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Venezuela: Workers Take the Present and the Future in Their Own Hand

By Thomas Davies

“Now when [the bosses] try to threaten that they are going to close the company, we the workers are no longer scared, we can count on the backing of the president, we can count on the constitution and the laws and the [National Union of Workers, UNT], because now we have an organisation at a national level that supports and defends the rights of workers.” -

Oswaldo Villegas, General Secretary of Sutraprec, in the Yaracuay-based Polar Alimentos food plant

“There is no turning back” – Hugo Chavez Frias, President of Venezuela

The bell has rung in another round in the fight for Venezuela. In one corner is the current champion – the mass revolutionary process which finds its official beginning in the 1998 election victory of Hugo Chavez. In the other, the combination of an enraged national bourgeoisie and on its last legs, the mad-bull fighter of US imperialism. The current champion is not one person, but millions of poor and working Venezuelans fighting in

increasing unison for their futures. In this, a backbone has formed through the leadership of Hugo Chavez and the exciting development of working peoples’ organization and victories. This backbone has been crucial not only in the creation of the “Bolivarian Revolution”, but is especially in the coming make-it-or-break-it rounds of consolidating and extending their victories.

Workers in Venezuela have a history of struggle which stretches back long before Chavez’s landslide election victory. In more recent times, the massive 1989 “Caracazo” uprising against poverty and neo-liberal attacks by the IMF was instrumental in exposing the brutality of the US-supported government of President Carlos Andres Perez. Over 4,000 murders by the government could not suffocate the seeds of change sowed during the uprising.

CTV No, UNT Yes

However, for 40 years business elites and their American friends did control the movements of organized labour

through the dominant Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV). The structure lacked any participation from rank-and-file workers, and its bureaucrats collaborated with management as independent union activists were fired and murdered.

The leadership of the CTV then even joined the business federation to support the 2002 failed military coup against Chavez, led a 63-day economic stoppage in an attempt to force Chavez’s resignation, and then plunged the country into the devastating management-led oil stoppage which cost more than \$10 billion in economic losses. Oil production was cut from 3.1 million barrels a day to 25,000 barrels. Their saboteurs poured sand into the pipes, locked computer access, and stole hard drives containing exploration maps and reports.

The response of Chavez and the workers of Venezuela? Thousands of retired and foreign workers rallied to save production and defeat the oil stoppage, the saboteurs were all fired, and the pro-Chavez labour leaders

founded the new National Workers' Union (UNT) on April 5 of 2003. Since that day, the UNT has made huge advances in the genuine organization of working Venezuelans. Last year's May Day rally provided a good look at the new balance of forces: half a million supporters of the UNT march flooded the streets, while not even 1,000 marched with the CTV.

Chavez + Workers = Venezuela Progressing

With Chávez at the helm, exciting new examples in workers control have emerged with amazing results. In January of 2005 The government expropriated bankrupt paper company Venepal (now Invepal), restarting the factory under a system of "cogestion" which means literally "co-management". The process guarantees workers' increasing control over the decisions which effect their lives and is a step forward for the lives of all poor and working Venezuelans.

In a speech to the National Assembly where Venezuelan President Chávez announced the decision, he also called for state control of all basic industry, and for the conversion of state run enterprises to co-management. CNV, a factory that produces valves for the oil industry was the second such factory, and the big electrical company Cadafe is also moving towards workers' control as well as several other factories. Chávez has also proposed the creation of a network of worker-recovered companies, and has pushed the idea of "a school in each factory" to equip workers with the skills to push forward these changes.

The profits of the state-owned oil company PDVSA now flow into social programs instead of the pocket of American businessmen. Sixteen companies - including Chevron and Shell - were forced to agree to terms giving PDVSA at least a 60 percent state stake, and the government recently seized fields operated by two European oil giants - France's Total and Italy's ENI - after the two companies refused to convert their contracts to joint ventures with the state by April 1.

"This country does not allow itself to

be blackmailed," said energy minister Rafael Ramirez. "Our sovereignty isn't under negotiation." Even CNN admitted that, "The [Venezuelan] government is making billions of dollars [from its state oil company] and spending them on houses education, medical care..." Chavez's Sept 26, 2005 speech to the UN highlighted some essential aspects:

"Seventeen million Venezuelans-almost 70% of the population- are receiving, and for the first time, universal healthcare, including the medicine, and in a few years, all Venezuelans will have free access to an excellent healthcare service. More that a million seven hundred tons of food are channelled to over 12 million people at subsidized prices, almost half the population. One million gets them completely free, as they are in a transition period. More than 700 thousand new jobs have been created, thus reducing unemployment by 9 points."

Add to that the October 28 V declaration that Venezuela is now a "Territory Free of Illiteracy" after teaching more than 1.5 million people to read under a Cuban modeled program, and you have a population making great strides in all important areas of human rights.

What has been the response of the United States to all of this? Condoleezza Rice called in February for an "international united front" against Venezuela and made false claims of a "truckers strike".

Workers and Peasants More and More in Charge

What was the response of the energized workers of Venezuela? The UNT declared in a public statement, "The U.S. Empire's intention of promoting an International Front against Venezuela is rejected by the Venezuelan workers... The UNT calls all Latin American unions in order to prepare an international response by workers to this imperialist attack targeting Venezuela. We also call US workers and their unions to reject this attack and manipulation that the US government wants to carry out against workers and Venezuela."

So as the fighters step into the ring for

another round of this crucial battle, the poor and working people of Venezuela stride confidently into the ring, knowing the match is still far from over, and calling on people around the world to echo the demands made by the UNT as part of their public statement:

LET'S REJECT THIS NEW IMPERIALIST ATTACK!

LET'S DEFEAT THE SABOTAGE ATTEMPTS AGAINST OUR COUNTRY!

BOLIVAR'S HOMELAND MUST BE RESPECTED!