

DSA: Solidarity with the Venezuelan people or with the regime?

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OPEN LETTER BY **VENEZUELAN WORKERS SOLIDARITY**

DSA's National Political Committee (NPC) and International Committee (IC) recently announced that they will send a delegation to participate in an official event in Venezuela. On May 16 they launched a **crowdfunding campaign** to finance the travel of an eight-person delegation that will attend the *Congreso Bicentenario de los Pueblos* (Bicentennial Congress of the Peoples) in Caracas from June 21 to July 1. The event is described as “a massive international gathering of socialist organizations across the planet.”

According to the delegation's announcement, the trip will consist of “two weeks participating in conferences and educational events meant to build solidarity, connections between organizations, and to illustrate Venezuela's struggle against COVID and US sanctions... surplus funds raised will be used to purchase critical aid”. The International Committee described the trip as part of its activity on “**the front of international solidarity.**”

Indeed, the Venezuelan working people need internationalist solidarity more than ever. Venezuela is going through one of the worst economic and social crises in its history. The economy has contracted since 2013 by more than 75%. Around 5 million people, 15% of the population, have left the country fleeing hunger and repression, generating the third largest exodus of displaced people in recent decades, 15% of the world total, numbers topped only by Syria and the internally displaced population of Colombia.

We fundamentally disagree with the DSA IC's characterization of the official event its delegation is attending. The Bicentennial Congress of the Peoples is not an autonomous body, but rather an assemblage of national and foreign supporters of the Venezuelan government that was **launched by President Nicolás Maduro himself**, in yet another transparent attempt to coat itself with a veneer of international support.

In its official website, one of the stated objectives of the event is “to express support for the Bolivarian Revolution.” Furthermore, its propagandistic nature is made clear by the fact that during one of the preparatory sessions of the Congress in Caracas, the Ministry of Communication and

Information announced **the creation of a “civic-military observatory of the multiform war and the nation’s communicational policies.”**

A capitalist dystopia

The Maduro government has made a great effort to present itself to the world as “socialist,” but the cruel reality of Venezuela is that it is a capitalist country with a corrupt and repressive government, which has destroyed trade unions and repressed the left. Dozens of union leaders are deprived of their freedom for defending workers’ rights. Some worker political prisoners have been imprisoned for years without even being tried. The longest-serving political prisoner in Venezuela, leftist worker **Rodney Álvarez**, has spent almost ten years kidnapped by the military regime without having been convicted of any crime. Leftist activist **Alcedo Mora** was a victim of forced disappearance after denouncing corruption in 2015—his relatives and comrades continue to denounce the government as responsible.

Although the government usually denies its responsibility in human rights violations, in a context of openings to the Biden Administration, it recently **changed its official version** and admitted after years-long cover-ups that three political opponents had been murdered by its repressive forces—Juan Pernalet, who police shot in the head with a tear gas canister in a demonstration, Fernando Albán, who was thrown down ten stories of a detention center by agents of the Bolivarian Intelligence Service, and Rafael Acosta Arévalo, a navy officer who was tortured to death by Military Counter-Intelligence agents.

The Venezuelan government’s policies of allowing wages to stagnate in a context of hyper-inflation and devaluation have reduced the minimum wage to less than 3 dollars per month, and has generalized semi-slavery labor relations based on arbitrary and miserly ‘bonuses’ from employers, and inferior-quality foodstuffs distributed through clientelist networks, while informal labor, illicit economies and remittances from abroad provide more sustenance than waged employment. For example, oil workers at joint ventures between the Venezuelan state and big multinationals like Chevron, Repsol, Total or ENI, earn a wage of around two dollars a month and bonuses which amount to around 40 dollars a month. Meanwhile, at the upper end of the extreme social inequality are **the capitalist sectors their government partners** —with their **luxury tourism developments**, imported luxury cars and obscene consumption.

To implement these policies, it has resorted to the suppression of independent trade unionism, and repressing basic union activities, **going as far as abolishing the right to strike and to collective bargaining in its infamous Memorandum 2792**, along with **arresting dozens of trade union leaders** in PDVSA and other state companies for criticizing working conditions.

Indigenous peoples and peasant communities have also been repressed, while the government does business with transnational oil companies such as Chevron, Total, ENI, Statoil and Repsol. Following the guidelines of the “Plan of the Fatherland” of 2012, in the last few years an impressive **wave of plundering and depredation** has developed in the south of Venezuela. The government defined that a territory of 112 thousand square kilometers of vulnerable ecosystems and great biodiversity, **the Orinoco Mining Arc**, be destined to mining depredation, contributing to an accelerated deforestation and contributing to the phenomenon of global warming.

While the government claims to be “feminist,” **abortion remains illegal and criminalized**, with the only exception of those cases in which the woman’s life is in danger of death. People of the same sex cannot marry and it is common for government spokespersons to refer to opponents as homosexuals **as an insult**.

Losing control of the social situation, the Government unleashed a wave of violence upon the *barrios*, with **police and para-police death squads murdering thousands of young poor men every year**, as part of a policy of state terrorism.

Losing its social base, the government has suspended constitutional guarantees and engaged in illegal maneuvers, such as removing the powers of the opposition-majority National Assembly during the 2016-2021 term—effectively a self-coup. In 2017, the regime crushed massive popular protests with police, military and paramilitary forces, in a similar way to the repression we now see in Colombia at the hands of the murderous Uribista regime headed by Duque.

The Donald Trump administration implemented financial and oil sanctions in 2017 and 2019 respectively, against a country already ruined by looting and corruption—a criminal policy not reversed by Biden. The Venezuelan government's response to the deepening crisis has been to advance major neoliberal reforms, with attacks on labor and social rights, **the opening up of territories to extractivism**, and **the re-privatization of the nationalized enterprises it bankrupted**.

In its foreign policy, the Venezuelan government has not only supported genocidal dictatorships such as **Assad's** in Syria, but it has also been characterized by a zigzagging policy towards imperialism. In addition to guaranteeing transnational business in the oil industry, Maduro **donated \$500,000 for Trump's 2017 inauguration ceremony through the Venezuelan state-owned company Citgo**. Ironically, Maduro cultivated expectations in the Trump administration, considering that he represented a positive break with “neoliberalism” and going so far as to call him **Comrade Trump**.”

As socialists, we have permanently rejected the interference of U.S. governments in Venezuela. We repudiate the right-wing opposition represented by Juan Guaidó, who acts as a puppet of US imperialism, and bases his political strategy on economic sanctions, threats of U.S. military intervention and **attempts at alliances with sectors of the Chavista military and bourgeoisie** to carry out a **coup d'état**. But, like **the majority of the Venezuelan population, we reject both the government and this sector of the opposition**. We want the Venezuelan people to take their destiny into their own hands through mass mobilizations and democratic self-emancipation.

Embedded journalism and guided tours are not internationalist solidarity

The Venezuelan government frequently organizes international activities for foreign intellectuals and activists, who visit the country in carefully-controlled tourism packages, watched by government minders and taken on visits of *potemkin* communes—the misery they observe is explained away as an effect of the sanctions, while the opulence they see some enjoy is taken as a proof of resilience or recovery.

This type of tourism gives a bad name to the international left in Venezuela. A wall of mutual ignorance is being erected thanks to the work of these self-appointed “ambassadors” of Chavismo: a large part of international leftist activism supports the Venezuelan government based on half-truths and outright lies, while a large part of Venezuelan youth and workers develop prejudices against the international left for its blindness and complicity. A young Venezuelan worker who sees a U.S. or European leftist supporting a government that imposes \$3 monthly wages will not suspect that the same activist is probably fighting in his or her country against essentially the same injustices, that are suffered in Venezuela, even if their forms and magnitudes are different: exploitation and oppression, racism, sexism and homophobia, environmental destruction, the dismantling of the commons and of social welfare, privatizations and pension cuts, etc.

Unfortunately, the decision to attend the Venezuelan government's event is part of an orientation of a sector of the DSA that wants to affiliate the organization to the Sao Paulo Forum and that has invited parties such as PT (Brazil), FMLN (El Salvador), MAS-IPSP (Bolivia), UNES (Ecuador) and PS (Chile) to the 2021 DSA National Conference. All these ruling parties developed strategic alliances with the Venezuelan government marked by corruption and realpolitik, **the promotion of national corporations such as Brazil's Odebrecht in overpriced contracts, unfinished infrastructural projects, the creation of opaque investment funds** and profiteering by political and business cronies.

But not only that, **all these Latin American governments sent occupation troops to Haiti as part of MINUSTAH in the years 2004-2017.** The troops, **commanded by Brazil, sustained the regime that emerged from the 2004 pro-U.S. coup d'état, carrying out acts of murder, torture and rape,** and even generated a deadly cholera epidemic that killed thousands of Haitians. An organization committed to the struggle against capitalism, imperialism and racism cannot establish alliances with those who are co-responsible for all these crimes against the Haitian people. Although the Venezuelan government did not send troops to Haiti, it did finance the regime through Petrocaribe, fomenting a massive corruption scheme and **endorsing the Haitian government's use of the money.** In 2018 there were **massive protests** against the corrupt misuse of the Petrocaribe funds.

We urge you to modify the purpose of your trip to Venezuela. Instead of attending the official event, meet with the relatives of Alcedo Mora, Rodney Alvarez and the indigenous leader **Sabino Romero**, murdered by police officers in the service of the landowners of Zulia state, a crime whose intellectual authorship was never investigated. Meet with the members of the **campaign for the freedom of worker political prisoners.** Meet with critical Chavistas of the **PCV and the APR**, and with left opposition Marxist organizations like **PSL** or **LTS**. Meet with human rights defenders, anti-extractivist and feminist activists, and independent trade unionists, and engage in conversations with them about the challenges they face in their struggles and in the difficult task of **surviving amidst the chaos and destruction wrought by the government and aggravated by the sanctions.** There are efforts currently underway by left activists in the diaspora like **VWS, Venezuelanvoices.org** and others, to amplify this perspective and navigate against the tide of hegemonic propaganda. With them, the DSA IC **can also develop constructive conversations.**

Naturally, a trip with these characteristics is a risky endeavor in a dictatorial regime. But if you do it, you will be complying with your political commitments, as stated in the **International Committee's website:**

"As democratic socialists, we believe we must also be internationalists. We believe that working people around the world have more in common with each other than they do with the bosses in their own countries. We believe that struggles ranging from peace to climate justice, from anti-racism to women's liberation, can only be won if we work together. We believe that we are engaged in a common international struggle, and are therefore concerned about what is happening to the working classes in other countries, about their human rights and workers' rights, about their struggles for democracy, for justice, and for socialism."

We call on you to honor that statement.

This article was re-posted from Venezuela Workers Solidarity.