

# Venezuela: The revolution that hasn't been

by Virginia de la Siega

Hugo Chavez Frias became known to the world when he led a defeated coup against president Caldera in 1992. In December 1998 he was voted president with 56% of the ballots. A couple of weeks later he had the support of 82% of the population. Two years later support was 59%. At present, it is around 33% and falling, he has already suffered an attempted coup, many strikes and from 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2002 the country has been thrown into chaos by a general strike called by the CTV (Confederation of Workers of Venezuela), Fedecámaras (the union of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie) and PDVSA (Oil of Venezuela SA) the enterprise that manages the oil resources of the country. What is going on?

## Who is Chavez?

When the poor masses of Venezuela—the “*escuálidos*” (the hungry) as they are called by the opposition to the government—voted for Hugo Chavez, it was because they believed in his promise to carry out a “Bolivarian revolution”<sup>1</sup> and set up the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic. His programme was a combination of populism, bourgeois anti-imperialist nationalism, Tony Blair’s “third way”, and Stalinist statism, all centred on his charismatic authoritarian personality.

Chavez’s government is a contradiction in terms. It is a capitalist government that has no support from the traditional Venezuelan bourgeoisie; a populist government based on a movement that has no political or social tradition and no experience of working with the masses. During the whole process which led to his election as president, Chavez rejected all suggestions to build his organization in the workers movement, trade unions and associations. The present situation is the result of this. Carlos Ortega, the president of the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV), is an old trade union bureaucrat of the oil workers union who defeated Chavez’s candidate in a fraudulent election on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2002. Up to now the CTV has refused to present the certificates of the election before the National Committee that has to control them. However, despite the electoral fraud, the results reflected what the national polls had already showed: that the anti-worker stance taken by Chavez’s government in the collective negotiations of 2000 had pushed the oil workers to the opposition. His change of policy in last year’s collective negotiations, when he conceded practically all their demands, partially changed this situation, winning him the support of some sectors. It is owing to these oil workers that the paralysis of the oil industry is not complete.

In short, Chavez’s support comes fundamentally from the poorest sectors of the population, he is weaker among the working class and his support is dwindling to non-existence among the middle class.

## Four years of “Bolivarian revolution”

After four years of Chavez’s government, Venezuela is undergoing one of the worst political, economic and social crises in its history. The country is rent by the struggle of two opposing sectors to impose their own project. On the one hand, there is a clearly defined bourgeois neoliberal project. On the other, there is Chavez’s programme, which he calls anti-neoliberal, revolutionary and popular, and which lacks any clarity.

The achievements of Chavez government are mainly economic and based on his utilisation of the rent coming from Venezuelan oil. He has made use of Venezuela’s international reserves to control the fall of the national currency, has managed to keep inflation in the lower two digits, and has achieved a reasonable growth of the GNP in a situation of crisis in the whole of the continent. However, 80% of the population continues to live under the line of poverty, 60% of the labour force works in the informal economy, unemployment is at 20%,

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<sup>1</sup> Simón Bolívar was the leader of the war of independence of Venezuela against the Spanish Empire in the nineteenth century.

crime is rampant, the shortage of housing is chronic and corruption—his hobby-horse during the electoral campaign—is rife. Working conditions have practically not changed at all: salaries are low, flexibilisation has been imposed.

It is true that from the point of view of legislation, 49 laws covering education, culture, health, agriculture, oil and territorial administration have been passed by Chavez. This was possible because the National Assembly passed a special dispensation to allow him to do so. It is particularly five of these laws that have caused the rejection of the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and the middle-classes: the law that limits the size of large estates and puts under state control the decision of what to grow and where; the law that tries to control the process of privatisation of the oil industry by increasing the state royalties from 16.7% to 30%; the law that establishes the state property of all lands 80 metres from the coast and directly affects the capitals linked to the tourist industry, hotels, etc; the law that safeguards the right of the state over education and controls and limits state subventions to private schools, which are mainly in the hands of the Catholic Church; and the law that establishes some ecological criteria to control fishing in some regions.

The Venezuelan bourgeoisie, traditionally used to living on state subsidies and exploiting the resources and the population of the country without any control, does not even want to accept limits which are usual to other bourgeoisies. It is because of this that to the fleeing of capitals and the threats to cause a food shortage they have now added a general strike which is, in reality, a lock out. The support they receive from American imperialism has to be understood as coming not only from their anger at Chavez's timid attempts to independence but also from their desperate need of Venezuelan oil. It urgently needs Venezuela to be back in the hands of its previous docile allies to make sure that Venezuelan oil production will cover up the gap left by the reduction of oil production of the Middle East after the war against Iraq starts.

### **The general strike**

The collapse of the coup against Chavez that was staged with American support on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2002, was mainly the result of the mobilisation of the poor masses of the cities and the rejection of the other Latin American governments and people to accept the new government. The present situation is quite different from that of the sixties and seventies, when the American administration could decide who was going to give a military coup, when and in which country in Latin America, or who was going to become president. In the present continental context, when the masses have shown their rejection of neoliberalism and its consequences by the election of left-wing populist governments in Brazil and Ecuador and taking a left-wing candidate almost to the presidency in Bolivia, and where the mobilisation of the Argentinean masses does not seem to stop, the idea of the people accepting a military coup is unthinkable. And this is what Bush and his thugs learnt on 11<sup>th</sup> April.

This is why this time they have gone about trying to overthrow Chavez more carefully. The general idea was to launch a "general strike" thinking that after a few days, Chavez would be forced to resign and call to elections. Nobody counted on the fierce resistance that the Venezuelan population and the workers would set up.

Left to their own devices by a president who hesitates to take measures which might offend the bourgeoisie by implying a clean break from them, the Venezuelan masses have combined old and new forms of organisation to oppose and defeat this so-called strike which is really a lock-out. The masses, now free to organise themselves and put their creativity to work, have brought about new forms of interrelation and opened new debates in whole new sectors of society.

Even the "escuálidos", Chavez's staunchest supporters mainly grouped in the network of the Bolivarian circles, have changed their name. Now they are popularly called the "Talibans", and the name of their most famous leader, Lina Ron, has become a synonym for somebody with very strong opinions. Literally having nothing to lose the "Talibans" have become ruthless in their attack against the bourgeoisie and their sympathisers, turning up by the hundreds at the slightest provocation of the opposition and marching by the thousand

demanding justice for the people assassinated by the Metropolitan Police and the paramilitary opposition groups.

The right to an education has become a key question to win the support of the youth, who had never been very close to Chavez. The decision of the bourgeoisie to extend the “general strike” to the schools, threatening students with losing the curricular year, has caused the mobilisation of thousands of young people and their parents. Parents whose children go to private schools have also mobilised against the strike as these schools demand that they pay their dues even if there are no classes. In their marches they have been accompanied by teachers and workers of the educational system who mobilise for their right to work.

But the most important developments are taking place among the working class. In Guyana, an industrial pole with the highest concentration of workers in the country—there are about 50,000 who work in the processing of iron, aluminium, bauxite, gold and hydroelectric energy among others—the organised workers have made sure that neither now nor in the previous strikes, the workers have gone on strike.

However, the key sector because of its importance to the country’s economy is that of the oil workers. While inside and abroad Venezuela we are told that the oil production has stopped, what has happened is that the oil supplies are enough to last for several months and the lack of oil is due to the transport companies refusing to transport it. If oil production has not stopped it is because in many areas, as in El Palito, the workers have taken control of the refineries and of the distribution centres and have put them to work. This process has opened a rich debate about the perspectives of the oil industry and has brought about the questioning of old preconceptions about how Venezuelan oil should be exploited and what role it has to play in the development of the country. A new process centred on democratic, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist ideas is developing, which is ignored by the majority of the population and which Chavez and his Bolivarian followers are trying to smother.

As the lock-out enters its sixth week, the confrontation becomes more acute. Every day of strike the country loses between 50 and 60 million dollars. But the Venezuelan bourgeoisie is making a tremendous economic investment to impose its plan. Since the strike started, the only publicity all TV chains transmit is against Chavez, and it costs 35,000 dollars each 30 seconds and the conference rooms where the strikers meet everyday to evaluate the progress of the strike cost from 500 to 3,000 dollars per day. No wonder the bosses have decided to take measures to cut down costs. So far, as it had been the case in the three previous “general strikes”, they had paid the workers their salaries. Now, they have said they will no longer do so. Some have tried to force workers to accept advanced holidays; others are paying but will deduce these amounts from future salaries and others are not paying at all. This is obviously creating anger among the workers. There have already been several confrontations between workers and their bosses and the situation is likely to get even worse. The government has come out on TV to call the workers not to accept their bosses’ conditions, since it is not their business to finance the lock out. The hope of bosses is not only to reduce their losses, but to force the workers to put pressure on the government to resign, or at least, to sit at the Negotiating Table.

In the meantime, the other Latin American governments, knowing that their future is also at stake depending on the way the Venezuelan situation is solved, have been trying to find a solution to the problem. Thus, when they met on 15<sup>th</sup> January for the ceremony of taking of power of the president of Ecuador, they decided, with the acceptance of Chavez, to set up a committee to mediate between the president and the representatives of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie so that an agreement can be reached. Nothing good for the Venezuelan masses can in any case come out of a committee formed by Brazil, Chile, Mexico, the USA, Spain and Portugal, whose purpose is to find a “democratic solution” to the situation.

### **What way forward for Venezuela?**

The difficulty to understand what is going on in Venezuela springs mainly from the misinformation of the mass media and the confusing news that come from the Left both, European and Latin-American. While for the bourgeois media Chavez seems to be a new

Fidel Castro, the leader of a “communist” revolution and guilty by association of being part of the “axis of evil”, for some in the left he is the revolutionary rebel who is struggling to start a “Venezuelan” way to socialism. The truth is that he is neither. That Chavez is no revolutionary is shown by the content of the laws he has passed, which, even if progressive, do not affect the capitalist structure of the country. If anything, they strengthen the power of the state and centralise its resources. No measures have been taken, to change the structure of the Armed Forces, which now have a stronger control over society. The bourgeoisie keeps economic power and ideological control because it has power over the media and is thus able to organise its forces without restrictions, while Chavez refuses to send to prison convicted coup organisers.

The political history of Latin America has had many instances of leaders who tried to stand up to the exploitation of American imperialism without breaking away from capitalism. Haya de la Torre in Peru and Juan D. Perón in Argentina are just two examples among many. The difference between them and Chavez lies in the time when Chavez’s process is taking place. September 1974 in Chile has already shown that the dream that Socialism could be achieved in a pacific way can only end in tragedy. In the period opened by the expansion of neoliberalism and the collapse of the Berlin Wall there is no room for neo-reformism or for an intermediate way to achieve: “Capitalism with a human face”. Venezuela shows that in its present state, the capitalist system cannot even allow the timid reforms Chavez wants to impose. Any conquest that the workers want to obtain from this system will only be achieved through a fierce struggle.

The only way forward for the workers in Venezuela, in Latin America and, for that matter, in the whole world is through their building an independent democratic and self-organised political force that can lead to a real social revolution and open the way to the only other possible world: socialism.