

# Venezuela: Workers' Control and the Contradictions of the Bolivarian Process

An Interview with Gustavo Martínez

By [Susan Spronk](#) and [Jeffery R. Webber](#)

Global Research, June 21, 2010

[Socialist Project](#) 21 June 2010

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*On June 10, 2010 we caught up with Gustavo Martinez, a union leader in the worker-controlled, nationalized coffee company, Fama de América, in Caracas, Venezuela. The company has 350 workers at the national level, with two separate plants – one in Caracas and one in Valencia. We sat down with Martínez to discuss the centrality of workers' control in the ongoing struggle to transition toward socialism and some of the most pressing contradictions of the Bolivarian process in Venezuela today.*

To start off, can you tell us your name, how long you've worked in this coffee company, your job in the company, and your role in the union?

My name is Gustavo Martínez. I'm a union leader in Fama de América. I've worked here for nine years. I started in 2001. As you would expect, at the time when I started Fama de América was a private enterprise, characterized by exploitation of the workers and rampant corruption. The owners of the enterprise, as capitalists, were only interested in extracting surplus; they didn't care about the conditions of the workers. All of these characteristics we already know about capitalism.

There was a union at the time, first established in 1978, that was controlled by the [centre-right] party, *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action, AD). Logically, as people on the left we were opposed to the union. I was one of those on the Left. My parents are Colombian, and my father was a militant in the Communist Party in that country. He was pushed out of Colombia, displaced economically and politically, and therefore moved the family to Venezuela. He worked for a transnational and faced death threats for his political organizing in the workplace.

So I found myself here in Venezuela, working at the company, and there were others with a revolutionary background working here too.

One of the women workers suggested to us that the situation of Latin America was changing, that there would be new opportunities in Venezuela, with the rebellions in Argentina in 2001 and 2002, with elections of left candidates in Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, and elsewhere, the left was starting to gain strength in South America again.

So we started to have meetings with all the workers, and decided it was time to organize ourselves. And eventually we succeeded in organizing a new union, one that is critical and holds to the ideals of the left, the importance of the proletariat, the workers. So we

succeeded in establishing this new union. And, obviously, we immediately began to come into conflict with the owners of Fama de América, who wanted to continue to exploit workers as they had always done in the past.

We understood that coffee, since the colonial period, had been in the hands of capitalists, and that it would require an extraordinary change of consciousness in the workers to change this dynamic.

We have workers who have been here for 30 or 40 years. And obviously while they feared change initially, they also felt that they had been very poorly represented by their former union.

In August and September of 2009 we started our struggle behind the idea that the factory had to be under workers' control. The new union met regularly and had searching philosophical and political discussions. The issue was raised over and over again about what our main purpose was, and we agreed that it was to establish workers' control. It is the workers who produce, and it is the workers who should be in control of the entire process. The national government eventually agreed with us on this point.

But it wasn't easy. We started to hold workshops on workers' control. The workers in the plant didn't have a lot of experience with struggle, nor with political theory. Workers would ask, why workers' control? It's impossible. And we said, no, it is possible. We talked about the original soviets in Russia, and talked about how they really had existed. And the workers came around to the idea, and over time this is what we wanted collectively.

We're situated here in this industrial zone of Caracas, and we decided we wanted to replace the capitalists; we wanted to transform this factory and the neighbouring factories into a socialist zone. We needed to stop the exploitation that we were suffering at their hands.

Before moving on to more questions about the specific experiences of the workers in this factory, can you tell us a bit more about your personal political trajectory? You mentioned your father was a revolutionary.

Personally, I was never a militant in a political party. Like so many others, I saw most political parties as corrupt, as tools of exploitation. Here in Venezuela there was this Punto Fijo Pact according to which the mainstream capitalist parties, *Acción Democrática* and the Christian Democratic party, *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization, COPEI), agreed to take turns in power, basically the idea that you can govern for five years, and then I'll govern for five years. So I obviously didn't want to be a militant in either of these parties. And you have to remember, too, that the Communist Party of Venezuela in this epoch wasn't recognized legally, and the political left in general had a very thin presence. And we also witnessed many former left-wing guerrillas later join right-wing parties.

But after Chávez had come to power and eventually established the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), many grassroots left-wing social movement activists responded to his call to join the party. I was one of them. And within the party I'm involved in the current called *Marea Socialista* (Socialist Tide), which is the furthest left current within the PSUV. *Marea Socialista* always raises the issue of workers' control and self-criticism of the process.

There are many contradictions in the process, and we point them out. We understand that

it's not easy to build revolutionary transformation, and that little by little the process is making advances, and that many people are working to push the process forward.

When Fama de América started, for example, there was obviously exploitation. Workers were not valued as humans, they were treated merely as machines. They had to produce results, they were measured by their numbers, and the profits were more important than the workers. Today I feel a certain satisfaction because, whatever doubts we have about the limits of the advances and the level of consciousness among the workers, we've achieved something.

By taking control over our workplace, workers have opportunities that they never had before. Something has been achieved. Something has been gained.

How would you describe the process of nationalization of this company, and specifically the role of workers' militancy from below in achieving it?

The workers have learned a great deal from their own experiences about the possibility of change. The workers began to understand through their own experience with the terrible union that they had before that something had to change.

And we began to push forward the idea of confronting the old ways of doing things in our factory. And we took our struggle to the radio, to the community television, and other media to explain to Venezuelans about the conditions of the workers in Fama de América. We explained that this wasn't ultimately about the workers of Fama de América alone fighting their bosses; this was part of a larger struggle of the people against their oppressors. Our reality was in no way distinct from what was happening elsewhere in private enterprises throughout the country. This was part of a larger struggle against our oppressors, against our exploiters, and that the people had to rise up and assume their role in the struggle.

You've mentioned workers' control at various points. How does workers' control function inside this workplace, and what are the workers' understandings of workers' democracy in the plant?

Right, consider the following. The workers put forward the idea of workers' control, and began to read and investigate about the possibilities and experiences that had developed elsewhere, including in capitalist countries. One example was the [hotel employees in Argentina](#) who struggled for workers' control, and who won control of their hotel.

We talked to comrades who participated in that struggle, around the idea that we don't need bosses, managers, to tell us how to do our jobs, we have the knowledge ourselves. So we held workshops with the workers, and we struggled for this idea, to push it forward.

Comrades from the Ministry of Culture also worked with us on this project to push the idea along, working together alongside us. The workers launched a campaign around workers' control, this is the most important thing.

In these workshops we showed [videos about workers' control](#) and used other educational tactics to explain experiences elsewhere in the world, and argued that we could do the same right here in our workplace.

My vision of the role of workers' control, essentially, is that in order to push forward the

revolution, to advance toward an authentic transition to socialism, the means of production have to be in the hands of the workers. And the chances of our success in achieving this, is going to depend, above all, on the level of consciousness of the workers, and the level of commitment to achieving workers' control among the workers themselves.

Because we've seen what happened elsewhere, when workers' control and workers' democracy were defeated and replaced with bureaucracy. In the Soviet Union a new bureaucracy was created which crushed the soviets themselves. What existed in the Soviet Union wasn't socialism; it was a brutal, Stalinist bureaucracy. And we don't want that to happen here, so we're working very hard to build consciousness around workers' control and workers' democracy.

Socialism is the only path that exists for the world's poor, their only alternative, because capitalism by its nature oppresses. So, in order to succeed, we need to work ceaselessly in the area of ideology, building a consciousness around workers' control, self-governance, and autonomy.

What are the specific challenges facing the workers in this workplace?

Really, the main challenge is to consolidate the idea and commitment to workers' control. This continues to be the main challenge. We have to transform the idea of workers' control into an authentic struggle in trenches as we push toward socialism.

We first have to debate and discuss openly the idea of workers' control in this workplace and to consolidate its practice, and then it is essential to bring this debate to the streets, to extend this into other areas, and not to restrict this to our workplace.

As Trotsky suggested in his idea of [permanent revolution](#), the idea of socialism in one country, or even in one continent is impossible. With one socialist continent, and the other four still capitalist, we'd be surrounded.

In our immediate situation we need to move out from our workplace inside this industrial zone to establish workers' control in the other enterprises here, to construct a socialist industrial zone, and to keep extending outwards.

Ultimately we need to take on the bourgeois state and to replace it with a communal state, to establish control by the workers at all micro and macro levels, and to consolidate the idea that the oppressed need to govern themselves.

Can you elaborate on the importance of workers' control within the wider Bolivarian process, and the processes of nationalization in various sectors?

You can't have a revolution without the workers. This is the importance of workers' control. And we have criticisms of the current process. Chávez, for example, has declared himself a Marxist, but sometimes there are practices that contradict this position.

In order to guarantee the triumph of this revolution, its authenticity, exploitation of the working class has to end, and workers have to have self-governance. This is the fundamental criteria of the revolution. Socialism is a society in which participation, ideas and politics have to come from the grassroots, from the workers. Chávez has declared his commitment to this, but at times he makes deals with segments of the private sector, and this isn't our idea of revolution, this isn't what we truly want.

Therefore we need to build an alternative to negotiating with capitalists, another form of pushing the revolution forward, pushing consistently for the control of workers from below. Chávez came to office in 1999, and over ten years later the concrete advances toward workers' control have been very minimal.

So the most important objective is to carry this forward, to struggle for this consistently.

In what ways has the political situation for workers changed over the last decade under Chávez?

A lot has changed for the workers in this country. The ministers and politicians managing the state apparatus are now interested in debating with us, whereas before this possibility never existed.

Look, fifteen years ago, if you went to Plaza Simón Bolívar, which is in the centre of Caracas, you'd find people drinking, lying around, and things like that. If you go there today, you'll see that the plaza has been transformed into a centre of constant debate.

People today understand the constitution, they know what PDVSA is, how it works. They debate issues of production and development in the country. On his weekly television program *Aló Presidente*, Chávez talks about education, suggests that people read this or that book.

There have been advances in political education and political life. And Venezuela has become a reference for revolutionaries all over the world – Australians, Mexicans, Canadians, Germans, Dutch – we've talked to everyone.

What does Socialism for the Twenty-First Century mean to you?

The meaning and significance of the twenty-first century socialism has become a fulcrum of debate. But, look, this is more than a question of semantics. We are starting to understand what socialism is, and that it's the only alternative. Today across the world there is an energy crisis, an environmental crisis, an economic crisis, and the only way to overcome these crises is to defeat capitalism.

Socialism can be a path toward liberation, whereas capitalism offers no opportunities for the world's poor. We believe in a society in which everyone has possibilities, where health and education are a right, not a privilege for the few, for example. These can't be the privileges of the few, they must be the rights of everyone.

But capitalism structures society in such a way that the poor have no possibilities. Or, take the issue of crime. Crime is not going to be solved with more police, with more repression. The only way to address this issue is through education, through nation-wide projects. In order to overcome violence, as such, it will be necessary to build socialism.

From your perspective, what have been the advances toward socialism thus far, and what still needs to be done in order to make this transition?

A tremendous amount still needs to be done, of course. There should be no illusions. In terms of advances, I think all revolutionaries have to respect President Chávez insofar as he's made it possible to enrich our culture on a general level.

The sphere of education is one example. The education missions have been an important advance. People who never had access to higher levels of education are now able to educate themselves. Conventional universities were never accessible to the people in the past, for example. Now we have the Bolivarian University.

But the Bolivarian University must not become a conventional university, a traditional centre of education. It must be a place to develop the most important and radical revolutionary ideas. And there are various revolutionary student initiatives, which are still in their incipient stages, struggling to make this a reality.

In health there have been many advances, with the assistance of Cuba. We have to salute the Cubans, because Cuban doctors have such a strong commitment that they treat us like their own brothers. In the poorest barrios, through Misión Barrio Adentro, the health care is delivered to the impoverished.

Again, the general level of political consciousness is much more advanced than it was before.

If we look back to the 2002 [\[coup attempt\]](#) against Chávez, the people understood what was at stake and defended the Bolivarian process in the most courageous way. It should be recognized that Chávez is one of the few presidents in the world who has a commitment to his people.

So, there have been important advances. But there is also a great deal missing; there are many things to be done. We have to build much stronger links with the left in countries close to us, like Ecuador and Bolivia. Like Simón Bolívar, we believe in the necessity of uniting South America into one, huge, socialist country, in which everyone is equal. •

*Susan Spronk teaches in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa. She is a research associate with Municipal Services Project and has published several articles on class formation and water politics in Bolivia.*

*Jeffery R. Webber teaches politics at the University of Regina. He is the author of Red October: Left-Indigenous Struggles in Modern Bolivia (Brill, 2010), and Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia: Class Struggle, Indigenous Liberation and the Politics of Evo Morales (Haymarket, 2011).*

The original source of this article is [Socialist Project](#)

Copyright © [Susan Spronk](#) and [Jeffery R. Webber](#), [Socialist Project](#), 2010

---

**[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)**

**[Become a Member of Global Research](#)**

Articles by: [Susan Spronk](#) and  
[Jeffery R. Webber](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)