

Venezuela: The struggle for a united socialist party

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Local battalions of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) have been meeting every weekend since August, aiming to organise the 5.7 million aspiring members who enrolled between April and June to join the party-in-formation. Spokespeople and heads of commissions elected by the more than 14,000 battalions have gone on to form socialist circumscriptions, grouping 10 battalions in a given local area, to elect delegates to the party's founding congress.

The process of forming the party comes in the context of the deepening of Venezuela's socialist revolution, through a massive push to organise the population by way of communal councils and proposed reforms to the constitution to create a new institutional framework to drive forward this anti-capitalist process.

Within this process, PSUV is envisaged as an essential political instrument to politically organise the popular classes to most effectively fight for their class interests. The party is intended to bring together the worker and farmer base of the revolution with their leadership. Until now, the leadership of the revolutionary process has almost entirely been embodied in the figure of socialist President Hugo Chavez.

On November 6, at a the mass meeting of the Zamora Command, formed to direct the campaign for a "Yes" vote in the upcoming December 2 referendum on constitutional reform, Chavez explained that "fundamental motor" of the campaign will be the PSUV's battalions. He stated that the campaign would require continuous street mobilisations in order to win the biggest vote possible to defeat the right-wing opponents of the reforms. The opposition has put forward three different strategies to defeat the reforms: a plan of destabilisation, building a "No" vote, and organised abstention.

The left's response

Many progressive and socialist activists around the world have been excited by the prospects of a new mass revolutionary party in Venezuela, which will aid collective discussion on the direction of the revolution. However, some on the international left have quickly dismissed the PSUV.

One such example is Mike Gonzalez, a leader of the British Socialist Workers Party and its International Socialist Tendency, and the SWP's key theoretician on Latin American politics. In Australia, groups such as the International Socialist Organisation (which is part of the IST), and Socialist Alternative and Solidarity (which are not, but share the same political tradition) take many of their cues from the SWP.

After spending some time in Venezuela recently, Gonzalez returned to Britain to report in

the October *Socialist Review* that the PSUV was merely “an instrument of presidential power and one in which debate will be virtually impossible”.

Hostile to the revolutionary leadership around Chavez, Gonzalez has decided that the process in Venezuela is simply a question of “top down” organising, counter-posed to a “real” revolution, which is “bottom up”.

Gonzalez argues that the PSUV “has become more or less analogous with the state, so that the expression of doubt can be interpreted as hostility to, or at best scepticism about, the revolution”. He raises the spectre of Stalinism like in the Soviet Union, and of the big bogeyman for the IST — Cuba (which the IST also considers Stalinist).

“There are a lot of Cubans embedded in different parts of the government. Their sympathies probably lie with that group of bureaucrats forging this new instrument”, writes Gonzalez.

“For me, and for most of the people I spoke to”, he adds, “it is clear that [the PSUV] was an initiative from the state and the bureaucracy, not so much of Chavez as of those around Chavez”.

Even before the PSUV’s founding congress, Gonzalez apparently sees no hope for the project to succeed in creating a mass revolutionary socialist party. However, the Venezuelan reality is different to how Gonzalez paints it.

Formation of PSUV

During the presidential election campaign in late 2006, Chavez convened a meeting of the key Chavista parties and individuals to explain that after the election he would call for the formation of a new united party. The parties that supported Chavez election, including both revolutionary and pro-capitalist elements, have been divided. Chavez’s ostensible party, the Movement for a Fifth Republic (MVR), was largely a bureaucratically run electoral vehicle rather than an activist-driven revolutionary party.

Some Chavistas argued that the current parties supporting the Bolivarian revolution should have automatic quotas for the founding congress of a united party. However, Chavez was adamant that all delegates, including himself, would have to be elected from the grassroots.

On December 15, after his overwhelming victory in the presidential elections on a socialist platform, Chavez formally called for the formation of the PSUV. He explained the past practice of top-down decisions and deals on Chavista candidates for elected positions should be changed and “This should all be done from below, from the base. The people should take these decisions, as has been written in our constitution for seven years, except we haven’t done it. Now is the time to start.”

Chavez added, “You will not see me with the same old faces, the same party leaderships — no, that would be a deception”. Such a discourse seems unlikely to have pleased the bureaucratic layers within the government, but rather acted as an impetus for the mass of Venezuelan revolutionaries, who applauded this initiative.

Yet Gonzalez claims that “initially much of the left argued that the PSUV was an exercise in manipulation and that they should continue to build a current outside”. He argues that only after it became clear that “many working class people were attempting to join [the PSUV],

this attitude changed ... Eventually most of those on the left decided to enter the PSUV to try to build an independent current within it.”

However this is untrue. For instance, within the trade union movement, all of the main currents decided months before enrolment began to join the new party. Even the overwhelming majority of the leadership and rank and file of the C-CURA union tendency, which Gonzalez writes of in glowing terms, voted in March to encourage its members to join PSUV — despite one of its key leaders, Orlando Chirinos, arguing against it.

In the *campesino* sector, the radical wing of the movement organised in the National Campesino Front Ezequiel Zamora had, by the end of January, agreed to be part of the PSUV.

The overwhelming bulk of the local political and social organisations also threw themselves into the formation of the PSUV. An interesting case is that of the Party of Revolution and Socialism, which, due to its Trotskyist leanings, was pointed to by many like-minded socialist groups internationally as the “real” revolutionary force in Venezuela (ironically this meant it was probably better known outside of Venezuela than inside). After a section of the PSR’s leadership, headed by Chirinos, voted to stay outside the PSUV, the overwhelming bulk of its worker membership left to join the PSUV.

Rather than the left delaying joining, most of these sectors immediately realised there was a need to go into the PSUV to fight to ensure that what would emerge from the process of party formation is a real political instrument of the working people. The number of people who registered to take part in the party was a massive display of the support for such an initiative and the strongly felt desire amongst the Chavista ranks for unity and political organisation.

It is undeniable that a sizeable chunk of the more bureaucratic sectors of Chavismo have thrown their weight into the PSUV in order to best try to control it from above. However, this is hardly surprising. They know that their interests are threatened by a formation that eliminates the distribution of quotas for position and selection of candidates from above and replaces it with real grassroots democracy and revolutionary organisation: a real party, not just another electoral vehicle.

It is important to note that according to a number of revolutionaries, in a clear majority of the battalions across the country grassroots activists have imposed their will on the leftover bureaucratic MVR apparatchiks, winning the elections for spokespeople and heads of commissions.

Because of the number of delegates won by the left-wing of Chavismo, activists feel confident the left will be strongly felt at the founding congress. Moreover, the congress will provide an important opportunity for many revolutionary activists to come together for the first time at this level.

Structure and program

Gonzalez criticises the fact that “neither the structure nor the direction of the party have yet been defined. Instead small national commissions nominated by Chavez have been given the task of defining its character and form”, though he is forced to acknowledge that they will not decide “its programme or aims”.

Gonzalez is particularly opposed to the fact that the local organising units are based on geography, meaning “there are no workplace units and no student units. And given where the barrios are located in the cities, a geographical unit could quite easily embrace a poor district and a middle class area.” Gonzalez proclaims that the problem is that PSUV “was declared from above rather than built from below”.

However Gonzalez’s arguments are designed to justify his predetermined opposition to the PSUV, not engage with the real process of revolutionary struggle within Venezuela.

Of course someone had to set some kind of guidelines for the initial structure — how else would Gonzalez propose the process proceeds? Have the local units just emerge “spontaneously”? Such a conception would be a free kick for the bureaucrats, who would be the best placed to create fake “battalions” and control the election of delegates. The reality that local grassroots activists have in many cases imposed their decisions on the bureaucracy demonstrates that the initial structure, rather than hindering, has facilitated the beginnings of a new grassroots leadership.

While it is true that a national commission has set out this initial framework, nowhere is it excluded that the founding congress can vote to change this. Similarly it will be those elected “from below” who will discuss and debate, in permanent contact with their local battalions, every aspect of the new party: structure, program and principles.

Moreover, student and workplace units are not excluded. In fact a number have been set up at the aluminium factory ALCASA (which Gonzalez says he visited, yet managed to miss this fact), telecommunications company CANTV, manufacturing company INVEVAL and others. While battalions have been formed in middle-class areas, Gonzalez does not explain where the problem with this lies — merely expecting the reader to just accept that this is criminal. Yet surely a new party would aim to organise the revolutionary sectors of this class. There is no evidence produced by Gonzalez to show that somehow having PSUV battalions in middle-class areas will automatically prevent the party from developing a revolutionary socialist program.

The nature of PSUV will not be determined simply by its social composition (and if it was, given the overwhelming working-class membership, it would already be a mass workers’ party) but by its political program — something that must be debated out and not simply imposed on the ranks.

Most importantly, Gonzalez misses the fact that the PSUV’s initial structures did not come from nowhere, nor were they the result of a conspiracy by a clique of bureaucrats. The structures build on the successful mass organisation of the people in the lead-up to the 2004 recall referendum (the Units of Electoral Battle) and the 2006 presidential elections. These structures were true expressions of mass participation and political organisation, rooted directly in the communities and drawing in hundreds of thousands of grassroots leaders, outside of the structures of the official parties, in successful electoral campaigns.

Today it is similar structures that are at the centre of perhaps the most important battle in the Venezuelan process — the referendum on constitution reform. Once again it is the real leaders in the community, who through the authority they have won among the grassroots, who will lead this battle. Furthermore, the discussion around the reforms — which is essentially a programmatic discussion on a mass scale — adds important fuel to the ideological debate taking place within PSUV and Venezuelan society.

Problems and challenges

This is not to say that the first few months of the formation of PSUV have been perfect. There are many problems and dangers (which *Green Left Weekly* has covered in the past), but none of them have anything to do with those listed by Gonzalez.

There are no simple formulas for revolution or building revolutionary parties, only the reality in which we live and the lessons we can draw from the past. Any process involving 5.7 million people will include steps forwards and steps backward, and will be a process of serious struggle. However it will not be advanced by the simplistic sloganeering and denial of reality exhibited by Gonzalez. He seems determined to write off the PSUV before the party even holds its founding congress, implying that it is preordained that the party cannot be a vehicle to lead the struggle for socialism.

Such a view has also been put forward by another SWP leader, Chris Harman, in *International Socialism* #114. Harman argues that the PSUV “cannot provide an answer to the chaos [in Venezuela] because it will reflect in itself all the contradictory attitudes within the Chavista ranks”. Not a hint that the struggle for the formation of the PSUV is not just an organisational question but a political one, which will include a struggle for a socialist program and grassroots structures. Such logic is removed from the reality of mass revolutionary politics and divorced from the need to grapple with a revolutionary process that involves not just thousands or hundreds of thousands of people, but millions.

The Venezuelan revolution and the formation of the PSUV open up the possibility of not only serious blows being dealt to capitalism at a global level, but also the possibility of discussing on a mass scale, far beyond the existing revolutionary left, questions of revolution and political organisation.

Today, the revolutionary leadership in Venezuela, headed by Chavez, working together with the historic leadership of Cuba, is not just beginning to turn the tide of history but has opened up an important discussion among the left. This will make clear those who are willing to engage with new revolutionary forces leading the fight against capitalism, and those who close their eyes and continue to follow dead-end schemas that fly in the face of reality.

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