

Venezuela's PSUV and Socialism from Below

June 24, 2009

ON MARCH 24, 2007, Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez announced to a gathering of about 3,000 supporters that he was creating a Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). The following interview was conducted (by the Venezuelan group *aporrea*) on April 13, 2007, with Orlando Chirino, national organizer of the UNT (Union Nacional de Trabajadores—National Union of Workers). Chirino is the leader of C- Cura—the United Autonomous Revolutionary Class Current—within the PSUV. Originally on the Venezuela left Web site *aporrea.org*, the interview was translated and posted on the *International Socialism* journal web site. UNT was formed after the main union confederation CTV (Confederation of Venezuelan Workers) attempted to dislodge President Chavez from power. Katie Cherrington says in *Znet*, "In 2002 CTV supported a Washington-backed military coup that kidnapped Chavez and put Pedro Carmones, the head of Federcameras (the Chamber of Commerce) in as president, before popular protest forced the collapse of the plot, and Chavez's return to the presidency. In December of that year, CTV collaborated with bosses and Federcameras to lock out oil industry workers, in an attempt to cripple the economy. For many workers, CTV's failed call for a strike in support of the bosses was the absolute final straw, and the struggle against the lockout had radicalized many workers, and given them confidence in their ability to organize—even without the CTV. In May 2003, workers from nearly every sector of Venezuelan labor came together in Caracas to form a new confederation—the National Union of Workers (UNT)."¹ *The International Socialist Journal* says, "We do not want to repeat the sad history of the CTV, which was converted in the course of years into a bureaucratic structure where the leading group held on to their positions and never respected the right of free union elections."² Diana Barahona writes in *Counterpunch*, "For 40 years the historically dominant CTV had an undemocratic structure and union bureaucrats collaborated with management to quash the struggles of rank-and-file workers. Democratic union activists were fired and even murdered while union bosses looked the other way."³ *Q: Orlando, what is your assessment of the issues posed by President Chavez when he launched the proposal for forming the PSUV on 24 March? A: The great virtue of the discussion that President Chavez has set in motion is that it gives us an opportunity to discuss the nature of the Venezuelan revolution, the project for creating the PSUV, the role played in the revolution by different social sectors, and in particular the working class; it's a debate about how you build an organization and it raises a whole series of questions which we should discuss openly, publicly, and with complete honesty. What is most worrying is that the president ended up by doing exactly what he criticized; he criticized the political cannibalism that characterizes the organizations of the left, but then he went on to say that anyone who does not share his views is a counterrevolutionary. I think this is a serious mistake, because far from encouraging debate it closes it down and encourages the sectarianism that the president has said he is anxious to fight. Q: What do you think are the most important issues? A: There are lots of issues to discuss, but let me address two in particular. The president says, for example, that the reformists are a danger—and I agree. And yet it is my view that the program the president is putting forward rests on a reformist conception, and that there is no perspective for a break with the logic of capital. Let me explain. After the great neoliberal offensive of the 1990s, we are seeing again multimillion dollar investments by international capital in strategic sectors of the economy such as oil, mining, coal, construction, and infrastructural projects. International consortia from China, Russia and Iran are exploiting our workers more than ever. I don't believe that some multinationals are better than others. They are all essentially concerned with monopolizing production and trade, exploiting workers, pillaging the natural resources of nations, and intervening politically in the economic decision-making processes of those countries. This strikes at the heart of the kind of economic model we are building. The president represents investment by the multinationals as a step forward. I see*

it as mortgaging the revolution. For me the first step towards socialism is the break with multinational companies and corporations. What this government is doing on the other hand is promoting concentration into larger and larger economic groups; the purchase of CANTV⁴ and the Electricity Company of Caracas are examples. There's no question that the recuperation of these enterprises by the state is a step forward, but the business sector were so pleased with these developments that they made a public announcement of their support for the move. Equally worrying is the President's announcement that Sidor (Orinoco Steel) will not be nationalized because it is being run by "good capitalists." In fact this company was privatized under the 4th Republic⁵ and is owned by a multinational consortium headed by Techint of Argentina. Our understanding is the President took this view because the company is based in a country governed by a "friendly" president, namely Kirchner. But we wonder when we began to speak of "good" and "bad" capitalists? The president is currently making a lot of public reference to China. We would ask him not to do that, because capitalism was restored in China a number of years ago, and today it is the country where the working class is most exploited. They are modern-day slaves, led by a rotten party that calls itself Communist but is in fact completely subject to the multinationals. To cap it all, the Chinese have just introduced into the constitution the right to private property. China is hardly a good example. Another important issue is the role of social classes in this revolution. You don't have to refer to Marx, Engels, Lenin, or Trotsky to know that the only way to overturn capitalism, a system in which a minority imposes its will on the majority, is that the working class and the people, we who are the majority and the producers, take the lead in expropriating the enterprises and place them under our control. In that sense, what we mean by socialism is very simply stated. Yet that is becoming more and more difficult in Venezuela. We workers are not in that position in the key sectors of the economy to contemplate even joint management, let alone workers' control. The government will not consider the possibility of co-management in strategic sectors. Our comrades at the Constructora Nacional de Válvulas (today called Inveval)⁶ had to undergo real physical hardships and hunger, and fight like hell before the government finally listened to them and agreed to expropriate the company. The workers of Venepal (now Invepal)—(a paper and cardboard manufacturing company)—had to fight for ten months before they beat the capitalists—while the government looked the other way. And now we have the case of Sanitarios Maracay⁷ where the workers are in the fourth month of occupation for nationalization—but the government still seems less than interested in nationalizations like this. This suggests that the government's program does not include expropriation, nor will the PSUV's. But if this doesn't happen we will not be moving towards socialism, but only towards some kind of state capitalism with a developmentalist perspective. This leaves private property untouched, and means that capitalist exploitation and the accumulation of profit by a very few will continue. *Q: And what about Chavez's view on the independence of the trade unions?* A: This is a really important issue. The president can't change history and argue that those of us who are fighting for the independence of the trade union movement have somehow been "poisoned" by the experience of the 4th Republic. On the contrary, trade union autonomy is the key antidote to bureaucratization; that's why the revolution was saved in 2002 and 2003 and as long as it continues it will be the key safeguard of the revolution. The CTV sold its soul to the old two-party system and the governments it produced. For 40 years the Venezuelan trade union movement lived through its worst period, because workers were puppets in the games played by the old parties (Copei and AD)⁸ and the bosses' organizations. Venezuelans still remember how AD (Democratic Action) decided the fate of workers, bought and sold contracts, and worked with the government to control the unions and the CTV. We should remember that the bosses' strike of 2002-3 was led by CTV and Fedecamaras (the bosses' organization) working hand in hand. The *raison d'être* of the new UNT union is exactly the opposite: to fight for trade union autonomy, and organize the workers to fight against any attempt to submit them to political control or give in to compromises. The president needs to remember that during the trade union elections of 2001, when as we all know the CTV orchestrated an enormous electoral fraud, many workers did not support the alternative slate led by Aristobulo Isturiz precisely because he was seen as the

government's candidate. The president has to understand that because of what we call the class instinct, and the levels of class and revolutionary consciousness, as well as because of their relationship with the bosses, the behavior of workers is different from that of peasants, communities or students. The worst thing about the president's comments, however, is the suggestion that by fighting for the independence of the working class movement we are playing a counter-revolutionary role. That is not true. With other comrades we have built a national trade union current which as well as fighting against bureaucracy and for socialism, is also committed to a fierce defense of trade union autonomy. The 2nd Congress of the UNT was proof of what I am arguing. What happened there was not just about five different factions or currents fighting or some leaders squabbling with each other because we have personal disagreements, and President Chavez is wrong to describe it that way. In fact for the last two years "the mother of all battles" has been under way between two conceptions—on the one hand those who want to tie the trade unions to the government, and on the other those of us who are fighting for the sovereignty and independence of the trade union movement. We have 30 years of trade union work behind us and we have never compromised with the bosses or the government, let alone with imperialism. And we have no intention of giving way now because the president has described us as "the poisonous residue of the 4th Republic"! We have fought tirelessly within the trade union movement for class principles, democratic methods and an integrity born of proletarian morality. As PST-La Chispa⁹ we are proud to have been the first political organization to support Hugo Chavez's presidential candidacy. He will remember the first meetings we organized in the La Quizanda district of Valencia and with the textile workers of Aragua. So our history is unimpeachable. We are the forefront of the struggle against the CTV, we supported the creation of the FBT¹⁰ and we are enthusiastically behind the UNT. We joined the best activists in resisting the coup of April 11, 2002, and we were centrally involved in the recovery of the oil industry during the bosses' lockout of 2002-3. Our record is an extremely honorable one. *Q: Yet Chavez quoted the great revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg in support of his case. How do you see that?* A: The president has tried to use Rosa Luxemburg's writings to support his arguments against trade union independence—but we have to see her positions in the particular political and historical context in which she put them forward. When she discussed the question of trade union autonomy she was referring to the German Social Democratic Party and arguing against syndicalist and bureaucratic tendencies within the unions. But as a Trotskyist I have to recognize that Trotsky was wrong when he argued that the trade unions in Russia should not be autonomous shortly after the Bolshevik victory. Luckily Lenin participated in the debate and he argued for autonomy. Trotsky's arguments had real force, given that this was the time of the war economy, when there was hunger, civil war, physical assaults against working class and trade union leaders and a confrontation with the holy alliance of the imperialist counter-revolution. Yet even so he was wrong while Lenin was right. This should tell you that we are not dogmatists, that we study reality and engage critically with our own history. It was not a coincidence that years ago the Stalinists described us as counter-revolutionaries because we were fighting for a new revolution that would sweep away the bureaucracy that had seized power in Russia. *Q: What effect has this discussion had on trade union independence?* A: It has had major effects. We haven't yet been able to hold the UNT internal elections, for example. The argument last year was that we had to give priority to the presidential elections. We were not against calling for a vote for Chavez, but we argued that the best way to campaign for that call was that it should come from a legitimately elected leadership. Unfortunately it did not happen. The other reality is the tragedy that public sector workers and oil workers are living through at the moment. If the trade union movement were not autonomous and we had to accept what the government or their functionaries were saying, we would have to accept the contract negotiated by Fedepetrol¹¹ and the other federations which were not just illegitimate but in fact were part of the group of imperialist employer saboteurs against the industry. Thanks to our independent struggle we prevented that outrage. The same is true of public sector workers. The current minister is busy making deals with the trade union leaders, who have no authority and are in a minority. Their power stems only from their control of the apparatus and the support they get from

government. And there is another issue related to autonomy. The FBT and the Labor Ministry allege that the UNT is not fulfilling its historic role and should therefore disappear. At the same time they are talking about setting up parallel structures and put forward a series of proposals which will decimate the trade union movement. It is crucial that these proposals are seriously and carefully discussed by the working class. It is because we are independent that we are able day in and day out to express without fear or favor our views on the errors, sometimes the appalling errors, that the government is committing. Public sector workers cannot be left waiting for 27 months for their contract to be negotiated. And it seems that the oil workers will face a similar fate. The key question is whether it is right to struggle for the independence of the trade union, and whether our exposure of these issues makes us counter-revolutionaries. Of course this is not just about trade union autonomy. It is also about the relationship between the PSUV and the government. Will all PSUV members be obliged to support the decisions of the government and its bureaucrats? Will the new party be more than just an appendage of government? I imagine an oil worker who risked his life risking the bosses' sabotage participating in a meeting where the minister will order him to accept a collective contract negotiated with the people who organized the coup . . . ! These are important issues that need to be discussed. *Q: Do you feel you were properly represented by Osvaldo Vera, who spoke at the launch meeting of the PSUV as a representative of the workers?* A: Not at all; he did not raise a single issue of concern to the working class. He just spoke in generalities. And I have to ask myself who decided, when and where that he should speak in the name of the Venezuelan working class? For me this is the key question. How is the PSUV being built? I want to express my solidarity with the thousands of my compatriots who went to Caracas to take part in the event and who were not only excluded but mistreated and beaten into the bargain. On television we saw governors, mayors and deputies who do not have mass support occupying the first rows. There were bosses and bureaucrats present who have defended the bosses, and a number of people who have been accused of corruption and the defense of policies that did not reflect the interests of the people. That is why there is so much discontent—because people know that this process has begun in a very questionable way. We in C-Cura believe that we have to be clear in our class allegiance. We cannot give space to bosses, landowners, bureaucrats or those guilty of corruption. But it would be completely wrong to exclude the grass roots or those who disagree with the president. Everyone knows that Vera does not represent the working class. The FBT is a minority within the UNT, yet he stood and spoke in the name of all workers. That is why we are fighting for the PSUV to accept internal currents without conditions or disqualifications. Nobody should be forced to dissolve—that would be completely arbitrary and designed to stop discussion before it could begin. And we need to know what the position of the president and the organizing committee is on these matters. *Q: How do you see the future of the PSUV project?* A: We have to recognize that the people have placed great hopes in it; indeed it is seen by many as a real political victory over the leaderships of the old parties like the MVR¹², PPT¹³, Podemos¹⁴ and all those other organizations that for years have fed a tiny group of fat bureaucrats while the majority grew thinner by the day. However, I must say to you that the way it has been presented by President Chavez will not succeed in bringing in the real class fighters, the honest revolutionaries working within the trade union movement. And that is why we insist on taking part in this debate. We have a view of how to build a revolutionary party in Venezuela, which is imperative if the struggle for a revolutionary process is to continue and develop to the point where it can seize from the capitalists their economic, political and military power. Until now, we have seen nothing of that in the discussion about the PSUV. What is important is that that the debate is open and that all say clearly what they think and what kind of party they want, what its program should be and how it should be built. We are part of that debate and we will not allow anyone to discredit our contribution or accuse us of anything. We will speak honestly, openly, and listen to others in the debate. Our views are different from those put forward by the president and the Organizing Committee. We will make sure that they hear our view and visions for the Venezuelan revolution.

Footnotes

For a thorough description and analysis of the history of Venezuelan politics, see Lee Sustar's article in the *International Socialist Review*, "Where is Venezuela Going?"

1. "Venezuela: Workers taking back control," ZNet, June 28, 2005.
2. "Analysis: The battle over Venezuela's union".
3. Here.
4. Compañía Anònima Nacional Teléfono de Venezuela. A telecommunications company, which has been nationalized.
5. There were four Republics in Venezuela up to 1998. The 4th Republic was anti-Bolivarian and opposed the Chavez government. Chavez created the 5th Republic.
6. The valve factory Inveval was nationalized in April 2005 by the Chavez government and is now functioning under workers' control.
7. Sanatorios Maracay produces ceramic bathroom products. The previous owner had closed the factory after several years of unending conflict with the workers. Workers occupied the factory and restarted production for the local community. In December 2006 workers marched to Miraflores Palace to demand its nationalization.
8. Copei (Comite de Organizaciòn Politica Electoral Independiente, Committee of Organization of Electoral Independence, also called socialcristiano, Social Christian) and Acciòn Democràtica (Democratic Action) shared power in governing Venezuela for four decades. Lee Sustar, writing in the *International Socialist Review*, explains their politics as follows: "The fall of the military dictatorship of General Pérez in 1958 was followed by a political power-sharing deal between the nominally center-left Democratic Action Party (AD) and the conservative Christian Democratic Party (COPEI). The agreement created a duopoly that excluded the Communist Party (PCV), then dominant in organized labor. The Communists were also expelled from the Confederation of Venezuelan Labor (CTV), which was soon dominated by the AD and became a vehicle for U.S. imperialism to subvert organized labor across Latin America." ("Where is Venezuela Going?")
9. Party of Socialist Workers—The Spark.
10. Bolivian Workers Federation. According to Roberto Lòpez Sànchez of the UNT, they promoted the elimination of UNT as a Bolivarian union organization and aimed to construct a bureaucratic parapet that could be controlled by the "true socialists and revolutionaries (as they proclaim themselves to be)." (*New Socialist*)
11. Federaciòn Trabajadores Petròleo—Union of Oil Workers
12. Movimiento Quinta República (Fifth Republic Movement). The party of Chavez, founded in 1997 as a coalition of non-partisan politicians from all extremes of the political spectrum promoting the Chavez presidency.
13. Fatherland for All
14. (We Can). Both PPT and Podemos are left-wing groups. Chavez sought their support.