourgeoisie and of imperialism and to the victory of the counter-revolutionary sectors. At the moment when we are commemorating the centenary of the birth of Salvador Allende, it would be good to remember why the Chilean road to socialism was broken. In our opinion, it was because they did not want to confront in a consistent way the Chilean bourgeoisie, allied to the “Yankees”, and that this bourgeoisie was able to organize the destabilization, the economic boycott and the weakening of the government of Popular Unity, which opened the way to and facilitated the coup d’état (of September 11, 1973). We have already experienced such a situation here but, thanks to the revolutionary action of the masses, the coup d’état was defeated on April 13 (2002).

Many comrades think that what is involved is a tactic of the president with a view to the next elections (regional and local elections in November), in order precisely to avoid economic destabilization and to slow down inflation...

I want first of all and above all to insist on the political, strategic problem of the Bolivarian Revolution. It is on this level that we can explain why the measures that were announced will not obtain the results that are claimed to be sought. The measures necessary to obtain these results are of a quite different order, they must really express the “workers’” term with which the government defines itself.

The political problem is the most important one because the president is talking to the wrong people if he wants to stop inflation and re-launch production. It is not these employers, it is not, in general, the big bosses, the Mendozas, who want to or who can stop inflation. Those who were present at this meeting work closely with the multinationals and their companies are sometimes themselves multinationals. The case of the private banks is illuminating; all of those in Venezuela are multinationals which only play to the rules of neo-liberalism. Moreover, they receive in deposit most of the financial resources of the state and do business with this public money without any control. They are by no means worried about whether the use of these funds causes inflation or not.

It is a mistake to think, precisely at the moment when the banking system in the United States and internationally is collapsing, where big banks are collapsing and where the neo-liberal states have to rush to their aid with the money of the people, that these bosses of finance will act in a different way in Venezuela. They do nothing but obey the orders of the financial institutions that control them, they are in no way interested in any “alliance” with the state, unless this alliance makes it possible for their enterprises to make bigger profits,

which will in any event be dispatched out of the country.

That is the reality. You cannot speak to these employers from the heart, with a project of national independence, even less with a socialist project, because their very existence depends on the maintenance of a system of neo-colonial relations with imperialism. These people would have acted at the time in the same way as the oligarchy behaved with Bolívar. You cannot make these bankers and the big economic groups recognise the need for national unity, they represent on the contrary a real threat for the revolution.

The president also invited the employers of the building industry to collaborate with the Brazilian and Argentinean multinationals. He invited the importers, producers and processors of food to collaborate with the Brazilian and Argentinean multinationals. He opened a fund of a billion dollars, to be shared between the local employers and the multinationals. But when we speak about Brazilian and Argentinean multinationals, it would be more exact to speak about North-American, European and Asian multinationals because the majority of their financial capital comes from companies and banks in these regions. Like the Ternium enterprise (which controlled 60 per cent of the SIDOR iron and steel plant that was nationalised), the allegedly Argentinean multinational, whose capital is Brazilian, Mexican, Italian and American.

To appeal to these firms in the name of national unity while following the path of Bolivarian socialism reveals great confusion on the part of the president. None of the 500 owners present at the meeting will answer this appeal. They want to hear only one thing: the appeal of profit at any price. It is they who create precarious employment, who sub-contract, who lay off workers, who harass the trade-union organizations when they cannot buy off or corrupt their leaders.

But let us return to the political problem. Mendoza and its group of companies are among those principally responsible for the shortage of and the speculation on

food. Why would it change its attitude today? The president is bathing in illusions if he thinks that by granting the privileges claimed by the employers, they will no longer constitute a factor of destabilization. The electoral agenda matters little to the employers, their only agenda is profit and for that they will use the electoral conjuncture if necessary. Either the president is mistaken, or he knows what he is doing and in that case he is promoting a capitalist model which will never win independence because these economic groups have no sense of the fatherland or of independence. They are only junior partners of imperialism and they only aspire to remain that.

To ask them to repatriate the billion dollars that they have hidden abroad constitutes another demonstration of naivety. They could indeed do it, but only with the guarantee that they will make even more money than they currently make and with the assurance that they will never be expropriated. And the only thing that can give them such confidence is that the (presidential) palace of Miraflores is occupied by a president who, as in the time of the Fourth Republic (1948-1999), does exactly what they want.

So the problem with which we are confronted is political, it is a question of choosing between two models. It is necessary to choose between the model suggested by the president on June 11 with the employers and that of the workers of SIDOR, of a consistent consequent fight against the multinationals.

Some people claim that it would be a question of a kind of "NEP", the economic policy followed by Lenin after the civil war. In order to solve the problems of supply and the productive crisis, he loosened controls on the market and gave certain advantages to the small capitalists. What do you think about that?

The Leninist NEP was a policy intended to solve the brutal crisis in which Russia had become enmeshed after the disasters of the First World War and the Civil War. This policy caused serious distortions; the well-off

peasants quickly grew rich. In Venezuela, there cannot be an NEP, in the first place because we do not have a state of transition towards socialism, the bourgeois state has not been dismantled. We still have a bourgeois state with all its structures intact and with elements of state capitalism. To put forward such a comparison only serves to sow confusion.

Moreover, the launching of the NEP in Russia was done after the expropriation of the great majority of the factories and the policy of "War Communism" during the Civil War. It was a policy that was made necessary by the state of the country after years of war and the failure of the revolution in Germany. So it was a defensive policy of Leninism, not an offensive one. To talk about the NEP in the Venezuelan process constitutes a falsification intended to occult the fact that what they call the "re-launch of production" is nothing other than a policy of incentives, subsidies and privileges granted to the big bosses of whom the majority are putschists, destabilizers and saboteurs.

What measures do you propose to achieve the goals defined by the president?

In the first place, there is a political objective. We reject this "alliance of national unity" because it is counter-productive if we really want to advance towards socialism. It will even be reactionary if it is carried out, because it will weaken the revolutionary process. We propose on the contrary an alliance of popular power, of the workers and the exploited and oppressed sectors of society, in order to resolve the question of state power. In the second place, we need measures of economic policy that are consistent with the discourse on the building of socialism and the working-class nature of the government, measures which must respond to the real problems and needs of working people.

Let us take the example of foreign trade. If there is an area in which the state must have a monopoly of purchases and imports it is certainly that of food. The nationalization of foreign trade and particularly of the food sector is a fundamental tool for

controlling inflation.

Next, there is the question of wages. You cannot on the one hand spend millions of dollars on incentives and subsidies to the employers, without any control by the workers, while on the other hand workers are affected every day by price increases. We must install a periodic, monthly or quarterly indexation of wages in line with inflation. Collective bargaining agreements concluded every two years cannot respond to the situation.

One of the main issues whose gravity should be understood is that of the control of finances, the banks and credit. The crisis of the international economy will continue to deepen, just like the crisis of the banking sector. In this context, it is not acceptable that

there does not exist any control on deposits in our country. We think that the system of credit is a strategic sector just like basic industries, oil, food, communications, etc. This sector cannot remain in the hands of the private sector and even less of the multinationals. At the very least, deposits would have to be nationalized. Or else, the central bank should control and manage all the money which is in the banking system. It would also be necessary to directly abolish VAT and to progressively increase taxes on company profits. That means, concretely: those who earn more pay more.

Those are some of the ideas and proposals which we want to put up for discussion among workers. But what remains fundamental is the question of knowing whether we are working

with the perspective of an alliance with the supposedly national bourgeoisie, which would represent a retreat on the road to socialism. The president must know that each of the possible choices excludes the other: either you are with the workers and the people or you are with the big economic groups and the multinationals. A genuine workers' government cannot choose an alliance with the bourgeoisie because that would mean the retreat of the revolution, and in saying that we are not falling into any kind of "ultraleftism".

This interview was conducted by Mare a Socialista (<http://www.mareasocialista.com/>) and published on the site www.aporrea.org on June 30, 2008.

The Bolivarian Revolution at the Crossroads

31 July 2008, by **Fernando Esteban**



The gains of the revolution

In a country which is the fourth world exporter of oil and which has the greatest oil reserves in the world, oil is a very powerful financial weapon. The profits generated by PDVSA (the state oil company) make it possible to finance the "missions" of the revolution. Among the most important are those concerning education:

- The Robinson mission aims at teaching illiterates how to read and write.
- The Ribas mission trains graduates.
- The Sucre mission gives access to the university to students that the former republic had excluded. To this end, a Bolivarian University has been established and located all over the country. It functions parallel to the traditional Venezuelan universities, of which the best known are the Central University of Venezuela (in Caracas) and the Andean University (in

Merida).

These educational missions are extremely successful. The students, of all ages, are very numerous, so much so that the centres where they operate are being multiplied. This enthusiasm can be explained partly by the methods of teaching that are used. The courses are given on video cassette and a teacher is there to help the group, which is always quite small. There is no place here for the system of evaluation and sanction. Everything is done to encourage the student's progress. And the results speak for themselves: in October 2005, UNESCO officially proclaimed Venezuela "a territory freed from illiteracy".

Another of the best known missions is "Barrio adentro", which is a medical mission. In the framework of an agreement with Cuba, nearly 15.000 Cuban doctors are today employed by the Venezuelan government. Access to health has thus become completely free. Installed in doctors' surgeries, all

built on the same model, these doctors treat the population, but at the same time they inform and make people aware of the rules of hygiene and contraception. They also keep many statistics up to date, in order to observe the evolution of the medical situation of the population. It is clear that progress is being made, and the whole of the population, in particular in the barrios, has seen its living conditions improving, largely thanks to these doctors.

We could also speak about the Mercal mission, which markets food products at low prices. Created for all Venezuelans, it addresses itself more specifically to the poorest sectors of the population.

We could furthermore mention the Piar mission which aims at improving the living conditions of children, or "Vuelvan Caras", the purpose of which is to develop co-operatives of production, or Guaicai which works to restore the rights of the indigenous peoples and communities of the

country. Chavez often repeats that "to fight against poverty, it is necessary to give power to the poor". The missions are there for that... to help the needy populations of the barrios, those who took to the streets at the time of the coup d'état in 2002 to put Chavez back in power.

Lastly, how can we speak about the gains of the Bolivarian revolution without evoking one of the essential reforms of the process: the law on land and fishing. Just eight families in the country own between them more than 150,000 hectares of land. That represents roughly the equivalent of eighteen times the surface of the capital of Venezuela, where more than 4 million people live. Furthermore, these immense landholdings remain most of the time uncultivated, whereas they are located in the most fertile areas of the country. It should be stressed that some big landholdings, such as for example the liquor-producing Santa Teresa company, established in the valleys of Aragua, do not have any documented title to the land that they occupy. The law has made it possible to launch a process of more equitable distribution of land resources, by regularizing the division of the land among peasants through the National Land Institute. It has encouraged the construction of rural population centres equipped with basic services, giving their inhabitants access to health and education, in order for them to have a better and more dignified life. The law protects the poor peasants and encourages the formation of co-operatives and other associative forms of production, by supporting them financially and technically and by creating at the same time the conditions of their economic viability, through establishing the necessary means of transport and marketing of their produce.

Again on the lost referendum

So we might be astonished that in spite of these well-known gains, Hugo Chavez lost the referendum last December. All the more so in that in the president's proposal we could find in particular:

- recognition of popular participation through the Councils of Popular Power (such as, for example, the Student,

Peasant Councils, etc.), and through workers' associations, co-operatives, community enterprises;

- strengthening of the right to work, including the creation of a fund of social stability for workers, allowing them, with the help of the state, to take advantage of wide-ranging rights concerning retirement, pensions and paid holidays;

- the reduction of the working day from 8 to 6 hours, and from 40 to 36 hours a week;

- recognition of the specificities of the indigenous groups and the groups descended from forced African immigration, guaranteeing the exercise of their rights and special attention from the law;

- the creation of a state productive economic model, based on the values of humanism, co-operation and the preponderance of social interests over private interests. The state promotes and develops specific forms of companies and economic units based on social, communal or state property, social production and distribution, mixed enterprises between the state and the private sector, creating the best conditions for the realization of the socialist economy.

All these social gains would make you think that the popular classes would mobilize to once again vote massively in favour of the proposals of Chavez. However that was not what happened, quite the contrary. The referendum was more a defeat of the Venezuelan president than a victory of the opposition. If we compare the results with those of the last presidential election, won by Chavez with 61,35% of the votes, the opposition stagnated, with 4 million votes, whereas Chavez lost 3 million votes. The abstention was 45 per cent. In the final analysis, it was by only 200,000 votes that the constitutional proposal was rejected.

Most of the Western media were quick to salute the wisdom of the Venezuelan people. For them, the explanation of this failure was simple, linear, and came down to two points: the refusal of a "Cuban-style" socialist model and the refusal to allow Chavez the right to stand for the presidency indefinitely. Admittedly, article 230 of the new Constitution proposed a lengthening of the presidential term to 7 years, with the possibility of

standing again immediately and indefinitely. Such a proposal is obviously not satisfactory. But to conclude from it that Chavez wants to make Venezuela a dictatorship, as the media said, is to forget a little too quickly that this same system is in force in France and in other European democracies without it posing the least problem for these right-thinking media people. Besides, they even quickly forgot to point out that Venezuela really is a democracy, since Chavez recognized his defeat and congratulated his opponents on the evening of the results.

The reasons for the defeat are undoubtedly to be looked for elsewhere.

Reasons for the defeat

First of all, by aiming to broadly satisfy the population, the proposal did not in the end satisfy anyone. The renewal of the presidential mandate was clearly there to satisfy the moderate wing of the Bolivarian process, the wing that wants a Chavism without socialism. It could not however satisfy the most radical wing of the process. So we saw personalities like Orlando Chirino, a member of the leadership of the country's main trade-union confederation, the UNT, officially come out against the proposal. On the other hand, the entire social aspect of the reform, which we outlined above, was unacceptable to a new Bolivarian bourgeoisie which does not want socialism. From this point of view, it was highly symbolic that General Baduel, an old associate of Chavez, came out strongly against the reform.

Furthermore, there was very clearly a problem with the method chosen by Chavez. The Venezuelan president worked on a constitutional reform, consulting only a group of friends selected by him and gathered around his own person. Over and above the reform proposals, Chavez thus made disappear by decree the original formula of this revolution: that of a popular, revolutionary, democratic process of a constituent nature. The maximum that was obtained was the kind of open discussion that there was around the constituent assembly of 1999. At a moment when the context

made it possible to go much further, to undertake a reform by establishing spaces of dialogue and power all over the country, Chavez threw down a challenge to the entire Bolivarian and revolutionary movement, forcing it to be with him or against him. There was a possible way out of this, making the model of reform proposed by Chavez a working draft for a great many constituent spaces organized all over the country, seeking perhaps their approval but gaining a model of legitimacy and a concretization of constituent and revolutionary democracy. In fact, the reform almost faded into the background because in the campaign Chavez personified the referendum to the point of transforming it into a plebiscite. The line was: "To vote No is to vote for Bush, to vote Yes is to vote for Chavez".

In the face of that the opposition developed a highly effective campaign. Through advertising spots on television, but also by going into the popular quarters, it ceaselessly explained that with the reform and "the arrival of socialism", the state would be the owner of all private goods and could seize in an absolutely legal way anyone's house or car. Exploiting people's fears by explaining that socialism would take from those who had little or nothing, this line of argument was extremely successful.

Lastly, the primary reason for this failure was undoubtedly the rise of a certain contestation within the Bolivarian camp. The desire to identify the Bolivarian revolution with the sole figure of Chavez, the way in which the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) is being constituted, without much consultation, and then the way in which they tried to impose the reform, explain this disaffection. Abstention was high because the proposal of Chavez, both in its form as and in its essential contents, did not offer practical democratic and counter-hegemonic perspectives. As Sebastien Ville and François Sabado wrote in *Rouge* n° 2230, "this defeat is a response to the degradation of the relations between the government and the most combative sectors of the Bolivarian revolution".

It is utopian to think that in the Latin

America of today, it is possible to impose socialism from on high. The challenge is to build a radical democracy, opposed to the present status quo but pluralist in terms of actors and popular ideologies. Faced with this first setback, there are strong temptations for the moderate wing of Chavism to impose a new reform that would reduce the socializing or socialist aspects, explaining that they were the cause of the defeat on December 2. So what is at stake for the social movement is to keep the process moving forward. And from this point of view, there are fortunately some positive points.

The nationalization of SIDOR

First of all, there is of course the very recent nationalization of SIDOR. After three months of a determined strike and of struggle, on Wednesday April 8, Hugo Chavez finally intervened and agreed to renationalise the most important iron and steel plant in the country, which had been privatized in 1997 by President Caldera.

At the heart of the debate was the denunciation by the workers and the UNT trade union of the violation by SIDOR of Venezuelan labour legislation. Completely ignoring the collective bargaining agreement, the management of Ternium-SIDOR, a company owned 20 per cent by the state, 20 per cent by the workers and 60 per cent by the Italo-Argentinian consortium Techint, had maintained for 15 months a situation of absolute wage insecurity for the 15.000 workers, including 9.000 who had no contracts. Not only did the management refuse until now to implement the wage increases voted legally in a general assembly by the workers, but on the contrary it sought to impose a reduction of the workforce, wage cuts, modifications of work contracts in the direction of greater insecurity, as well as a downward revision of the pensions paid to former employees.

Worse still, whereas the fact of having 20 per cent of the capital enabled the workers to appoint one of the co-presidents, the management categorically refused to recognize the validity of this vote. Hitherto

protected by Jose Ramon Rivero, the Minister of Labour, the management of the firm thought it could count on the fact that it benefited from foreign capital to continue flouting Venezuelan law. Whereas Rivero never sought to negotiate and on the contrary preferred to impose a trial of strength on the workers, as he had previously done last August with the comrades of the UNT in the public sector, he has just been repudiated in a scathing fashion by Chavez.

On April 4, the UNT trade union organized a referendum where two questions were put to the workers of the factory: first of all, did they or did they not agree with the proposal that the employers had made at the negotiating table; then, whether they wished to continue the strike and the negotiations. In spite of three months of struggle, the workers answered No to the first question by 3,338 votes to 65, and Yes to the second by 3,195 to 97. On Monday April 7, weary of the workers' resistance, the government decided, in the person of Vice-president Ramón Carrizales, to convene new negotiations. Negotiations to which the minister Jose Ramon was this time not invited. Under the constant pressure of 600 workers guarding the factory permanently, it took less than 48 hours to resolve the crisis.

The fall of Rivero

This struggle led in addition to the fall of Jose Ramon Rivero. It was not the first time that the comrades of the UNT had clashed with him. On August 15 last year, the trade-union representatives of the UNT, workers in the Venezuelan Ministry of Labour, had an appointment with the director of his cabinet, Lennina Galindo, in order to present their draft of a national collective agreement for the whole of the workers of the public sector. On their arrival, they were told that she was in a meeting with the minister Jose Ramón Rivero. So the trade-union representatives decided to wait. At the end of the day, someone came back to see them to tell them that by order of the minister, Lennina Galindo was not authorized to receive them.

The trade unionists, furious, then

decided to occupy the Ministry until they were received. Forty-five people, men and women, thus continued to wait. Initially, the director of his cabinet and the vice-minister were sent to convince the recalcitrant workers to leave the Ministry. Then, understanding that he could not avoid a confrontation, the minister ordered the doors to be closed, but also for water and electricity to be cut off. Six days passed thus, without any change in the situation. Fire-fighters were prevented from entering, all contact was prohibited with the employees of the ministry who, out of solidarity, vainly tried to forward get food to them.

Deprived of water, food and medicine, faced with this serious lack of respect for the elementary rights of the human person, the courageous trade unionists nevertheless remained in place. The minister then called on the army to evacuate them. Soldiers came to the scene, noted the occupation, but decided not to intervene. Furious, the minister then decided to use purely and simply gangster methods, by calling in roughnecks from the neighbourhood. Promising each of them 50,000 bolivars (approximately 15 euros), he asked them to forcibly make these trade unionists leave, presenting them as anti-Chavist oppositionists. A violent evacuation of the ministry ensued, with the trade unionists being driven out by thugs armed with revolvers.

But the funniest part of the story was not in the evacuation itself.

In fact, these trade-union comrades were all members of the C-CURA and Marea Socialista currents of the UNT, and many of them were Trotskyists. And at the time as the evacuation was taking place, this same minister was making an inaugural speech on the occasion of the first official homage paid by the Bolivarian Republic to... Leon Trotsky! Such are the methods of Rivero.

Finally, at the time when he was ousted, Rivero was trying to set up a new trade-union confederation, directly in competition with the UNT, and which would have followed his orders. Although this project seems to have been frozen with the departure

of Rivero, nothing indicates that it will not be taken out of the closet one day by the right wing of Chavism.

The internal manoeuvres in the PSUV

The right wing seems for the moment more preoccupied by the PSUV, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, the new party bringing together the old MVR (Movement for Fifth Republic) of Chavez, and part of the Venezuelan Communist Party, of PPT and of Podemos. During March, the election of the leadership took place.

The first stage consisted of designating the members who had the right to vote. Out of 5 million members, only 80.000 could vote, without anyone knowing on what criteria this choice was based. In a second stage, Chavez announced on live television a list of 70 names from which it was necessary to choose the 35 people who were going to make up the national leadership. Lastly, in the third stage, once the 35 members of the national leadership had been elected, Chavez designated on live TV the members of the political bureau. There you can only find members of the government, and there are no representatives of the social or trade-union movement. The vote of the delegates in each battalion (base organisation) proceeded without there being any control of the results.

In spite of the way the bureaucracy arranged this election, there remain political spaces within the PSUV. Thus for example, when there was the election of the 35 people who were to make up the national leadership, a list drawn up by the government was circulated, indicating the names for which it was necessary to vote. Unfortunately for those thus designated, the 80,000 grand electors did not follow instructions and voted freely. Which undoubtedly partly explains Chavez taking matters in hand directly by nominating the political bureau. In the same way, comrade Gonzalo Gomez, a member of Marea Socialista, succeeded in being elected a delegate, in spite of the opposition of the bureaucracy.

Admittedly, learning how to work within the big machine that the PSUV

is, is extremely complicated. Nevertheless the assiduity and the sharpness in the political struggle that the comrades of Marea Socialista, above all Stalin Perez, have shown, is making it possible for them to win a hearing. These small day-to-day political victories validate a posteriori the choice of going into the PSUV and calling for a Yes vote at the time of the last referendum. Inversely, the positions of the comrades of C-CURA and Orlando Chirino on these two principal points, tend to put them off the political field.

The next electoral deadlines

In this context, the municipal elections in November look like being very complicated. There is a strong chance that the Chavist camp will lose quite a few towns and cities, which would weaken the process a little bit more. At the time when the revolution seems to be looking for its second wind, the problems of daily existence are coming to the fore again. Galloping inflation (20 per cent per annum), insecurity, the problem of refuse disposal, unemployment, corruption are elements which contribute to weighing on the process and which will play a preponderant role at the moment of putting a voting paper in the ballot box. Admittedly, these problems did not start with the Bolivarian revolution and are inherited from the former republic. However, the Chavists must be able to respond to questions relating to living conditions at the same time as proposing a project for another society.

For ten years, the revolution has continued to be unceasingly attacked by the capitalist bureaucracy, which forces it to solve the strategic problems of industrialization and nationalization, of the development of agro-industry in the countryside, and especially of private banking which still controls public finances and the rates of interest and borrowing (which is about 32 per cent). If the Bolivarian camp does not grapple with these problems, the towns of Ciudad Guyana (the most important iron and steel basin of Venezuela), of Puerto Cruz (an oil town), of Valencia (the main industrial city in the country) and even

Caracas, the capital, can be lost, which would lead to a halt in the revolutionary process.

So it is more than ever important to defend the Bolivarian process. Of course it makes mistakes, even takes condemnable decisions such those that we have described above, and we will not cease to condemn them. Nevertheless, it is worth repeating with force that the Bolivarian

revolution remains by far, and in spite of its errors, the most interesting phenomenon existing on the planet today. On it depends the equilibrium of the entire Andean and Caribbean region. If a fatal blow was dealt to it, the Bolivian and Ecuadorian processes would crumble. The Cuban experience would end. In spite of undeniable gains which have benefited the most underprivileged layers, the bureaucratic heaviness of the state

apparatus as well as the continental context weigh enormously. That is why it is important to follow and support the Venezuelan social movement. Admittedly, it remains weakened and divided. But it is its capacity to unite which will make it possible to give a second wind to the revolution and will radicalize a process which is still and always too dependent on the sole figure of Hugo Chavez.