

# Venezuela

Diary of a Revolution

Paul Benedek

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# Introduction

Between July 26 and August 5 this year, 58 Australians participated in the first-ever solidarity brigade with Venezuela, with most also remaining for the Caracas-based August 8-16 World Federation of Youth and Students festival that involved some 20,000 people. This is my diary, as one brigade participant.

Before we left Australia we had some understanding, especially from the progressive newspaper *Green Left Weekly*, that Venezuela was undergoing radical social change under President Hugo Chávez, that new “social missions” had been formed to tackle social problems in areas from health to education, that an alternative was being attempted by the Venezuelan people.

But what we saw over the heady days of the solidarity brigade easily surpassed anything that could be conveyed in words — a living people’s revolution. A society racing in the opposite direction to the majority of the world, away from the destructive capitalist system that exploits and brutalises the many for the interests of the rich few, and toward a new system where the basic needs of the people — for health, education, housing, justice, work, dignity — determine the society they are creating.

As Venezuelan society changes, so are the Venezuelan people changing with it — challenging alienation, breaking down false barriers of race and gender, and building new values of solidarity, cooperation, community and love. We saw these dramatic changes in the system and the people occurring everywhere — from the heart of industrial Caracas to the heights of rural Andean villages.

This diary was written as the brigade occurred, almost every day, to try and capture some of the experiences and lessons as they happened. While as one participant’s account it can only be a glimpse of the revolution, it was a glimpse that has changed my life, and been confirmation that another world *is* possible. That world is socialism, and this alternative is being built in Venezuela today.

*Paul Benedek*  
*September 2005*



Above: Campaigning activists of the Movement for a Fifth Republic (MVR). Below: Australian contingent at the opening ceremony of the World Festival of Youth and Students, Caracas.



# Touchdown in Latin America!

Just a quick email at 5:30am Buenos Aires time to say YEEEEEEES! We have made it to Buenos Aires safely, we have touched down in America Latina!

This place is just soooo amazing. One of the highlights was the plane dipping low over the Andes, the most incredible scene of endless *montanas* (mountains) and huge glaciers. No picture in a book could prepare us ...

The 16-hour plane trip was fine, but I was so excited that I didn't get one wink of sleep. I don't seem to be suffering from jet-lag, but from excitement overload — I can't settle down! — instead watched several terrible movies (one of which I watched first in English then in Spanish!) and practiced my Espanol. My Espanol is having some small success — I held a conversation with the cab driver from the airport who expressed support for Chávez and Venezuela. I can make sentences (slowly), but the people speak far too fast for me to understand.

Buenos Aires is extremely beautiful, almost a sort of Latin American Paris. We only had from about 4pm from the time we checked in to look around (and on no sleep), but still managed to see the beautiful Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the May Plaza), some amazing architecture, a bustling market where the second stall we came across was selling a huge array of Che Guevara photos and paraphernalia and we also saw a left stall campaigning in support of the popular assemblies.

We feasted on massive delicious steaks — mandatory of course! — and drank hot chocolate in Cafe Resistencia ...

At 6:30am we head to the airport for our flight to Caracas, via a stop in Bolivia ... hopefully some more amazing views of the Andes ...

Love to you all, hope everyone is well.

*Hasta la victoria siempre* (always until victory),

*Pablo!*

# Welcome to the Revolution!

Welcome to the revolucion! Caracas greets you as amazing mountains running into a sprawling mass of housing and barrios, buildings, and then quickly to the gorgeous Caribbean sea — this is the route we flew into Venezuela on. That was about 5:30pm here, Monday arvo, having spent the day testing our Spanish with a lovely taxi driver who is pro-Chávez and belongs to an Argentinian left group, then flying to Bolivia, then on over the Amazon forest and mighty river, some glimpses of the edge of the Andes, then to Caracas ...

We were met at the airport by *companeros* from the world youth festival — several from Venezuela (one thankfully with great English) and one from Brazil and one from Cuba — there were photos and soon we met up with about 20 other comrades who had arrived in the last couple of hours at the airport.

Even the trip from the airport was breathtaking — a bus with 25-30 Australian comrades, with our Venezuelan hosts, blaring Latina pop music, frightening displays of driving, amazing scenes of the barrios, some stacked 6, 7, 8, 9 stories high (75% of Caracans live in these). It's very clear the revolution has huge challenges in front of it, but that makes it all the more inspiring. It's disgusting that a country so rich with oil has been run in a way that condemns so many to such an existence. And all through it, revolutionary messages on huge billboards, masses of graffiti saying "Vota No" (to the recall referendum against Chávez), "Viva Chávez", "Chávez no se va" (Chávez, he won't go!), liberator Simón Bolívar's image — unfortunately my camera battery ran out so missed this journey, but heaps of other photos.

A few delays and we were at our Hotel Cristal, and I ended up sharing with my brother Aaron and John from Adelaide. All the comrades — now about 40 — dine on pizza, pasta and many Polar Beers at a nearby haunt, all very cheap. Even when home at 11:30pm, have we escaped the revolution? No! We turn on the TV and immediately can make out the words "socialista", "revolucion" and even try to decipher some of what a progressive priest says on a show called *Sermon por paz* (sermon for peace).

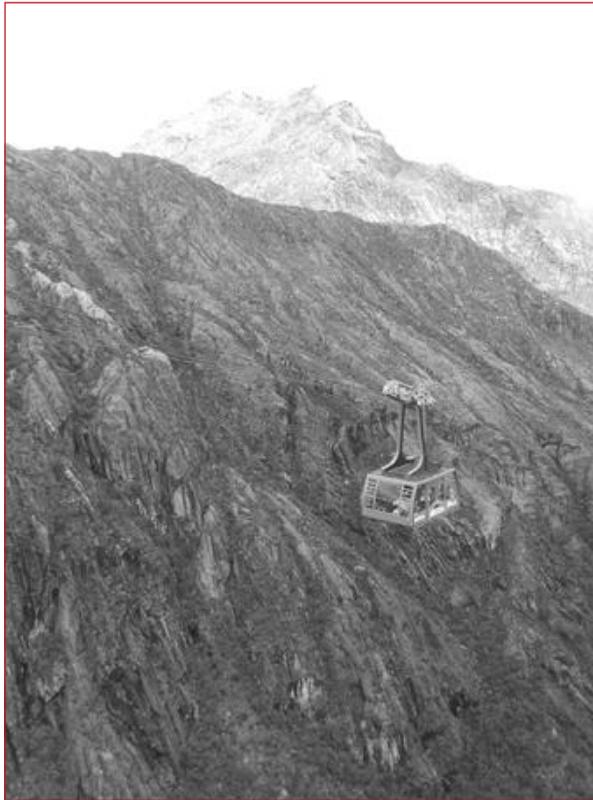
This morning (it's 9:30am) we are off sightseeing, doing the Bolívar walk, gardens,

Miraflores palace (where the coup took place) and hopefully much more, in 33-degree heat! Tomorrow the brigade starts at the Bolivarian university, before our group heads overnight to Merida.

*Viva la revolucion!*

Love to all,

*Pablo*



Teleferico, the highest cable car in the world, at Merida in the Andes.

# Celebrating Revolution While in a Revolution

*Tuesday, July 26 — Viva la Cubana y Venezuela revolucions!* Our first full day in Venezuela and the anniversary of the start of the Cuban revolution (the July 26, 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks) — a potent combination, reflected in an amazingly revolutionary experience.

It was supposed to be our only “sightseeing” day before the brigade begins. It was that, but in a revolution everything takes on the flavour of change and possibility. As one placard read at a pro-revolution demonstration we stumbled across, urging the revolution forward, “inventamos o erramos” —we invent or we err and Venezuelans are certainly inventing, on a daily basis.

Starting with pleasant brekky in the Gran Cafe near our hotel, we ended up inviting two locals to our table. They had wanted to clean our shoes, but instead we shared breakfast and discussions with them, and they told us of the improvements under Chávez, and the problems of the police (many of whom are corrupt and anti-revolution, coming from the old order).

First we got the obligatory shot of comrades in front of pro-Chávez graffiti — one of seemingly squillions around the city.—.then Aaron and I metroed to the area around Plaza Bolívar, which pays tribute to the great independence leader whose inspiration pumps through the Bolivarian revolution.

Arriving near the plaza, we ducked into a library for a quick peek, came across a woman and her daughter and baby, wearing a youth festival shirt — speaking to her it turned out she was helping organise the festival, and insisted that she be our guide a for time, showing us a nearby church, where we met a pro-revolution nun! We came across huge Bolívar statues and signs, masses of pro-Chávez posters — “Mr Bush, if you are against Chávez you are against the people” — before Susan left us to do some festival organising.

Before long, we stumbled upon a protest at the national assembly, with Chávez

supporters urging an end to police killings and corruption. The police is one of the biggest problems of the revolution, mostly old order and very corrupt — several of our comrades have been robbed by them. The Chávez government is considering abolishing the current police and setting up popular militias, or other measures, to combat the problem.

The protest was led by women, many of whom had had loved ones killed by the cops, and carried photos and names and details of those the police killed, plus a long list of those killed in recent years, over 100 people, including students and campesinos (we have some striking photos of this). Placards read “Bolívar against corruption”. Here Aaron held a conversation with several of the women, with protesters thoroughly excited that Australian lefties were here supporting the revolution.

Here I met an amazing guy named Donatello, about 50 years old, who saw my Che shirt, and more or less adopted me. For his part, he wore a shirt with the Cuban and Venezuelan flags and Chávez and Fidel, which read “Our America changing for ever”. He even got me to put on his shirt for a photo, and then gave me two Venezuelan cigars, one of which was later smoked in honour of the Cuban revolution! We also met a great woman named Jessica who invited Aaron and I to visit in Maracay, about one hour from Caracas, and see the work they are doing there. Another guy there who was filming was a pro-Chávez member of the military. The protesters made it clear that the military are on side with the revolution, but the police needs drastic changing.

Leaving the protest and walking up Plaza Bolívar, we come to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs — according to Lonely Planet, closed to the public. But the revolution changes things! We were invited inside, and ended up meeting the director of foreign affairs, who told us in English how the revolution is very democratic, and is opening up to the people. “This place used to be for the elite only, now we want the people here.” A striking black man, he noted that before Chávez there was no way someone black could get his position. We saw lush rooms and paintings of Bolívar, before continuing . . .

Only a few minutes away we came across an exhibition that was half Japanese art, and half a tribute to assassinated socialist leader Jorge Rodríguez, who founded the Liga Socialista, and was killed in 1976 (?). It was an amazing exhibition which showed how the government is clearly trying to promote socialist ideas and appreciation of socialist history — the shot of Rodríguez’ son, all of about six, leading a protest rally after his father’s death with a face full of determination, was particularly striking.

After grabbing lunch, it was getting late so we decided to head for Miraflores Palace, the presidential residence where the dramatic events of the coup took place. On our way there, we stumbled across a guy painting a mural that turned out to be for

a newish organisation called the National Foundation of Those Without Roofs — Chávez has given the organisation buildings that are not being used, and this organisation, very conscious of capitalism's misuse or non-use of resources, is turning the situation on its head and making use of unused buildings. Inside the place was a hive of activity and the leaders eagerly talked to us about their project. We ended up having two of the leaders, Bryan and his wife, come along to our dinner and drinks that night! Outside the building they had a street stall with fantastic Che bandanas and headbands, and the side of their building had beautiful revolutionary murals.

Pushing on, we reached the bridge just before Miraflores that is shown in the film *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, which has masses of murals and tributes to those that fell during that right-wing-orchestrated coup. Forward to Miraflores, and into our second protest of our day of "sightseeing"! Mission Sucre, which coordinates the Bolivarian University, was urging greater importance and priority on education. They had a letter to Chávez, agreeing with the push toward socialism and greater battle of ideas, and noting education's important role in this, in particular the need for more/better teachers, and a cleaning out of the bureaucracy. Its clear that Chávez and the masses are together in seeing the need to push forward, clean out the bureaucracy, police etc. — the people are playing their role in actively showing their support for the revolution but not relaxing with the gains to date.

At the demo the colour was amazing — Venezuelan flags, Chávez and Che shirts, berets and plenty of passion. I met a guy in a beret from the MVR (Movement for the Fifth Republic, Chávez' party) who ended up giving me a *regalo* (gift) of a Chávez badge — my second gift received for the day, as if the revolutionary experience was not enough! Again, the people were amazingly friendly when they heard we were *con Chávez* (with Chávez) and were going to the youth festival.

Finally we got back to our hotel area around 6:30pm, grabbed an amazing and desperately needed *heladero* (ice cream) returned briefly to the hotel, before joining comrades for a celebratory dinner and drinks for the Cuban revolution. We ended up with perhaps 60-80 people, mostly brigadistas but also Alvaro and others from the youth institute, plus comrades we had met during the day ... a few drinks, a quick salsa attempt, a good feed, and back to the hotel for a serious night's sleep.

All I can say is that I'm truly honoured to get the chance to experience such a process, and as I keep telling people "queremos la revolucion en Australia y por todos en el mundo" — we want the revolution in Australia and for everyone in the world!

Hasta la victoria siempre,

*Pablo*

# The Brigade Officially Begins

*Wednesday, July 27* — So much has already happened, and it feels as though we are living in a new world with the old one far behind, even though the brigade only officially begins today with an all-in session of the whole brigade at the Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela (UBV).

From the moment we walk in it's obvious this is a different sort of university — endless graffiti with “Viva Chávez + Fidel” and much more is the welcome from the outside, while inside sees huge murals to revolutionary heroes of Venezuela and Latin America, from Bolívar to Che to Chávez. Walking to our meeting room, we spy a beautiful sign adorned with the Cuban and Venezuelan flags, promoting Barrio Adentro, the project that has brought 26,000 Cuban medical personnel to work within the poor slum areas to provide medical care where previously little or none has reached. As we walk, apart from the very friendly “holas” and occasional “viva Chávez” directed towards us, we notice a real culture of solidarity amongst the students — we saw them dance together in the uni yard, banter and socialise — a real counter to the deep alienation, isolation and stress easily observed in Australian unis (and society more generally). As we learn about the uni, the reasons become clear.

The UBV used to be offices of the PDVSA, the Venezuelan oil company, when it was a corrupt institution controlled by a rich elite, a tool of the US. Imagine converting a corrupt capitalist institution into a people's university. But not just *any* uni — this is a new type of uni, for helping create a new type of society.

In our short, informal brigade briefing session, we hear from revolutionary and member of the Chávez government, Carolus Wimmer. “The revolution is the result of 500 years of struggle”, Wimmer notes. To underscore the unpredictable nature of capitalism and struggle for a new society, he tells of how in 1997 and even 1998, months before Chávez was elected in a landslide, they all thought revolution was very distant in Venezuela, that it would be the last country to have a revolution. Wimmer gave other fantastic insights into the unfolding revolutionary process, its creativity, its development, while pointing out that we will get more from talking to the people than

theoretical talks.

So that is what we do, as we head around the university. First stop is lunch, and our first experience of the new society's effect. We look to pay for the delicious meal as we leave, but are informed that this is free. "For us?" we ask, feeling special. "No, for every student, every day!" "Once a day?" "No, another free meal again at 5pm!" Outside the lunch hall we talk to the students and staff, many adorned with revolutionary shirts (support the education missions, the Bolivarian university, or Chávez). They are all eager to tell the story of the new revolution ... a little further on our walk we come across Venezuelan state TV interviewing students about the upcoming world youth festival ... further on we get to a faculty with huge Bolívar quotes on the wall saying that "The prime necessity of the government is the education of the people" ...

I keep trying my stumbling Spanish, and luckily the people are warm enough to embrace our questions. Two more mature students end up giving me a side tour, taking me to Barrio Adentro, where I get to meet two amazing Cuban doctors, who have travelled here to provide healthcare for the poor! Meanwhile I snap pics of posters for events such as film nights against bureaucracy, looking at Cuban films, a sharp poster attacking "Mac Murder" and many more. We eventually reunite late in the afternoon having had countless discussions with these enthusiastic students and staff.

And then its time to part ways — four groups, *brigadas*, covering areas across Venezuela. We are charged with soaking up as much of the revolution as possible, questioning, listening, writing components for a booklet, taking photos for pictorial displays, videoing, sharing ideas, being inspired — that last one I can assure is not very difficult!

And so it is that at 6:30pm a dozen of us are off to Merida city, in the Andes, south-western Venezuela, for meetings with unionists, campesinos, students and much more. But first, a 14-hour overnight bus trip! But even on the trip, at a midnight stop at an all-night gas station, a quick chat with a local reflected the revolution when, in response to my asking "con Chávez?" (with Chávez?), he noticeably rises in stature, clenches his fist and says "Oh siiiii, con Chávez!"

*Thursday, July 28* — Revolution in the mountains. Revolution could make any setting beautiful in a certain way, if humanity is changing for the better. However, Merida is a setting that revolutionary dreams are made of. Having woken early, to see the sun rise over enormous Andean mountains was an awesome and humbling sight. Merida is nestled amongst this paradise, but like all of Venezuela, until recently the paradise could only be properly enjoyed by a few. Now it has a chance to become a people's power paradise ...

Our hostel is truly gorgeous place, with a colourful hammock-adorned balcony having views of the magnificent mountains. We had barely settled in by 10am after the all-night trip, and we were off for our first meeting with the Unidos Nacional de Trabajados (UNT — National Union of Workers), the new federation that is superseding the old, corrupt, yellow union. But there is immediately a change of plans — our contact tells us that a gas factory has been occupied by the workers in dispute, and we should meet him there instead!

After further breathtaking views on the way up the mountains, we ultimately arrive at the factory to find the dispute has been settled (we later find out that it won all its demands quite quickly, its very useful to have a pro-worker government!). So we return to the offices of the UNT. Here we gain fascinating insight into the new union, its links with the missions, which will have to continue next time, as the cafe is about to close. But it is clear already that this is a revolution that is in no way confined to Caracas, it is pulsing across the country, in every community and all aspects of life ... having a chance to study it in Merida is truly an honour!

More soon *companeros* and *companeras*.

Hasta la victoria siempre,

*Pablo*



Children and murals inside the liberated zone of Barrio 23rd of January in Caracas.

# The Workers Taking Power

Hi all, this hopefully follows on from my previous email. Unfortunately, with so much going on, and the overwhelming desire not to miss any moment of the revolution, its hard to keep up the diary as often as I'd like, but hopefully this will take it forward ...

*Thursday, July 28* (continued) — Returning from the mountains (if you're going to miss an occupation, a beautiful trip through the Andes is not a bad way to do it!), we entered the offices of the UNT (National Union of Workers), the new revolutionary union that has quickly superseded the old conservative union structures. The offices are spartan, with a huge banner proclaiming support for the revolution and workers control.

Immediately we are inspired by a very different type of unionism outlined by Benito — a unionism far removed from any limitation to “merely bread and butter worker issues” — instead we deal with the rich, integrated cake of the revolution. Benito is in the teachers union, and explains the revolutionising of education.

- From the Simonsitos that promote care and education and challenge violence in pre-school, and care for children all day. Before Chávez, parents could only leave children at school either in the morning or the afternoon, which made it extremely difficult if you were working. And there were few pre-school places. That has all changed.
- Through to the Bolivarian schools for 6-13-year-olds, promoting overall education, from 8am-4pm, and like Simonsitos, *is completely free and every meal is free* (this program is called Free Food for All). Activities are broad, such as watching over a plantation and how it develops, a range of recreation and activities.
- Through to high school, which previously would be by division between education gained by those going to uni (a broader world education) and those going to work. Now it is united for a rounded education, with every person getting understanding of the world, and more creativity and an emphasis on out-of-class-room teaching. Part of this is endogenous development — learning to use what is in the community for greatest development for the people. There are more staying at school now,

and it's not considered an institution but part of the community

And all that is *before* the missions, which in brief are: Mission Robinson 1 and 2 giving literacy, especially for the aged, using the Cuban method of young teaching the elderly illiterate (around October, Venezuela will be declared *illiteracy free!*); Mission Rivas for those who were excluded from, or who left early from, high school education so all have this fundamental education; and Mission Sucre helping to get tens of thousands into university.

At this point in time, *approximately half the population of Venezuela is involved in some form of study* — schools, unis, tech colleges, pre-school, missions, etc. — probably the *highest* in the world!

This is the base of the Bolivarian revolution, that is changing society fundamentally. Of course, it is *all* totally free.

Soon it was on to Hugo, the regional president of the UNT, who described how Venezuela is a government of the working people, with the UNT involved in drafting laws and so on (compare that to Australia!). The UNT leadership is a much more youthful leadership.

Another union leader told us how they want their resources to be used not just for Venezuelans, but across the world.

Then it was off to see in practice the effects of the situation for workers ...

Packing a dozen of us into a taxi meant for eight, we drive to a construction site at the foot of the Andes, a massive operation building several sporting complexes, for the upcoming Andes games and Latin-America-wide COPA football cup. We were greeted by worker delegates and rank-and-file workers who outlined the gains in occupational health and safety, wage rises of some 60%, and the weekly workplace meetings they engaged in to involve everyone in decisions. We couldn't help but think how we never generally have such a possibility as this in Australia ...

Then late in the afternoon we are dropped at Merida's Plaza Bolívar, where we swap stories with left groups campaigning in the upcoming council elections, then off to dinner to celebrate the first day of the brigade in Merida plus the birthday of Comandante Presidente Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías.

But revolution doesn't even escape us when Aaron and I slip into a late-night web cafe ... the guy running it is a Chavista, and is eager to tell us of the fantastic state TV, and the new Latin-America-wide television network Telesur, which is set to challenge CNN and Co's control of America Latina. We have a great political exchange before bed! Viva!

# Youth & Students, the Future of Venezuela

*Friday, July 29* — While we've had some amazing days, this would have to have been the most stuffed with revolutionary ideas and passion, as we end up engaging in discussion and ideas with some 15-20 student and youth revolutionary organisations, until after 8pm at night!

The range of groups we hear from reflects the flowering of ideas and organisation throughout the revolution. In the morning we meet at the offices of the Frente Francisco de Miranda (FFM), a place decked out with beautiful banners, posters and murals, from Che to Chávez, Bolívar, Marx and many more Venezuelan and Latin American revolutionary heroes. Socialist, communist, libertarian, barrio organising, social missions, and many more activists slip in and out of the offices, and recount to us their ideas and development.

There are plenty of differences and divisions, but overall there is great camaraderie, and all are united behind the revolution and its undisputed leader in Chávez. However, most have criticisms of the government as a whole, and of many of the parties including Chávez' party, the MVR, for bureaucracy and corruption, a feeling that many are simply joining behind Chávez to get positions, not to further the revolutionary process.

We finish in the FFM offices with a very moving session from the young FFM activists themselves who give us one of the most powerful chants I've ever heard about Che, Chávez, revolution, Bolívar and fighting imperialism before giving us all gifts of posters, books and more. Three of us (including me!) were lucky enough to win a beautiful Chávez t-shirt — this sort of giving is very common in the revolution, everyone wants to give you a little, or is eager to tell you their story. It is a teary moment for some of us as the FFM give an official gift to our translator Fred, getting him to read a quote from a book on Mission Milagro (miracle) — through which 20,000 Venezuelans have travelled to Cuba for sight-restoring eye-surgery — which is about a man who couldn't see his child, nor the sun rise or set, until he went to Cuba

as part of the mission — now his sight is restored. *This* is the revolution, it is humanity.

The afternoon took us to the University of the Andes, again a site full of inspiring murals and activity, with the meetings going deep into the night, the constant coming and going of student and youth revolutionaries reflecting a fluid revolution. We heard from youth who had assassination attempts on them, while others told of those who were killed near where we met — another clear theme of the revolution is that it is built on a solid base of struggle, it's not something completely new.

That night we are fried — dead tired, brains frazzled, completely drained — but I think I speak for all the brigadistas when I say we wouldn't have missed it for anything — except maybe an Australian revolution!

One of the youth leaders told of a saying they had during the times of repression: “They say youth are the future, but they kill us in the present”. Now we can say these people *are* the future, and they are killing the barbarous capitalist world in the present! All power to them!

Revolutionary love to all,

*Paul*

PS: Tomorrow, Sunday, is our day off, and hopefully we will hit the highs of the Andes in the *teleferico*, the highest cable car in the world!



With students at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV).

# From Barrios to Andes Peaks — the Revolution is Touching Everything

*Saturday, July 30* — For the first time since the brigade's commencement, we had a chance to relax a little, gaze at the Andes peaks, browse the markets and try to catch up on our diaries, until around lunchtime, when we were set to visit Pueblo Neuve barrio.

With a huge proportion of Venezuelans living in barrios, sort of urban slum poor areas, its crucial that the brigade was able to see this part of life. We were escorted by activists from the Tupamaros, both a social movement and political formation on the left of the pro-Chávez forces. The barrio was in lower areas around Merida, and as we walked the path to Pueblo Nueve a woman coming from the barrio looked at us in a sort of quizzical amazement saying “Gringos ... con Chávez!”

The barrio appeared poor in wealth, yet rich in community and possibilities ... amongst the dilapidated buildings were murals full of revolutionary pride, and new organisation taking place ...

We visited a community centre that housed a community radio station that, since the revolution, has been able to get more resources so that instead of reaching only a couple of blocks, it reaches the entire community. It now acts as an organising centre, where people can express their ideas, issues and engage the community. The radio show we saw and participated in was co-hosted by very young revolutionary, David, only 15, whose nickname is “leader” — an amazing young guy that made me think of the amazing youth revolutionaries that are created in Cuba's revolutionary system.

The centre also housed a community health centre that promotes a sort of all-round wellbeing.

After the barrio visit, we ventured to the end of a graduation ceremony for one of the education missions, Mission Sucre, and were invited to a party that night, a party with a difference ...

The celebratory party had all the usual Latino aspects — drinks, dancing, salsa, etc. — but with a difference — it was held at a military barracks. As one of our hosts told us, this indicated the growing “military-civic alliance”, and it was certainly a surreal and empowering feeling to enjoy a party in a military barracks, with the military playing the role of hosts and bouncers!

On a lighter night, there was a small incident where five men and five women were brought on stage to fight it out for five free beers for the best dancer. When the host urged someone from Australia to step up, yours truly was pushed forward by comrades. The women went first and a winner was selected by applause. When it was time for the men, through sheer coincidence of a vocal Australian contingent, some good alliances made with some of the revolutionary students, and Latino appreciation of my pulp fiction moves, I shamed all of Venezuela by taking out the male dancer title!

*Sunday, July 31* — A day off, a trip to the Andes peaks. Four of us ventured up the teleferico, the highest in the world, starting at 7:30am.

The climb was absolutely amazing, getting a close look at the Andes as well as being able to survey the Andes and greater Merida for many miles around. Each of the five stages took us higher, with drastic temperature drops, and thinning air, while poncho-wearing musicians serenaded us in between stages.

At the peak, we ventured through freezing winds on to snow at close to 5000 metres (Kosciosko is not much over 3000).

But of course the revolution doesn't take a 24-hour break ... on the way down the politics began, with a discussion with one young guy expanding to a small circle of overwhelmingly pro-Chávez people. By the bottom we were good friends, being invited for dinner and so on!

Indeed that afternoon, in the short space of time before leaving for our next stop (Apartaderos, two hours up the mountains), I had no less than five discussions with pro-Chávez people who simply stopped me and chatted in street, came to lunch, hugged me, and told their stories of inspiring changes and their passion for the process — a very enjoyable day off!

Sorry to rush but a meeting of the cooperative in the cultural centre, and the women's bank is about to start ...

Love to all and revolutionary greetings from the Andes,

*Paul*

# Into the Campesino Areas

(Dear all, sorry for the delay. I fell ill a while back and it took quite a while to recover, plus we ended up in a very remote location for the festival that has made internet access difficult, so that has slowed the diary somewhat. Hopefully today I will catch up much of the last amazing week, which included a midnight session with Chávez!)

*Monday, August 1* — We arrived at our beautiful spot in Apartaderos the night before, nestled in the Andes, and very cold. Our lodgings were part of a community cooperative, and as we would soon learn, one cooperative of a growing network that is developing an alternative economy-society based on cooperation and collectivity.

On the Monday morning we met our host, a political guy named Pedro Ruiz, who we would spend hours with on each of the next three days, getting his opinions on things as varied as the cooperatives, to the battle against bureaucratism, to the problems of the political parties, and much much more.

The La Correta cooperative was set up in 2002 using the new constitution, to maintain the culture of the area and empower the people, using credits from the women's bank (Bancomujer). The cooperative, spurred by Chávez, was given control of an old, virtually unused government house, the sort of plush building that abounds in Australian society while people lie homeless and important people's organisations have no space in which to work. In Venezuela, you quickly realise that if something played no useful function in the old society, it will be altered for the peoples use in the new society. The vision of the cooperative is the artistic-touristic revolution inside the beautiful revolution — how can the collective use tourism to eradicate poverty, and reclaim the people's culture.

But Pedro also used the time to talk of the difficulties of the revolution. While Chávez is rock-solid in pushing for maximum participation of the people, others in the government stymie it. As new forms begin to take power, the old order starts to lose it and is not happy. Just the day before on *Alo Presidente* (Hello, Mr President), Pedro recounted how Chávez had been given a plan by his ministry of housing for 8000 more houses and apparently said “8000? Ridiculous, we need 100,000 or 150,000 new houses

for the people”. The growing impression is that Chávez and the people are deeply united, but between them are layers of bureaucracy, inefficiency and corruption. That looks to be one of the key challenges of the revolution. Chávez is meeting the challenge head on, having recently set up a new ministry of popular participation in order to address bureaucratic problems.

The cooperative runs a cafe, has internet access plus other computer equipment such as scanners, which is free for local students and residents and charges for tourists, a growing library, and even is producing a range of strawberry-based wine! Needless to say we had to taste the product, not a bad mix somewhere between a desert wine and regular wine ...

That afternoon we head to another cooperative at San Rafael, a little way down the mountains. The women heading it up present an impressive plan for a trout farm, tourism areas, organic gardens, green spaces and more, with cultural activities to defend local heritage and artifacts. Much of the cooperative is focused on environmental issues, reforestation, the water, pesticide issues, eco-tourism, and they hold weekly workshops to develop the community’s skills. The women talk of how before Chávez and the revolution there was so little community participation, and how women especially are playing an increasing role.

Even in these remote areas, political graffiti and murals are everywhere, and we see an entire house, painted red with white words “Hasta el 2021”, meaning “until 2021” — Chávez’ response to the opposition when they squeal about how long he will stay! So *Hasta 2021* has become a popular call of Chavistas. The stonemasonry in this area is exquisite, including an incredible old church we visit briefly.

Back at La Correta that night, there is a big meeting of 50 or 60 people from the rural bank cooperative, who all get to hear how things are, offer their ideas and input, and discuss out plans, before the usually monthly cake that is for all those who had a birthday in the previous month.

# Inside Barrio Adentro

*Tuesday, August 2 & Wednesday, August 3* — Barrio Adentro, meaning “Inside the Barrios”, refers to the amazing agreement between the Cuban and Venezuelan governments, that is providing thousands of Cuban doctors to provide healthcare in the poor regions of Venezuela.

We visited Barrio Adentro in Muccuchies, a short trip from where we were staying. A small town or village, the impact of BA is immediately noticeable when we enter its doors. In this quaint village, the BA diagnostic and rehabilitation clinic is like a modern space station — perhaps somewhat out of place, but of course 110% welcomed and loved by the people. Think of the best medical facilities you’ve come across in Australia, then think how this is being provided in a Third-World country, completely free of charge, paid for by socialist Cuba.

The friendly and young Cuban doctors run us through the history of BA, while touring us through the first-rate facilities.

Barrio Adentro began only a couple of years ago with part one, which focused on a network of doctors providing healthcare to families, often going to visit people.

Part two, now in effect, are these amazing diagnostic and rehabilitation centres, equipped well beyond a regular general practice, with ultrasound, x-rays, cardiography and endoscopy. For Merida state there will be 16 such centres, and there are already three, plus there will be two specialist centres with even more high-tech equipment and doctors. Three of the centres will be in the mountains — a tremendous improvement on a situation where it was hard to get one basic doctor in most mountain areas.

Forty-one Cuban doctors are involved in the area, including community doctors and specialists. Some Venezuelan doctors are also involved, however, we later learned from Pedro that the Cubans were probably being diplomatic, as most of the Venezuelan doctors refuse to work in the poorer areas which is why BA is so crucial.

The Cuban doctors get a salary from Cuba which stays with their families there, and get a stipend from the Venezuelan government while here. The pro-revolutionary

municipal government is helping get medicines and the like.

One of the Cubans who spoke to us, Ihovane Giovanni, had worked in Haiti for 2 years, and had volunteered to come here on a two-year contract — he may extend to three years, others would do five.

There are 654 Cuban medical personnel in Merida state and 26,000 across Venezuela, including doctors, nurses, eye specialists and x-ray experts.

Asked about any opposition, the doctors say only the medical schools and doctors in the Caracas area in the initial stages — in the mountains, where there were very few doctors before, there is no opposition, only overwhelming support. Support for BA has gone from 50-60%, to 87.5%.

While Cubans, who have a proud history of sending medical help around the world, see all missions of support as important, it's true that this agreement between Cuba and Venezuela is particularly distinct, as Castro has pointed out, given the importance of the Venezuelan revolution. While they are in Venezuela as doctors, not in a political role, it is still political. And, of course, Cuba is able to maintain its full, free healthcare system at home.

The doctors spoke of a growing excitement in Cuba, after the blow of the fall of the Soviet bloc — an enthusiasm both economic (in return for the BA program, Venezuela provides very cheap oil that Cuba desperately needs), and spiritual/moral.

“Coming here is a small way to help repay the Cuban revolution”, Ihovane said. “Coming from a poorer, working-class background, I probably wouldn't have had a chance to study medicine and become a doctor in any other country, without a revolution. So this is my way to repay the revolution.”

However, the doctors made clear, BA is not merely about health — it's about uniting with the people. The Cubans live with the Venezuelans in the barrios, integrate with other social missions and Venezuelans are now going to Cuba to train to be doctors. Now there is also more focus on health care, integration in the community, wellbeing, rounded care-giving, not simply patching up problems.

And BA will not stop there — like in every facet, the revolution bounds forward. Barrio Adentro 3 is to be focused on the hospitals, to improve them so that not as many people have to be sent to Cuba as part of Mission Milagro which has fixed the eyesight of 20,000 people. Perhaps then, Venezuelan doctors will start to be sent to the rest of Latin America, and other people will come to Venezuelan hospitals to be treated, further spreading the gains of the people's revolution.

We then toured the facilities, seeing a small, functional intensive-care unit, an x-ray room, electrocardiogram, ultrasound, external consultant, laboratory/blood analysis room, preparation/sterilisation room/injections area, observation room and

resuscitation (under construction), ophthalmology, clinical lab, and a records/information area where records can be sent electronically around the country, which the doctor in our group says can't even be done in Australia!

10,000 Venezuelans are going to Cuba to study to be doctors, 21 from the local area, and they will live with Cuban families.

The BA experience is a thorough confirmation of what can be achieved with revolutionary solidarity. Cuba and Venezuela alone are amazing — together they are an unstoppable force for change for the people.

That afternoon it was off to another cooperative, this time at a place called Condor Park, atop beautiful mountains, with an aviary enclosing three massive Andean condors! It was a majestic setting in which the people were again taking control, establishing facilities for tourism, for local culture, for promoting the environment.

The next day there are further meetings with Pedro from La Correta, who gives us an interesting history of the UBEs, the Units for Electoral Battle (later for Endogenous Battle) that were started around the referendum. With Chávez as leader, people as the grass roots, but poor structures in between, Chávez goes to the people and urges formation of UBEs to organise groups of 10 people — the UBEs worked.

Pedro explains how Chávez uses *Alo Presidente* as a sort of weekly class in politics to train the people directly as active revolutionary participants. While the UBEs have currently been effectively dropped, Chávez has argued for them to remain organized.

Pedro talks about the parallel process at the local/cooperative level and national level. “As the community works and discusses way forward, they come to realise that what they are saying and working for at the local level is the same as Chávez is saying and working for. It's not a line handed down from above, but a melding of the same pro-revolutionary perspectives.”

Wednesday sees more visits, firstly to some non-government organisations. The NGOs here, as with many we are familiar with in the West, are well behind in the process. While acknowledging that the revolutionary government has made their work of defending the environment etc. infinitely more realisable, they stick to the dogma of needing to be “non-political”, in effect not throwing their support behind the revolution. This seems starkly out of place with the amazing people's power developments we have seen in such varied areas.

Then it's home for more fascinating discussions with Pedro.

But unfortunately, it is around this time I contract the dastardly stomach bug, and it is a none too pleasant night and several days to be spent ...

*Thursday, August 4* — We return to Merida, where comrades visit the national women's institute (local offices), meeting some inspiring leaders, as well as try the ice-

cream place with hundreds of bizarre flavours, including spaghetti, ham and cheese, etc. Needless to say, I am in no condition for any of this, resting and doing disgusting things at the bus station and if I had known that comrades were eating beer ice-cream it probably would have made matters worse.

That night we set off for our return to Caracas, with amazing experiences in our short brigade. The trip was to have been 12 hours and have us in Caracas around 7am, but ... at 2:30am the bus breaks down, a fan-belt issue apparently, and amazingly we don't leave again until 11:30am! Nine hours in the middle of nowhere, although even there, at our breakdown point, was a wall painted with information about Mission Ribas and those who had completed the course ...

Bizarrely, a couple of hours after finally getting going on a new bus, the bus breaks down *again*, and apparently it's the *same* problem! A Venezuelan woman urges us to pray and sing songs, so, fearing some rising anger that may be misdirected to the gringos, we join in, singing that old religious favourite, Paul Kelly's "To her door"! Eventually the bus starts up, and we get to Caracas at 10:30pm, a 27-hour bus trip from hell!

But more adventures were not far off, with our triumphant return to the heart of the revolution ...

Love to you all and more to come very soon.

*A lotta continua,*

*Paul*



Brigadistas with two Cuban doctors of Barrio Adentro.

# A Liberated Barrio. Midnight with Chávez

*Saturday, August 6* — Visiting a liberated zone back in Caracas, with the brigades gathered from the far corners of Venezuela, with many a story, including the very sick, the very inspiring, the frustrating, the funny and many in between ... this was to be a day to visit Barrio 23rd of January, a very organised barrio. From the time we entered the barrio area, with public housing, an old military area that had been taken over, it was clear this was a place of heightened political activity and organisation.

“A liberated zone”, they called it, as we saw youths painting banners and murals, dressed in matching Che-barrio shirts and bandanas, as they escorted us to the meeting place. We were told by leading members, no more than 25 years old, of how they had gotten rid of the corrupt police from the area and had secured it themselves, had fought to get rid of crime, were drug-free, and proudly highly organised.

We heard from campesino leaders about the struggle to implement land reform ... a woman leader of the barrio who is also part of a feminist organisation spoke about women’s struggles, the efforts to get women to participate in all struggles, not to be seen as sexual objects, not merely for housework, but equals in the revolution.

The barrio organisation, highly disciplined, committed themselves to defend Chávez with their lives. They also have cooperatives inside that are involving the people. The youth of these people was amazing, ranging from barely in the teens to late twenties maximum. These were the leaders of the community, taking the revolution forward in the local area.

As we toured we came across friendly young military, there to help guard the barrio, part of the people-military links. The murals here were amazing — Che, Bolívar, Zapata, Ali Primera, and so much more. They invited us to “take a few shots from the roof” — little did we know what they meant ...

We climbed a 15-storey building, and went out on its open roof, with amazing views of the barrio and the whole of Caracas, the murals, everything. Then the

comrades started with an obviously well-practiced military-style chanting for the revolution, on the side of the building, before letting off firecrackers and revealing that they were all armed — as the people say, the revolution is peaceful, but it is not unarmed. Here were an amazing bunch of youth, highly organised, that had helped clean up their barrio, and had formed an armed organisation for its and the revolution's defence ... all this atop a 15-storey building, a very heady experience indeed!

Then down again for more inspiring speakers and info about the barrio, mingling with the ultra-cute kids in the area, before heading to buses that would take us to our lodgings for the world festival of youth and students.

As it turned out, those lodgings were to be in Miranda city, some 1-1.5 hours away from Caracas that would put a little strain on our conference experience ...

Still, the surroundings again prove amazing. We are to stay in a virtual created suburb, some 10,000 or more lodgings that will become public housing after the festival. When you think how Sydney put on the Olympics, by trying to “clean out” undesirables — i.e., Aborigines, the poor etc. — this is basically the complete opposite. Chávez is using the festival as a means to actually bolster conditions for the poor, an opportunity to step forward.

And it's a pretty amazing place in general, with a sea of countries and cultures milling for the festival, as we wander the surrounds, we come across Greek dancing and other little parties ... but unfortunately very little in the way of internet or any other communications!

*Sunday, August 7* — The day before the festival begins, we are able to take a group trip to the beach! A surreal pink bus collects us and takes us two hours to the Caribbean sea, with amazing landscapes of sea almost bumping into mighty mountains on the coast. The water is nice, the sand is hot, but there are huge rocks below the water that make getting dumped a dangerous experience. All in all, a pleasant interlude ...

*Monday, August 8* — Midnight with Chávez! Today is the opening ceremony for the youth festival, a day that proves to be as massive as it is momentous. We leave around 11am to get to the military area of the opening ceremony. As soon as we get there, other contingents from the regions of the world are marching, chanting, carrying amazing banners. It's fairly chaotic for sometime, we are not clear what we are supposed to be doing and no-one seems to know. Eventually we come across a sort of pre-ceremony of the Cubans, an incredible sight of 3000 Cubans chanting and singing revolutionary songs, thousands of Cuban flags waving, warming up for the festival, confirming the special bond between Cuba and Venezuela.

Our contingent is pumped, learning new chants in Spanish, the especially popular “Alerta, alerta, alerta que comina, la espada de Bolívar por America Latina!” (Alert,

alert, alert, the sword of Bolívar is moving across Latin America!)

Finally we start to assemble in a huge procession, and it's clear there are many thousands here, perhaps 20,000 or more. We move into our country groups, and being in the "A"s we are one of the first groups to enter the stadium, greeted by an inspiring cheer, chanting our lungs out in both English and Spanish. We round the front area, where the dignitaries are, and I am almost floored to see, probably only 50 metres away, Chávez himself, waving to our contingent. I'm sure our eyes meet as I give him the fist and he gives the fist of solidarity and struggle back, and the Australian contingent breaks into an inspired screaming of "Uh ah, Chávez no se va!"

The ceremony continues for hours from this point ... the huge Cuban contingent, 3000 Colombians ("C" alone probably takes 2 hours!) ... all the marchers are in probably only at 11pm, but no matter, no-one is going any where until Chávez speaks. We push toward the front to get position, while other youth speakers and choirs and bands perform, until finally, around 11:45pm, Chávez strides to the microphone to be received by thunderous, rapturous applause ...

Yet everything that had happened until then proved to be minute in comparison to his speech of some 45 minutes or an hour, that had the crowd on the edge of every word ... even without being able to grasp it fully in Spanish, it was so clear, crisp, passionate and demonstrative, that the meaning came through profoundly. It was an introduction to socialism, a manifesto, a call to arms — imperialism was denounced in the most aggressive terms, while the people of the US, as opposed to the government, were called upon as necessary allies and equal victims. It was a history of US imperialism and of liberation struggles in Latin America; a warning that any attempt like Iraq or Afghanistan would fail, and that every Venezuelan would have to be killed. But it was the conclusion — a clear, unambiguous call for socialism — that received the most vigorous applause, finishing the night with a crescendo of approval, fireworks cracking, people chanting, and smiles everywhere you looked. An amazing night no-one there will forget.

# The Festival of Youth

*Tuesday, August 9-Thursday, August 11* — The festival is a contradictory beast. Held in the revolutionary new world, but with many more conservative, formerly Stalinist and/or pro-social-democratic forces in its leadership; overflowing with youth, but with many speakers and leaders of this “youth festival” being in their 60s. And it starts in tremendously chaotic form. The first day is almost a write-off, with few sessions happening.

Still, there is a carnival atmosphere — never has more Che Guevara merchandise been in one place, not to mention the amazing array of Bolivariana merchandise, all the colours and cultures of the world mingle. I end up late in the day at the Frente Francisco de Miranda tent, listening to reggae and attempting Spanish. The FFM are amazing people (more below), extremely friendly, helpful and political. That Tuesday we try to get accreditation and succeed, but only at around 1:30am, meaning arriving home after 3:30am

The next day improves a little, and I spend time around the stalls area, where countries have stands with political and craft material. A Cuban woman gives me three videos on Cuba including one on Barrio Adentro, another Cuban stall gives me a *Motorcycle Diaries* book! The session I attend is a little dull and conservative, but that doesn't dampen things overly.

Finally on Thursday, the festival starts to come alive. After engaging in some political discussions at our stall, many of us attend an arvo session on debates in Latin America. The first speaker, the Cuban foreign minister, is fantastic, blasting imperialism, clearly putting Venezuela's revolution centre-stage in world politics, defending the right to win power for the people in whatever way necessary, the inability to defeat imperialism without defeating capitalism, and concluding on the genuine possibilities for revolutionary growth.

During the talk the Venezuelan vice-president walks in, while later on, a surprise speaker as Evo Morales, leader of the MAS in Bolivia, speaks as well!

It is also a day to collect many books, including Chávez' speeches, plus we find a

government-produced book on voices supporting the Venezuelan revolution, that includes some articles from *Green Left Weekly*!

At 7pm it's off to the Frente Francisco de Miranda (FFM) offices, for a presentation from their director. The place is ultra-impressive, with 400 packing the hall and three young women leading the meeting. This organisation of youth who have spent 50 days in Cuba doing a social activism course is very disciplined, and has been used by the revolution to mobilise against the referendum, to fulfil the missions, and much more. The youthfulness is a standout, as is the quick development — the FFM has only been going for two years, and has a very active 15,000 members.

This is an organisation we will see more of and should study more ...

We arrive home around 1am, much more satisfied and ready to get more of the juice from this conference.

Finally, back up to date (almost), love to you all and hope things are well there, they sure are here!

Venceremos,

*Paul*



A women-run collective at San Rafael in the Andes.

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