

Can we swap Obama for Chavez?

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On Monday, while Barack Obama was hob-nobbing with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Hugo Chavez was busy handing out laptop computers to second graders at a school in Caracas. After that, the Venezuelan president rushed off to a meeting at a food distribution plant which is providing \$110 million in prepared meals for Venezuela's poor. Finally, he ended his afternoon by making an appearance at one of the many construction sites where new homes are being built for the victims of January's massive floods.

It's all in day's work for Hugo Chavez.

While Obama has turned out to be the most disappointing president in the last century, Chavez continues to impress with his resolve to improve the lives of ordinary working people. For example, in just 12 years, Chavez has created a thriving national public health care system with 533 diagnostic centers and medical facilities spread throughout the capital. Health care is free and there have been over over 55 million medical consultations since Chavez launched the Misión Barrio Adentro program. Compare that to Obama's wretched cash-giveaway to the giant US HMO's which he has tried to promote as universal health care. What a joke.

Chavez has also led the way to greater political engagement and activism by establishing over 30,000 communal councils and 236 communes, all focused on entering more people into the political process and empowering them to bring about change. In the US, grassroots organizations are shrugged off by party leaders who take their marching orders from the deep-pocket elites who control both parties. And, as far as Obama is concerned, he could care less what his supporters think, which is why he went groveling to the Chamber of Commerce.

And what has Chavez done to loosen the stranglehold that corporations have on media? Here's what Gregory Wilpert says in his article titled "An Assessment of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution at Twelve Years":

"With regard to the media, ordinary Venezuelans now participate in the creation of hundreds of new and independent community radio and television stations across the country. Previous governments persecuted community media, but state institutions now actively support them - not with ongoing financing, but with training and start-up equipment.

The combination of greater inclusion and greater participation has led to a greater acceptance of Venezuela's democratic political system, according to the annual Latinobarometro opinion polls, which allow for comparisons with other democracies in Latin America. That is, more Venezuelans believe in democracy than citizens of any other country in Latin America. Eighty-four percent of Venezuelans say, "democracy is preferable to any

other system of government.” (“An Assessment of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution at Twelve Years”, Gregory Wilpert, Venezuelanalysis.com)

Last week, Chavez joined the battle against Coca-Cola by attending a rally of striking workers in the city of Valencia, home to the main Coca-Cola bottling plant in Venezuela. Chavez blasted Coke saying that if they didn’t want to follow “the constitution and the laws” then Venezuela could “live without Coca-Cola”.

Right on, Hugo! Tell Coke to pack sand!

The 1,3000 striking workers are only asking for a meager raise to meet their growing expenses, but of course that cuts into corporate profits, so Coke is fighting their demands tooth-and-nail.

Try to imagine a scenario in which “business-friendly” Obama would take-on a major corporation?

Last week, Chavez announced that his government would spend another \$700 million to fight homelessness and build another 40,000 houses. The president has stepped up his efforts since floods ravaged the country earlier in the year leaving tens of thousands without shelter. Chavez is determined not to make the same mistakes George Bush following Katrina, when disaster victims were left to fend for themselves forcing a third of the New Orleans population to flee to other parts of the country.

And what effect has Chavez had on the Venezuelan economy? Here’s Wilpert again:

“Just as the Chavez government has democratized Venezuela’s political system over the past 12 years; it has done the same with its economic system, both on a macro-economic level and on a micro-economic level.

On a macro-economic level this has been achieved by increasing state control over the economy and by dismantling neo-liberalism in Venezuela. The Chavez government has regained state control over the previously quasi-independent national oil industry. The government nationalized private sub-contractors of the oil industry and incorporated them into the state oil company, giving workers full benefits and better pay. It also partially nationalized transnational oil company operations so that they control no more than 40% of any given oil production site. Then, the government eliminated the practice of “service agreements,” whereby transnational oil companies enjoyed lucrative concessions for oil production. Perhaps most importantly, the government increased royalties from oil production from as low as 1% to a minimum of 33%.

In the non-oil sector the government nationalized key (previously privatized) industries, such as: steel production (Sidor), telecommunications (Cantv), electricity distribution (production was already in state hands), cement production (Cemex), banking (Banco de Venezuela), and food distribution (Éxito).” (“An Assessment of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution at Twelve Years”, Gregory Wilpert, Venezuelanalysis.com)

So, dear reader, are people better off with the telecommunications and electric companies privately owned by cutthroats like Enron (and the other Wall Street pirates) or should they be turned into public utilities?

How about oil? Are BP and Exxon better suited for the task than the public sector?

And what about banking: Would you feel safer with Uncle Sam or Goldman Sachs?

Chavez has slashed the poverty rate in half, lowered unemployment from 15% in 1999 to 7% today, and shrunk inequality to the lowest level in Latin America. In Venezuela people are getting healthier and living longer. They're better paid and more politically engaged. "84% of Venezuelans say that they are satisfied with life, which is the second highest level in Latin America." And, guess what, Chavez is strengthening social security and retirement programs, not trying to destroy them by handing them over to Wall Street in the form of private accounts.

And, Chavez's generosity has not been limited to Venezuela either. In fact, he was the first world leader to offer medical and food aid to Katrina victims. (Although you won't read that in an American newspaper!) And, he still provides free heating fuel to poor people in the northeast United States. Venezuela-owned Citgo joined with Citizens Energy "to provide hundreds of thousands of gallons of free and low-cost heating oil to needy American families and homeless shelters across the US." According to Citizens Energy President Joseph P. Kennedy, "Every year, we ask major oil companies and oil-producing nations to help our senior citizens and the poor make it through winter, and only one company, CITGO, and one country, Venezuela, has responded to our appeals."

That's right; no other oil company has given even one stinking dime to the charity. Chavez has provided over over 170 million gallons of heating oil since 2005.

In contrast, Barack Obama has done nothing for the poor, the homeless, ordinary workers, or the middle class. Zilch. He's been a dead-loss for everyone except the richest of the rich. Maybe we should swap him for Chavez?

It's worth a try.

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