

Communal Power versus Capitalism in Venezuela

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Led by the country's socialist president, Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan revolution is sending shockwaves through the corporate elite both within Venezuela and internationally. The Venezuelan people are waging a struggle to gain sovereignty over the country's natural resources in order to rebuild the nation along pro-people lines.

From April 30 to May 9, a range of Australian trade unionists, including an official delegation from the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), participated in the 2007 May Day solidarity brigade to Venezuela. This was the fifth official solidarity brigade, and the second May Day brigade, organised by the Australia-Venezuela Solidarity Network (AVSN). It was the first brigade from Australia to visit Venezuela since Chavez's announcement of a new phase in the Bolivarian revolution following his re-election on an explicitly socialist platform in December last year with the largest vote in Venezuelan history.

Chavez followed his re-election with the insistence that "now we build socialism". He has announced a series of moves, including plans to renationalise previously privatised companies, an "explosion of communal power", and the construction of a new, mass, revolutionary socialist party that would unite all militants across the country to help lead the construction of "socialism of the 21st century".

While the brigade was going on, the Chavez government carried out the nationalisation of oil ventures worth US\$17 billion owned by multinational corporations in the Orinoco Belt. Also, the mass registration drive for the new United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) began on April 29, and they have already signed up hundreds of thousands of people — nearly 30% above the national target.

Green Left Weekly spoke to the brigade's coordinator, Federico Fuentes, who also served as a *GLW* correspondent in Caracas in the second half of 2005, about the brigade and the recent developments in Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution.

Fuentes told *GLW*: "The brigade had either official representation or members participating in a personal capacity from the Electrical Trades Union from three different states, the Community and Public Sector Union, the National Union of Workers, the Australian Services Union, [and] the Rail, Bus and Tram Union, as well as perhaps one or two others. The brigade was an extremely important way to cut through the lies in the corporate media and give Australian unionists a sense of what is really happening in Venezuela."

The brigade was especially important because "this was the first time the ACTU [has] sent an official delegation to Venezuela, on a fact finding mission to gather information on the UNT [the National Union of Workers, the pro-revolution trade union federation established in

2003 after the right-wing Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV) backed attempts by the elite to overthrow the Chavez government], and the battle occurring inside the International Labor Organisation between the UNT and CTV about which federation has the right to represent Venezuela in the organisation, and about whether the Chavez government is pro- or anti-union”.

As well as extensive discussions with a range of unionists, Fuentes said the brigade was able to visit a range of community organisations, as well the popular health-care clinics that provide free care to the poor. The clinics are part of the Barrio Adentro health care program, one of the many government-funded social missions that allow the poor majority to enjoy the benefits of the nation’s oil wealth.

Fuentes explained that the brigade got to witness the elections for one of the communal councils in Barrio 23 de Enero, a large, impoverished neighbourhood in Caracas that is a revolutionary stronghold. The communal councils are currently Venezuela’s most important experiments in popular power. More than 18,000 councils have been established, based on communities of no more than 400 families.

Fuentes explained the depth of the social gains achieved by the revolution, telling *GLW* that an article published during the brigade revealed that the purchasing power of the poorest wage income category has increased dramatically over the last year (in Venezuela the categories are rated from A, the richest, to E, the poorest). “This is a phenomenal figure, and is on top of figures already showing a significant drop in poverty before this period. This doesn’t even include the gains associated with the mass provision of free health care and education. They are continuing to reach out to more and more communities; there are still some of the social missions that have yet to achieve national coverage. The minimum wage was increased once again on May Day, by 20% — higher than the rate of inflation.”

Fuentes said that returning to Venezuela he had been struck by “a feeling among the people that, post Chavez’s election victory, now was the time for serious inroads into the capitalist system, that now was the time the revolution would significantly deepen. And this has been expressed especially through the real surge of community organising.

“It is a powerful dynamic developing centred on the creation of the communal councils, with the community and workers increasingly organising to take power into their own hands. This is being constructed side-by-side with the process of the formation of the PSUV, built from the grassroots up. This has created a lot of discussions in Venezuelan society — what type of socialism, what type of party, what type of program for the party? These discussions are only just beginning, but this will undoubtedly come more and more to the fore through the year. There was a real sense that this is going to be a decisive year, perhaps one that breaks a bit of the deadlock that has existed.”

Fuentes explained that the discussion on socialism “was much deeper than in 2005”, when socialism was identified mostly with providing for people’s basic needs, such as free education and health care. He said the discussion was “still very open”. “There is a willingness to discuss and debate all different kinds of ideas”, especially what had failed in previous attempts to build socialism.

Fuentes said there are a variety of perspectives on what form socialism should take, however “there is a very strong view that having property formally state-owned doesn’t

resolve the key question, which is how do you ensure that people feel the property really belongs to them? How do you not simply reproduce the old relations of production?"

Giving a sense of how the government is promoting this as a mass discussion, Fuentes pointed out that one of the "five motors" to advance the revolution announced by Chavez is the concept of "education everywhere". Fuentes said this involves "the massive expansion of education into all areas of life, not limiting it to the existing universities and schools. The government is saying we don't just want the ideological formation of just some people, but that everywhere is the site of this discussion."

To this end, the government announced new legislation on May Day that by 2010 will cut the working week from 44 to 36 hours, and will also mean that "every week workers will be paid by their bosses for four hours to take part in classes on socialism and the nature of the Bolivarian revolution". Fuentes said that this had already begun in the ministry for labour. There are plans to expand it to the rest of the work force over the next two years.

Fuentes told *GLW*: "One group we met as part of the brigade was the Bolivarian Schools of Popular Power. They would work with the communal councils to go out into the communities for discussions on what sort of socialism they are trying to build, and [encourage] each communal council to have an ongoing school that can train council members to then go out into the community and give workshops."

Fuentes said he was able to attend a meeting in Petare, the largest barrio in Venezuela, aiming to create a federation of communal councils in the area. "I was able to get a real sense of both the exciting potential of the communal councils, as well as some of the problems they face. What was very clear was the push by those leading the process of constructing popular power to explain to people that the councils were not the end point, but were the means to achieve something much more fundamental. The formation of the councils is seen as a process through which a sense of community spirit can be formed, and humans can develop themselves. This is in a community that has one of the highest murder and crime rates in Caracas."

The revolutionary movement still faces serious obstacles, especially the role of the old state structures and the bureaucratic and corrupt practices that dominate it, as well as sections of the pro-Chavez camp. Fuentes told *GLW* that this "underpins the current push to 'deepen' the revolution". He highlighted the "inability of the revolutionary government to push forward on a lot of its programs, because of the fact that they have inherited an old state bureaucracy that was never built to carry out the types of programs the Chavez government is pushing. It has created a very dangerous dynamic where the needs and wishes of the people are often not being met, where the results of the revolution are falling short of people's expectations.

"This is why you see the combination of the push around the communal councils, which seeks to organise the entire Venezuelan society, along with the formation of the new revolutionary party, which attempts to group together the real leadership emerging out of real struggles across the country. That is, those whose authority stems not from past struggles, but the real organic leadership developing today, which needs to be given space to develop. We are seeing a whole new layer of revolutionaries that are yet to impose themselves on this process, but are beginning to do so through the combined dynamic of the communal councils on the one hand, and the new party on the other."

Fuentes says this “scares the pants off” some in the pre-existing pro-Chavez parties, who realise they stand to lose out through this process. Many of those currently in official positions would not be elected by the grassroots because “ they haven’t done the work”. However, Fuentes said there were a number of officials who had used their positions to promote popular power, “and the classic example is Chavez as president. He describes himself as the ‘subversive within Miraflores [the presidential palace]’. He uses his position to undermine the old state bureaucracy.”

While the PSUV is still in its early days, Fuentes pointed out that already “over 2 million people have demonstrated their willingness” to join it, and it is expected at the end of the registration process that more than 4 million will have joined. “This is having a tremendous impact on the grassroots of the parties that have held back from joining the PSUV”, Fuentes said. So far, For Social Democracy (Podemos), Homeland for All (PPT), and the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) — the three largest pro-Chavez parties after Chavez’s Movement for the Fifth Republic, which has already dissolved — have held back from joining the PSUV. “Last I heard, Podemos [generally regarded as the most right-wing and consciously reformist pro-Chavez party] was down to around 30% of its original membership. This is ordinary members leaving en masse for the PSUV, saying clearly that they believe the Podemos leadership is heading for the camp of the counter-revolutionary opposition. I’d say the PPT has lost a similar proportion of members.”

Fuentes said Chavez “constantly talks about the need for unity”, not to prevent discussion and debate, but to promote united action. “Among the grassroots there is 100% support for this idea.”

GLW asked Fuentes about the value of the brigade both for building solidarity with the Venezuelan revolution and for those who participate. He explained that “those who participate in these brigades do so as friends of the revolution. However, that doesn’t mean they come without preconceptions and questions. Many participants get a real shock when they see exactly how far this revolution has developed and what has already been achieved. It is one thing to read about the revolution, it is another altogether to see it, live it and be able to speak to people who are breathing this revolution every day.” He said this enabled those who participate to come home as “ambassadors” for the revolution, to tell their stories as widely as possible.

Fuentes told *GLW* that the Venezuelan people realise the importance of this international solidarity, and are very keen to tell their stories to international visitors. He said, “The most important social gain that I could see has been the growth in feelings of dignity among the Venezuelan people”. They feel like Venezuela is no longer “just a hole in the ground for people to come and extract oil”. He said this feeling of pride and self worth “is the thing the old elite will never be able to take back”.

[To find out more about the Australia-Venezuela Solidarity Network, visit its website: <http://venezuelasolidarity.org>.]

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