

Hugo Chavez, the Fifth International, and the Shadow of Trotsky

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Speaking at the Congress of 55 left and centrist parties in Caracas in November, 2009, Hugo Chavez unveiled the initiative to establish the V International. His statement is extensively cited by the media and the leader's biographers: calls for the creation of the V International are audible across the world and the demand to unite all left and revolutionary parties eager to fight for the XXI century socialism has become truly popular in the settings of the global capitalist crisis and the threat of an all-out war. Chavez invited the delegates to join his initiative and pledged to dedicate all of his personal energy to its implementation. The listeners greeted Chavez's speech with a long ovation.

The Caracas Commitment produced by the forum contain no mentioning of the V International. The document outlines the general task of uniting efforts to safeguard social gains and freedom of peoples against the capitalist onslaught and slams the US over its increasingly aggressive conduct: "...the new threats spread over our region and the whole world with the establishment and strengthening of military bases in the sister republics of Colombia, Panama, Aruba, Curacao, the Dutch Antilles, as well as the aggression against Ecuadorian territory, and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. We consider that the world capitalist system is going through one of its most severe crises, which has shaken its very foundations and brought with it consequences that jeopardize the survival of humanity. Likewise, capitalism and the logic of capital, destroys the environment and biodiversity, bringing with it consequences of climate change, global warming and the destruction of life".

As decided by the meeting participants, the Caracas Commitment is "a revolutionary guide for the challenges ahead of mankind". Yet, Chavez's proposal concerning the V International seems to open completely new political horizons. In addition to the Commitments, the forum passed a special decision on the V International as the supreme command post of socialist parties and socially oriented movements charged with the mission of "harmonizing a common strategy for the struggle against imperialism, the overthrow of capitalism by socialism and solidarity based economic integration of a new type". The formulations may appear diluted but do convey a sense of alarm: the underlying philosophy is that the Venezuelan revolution is coming under US attacks launched from all azimuths using the most sophisticated means at Washington's disposal. For Washington, resolving "the Chavez problem" by force has never been out of question. This is the explanation behind the proliferation of US military bases around Venezuela and the current strenuous conspiratorial activity. Only a powerful mass movement with support bases in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and potentially Europe and the US (where Chavez can also find fairly influential supporters, especially among the country's minorities) can help neutralize the US plans.

Chavez rolled out his plan for the V International officially at the opening ceremony of the First Extraordinary Congress of the PSUV – Venezuela’s United Socialist Party – which formed a work group to carry out preparations for the congress that would constitute the new international alliance. The PSUV chose to incorporate the support for the V International into its charter.

The Commitments are open to new signatories. The initiative met with enthusiastic support in Nicaragua whose ruling the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) is assisting Venezuela in organizing the forum which is to constitute the V International. In Salvador, serious efforts are contributed to the realization of the plan by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Cuba responded to Chavez’s initiative with a measure of reservation. The country is too burdened with problems linked to the reorganization and modernization of its economy, improving the population’s living standards, and countering the US subversive activities. No doubt, Cuba will side with Chavez in what concerns the V International, but its role will be more or less implicit.

There is no shortage of critics of the Caracas Commitment. Social-democratic parties reject the idea of an anti-imperialist International. For example, Brazilian Workers’ Party (the party of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) maintains that the San Paulo Forum and the World Social Forum are all that is needed to advance the socialist cause and to organize protests and demonstrations. The truth, however, is that the forums have lost the ideological edge and are currently used for self-expression by various marginal organizations, CIA-sponsored NGOs, and gay rights advocacy groups.

The special decision echoed with unenergized activity of Trotskyist groups worldwide which clearly hope to see some form of continuity between Chavez’s V International and Trotsky’s IV International. In fact, Chavez occasionally provoked such expectations by describing himself as a Trotskyist and a proponent of the permanent revolution during particularly heated debates. Chavez drew freely from Trotsky’s legacy in the process of putting together the PSUV charter and program, and the views will definitely be taken into account when the V International is formed.

It is noteworthy that the Venezuelan leadership chose to synchronize the left forum in Caracas and the memorial activities dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the assassination of Trotsky. Trotsky’s grandson V. Volkov, Trotsky Museum director in Mexico, was invited to Caracas, took part in various conferences and debates, and generously dispensed advice and recommendations to the PSUV leadership.

The formerly marginal Trotskyist groups are zealously infiltrating the PSUV. The level of ideological training among their flock far exceeds that of the majority of the PSUV mid-ranking leaders. In the past, Chavez attempted to attract the Venezuelan Communist Party’s membership to the PSUV but met with total resistance: the communists feared being absorbed by the amorphous and fairly inefficient PSUV whose future may well be bleak.

The widespread doubts concerning the amount of political realism in the ranks of Trotskyist groups is entirely warranted. Nevertheless, the prospects to connect with Chavez can prove revitalizing and turn them into active players in both the PSUV and the V International. Political analysts are aware of the friendship between Chavez and Alan Woods, who is a top Trotskyist theorist and the key figure in the International Marxist Tendency. Woods

occasionally praises Chavez in his writings but the fact to be taken seriously is that for Woods the Bolivarian revolution is an element of the global one and thus automatically deserves the support of all Trotskyist groups.

The communists are concerned over the increasingly tight partnership of Venezuelans and Trotskyists, but at the moment Chavez is skeptical of the Communist Party of Venezuela. The above may be the reason why the communists' leader Jerónimo Carrera criticizes the idea of the V International. Carrera slammed Chavez's initiative in an interview to El Nacional, an outlet from the camp of the Venezuelan leader's opponents, describing Chavez as "a rare animal on three paws – a Bolivarian, a Christian, and partially a Marxist" who lacks the theoretical background needed to put the project into practice and "changes his thinking and allows himself to be influenced by hasty reading or by people who get close to him". Carrera said Venezuela is not the center of the world and its revolution is a phenomenon of fairly modest proportions. Disavowing the statements at a plenary meeting of its Central Committee did not help the Communist Party of Venezuela rebuild the relations with Chavez.

The congress intended to constitute the V International was supposed to convene last April but ended up being postponed indefinitely. No comments emanate from the work group in charge of the mission. Evidently, serious difficulties have been encountered and the overall situation in Venezuela where parliamentary elections are due on September 26 is taking a toll. It is natural that at the moment top priority has to be ascribed to maintaining the PSUV grip on Venezuela's national assembly.

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