

Venezuela: New Moves to Build Workers' Power

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Caracas — The free, sovereign and independent homeland of our dreams will only come true if we radicalise the process and speed up the transition to socialism”, Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez wrote in his March 14 weekly column “Chavez Lines”.

The Venezuelan government has launched a number of initiatives in recent weeks aimed to tackle threats to the revolutionary process—including from elements within the pro-Chavez camp that seek to undermine plans to deepen the revolution.

Central to this are new measures aimed at speeding up the transfer of power to organized communities.

Chavez wrote in his February 21 column: “The time has come for communities to assume the powers of state, which will lead administratively to the total transformation of the Venezuelan state and socially to the real exercise of sovereignty by society through communal powers.”

Participatory democracy

The previous day, Chavez announced the creation of the federal government council in front of thousands of armed peasants that are part of the newly created peasant battalions in the Bolivarian militia.

As well as the vice president, government ministers, state governors and mayors, the council includes representatives of communal councils, communes and other representatives directly elected by the people.

The communal councils are grassroots bodies that bring together existing community organizations that have sprung up in Venezuela’s poor neighbourhood around issues such as access to health, education, water and electricity.

The councils encompass 200-400 families in urban areas and 20-50 families in rural areas. Decisions on which problems to prioritize and how to tackle them are made in citizen assemblies open to the entire community.

Funding for the councils comes from the government, but a strong emphasis is placed on relying on local cooperatives, volunteer labour and local expertise to bypass private contractors and empower the community.

Communes bring together various local communal councils and other social organizations in order to tackle problems on a larger scale. There are 187 communes are in the process of being created nationally.

Communes are being encouraged to play a direct economic role, such as creating cooperatives, taking over idle factories to be reopened under worker-community control, and setting up communal markets to sell produces from other communes.

The federal government council brings together representatives of the old state structures with the new, emerging communal state. The council aims to help transfer various powers now held by the national government, state governorships and mayoralties to these emerging organs of peoples' power.

Such organs include workers' and peasants' councils, which will also be represented on the council.

Workers' control

There are also indications the government is moving to transfer control over the running of important state industries to their workers.

One example is Plan Socialist Guayana, which involves tens of thousands of workers in the industrial complex in Bolivar state.

Workers, backed by Chavez, have been discussing, and in some cases implementing, a radical transformation in the running of local aluminum, iron ore, steel and mining companies.

There are also important moves in the electrical sector, which has been plagued with problems. Hydroelectric dams that are at critically low levels due to ongoing droughts generate some 70% of Venezuela's electricity.

The sector also suffers from years of under-investment by pre-Chavez governments that were preparing to privatize the state-owned industry.

Declaring a state of emergency in the electrical sector, Chavez has called on the workers to actively participate in management.

This has long been a demand of the workers themselves, who finally won this year an important 15-month-long battle against state management for a new collective contract.

The new contract not only equalizes pay and conditions across the electricity sector (as part of integrating newly nationalized companies with the pre-existing state industry), it also enshrines worker and community participation in management.

Since then, the Federation of Electrical Workers (Fetraelec) and new electricity minister Ali Araque Rodriguez have been removing managers who have operated against the interests of the workers and sabotaged the industry.

In some places, workers have begun to take control over local affiliates of Corpoelec, the national state-owned power company.

Chavez also named Raul Arocha as president of CADAPE, a key component of Corpoelec. Arocha is an engineer who was elected by workers as manager of the Merida zone of CADAPE and helped develop workers' participation there.

Fetraelec proposed Arocha's appointment due to his proven commitment to promoting worker participation. Fetraelec is organizing nation-wide workers' assemblies to develop a plan for how workers can run the sector. The assemblies will culminate with a mass meeting with Chavez where workers will present their proposals to restructure Corpoelec.

In a March 18 press conference with Fetraelec leaders, Jaua said: "Chavez wants the workers to convert themselves in protagonist subject ... via the creation of socialist companies, with the decisive and active participation of the workers."

In response to allegations by the right-wing opposition that Chavez is seeking to concentrate power in his own hands, Vice-President Elias Juau told the February 20 gathering of armed peasants: "We did not come here to concentrate power but rather to dismantle the national oligarchy."

"For us, the only way to avoid the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the oligarchy is to return power to the people."

This encroachment on the economic and political power of local and Western capitalist interests has provoked a violent reaction.

One example is the response of large landowners to the government's land reform program, in which 2.5 million hectares have been redistributed to poor peasants since 2001. In that time, more than 250 peasant leaders have been killed at the hands of paramilitaries hired by large landowners.

In response to this violence, and as part of preparing for a potential foreign military attack, peasant battalions of the Bolivarian militia have been formed this year.

Chavez has also argued for the creation of worker battalions organized in factories. He said: "The Bolivarian Militia, as well as community councils, are expressions of the new communal state, an integral part of the new structure of the communal power we are building."

A new state

Chavez said creating a new state was needed "to demolish the old perverse vestiges and new threats of bureaucracy". He said, "the best and most radically democratic of the options for defeating bureaucracy and corruption is the construction of a communal state".

A recent example of government moves to tackle corruption was the arrest of a number of bankers. Many of the arrested claimed to support the revolutionary process. But via deals signed with government ministries and other state institutions, they had created a network of corruption with state funds. More than 30 bankers face charges. The state intervened into eight banks (of which six are now run by the state) and several dozen companies owned by the bankers were nationalized.

Reformist and corrupt practices within state companies and the government have set back past attempts to move towards workers' control.

The push by electricity workers between 2004 and 2006 for workers' participation in management was rolled back by reformist sectors within the company and the government. The workers are confronting some of these same forces in the renewed battle for workers'

control.

In Guayana, aluminum workers have denounced a number of attempts by management, and national and state officials, to sabotage workers' participation—which has increased discontent and disillusionment among workers toward the government.

One recent example is a contract signed by management to sell semi-finished materials to the multinational Glencore for the next six years, with no consultation with the workers.

Such corrupt deals with multinationals remove the possibility of workers deciding where production should be geared.

Venezuela is an underdeveloped nation heavily reliant on its oil industry. One of the key aims of the revolution is to overcome this through national development. Production for foreign markets on behalf of multinationals undermines this goal.

It contradicts Chavez's January 24 announcement that all state firms should hand their products to a state entity to distribute them according to the needs of the people at cheaper prices.

The aluminum workers are demanding such contracts be rescinded.

Revolution, not reform

On February 20, Chavez again called on the people to continue to "prepare themselves for the transference and redistribution of political, economic, social and military power".

Chavez said on March 5: "We are not here to carry out a reform, no! This is a revolution, and if we are not clear about what we are dealing with, we could end up carrying out a simple reform so that nothing changes in the end."

Chavez quoted Polish-born revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg's famous 1900 pamphlet *Reform or Revolution*: "Only when the great mass of workers take the keen and dependable weapons of scientific socialism in their own hands, will all the petty-bourgeois inclinations, all the opportunistic currents, come to naught."

Chavez argued that ideological weakness and ties to business interests were behind the defection in February by Lara governor Henri Falcon, who left the Chavez-led United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) to join the Homeland For All (PPT) party.

On March 13, Chavez said: "He couldn't take it any more because he is not a real revolutionary ... A special fibre is required in order to confront the oligarchy."

He said the "regional bourgeoisie" surrounded Falcon. Chavez urged the pre-candidates in the internal PSUV elections to determine the candidates for September national elections to strengthen themselves ideologically by reading Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Che Guevara. "We have a clear target for the next elections: an overwhelming triumph so that the National Assembly continues being a space to strengthen and deepen the socialist dynamic."

Rather than simply being a question of the number of PSUV candidates elected, Chavez said, "what we are dealing with is a qualitative revolutionary challenge". "If we want that

the parliament to dismantle the old capitalist state and open the doors to the socialist state, we have to increase our revolutionary conscience and our real socialist praxis [practice].”

Chavez said the aim was moving beyond simple representation to a situation where the people themselves will govern.

“This is about legislating in accordance with the socialist praxis and obeying the people. Those who do not understand it must choose another path.”

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