

Support Venezuela's workers, not Chávez!



Working-class socialism and Chavez

Socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class. It is thoroughgoing democracy - at work, in communities. The guiding principle of what socialists do is how it relates to the working class, especially the organised labour movement.

Thus, in Venezuela, we support the UNT, the new union federation. We support socialists like the PRS. We oppose the business association FEDACAMARAS and its cronies in the old CTV union federation. We oppose US intervention. We uphold the right of nations to self determination.

How to judge Chávez?

Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela in 1998, saying that there was a "time bomb ticking and I'm here to defuse it". He made the same point to business leaders in July 2006.

He was not a workers' candidate, He was backed by sections of Venezuelan business. According to Daniel Hellinger, a sympathetic academic, Chávez was backed by insurance companies, PR firms, developers, bankers etc.

"Some notable big business interests did support his campaign, such as the newspaper El Nacional and media mogul Gustavo Cisneros. The key architect of Chávez's campaign, Luis Miquilena, raised large sums of money, mostly from big business..."

Although Chávez calls his movement the "Bolivarian revolution" he has not led a revolution.

- He has not smashed the state.
- Nor changed the social relations in the country.
- No workers' councils, no factory committees.

Venezuela today is still a capitalist economy, with a state that supports capitalism. Nationalisations do not contradict that any more than they did in Peru under the military regime or Argentina under Peron.

The key factor is the army. Chávez is a career soldier, with over 20 years in the military. That conditions his politics. He tried to seize power in 1992 through a military coup. His organisation, the MBR-200, formed in the early 1980s, was made up largely of middle level officers.

Since Chavez became president, military personnel hold a large number of civilian positions. One estimate has 800 senior government jobs and nine state governors (out of 23) held by officers. Retired and active duty officers have held up to a third of cabinet positions. The new constitution substantially increased the role of the army in politics and society, and the personal control of the president over the

army.

Plan Bolívar 2000, involved massive funds for public works - to repair schools and hospitals, set up medical clinics and distribute low cost food - channelled through the army.

History has plenty of examples of army-based regimes nationalising large areas, introducing social reforms, and clashing with the USA; none of them liberating the working class from above.

Chávez is still popular. But this is the same army that put down the uprising in 1989. The same army that was used against striking tube workers in 1996.

Chávez has won eight elections. But he's concentrated power in his own hands. He appoints his own vice-president and has no prime minister. He has sole power over military promotions and a big say in the appointment of judges. He can dissolve the National Assembly and declare a state of emergency

Article 147 of the new penal code states: "Anyone who offends with his words or in writing or in any other way disrespects the President of the Republic or whomever is fulfilling his duties will be punished with prison of 6 to 30 months if the offence is serious and half of that if it is light."

By their friends you shall know them? Chávez's heroes:

* Simon Bolivar (1783-1830), who fought the Spanish for the independence of the South American colonies. In his 1826 Bolivian constitution he made himself life president with the right to name his successor. Only literates could vote. In a letter to Engels in 1858, Marx called Bolivar "the most dastardly, most miserable and meanest of blackguards," worthy of comparison only to the contemptible Napoleon III. (*Collected Works*, Volume 40, page 266.)

* General Velasco, who seized power in Peru by military coup in 1968. Velasco's regime carried out nationalisations and presented itself as left-wing. But it kept peasant leader Hugo Blanco in prison for a year. When Blanco was released and supported a big teachers' strike, he and the teachers' leaders were expelled from Peru and their strike repressed.

* Mao Zedong. Chávez: "I think if Mao Tse-tung and Bolívar had known each other they would have been good friends because their thinking was similar. Their inspiration came from the same place. It came from humanitarianism..."

This is the same Mao responsible for crushing the Chinese workers' movement and for millions of deaths during the so-called Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

* Chávez recently called Iran a "sister republic".

That's the same Iran where trade unions are banned and women get stoned

The key to Chávez's rule has been the re-establishment of control over the state-owned oil company PDVSA. PDVSA says it will make \$70 billion this year, providing \$10 billion to the treasury – or over one-third (35%) of the federal budget.

The windfall from higher oil prices has given Chávez the funds to spend the oil money on social programmes. These reforms have benefited some of the poorest sections of Venezuelan society – but also helped cement his rule.

State capitalism in Venezuela

The shape of Venezuelan “21st century socialism” has become clearer since the election, with Hugo Chávez announcing plans to nationalise strategic industries and form a new ruling party. The direction is towards state capitalism, headed by a Bonapartist bureaucracy.

On 8 January, in a speech quoted on the Venezuelanalysis website, Chávez announced plans to nationalise key industries that were privatised under previous governments, such as the telecommunications company CANTV and the electricity companies such as EdC. He said: “All of those sectors that are in an area as important and strategic for all of us, such as electricity, should be nationalised.”

At present the majority shareholder in CANTV is the US-based Verizon Communications, although last year it tried to sell its stake to a Mexican consortium — and Spain's Telefonica. According to the Financial Times, EdC has always been a private company and is owned by US firm AES.

Chávez also announced that the state oil company PdVSA would push for a majority stake in four Orinoco oil projects where it is currently in a minority with multinationals. The four Orinoco joint ventures are with ExxonMobil, Conoco, and Chevron, Total, BP, and Statoil.

These announcements follow a speech Chávez gave on 15 December, when he shut down his electoral front, the Movement for a Fifth Republic and pledged to create a new ruling party, provisionally called the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Chávez posed membership of the new party on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. He said: “The new party cannot be the sum of old faces. That would be a deceit. We don't have the time for endless debates about this. We have to build this new party from below now. So, you decide what you are going to do because there's no time to lose.”

The turn is clearly in a Bonapartist direction. In his 8 January speech, he called the preceding years of his presidency a “phase of transition,” which had ended. The next phase, “the National Simon Bolivar Project of 2007-2021” would be towards “Bolivarian Socialism”.

The year 2021 is significant for Chávez because it is the 200th anniversary of Venezuelan independence.

It also suggests he may amend the constitution so he can stand for another term in 2013. He raised the prospect of an enabling law to make constitutional changes, such as abolishing central bank independence and for nationalisation. This would give him the power to make other laws by decree.

Another sign of growing Bonapartism is Chávez's decision not to renew the broadcast concession of the oppositional TV station RCTV. The concession is due to expire in May and Chávez announced last week that he would not renew it because RCTV supported the coup attempt and lockout in 2002.

Chávez hinted at the kind of populist state he wants to create by calling for an “explosion of communal power”. He said he wanted the “communal councils”, made up of 200 to 400 families, to eventually eclipse the existing power structures, so as to create a “communal state.” What is needed, said Chávez, is to “dismantle the bourgeois state” because all states “were born to prevent revolutions.” Instead, the old state would have to be turned into a “revolutionary state”. But he is moving not to break up the army, but to sideline the limited structures of electoral democracy in Venezuela.

For the left to join Chávez's party would be a disaster — effectively to commit political suicide to a bourgeois force. What's needed is an independent party of workers.

It would fight the ideological front of the class struggle, including against Chavismo. It would stand candidates in local and national elections. It would fight for the UNT trade union federation to remain independent of the government, to elect its leadership and to fight the class struggle militantly against Venezuela's bosses and the state that props them up. It would move to occupy the factories and agitate for workers' self-management in the industries that really matter in Venezuela, especially the oil industry. In short, it would fight for independent working class politics.

Venezuela, Cuba, and "socialism from above"

Review of D.L. Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today*, Pluto 2006

Academic Diane Raby argues that: “Cuba and especially Venezuela represent the real revolutionary alternative of our times.” (2006 p.8) The book is an attempt to salvage something from the wreckage of Stalinism and to produce a manifesto of “socialism from above” for the 21st century. As such it has a certain value. It sets out tersely the arguments which third camp socialists who look “below” to the working class have to combat within the left.

Cuba

Instead of looking at the role and position of Cuban workers, Raby simply passes over their treatment by the Castro regime from 1959 onwards. The book

contains a laughable description of the 10th congress of the CTC union federation - where Castro first imposed Stalinist trade unionists on the labour movement - as having "lively arguments". (2006 p.99) Only once is the real situation of Cuban workers hinted at, when Raby describes the scope for decision-making by trade unions as "severely limited." (2006 p.106)

Raby believes that "Cuba has its own system of Socialist democracy" and approvingly quotes Fidel Castro that democracy is a government that serves the people not the oligarchs. (2006 p.78, p.122)

The book tries to make the case that Cuba is democratic, but ends up proving the opposite. Raby argues that the "Popular Power" structures are a form of democracy - indeed a superior form to liberal democracies. However she has to acknowledge that no elections took place for the first 15 years of the regime, when what she dubs "informal" mechanisms were used.

Raby describes how the popular power has functioned since 1992. At municipal level, delegates elected to assemblies represent 1,000-1,500 voters and candidates can only be nominated at public meetings. They must reside in the district they represent and face competition in the election from up to seven others. The Communist Party does not choose candidates. Once elected, the delegates are not paid for the role, have to report back every six months and can be recalled during their two and half year tenure.

However Raby also mentions the limits of the system. Candidates cannot stand on their politics nor can they campaign. Instead they stand solely on their biography. If that wasn't enough, once elected, delegates "lack real power" and "do not legislate" but rather supervise local projects (2006 p.125, p.126)

The situation in the higher assemblies is even worse. "There is only one candidate for each position at provincial and national level", the "nomination process less open" and requires 50% of the registered electorate. Raby describes the process as the "popular ratification of a pre-selected list of candidates". Once elected, the National Assembly plenary meets "twice a year for a few days" and most votes are unanimous. (2006 p.127)

Raby falls back on two rather weak arguments to justify the Cuban system. Firstly she writes: "Only the strength that comes from a true popular revolution which still retains its essential character can explain such resilience" and secondly that "'Democratisation' along liberal lines would undermine Socialism and would open the door to domination by the US and the Miami exile mafia." (2006 p.78)

The arguments are self-contradictory. If Cuba is so democratic and its people overwhelmingly support the government, it seems odd for its apologists to believe that merely a (liberal) election would let in the Miami reactionaries.

Venezuela

Raby argues that the victory of Hugo Chávez was "the first successful popular and anti-capitalist revolution

since the fall of the Soviet bloc, and one which is so profoundly democratic, open and original, it offers hope to a degree unimaginable even five or six years ago." (2006 p.61)

Raby, however, confirms that the decisive characteristic of Chávez's rule is the "civil-military alliance", in which the military core (the MBR-200) predominates. (2006 p.146)

This is extended to an interpretation of the April 2002 coup attempt and its repulsion. Raby argues: "the conventional wisdom on the Left is that it was the people in the streets who defeated the Fascist Carmona and his acolytes, but this is at best a half-truth... What saved the revolution was the civic-military alliance." (2006 p.168, p.169) She goes on to argue that it was largely the loyal soldiers who restored Chávez to power.

Although this is a more realistic explanation of the events, Raby can't resist spoiling it by quoting Mao favourably, arguing that "what has happened in Venezuela is - quite remarkably - that the conventional military has been in large part transformed into a revolutionary army". (2006 p.169)

Raby does discuss the situation in workplaces in Venezuela, although again the picture is far from overwhelming. Apparently the number of co-ops has grown from 762 in 1998 to 73,000 in mid-2005, and now involves 800,000 members. (2006 p.180)

On 17 July 2005 Chávez announced that, "136 enterprises which had been closed by their owners were being evaluated with a view to expropriation in order to turn them over to workers in co-gestión [co-determination]". Chávez declared that he was creating Empresas de Producción Social (social production enterprises, EPS) and that "the government had discovered 1,149 enterprises totally or partially closed down by their owners, a situation which could not be allowed." (2006 p.183) However, Raby wisely observes that very few firms operating co-gestión have anything like workers' control.

Raby also acknowledges that Venezuelan national capital plays a big part in Chávez's "revolution". She accepts that "Pragmatic Venezuelan entrepreneurs and transnational companies have come to realise that they can do business perfectly well under Chávez... Capitalists may still be able to make handsome profits, but they do so under conditions dictated by the Venezuelan state and not just as they please. The economic system as a whole is still capitalist, but it is subject to a degree of dirigisme not seen anywhere in the so-called 'Free World' for at least two decades... Although private capital can and will continue to do business in Venezuela, the logic of the process is anti-capitalist... Although members of the national oligarchy still control most of their economic bastions, they have lost both political and military power." (2006 pp.195-96)

These observations about the central role of the military and of national capital have been made for many years by the AWL and lead to the conclusion that Chávez is leading a bourgeois Bonapartist regime in Venezuela, which working class socialists should oppose sharply. Although Raby seems to have grasped important elements of Venezuelan reality,

she comes to the opposite conclusion and positively embraces Chávez's military road to "socialism".

The rationale for such a bizarre stance is three-fold: Raby offers a rejuvenated Stalinism, the embrace of populism and the rejection of the working class as the essential agent of its own liberation.

Stalinism

Raby's book is nothing less than the selective rehabilitation of Stalinism. For example she justifies the theory that it is possible to build socialism in one country, the very core of Stalin's doctrine from 1924 onwards. She says: "Socialism, or at least an anti-capitalist political and social order, may be able to exist in one country or a group of countries for a significant period of time, but will always be unstable and in constant tension with both external and internal capitalist pressures." (2006 p.64)

There are persistent references in the text to the "socialism" of the Eastern bloc and China and that the Yugoslav experience [under Tito] "may be quite relevant to any new attempt to construct a non-capitalist socio-economic alternative." More specifically, she says that, "revolutionary popular power can survive for decades even in a small country like Cuba." (2006 p.65, p.75)

Just to be absolutely clear, Raby argues that, "the Trotskyist thesis of the impossibility of 'Socialism in one Country' is dangerously misleading." (2006 pp.65-66)

Populism

Raby also promotes the tradition of leftist populism in Latin America, stretching back to Simón Bolívar. She highlights the examples of Juan Perón in Argentina (1943-73) and Eliécer Gaitán in Colombia (1943-48), celebrating the fact that today "a spectre is haunting the world, the spectre of populism". (2006 p.255)

Raby follows Ernesto Laclau in understanding populism a "multi-class or supra-class political movement, emerging at a critical juncture and characterised by charismatic leadership and a radical anti-establishment discourse". In particular she distinguishes between the populism of the dominant classes and the populism of the "dominated classes". (2006 p.240, p.241)

Populism was summed up well by Gaitán, who said "Yo no soy un hombre, yo soy un pueblo" – I am not a man, I am the people". (2006 p.245) The young Fidel Castro was in Colombia during the riots that broke out after the assassination of Gaitán – and seems to have learned some of his populism from the Colombian

experience.

Raby accepts the prominent role of the military in populism, claiming that the "military are not genetically reactionary". (2006 p.16) With regard to Venezuela, she makes the incredible claim that "dictatorship and military rule might be considered a force for civilisation while the reality of democracy brings barbarism." (2006 p.50)

Raby also acknowledges that populism emerges as an alternative to (or the failure of) working class political representation. She writes: "If the majority of the working class or of the popular classes in a broader sense are already organised in support of a Socialist, Communist or other party which they recognise as representing them, then there is no room for a popular movement to develop." (2006 pp.246-47)

The working class cast out

Raby opts for populism essentially because of a lack of confidence in the democratic and organisational potential of the working class. She hints at this, with the comment that "social revolutions will continue to occur – at least in the global South" – effectively writing off workers in the "North". (2006 p.65)

And she is more incisive in the conclusion. "It is not a question of building a pure working class movement in the sense of strict conventional Marxist analyses, but a movement of the popular classes in the broadest sense, encompassing ethnic minorities, immigrants, women, sexual minorities, students, pensioners, and small and medium businesspeople: the whole gamut of oppressed and excluded groups." (2006 p.261)

In other words, Raby's conception of socialism (from above) is to be built by developing a popular front movement. This is a dangerous illusion, which countless historical events, from Spain and France in the 1930s, to Chile, Portugal and Iran in the 1970s have demonstrated. The working class in Latin America and elsewhere should have no truck with such a pernicious strategy, which is guaranteed only to continue its subjugation.

Articles by Paul Hampton adapted from

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