

Venezuela

The Revolution Unfolding in
Latin America

Jorge Jorquera

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Resistance Books 2003

ISBN 1876646276

Published by Resistance Books, resistancebooks.com

Introduction

A revolutionary process is unfolding in Venezuela, part of a continental rebellion unparalleled since the 1960s and '70s. Bourgeois power is being challenged by the emergence of a counter-power of the working classes. The reforms of the Chavez government have re-ignited the class struggle after years of defeat and decay of the left. This is not a simple replay of the Salvador Allende government in Chile 30 years ago. The Venezuelan army is deeply divided and within it there is a revolutionary current of officers and soldiers. Chavez himself has radicalised and fallen back not on the institutions of bourgeois democracy but the revolutionary power of the working masses.

Internationally the left has become all too accustomed to analysing defeat and unfamiliar with the measure of a revolution. The development of the Venezuelan class struggle is an important opportunity to re-acquaint ourselves with the real-world development of class consciousness and the tactical complexities of a life-and-death struggle for power.

This publication is only a condensed introduction to the evolution of the struggle and its key challenges but we hope that it might inspire others to study the Venezuelan revolution and draw from it the inspiration now feeding rebellion across Latin America. ■

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Venezuelan Politics & Class

The class consensus maintained by Venezuela's bourgeois party-system proved exceptionally durable, lasting from 1958 through to the late 1980s. Unlike in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and other Latin American countries, Venezuela's ruling class managed to survive the class upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s without recourse to a long-lasting military dictatorship in order to contain the workers' movement. When the system did break down, it did so dramatically, bringing forth the most precipitous fall of bourgeois "democratic" political forces anywhere on the continent.

Venezuela's bourgeois-democratic stability, as in the rest of Latin America, was established only after violent class struggle at the beginning of the 20th century. This is when the modern Latin American ruling class forged its political identity, in class battles against a young but rapidly politicised working class.

Military sponsored rule maintained the control of the *mantuanos* (a landowning class of European extraction) over the vast majority of the population, the *pardos* (descendants from African slaves), for most of Venezuela's early post-independence history. The modernisation of the Venezuelan economy started in earnest with the regime of Juan Vicente Gomez who took power in 1908. Under Gomez the economy was opened to international capital, which set up oil extracting operations in the Maracaibo oilfields and began the process of transforming the economy and class structure of the country.

In 1935 in the context of increasing stirrings among the new working class, Gomez's former aide General Eleazar Lopez Contreras took power. During the Contreras regime most democratic forces operated underground, including the burgeoning communist forces. However, even under conditions of restricted suffrage and indirect elections (members of congress were elected by municipal councils), democratic forces managed to gain some representation in the 1937 elections. Repression followed immediately, with leading left figures arrested and a decree adopted in March 1937 exiling most of these leaders.

By the end of the Contreras period, however, it was clear that a new relationship

of class forces was emerging. The oil-based transformation of the economy was increasing the social weight of the urban classes, both working class and urban “middle classes”. A new correlation of power was being forged in a battle among the elites, and between them and the growing urban popular forces. In the April 1941 presidential elections the Partido Democratico Nacional (PDN), the precursor of Accion Democratica, was de facto allowed to participate. Its candidacy, with Romulo Gallegos (novelist and educator), was largely symbolic but represented the rise of the new “democratic” bourgeois forces.

The new president, General Medina Angarita, Contreras’ minister of war, had no choice but to continue with the liberalisation of bourgeois rule. The PDN applied for and was quickly granted legalisation, becoming formally constituted in September 13 1941 as Accion Democratica (AD). AD wasted no time in establishing itself as the bourgeois-democratic party, *par excellence*. According to AD’s most outstanding historical figure and principal Venezuelan social-democrat, Romulo Betancourt, “the leadership of AD established for itself the watchword of: ‘Not a single district, not a single municipality without its party organisation’.”¹

AD pioneered the “mass” (*clientalist*) politics of the Venezuelan ruling classes.² It rapidly established itself in every town and urban *barrio*.³ Most importantly it waged a dirty war in the labour movement against the communist left, which by 1945 it had clearly won. This was facilitated by the Stalinised class-collaborationist politics of the communist movement, the majority of which lent its support to the Medina regime.

When in October 1945 a small number of officers sought to oust Medina and deepen the liberalisation process, AD was centrally placed to lead a new government — a civilian-military junta composed of four AD members, two military officers and one independent intellectual figure. This regime, whose three year rule became known as the *trienio*, witnessed the massive expansion of democratic space. Universal suffrage was introduced and the voting age reduced to 18. Elections were held in October 1946 for a national constituent assembly (to draw up a new constitution), then in December 1947 to elect a new president and congress and once again in May 1948 for municipal councils. During the *trienio*, Venezuela’s second-party of bourgeois government was formed. The bourgeois-conservative Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI) emerged from the Catholic-based Unión Nacional Estudiantil (UNE), which had split from the secular and once radical Federación Estudiantil de Venezuela (FEV) in 1936.⁴ Also during the *trienio*, the communist movement held its Unity Congress and formally established the (mostly) united Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV) in November 1946.

This period also witnessed the massive expansion of labour organisation. In 1946

alone, 500 new unions were formed.⁵ In November 1947, the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV) was formed and within a year claimed 300,000 members.⁶ The same expansion of organisation occurred among the rural population, with the Federacion Campesina de Venezuela (FCV) growing massively. In the countryside the agrarian reform shifted the political power from central government administrators to union and party officials. Likewise, the CTV became a vehicle for AD control of the labour movement.

The *trienio* exposed the growing threat of working class political mobilisation as well as the still significant intra-bourgeois divisions, reflected in the AD and COPEI power struggles. To avoid anything like the Colombian period of *La Violencia* (30 years of intra-bourgeois civil war and class war), the ruling class majority opted for a military coup and the AD-led government fell on November 24, 1948. The next 10 years of Perez Jimenez's brutal dictatorship repressed the left and helped AD, COPEI and other bourgeois opposition forces to mend differences and lay the foundations for the future stability of bourgeois-democratic rule.

The leadership of AD marginalised its more radical cadre, which had been working underground with the PCV in organising opposition to the dictatorship, and in October 1958, the three major bourgeois-democratic parties —AD, COPEI and Union Republicana Democratica (URD) — signed the Pact of Punto Fijo. This agreement put aside their petty-political differences and laid the political basis for the bourgeois-democratic consensus that prevailed till the late 1980s. AD reconciled itself with the influence of the church (its major source of previous friction with COPEI) and a power-sharing arrangement was forged in the organised labour movement to marginalise the left. A system of proportional representation in the CTV and many individual unions promoted this arrangement.⁷

This marginalisation of the left in the labour movement combined with the way in which elements of the left — especially the radicalised student base of the bourgeois-democratic parties — interpreted the Cuban Revolution, resulted in a strategic focus on (rural) guerilla war. The left, especially youth and student base of AD was expelled and made up the bulk of the Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionario (MIR), formed in April 1960. Along with the radicalised student base of the URD and finally the PCV, the MIR opted for guerilla war. This proved a disaster for the left. Along with the targeted repression of the Betancourt government, this strategy further marginalised the left and contributed to strengthening the political and ideological grip of AD and COPEI. By 1965 the PCV had already decided to pull back from the guerilla struggle, leaving its left wing out in the cold.

The Venezuelan left was dealt a heavy blow before it could gain any of the influence that, in the context of an international radicalisation and looming economic decline, much of the rest of the Latin American left was beginning to accumulate. This provided an important basis for the continuity of bourgeois-democratic government in Venezuela till the late 1980s. ■



Chavez waves to crowd as his supporters take over Caracas, January 2003.

Neoliberalism, the Erosion of Consensus & the Rise of a New Popular Movement⁸

Lasting between the 1920s and 1970s, an oil based “development-strategy” underpinned the long bourgeois-democratic consensus of Venezuelan politics. In this period the economy grew at a remarkable average rate of 3.9% per year, more than twice the Latin American average.⁹ Two key characteristics of Venezuelan politics were based on the distribution of oil rent.

Firstly, the stability of the bourgeois party-system depended on its strong clientalist character, made possible by the public distribution of oil revenues. People joined and supported AD and COPEI to get their share of the crumbs. According to an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development study in the late 1980s, out of a population of some 20 million, AD and COPEI claimed a membership of three and two million respectively. In Caracas alone, 150,000 people were affiliated to both.

Linked to the clientalist character of the party-system was the role of the organised labour movement as an adjunct to this system. As the labour movement’s membership came mainly from the oil and public sectors, it was more easily coopted by government. While governments’ could afford to distribute some crumbs to the organised labour force the trade union movement became a vehicle for state intervention rather than independent class action. This was compounded by the conscious corporatism of the AD leadership in the union movement. This leadership injected the movement with an ideology based on seeking privilege rather than establishing class solidarity with the vast majority of workers who remained outside the formal economy and unorganised.¹⁰

The other characteristic of Venezuelan politics based on its oil economy is the especially parasitical and politicised character of the national bourgeoisie, whose

“rent-seeking” mentality made them much more like mafia bosses than “business people”.

The last hurrah of this economic model was the first (AD) government of Carlos Andres Perez (1974-79), which used the windfall of the global oil shock to nationalise the oil industry and attempt a big industrialisation push, with public sector investments in large-scale industries like iron, steel, aluminum and coal. When COPEI’s Luis Herrera Campins was elected in 1979, he reduced import duties from 300% to less than 100% and cut public spending, heralding the beginning of neoliberal deregulation and the process of restructuring the Venezuelan economy.

While the AD government of Jaime Lusinchi (1984-89) was forced, under pressure from its trade union bureaucracy, to revert to some minimum social spending measures, the tide of neoliberalism was gaining pace and the very basis of the Venezuelan economy and its bourgeois-democratic stability was beginning to crumble.

When the second AD government of Perez took office in 1989 it was no longer the clientalist AD of the past. Perez even surprised some in his own party with the selection of a government cabinet including in key posts a number of non-AD members, mainly associated with Venezuela’s elite business school, the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administracion. The government elaborated a strategic plan for the (neoliberal) restructuring of the economy along the lines advised by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. The initial instruments for the implementation of this plan included — ending price controls on goods and services, devaluing the currency, large and successive reductions of import tariffs, increasing prices on public goods and services, reducing taxes on business and the wealthy and liberalising interest rates.

El Caracazo

On February 27, 1989 the government’s first price hikes took affect — a 10% increase in the price of petrol and 30% in “public” transport ticket prices. The people of Venezuela responded to the Perez government’s neoliberal program with a shock treatment of their own.

In the early hours of that morning the first protests began in a number of central transport points throughout Caracas’ suburbs. In the Nuevo Circo de Caracas terminal, servicing major satellite cities, and in a number of terminals servicing transport to Caracas from cities like La Guaira, Catia La Mar and Guarenas, protests started before 6am. Similar protests began soon after throughout the cities of Barquisimeto, San Cristobal, Merida, Maracay, Barcelona, Puerto La Cruz, Los Teques, Puerto Ordaz, y Maracaibo. By that afternoon protests had spread to every significant population

centre.

The protests often started as incidents between individuals or small groups, like verbal exchanges between people and bus drivers. Within hours these were turning into collective actions — protests, road blockades, street barricades, and shop invasions. By 7.30am that morning in the city of Guarenas, adjacent to Caracas, people had begun to burn down a major commercial shopping centre and take goods. These sort of actions quickly spread to the capital and throughout the country. By 6pm that evening tens of thousands of people were engaged in street protests, all major roads in Caracas were blockaded and the city's subway was forced to close down.¹¹

The slogans that could be heard and seen written on walls included: “El pueblo tiene hambre” (The people are hungry), “El pueblo esta bravo” (The people are angry), and “Basta el engano” (Enough of the deceit). When people went into shops to take goods, they were often heard singing the national anthem as they did so, many carried the national flag and in many cases people organised the stealing of goods by lining up in an orderly manner. This was not primarily a case of mass looting or riots, as the media later tried to portray it. This was a semi-organised (though largely nonpoliticised) expression of working-class opposition to neoliberal austerity.

For over 24 hours the government authorities were nowhere to be seen. Neither were any of the political parties or trade unions represented at any of the protests that sprouted up throughout the country. It was only around midday on February 28 that the minister of the interior appeared on television to announce that the government would not permit this “violence”. As the minister fainted during his television pronouncement, it only added to the atmosphere of uncertainty. Just before 6pm that evening president Perez and his cabinet went on air across all the television networks and declared the cessation of a number of civil rights guaranteed under the constitution and the beginning of a state of emergency between the hours of 6pm and 6am. Thus began a massive and violent crackdown, which by March 4 had already claimed at least 400 dead, mostly civilians executed by the army. The injured were in the thousands.

The Caracazo signalled the turning point in the interminable process of delegitimisation of Venezuela's bourgeois-democratic parties and the trade union movement sponsored by them. By the time of the 1993 elections neither AD or COPEI could muster a credible presidential campaign. Seeing the writing on the wall, Rafael Caldera led a group of COPEI dissidents in an alliance with the Eurocommunist Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) known as Convergencia. They triumphed based on a demagogic campaign against AD's privatisations and by avoiding criticism of the

relatively popular but failed 1992 coup (led by military officers including Chavez) and instead using it as an opportunity to attack the measures of the previous government.

The Caracazo also brought onto Venezuela's historical stage a previously excluded actor, the 80% of the population who live in poverty, working mostly in the informal sector, and previously unorganised. As the material base of the old bourgeois-democratic consensus crumbled, Venezuela's *pardos* began to mobilise and make demands on the authorities. In the almost ten years between 1989 and the Chavez triumph, two formally registered protests occurred per day, not including trade union industrial action.¹² Venezuelan politics shifted from the tradition of the "party-ocracy" to the street. ■



Caracas: soldier shows his support for pro-Chavez demonstration.

The ‘Democratic Strategy’ of the Bolivarian Revolution

The revolutionary situation unfolding in Venezuela today represents the fusing of the new “street democracy” of the masses with the political movement that emerged out of the army in the early 1980s. This movement, the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR-200), whose central leader became Hugo Chavez, originated from the profoundly democratic aspirations of a generation of junior officers drawn from the poor masses and educated in a unique military and social setting.

Unlike the rest of Latin America’s career military officers, Venezuela’s were not trained in the *Escuela de las Americas* but rather in the national Military Academy, which was fundamentally transformed in 1971 by the Plan Andres Bello.¹³ This reform integrated officer training with general university education. This meant the new officers not only studied a much broader array of political theory but also participated in general university life, being exposed to the often radical ideas of their fellow (nonmilitary) students. The reform also involved a certain (liberal) democratisation of the military structure, at least to the extent that promotion became more weighted toward merit rather than family connections.

General Wilfredo Ramon Silva, a supporter of Chavez, is a good example of those first generations of officers trained in the new academy. Ramon Silva is one of 11 children born in a little town called La Miel, to a poor family, his mother an assistant nurse and his father a truck driver.

We who lived in the countryside witnessed all the abuses of the landowners against the *campesinos* — how they stole our lands and mistreated us. I lived through all that. My family lived through it.^{14, 15}

In the new military academy these young officers in training could reflect on their own experiences alongside radical students and with the benefit of exposure to radical writings, including those of Marx and Lenin. This was a contradiction that the old guard of officers was not unaware of. General Ramon Silva recalls the animosity they

felt from the older officers and how at certain points some of the literature from Marx and socialist history was prohibited.¹⁶

Unlike their counterparts in the rest of the continent, these same officers were exposed to a very weak guerilla movement. Instead of intense fighting, they encountered the massive misery of the rural population and contrasted that to the wealth of the elites they had occasion to mix with. General Ramon Silva recalls:

Hence those of us from the same graduation started talking during our free time and asking ourselves what it was that we were combating. You were supposedly looking for the guerilla, but what you saw was the misery, the extreme poverty of the population. On many opportunities we would swap our food with them for one of their chickens, and sometimes we just gave it to them, because we witnessed so much misery ... One day we would be in the countryside with the campesinos, seeing that poverty, then another day we would be in the city, or at a meeting with a governor or even the President of the Republic, and then we would see the opulence, the wastage, the great quantities of whisky drunk, the great extravagance. When we would see that contrast we would ask ourselves: “Well, what is it that we are fighting? Can we accept that such poverty continue, the misery of these campesinos, while this group that’s up here continues taking advantage and doing business.”¹⁷

The MBR-200 was born when a group of four such officers — Chavez, Raul Baduel, Urdaneta Hernandez and Felipe Antonio Acosta Carlez — took an oath on December 17, 1982. General Luis Felipe Acosta Carlez, brother of Felipe Antonio recalls what his brother said to their father the weekend after the four took that oath:

Papa, we have just taken an oath at the Saman de Guere, where we asked for a change in Venezuela — a philosophical change, a democratic change, where the people participate, where the people give their opinion, where the needs of the people are satisfied through the public policies of the government.¹⁸

The MBR-200 started small but with a plan to organise. For years they worked an underground network throughout the army, making contact with officers they thought would be sympathetic, careful to avoid being exposed but little by little reaching significant numbers and developing a loyal and disciplined cadre base. They had a determined political project, which did not escape the attention of the ruling elites. In fact one of their founders, Felipe Antonio Acosta Carlez, was assassinated during the Caracazo. It’s suspected that this was at the hands of a secret police agent on the orders of then president Carlos Andres Perez.

Chavez himself played a central role in the development of the movement, refusing promotion so that he could stay at the military academy as a trainer and continue to influence new generations of officers and soldiers with the ideas of the

MBR-200. It was many of the younger officers trained under Chavez that played a key organising role in the failed 1992 coup.

Not all the MBR-200 agreed with the attempted coup but they concurred with the objective. As Colonel Jesus Del Valle Morao Cardona (currently in charge of presidential security) notes, their aim was not to establish a military regime, rather they aimed to wrest power from the elites and open a process of democratisation based on the idea of establishing a new democratic constitutional foundation.¹⁹

The 1992 coup demonstrated the weakness of a political movement still disconnected from the emerging leaderships of the new popular movement. The plans of the MBR-200 were inspired by the 1989 Caracazo, where many of its leaders participated, sent by the Perez government to kill people but instead often taking charge in the organisation of expropriating goods from stores and generally keeping an order of solidarity among the people on the streets. The MBR planned the coup for May 1992 to coincide with a general strike. When the coup had to be put forward, fearing that the MBR-200 plans had been discovered, the organisation of the strike proved weak.

Many of the officers and soldiers that participated in the coup and most of the leaders ended up jailed and persecuted. While in prison however, Chavez and the cadre of the MBR-200 took the time to study and consider their next steps. The coup had earned them notoriety and a certain respect from the masses, who were unaccustomed to seeing any of the country's leaders assume responsibility for their deeds. Chavez publicly assumed responsibility for the coup and made his famous statement, saying that "for now" he would take the punishment given to him. The masses interpreted this as a call to action for the future.

Once out of jail the MBR leadership set a different tactical course. They realised the importance of developing the movement outside of the army and, given the opening created by the increasing de-legitimisation of the old two-party system, they opted for an electoral road. Chavez and other MBR-200 leaders travelled the entire country meeting with communities and developing their dialogue with community leaders. In 1997 they set up the Movimiento para la Quinta Republica (MVR). The MVR planted their key tactic at the centre of its political platform — the refounding of the Venezuelan Republic based on a new, democratic constitution. As Chavez noted:

Our process is a transition from a neoliberal model to a humanist self-government — a more democratic model that would resolve the basic needs of the people.²⁰

Even before his election Chavez faced a massive slandering campaign from the Venezuelan ruling class. Polls gave him 8% in the presidential race. Instead he won the

December 1998 election with a majority of 56%. The new government moved immediately to the convocation of a “constituent assembly” to draft a new constitution. Of the 131 members elected to this constituent assembly the *Polo Patriótico* — consisting of various organisations supporting the Chavez government — won almost all of them.²¹ The new constitution was approved by a majority of 129 votes to 2 and then approved in a referendum by 70% of the population.

The new constitution established a democratic foundation for national politics unimaginable in any other Latin American capitalist country. It also indicated that the Chavez forces had some understanding of the limitations of government and at least partially understood that their democratic objectives required a struggle for a new type of state.

The participation of the people in the development, execution and control of the public power, is the necessary means by which to achieve the protagonism that can guarantee their all-round development, both individual as well as collective. It is the obligation of the state and duty of society to facilitate the generation of the conditions most favourable for this to be practiced.²²

Still constrained by congress and the continuous sabotage of the ruling class and its politicians, the Chavez government did not limit itself to the institutions of bourgeois democracy, like Salvador Allende had in Chile 30 years earlier. While the new mass movement booming during these years remained ill-organised and without consolidated leadership, Chavez turned to the one (organised) social force which he thought could provide a motor force for his government — the army.

On February 27 1999, a date chosen symbolically to demonstrate solidarity with the Caracazo uprising, Chavez launched Plan Bolivar 2000. The plan mobilised the army to carry out massive social works programs — constructing housing for the poor, dealing with health and nutritional problems and assisting with a range of other public projects. Over two years Plan Bolivar 2000 built more homes than had been built in the previous 20 years.

Most importantly, Plan Bolivar 2000 further increased the solidarity between the working classes and the soldiers of the Venezuelan army. However, in demonstrating the critical role that army officers were playing as cadre of the Bolivarian revolution, it also exposed the paternalism this bred and the gaping hole created by the lack of a political vanguard rooted in the new mass movement.

After the new constitution was adopted, the old congress was disbanded and new elections held. In July 2000 the Chavez forces won a majority in congress and Chavez was re-elected. In November 2000 the government enacted the *Ley Habilitante*, an old enabling law which allowed the executive of government to legislate 49 new laws

without having to debate them in the congress. The 49 laws drawn up by the government included a number involving substantial reforms of the economy and the government bureaucracy — a land reform law, laws privileging small and medium industry and the *Hidrocarburos* law aimed at reorganising the national oil company *Petroleos de Venezuela* (PDSVA). These laws taken together represented the first concrete incursion into the “property rights” of the Venezuelan ruling class.

Most importantly these laws, together with a range of reforms like the 3000 new Bolivarian schools and the beginning of the democratisation of education, gave massive impetus to the self-organisation of the mass movement and for the first time set in train its ideological formation.

As a consequence of the growing experiences of struggle, Chavez reacted to the limitations imposed by the institutions of Venezuela's bourgeois democracy by continuing to deepen the democratic trajectory of the movement. On May 7 2001, while the MVR languished and many MVR politicians including governors continued along the lines of the old-style corrupt and clientalist politicians, Chavez publicly stated the need to re-establish the MBR-200. He called on well-known left militants such as Pablo Medina from the *Patria Para Todos* (ex-Causa R) and Guillermo Garcia Ponce, long-term communist and previous PCV militant, to play a leading role in this process. In this way the *Comando Nacional de la Revolucion* was formed.

At the same time the Bolivarian Circles were launched, aimed at organising the movement on a street level and beginning the development of structures of peoples' power that could organise social mobilisation and begin to ideologically combat the ruling class.

The depth of this growing popular organisation was yet to be tested. ■

Capitalist Power

In the wake of a failed labour strike, on the day of April 1, 2002, the anti-Chavez forces organised a protest with the backing of the rightist mayor of Caracas, Alfredo Pena. As the opposition march made its way to the Miraflores presidential palace, a counter-protest by the government's supporters approached from the rear. Then a street battle began as the pro-Chavez forces defended themselves against shooting from the Caracas city council-controlled police and opposition snipers. This incident was manipulated by the mass media and became the trigger for the coup.

Those involved in the planning of the coup included: Pedro Carmona (president of Venezuela's major business umbrella organisation); Alfredo Pena; Lorenzo Mendoza (from the Mendoza family, owners of the Grupo Polar, the biggest business conglomerate in Venezuela); Gustavo Cisneros (Venezuela's supreme magnate, owner of key media and telecommunications interests, such as the Venevision Network and Direct TV, the biggest cable provider in Latin America); Jesus de Polanco (director of the Prisa business group, with massive interests in the distribution of education materials and owner of various radio stations and other media interests throughout Latin America); Charles Schapiro (US ambassador in Venezuela); Otto Reich (US subsecretary of state for hemispheric issues); Aznar (Spanish president); James Rodger and Ronald McCammon (lieutenant-colonel and colonel respectively of the US army, both assisting the anti-Chavez generals and officers working alongside them on the fifth floor of the Comandancia del Ejercito de Venezuela).

With the exception of the assistance provided by ex-president Carlos Andres Perez and his advisers, the political leadership of the coup was left directly in the hands of Venezuela's club of capitalists. This was one of its key weaknesses: the lack of a *political* leadership. The old political elite of the Venezuelan ruling class was and remains so thoroughly discredited that it has no authority, including among the middle classes — the force that could potentially provide a social base for a post-coup regime. Neither AD or COPEI can provide the political leadership that, for example, the Christian Democrats did in the Chilean coup of 1973 and the military dictatorship

that followed.

The only force that might have provided the April coup some important political leadership, the Confederacion Trabajadora de Venezuela (CTV), was excluded from a leading role in the opposition by its business leaders, who fear any protagonism from the “plebeian” sections of the anti-government forces. The CTV’s stormtrooper role in the April coup only served to further reduce its political influence among the better-off workers it had previously organised and in the middle classes whose interests it had championed.

Lacking this political leadership the anti-Chavez forces are also much more susceptible to petty squabbles and divisions. The Venezuelan capitalists who led the April 2002 coup and still dominate the opposition have limited political vision, as they put priority on their own specific economic interests. General Nestor Gonzalez, one of the anti-government conspirators in the army, recently reflected on this:

The CD [*Coordinadora Democratica*] has served to create divisions amongst the political opposition through personal, economic and party interests. The CD members will be cast aside when the people realise that they don’t represent the interests of the Venezuelan on the street.²³

The power of the opposition

With the historical political forces of the ruling class long discredited, the opposition has suffered a permanent problem in re-establishing a tactically united political movement. Especially since its “civic” forces were so thoroughly exposed by their role in the April coup, the strength of the opposition has been increasingly stripped down to its bare essentials — the naked economic power of the capitalist class. Since the April coup the owners of Venezuela’s economy — especially in key interests such as the food, media, finance and oil — have wielded all their economic power to create chaos in the country, without giving much thought even to their own need to win public support and construct a viable political alternative.

This campaign reached an important turning point with the December 2002 opposition “strike” and the battle over the Petroleos de Venezuela (PDSVA).²⁴

On December 2, 2002, the opposition forces launched another “civic strike”. Like the one in April that preceded the coup, the strike was more of a lock-out and only marginally successful. In the first days almost all the commercial centres in the western side of Caracas were opened, while in the east they were mostly closed. Transport functioned normally, as did the banks, major food supermarkets, pharmacies and of course the informal economy. The increasingly discredited CTV, which organises mostly public servant unions, did not prove capable of mobilising even a majority of

these unions for the December strike.

On Wednesday December 4 the situation began to escalate as strike activity became visible in the oil industry. The technocracy of PDSVA joined the civic-strike and with only a small number of upper-level technicians from the 45,000 workers employed, was able to paralyse the industry. The workers and peasants responded on December 7, with two million people from across the country rallying in Caracas against the shutdown. Over December and January the government moved in to restore production in the PDSVA, sacking some 3000 technocrats and beginning the process of establishing real public control over the oil sector.

The opposition proved it had the power to bring the country to its knees but not to win political support. When the opposition officially called off the strike on February 2, 2003, it did so having lost control of the PDSVA, and to prevent a total haemorrhaging of its support base, as more middle-class elements began to look to the government as the only source of stability.

The Venezuelan capitalist class has lost its more or less direct control over the country's main industry but maintains its class rule through continued control of all the other key sectors of the Venezuelan economy — most importantly this includes almost the entirety of finance, media, telecommunications and the critical foods sector. In conjunction with imperialist economic sabotage, this allows the capitalist class the luxury of persevering in opposition even with a diminishing political movement and organised military support that for now at least, seems reduced to the 400 or so officers expelled from the armed forces after the April 2002 coup (a number of generals and the rest mostly from administrative positions).

The strategy of the counter-revolution, as it has always done, falls back on economic sabotage. For the most radicalised and desperate section of the opposition — mostly among the upper middle classes — the point of this sabotage was clearly stated in a document revealed by intelligence agencies on May 9 2003 as a fifth conspiracy plan to overthrow the government:

... augment the levels of resistance and ferment chaos in order to arrive at ungovernability, which would provoke civil war, which Chavez and his group of millionaire friends would not be willing to sacrifice, or a civic-military coup which would avoid a civil war.²⁵

This view is shared by the ousted military officers, the 135 so called “democratic military” who maintain the “liberated territory” of Plaza Altamira and occupy the Four Seasons hotel in Chacao, the most exclusive district in Caracas

When someone sells the country down the river, when they betray the people by imposing an outside regime that has no interest in the greater good, the wellbeing and

peace of the people, freedom must be achieved whatever the cost. We've begun peacefully, but if we have to resort to other methods, we will.²⁶

Other elements of the opposition aim to use the continued economic sabotage to re-win middle-class sectors and divide the Chavez government and army, hoping that conditions can be improved for electoral success and a process of pushing back the gains of the movement can be set in train.

The test of the movement will be if it is able to combat this sabotage, which in essence entails the repression of the procapitalist forces and the concurrent extension of workers democracy. Failure to be decisive in this will lead the least politicised elements of the working and middles classes over to the opposition and create a more favourable relationship of forces for their counter-revolutionary objectives. ■



Hugo Chavez

Beginning of a Counter-Power

The popular response to the April 2002 coup revealed the embryonic development of a worker-peasant-soldier counter-power. The organisation of an uprising against the coup began in all these sectors and across them within hours of Chavez's kidnapping on April 11.

In the early hours of the evening of April 12 radios began to report strong *cacerolazos* and protests in El Valle.²⁷ The people in Caracas' poor hillside suburbs started to come out onto the streets. Protests were reported in Catia, el 23 de Enero, Guarenas, Antimano and other areas of the greater-capital. The Caracas-La Guaira highway was blockaded. At the same time protest action began throughout the country's interior. In Vargas, for example, on the morning of April 12, the Bolivarian Circles, MVR militants, land Committees and various women's groups organised clandestine meetings to prepare the popular response, using a funeral that day as the means for organising a mass mobilisation.

The same day discussions were already well underway within the ranks of the army. Some soldiers within the palace regiment suggested a commando-style operation to take hostage all the coup conspirators and then attempt to negotiate. It was decided to buy time first to unite with other forces.

The decisive action came from General Baduel, in charge of the Maracay-based parachutists brigade and founding member of the MBR-200. He refused to recognise the Carmona regime and together with the people of Maracay, who had already taken over the streets and set-up barricades in preparation for battle, installed themselves in defiant opposition to the coup leaders. Word of Baduel's stance soon reached leaders of the popular movement and soldiers throughout the country. The order went out through the Bolivarian Circles and other mass organisations for people to march toward the army barracks. They did so in their thousands, calling on the soldiers therein to support the movement and demand the return of Chavez.

This strengthened the resolve of the officers and soldiers already planning against the coup leaders. On April 12 a group of young officers with contacts in both the important *Fuerte Tiuna* and the military academy, where a number of the coup conspirators had set up base, met to organise themselves.²⁸ They had two key goals, to find a general at *Fuerte Tiuna* that would side with the people, and to break the media blackout on developments. Lieutenant-colonels Jesus Manuel Zambrano Mata and Francisco Espinoza Guyon played a leading role. They garnered the support of generals Martinez Mendoza and Garcia Carneiro at Fuerte Tiuna, they also organised the retaking of the government TV channel Canal 8.²⁹

By 10am in the morning on April 13 the palace regiment had already taken over the palace and forced coup leaders to flee. They too were in contact with general Garcia Carneiro. They called to the palace a Spanish television crew and video taped a message making it clear that the Carmona regime was not recognised. Then lieutenant-colonels Zambrano Mata and Francisco Guyon went to Canal 8 to get the recorded message out. Contact had already been made with the Bolivarian Circles to organise a mass protest at the station. Once at the station the officers and movement leaders rallied the protest and forced the police to let them in. Armed with rudimentary crews and equipment from the barracks they finally got the station on air that afternoon.

By then hundreds of thousands of people were on the streets of Caracas, sweeping down from the hillside suburbs. The atmosphere was defiant, slogans echoed throughout: “Pueblo, escucha, unete a la lucha” (People, listen, unite in the struggle); “Chavez, amigo, el pueblo esta contigo” (Chavez, friend, the people are with you). In Maracay workers and soldiers were ready to march on Caracas if necessary. Within 48 hours an impressive web of communication and organisation had developed between the Bolivarian Circles, other mass and neighborhood organisations and the revolutionary elements in the army.

The Bolivarian Circles were launched in December 2001. At the time of the coup there were only some 8000 Bolivarian Circles, each having around 10 or so members and organised mostly along a territorial basis — in streets and local communities — but also along sectoral lines. During the December 2002 battle for the PDSVA, Bolivarian Circles provided volunteer labour, groups to defend oil installations, and contacts to former oil workers and technicians.

The Bolivarian Circles now organise around two million people, some 10% of the adult population. They function as autonomous organs of people’s power capable of organising community campaigns, mobilising against capitalist sabotage and provocations and increasingly providing a forum for the development of the class

consciousness and combativeness of the working masses. In April 2003 for example, the regional coordinators of the Bolivarian Circles in the 23 de Enero area of Caracas began to develop a Bolivarian School of People's Power, with the aim of developing the political education of the movement. The ruling class rightly compare the Circles to the Cuban Committees in Defence of the Revolution in the scope of their role and the threat they pose to the institutions of bourgeois state power.

The self-organisation of Venezuela's working classes is getting further impetus from the Chavez government's land reform. Eight Venezuelan families own land equivalent to 18 times the size of greater Caracas. The Ley de Tierras has set a maximum legal size for farms ranging from 100 to 5,000 hectares, depending on productivity. It also imposes a special tax on any holding that is left more than 80% idle. At the same time, any Venezuelan citizen who is either the head of a family or is between 18 and 25 years old may apply for a parcel of land and after three years of cultivation acquire a title that can be passed on but not sold. This is changing the balance of power in the countryside, undermining the political strength of the old latifundia. Violence is escalating from their part and in response rural workers and peasants are organising, including arming themselves.

In the urban centres, where almost 90% of the population live, the government is pursuing initiatives to transfer the legal ownership of the barrios to the 10 million people (40% of the population) who inhabit them. Rather than leave this process to administrators, the government's law required families in the barrios to establish land committees, which sent representatives to the National Assembly to discuss and amend the Special Law to Regularise Land Tenancy in Poor Urban Settlements. Land committees are made up of seven to eleven individuals elected by a gathering of at least half of a maximum of 200 families for each committee. These committees are not only responsible for regularising the process of urban land title distribution but are also playing an increasing role as a framework for self-government and for the general transformation and empowerment of the barrios. Many of the committees have formed subcommittees to deal with all sorts of tasks — such as assisting in municipal public works, organising cultural activities and organisation of security.

As a result of the increasing level of organisation and class consciousness among the working class as a whole, the historic grip of social-democracy and clientalism over the trade union movement is now in terminable crisis. On March 29, 2003 a new national trade union federation was formed — the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT). The UNT was initiated with 56 national and regional federations and 14 national trade unions. It involves most of the key unions in the country, including petrol workers.

The UNT is still in formation but already represents many more workers than the CTV supposedly does. The leadership of the UNT has formed in the heat of class struggle, during and after the events of December 2002. Its orientation is clearly independent and based on a class-struggle perspective. It leaves the CTV totally exposed as a bosses' union and without any significant mobilising power.

There is a growing political consciousness in the trade union movement. On April 13 for example, after months of struggle and having exhausted legal channels, the Fenix textile factory workers in San Juan de los Morros occupied the factory and started producing under workers' control. These sort of actions are being given massive stimulus by the discussion about workers control within the PDSVA. Workers are also aware that the government is behind them — on a number of occasions Chavez has come out in favour of workers occupying factories closed by the bosses.

Within the military itself there is a struggle going on to develop the revolutionary current and build the alliance with workers and peasants. After the April 2002 coup, some 400 mostly senior officers were removed and a restructure followed that put key people in all major posts commanding troops. These army leaders are not just “constitutionalists”, many represent a genuine revolutionary current.

When someone tells me they are institutionalists, I ask them, what does institutionalist mean? Does it mean that you fold your arms when the problem is political, social, when the problem is not strictly military? Being an institutionalist means knowing who your principal client is, what your business is. The business of the army is the defence of territory, of sovereignty. But sovereignty is the people; your client is the state and as the structure of the state is changing, the army has to change too. For me being an institutionalist means participating and facilitating the process of changing this organisation [armed forces] to adapt to the new state, which is contained in the Constitution. (General Virgilio Lameda).³⁰ ■

Problem of Political Leadership

A revolutionary situation has opened up in the Venezuelan class struggle. The political consciousness and combativeness of a majority of workers, peasants and soldiers has taken a qualitative leap since the events of April and December 2002. Earlier this year Chavez himself described the situation this way,

[We concur] with Antonio Gramsci when he wrote, a crisis, a real crisis occurs when something which is dying has not finished dying and at the same time something which is being born has not finished being born.³¹

A life-and-death struggle for power is now unfolding. The ruling class is mobilising all its economic power and, with the assistance of imperialism, preparing conditions for a reactionary counter-offensive. The working masses are increasingly conscious of the stakes but they haven't the centralised organisation that could best prepare them for victory in the decisive battles to come. The revolutionary movement lacks the political and ideological apparatus that could provide the necessary direction and organisation to unite every struggle, mobilise forces for every battle front, and develop the general capacity for self-organisation of the working masses.

This is the legacy of social-democracy in the labour movement, the opportunism that tainted and poisoned the Venezuelan left for so much of its history. After a brief period in the 1960s of charting an independent course, flawed as it was by its *guerillismo*, the MIR and Communist Party soon fell back into the framework of parliamentarist politics.³² When the Communist Party split in the 1970s the split went to the right, forming the Eurocommunist Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). When the Causa R developed in the 1980s, many elements of it also fell victim to the trappings of AD-style social-democratic parliamentarism. Through these processes in the 1970s and 1980s thousands of left cadre, who today could potentially be in the frontlines, were lost to the revolutionary movement.

As the Chavez government has radicalised, the movement has been forced to rely on the leadership role provided by the MBR-200 supporters in the army. While these officers and soldiers have proved less corruptible than the electoral machinery

of the movement — the MVR and the other left parliamentary parties that have supported the government — their role in mass organisation has bred a paternalism that can undermine the self-organisation of the masses.

Chavez and many other leaders of the movement have increasingly sought to consolidate a unified revolutionary leadership. At the same time as launching the Bolivarian Circles, Chavez called upon a number of leaders of the left and historic figures of the movement to form the Comando Politico de la Revolucion. According to Guillermo Garcia Ponce, director of the Comando,

The principle weakness of the revolutionary process is the absence of the party of the revolution. In Venezuela we have many revolutionary parties that support the process but we lack one capable of uniting them all. The government lacks a centre of leadership and mass organisation on the streets, that can unite the efforts and resources of all the revolutionaries ... The revolutionary political parties have not been able to form a solid structure at the base [grassroots] level. They continue to be, in some ways, electoral apparatuses with organisation at the level of the upper and middle leadership but very weak at the base.³³

Since May 2003 Chavez's own party the MVR, has been undergoing a reorganisation aimed at democratising the party and turning it towards political organisation of the mass movement rather than an exclusive focus on electoral organisation. In June 2003 Chavez also announced the formation of the Frente Nacional. The FN is not intended to be another electoral alliance like the Polo Patriotico but a political front of the revolutionary mass and party organisations that can fuse the leadership capacity of these organisations.

The three-decade-long discontinuity in the accumulation of revolutionary cadre is not something that will be easily made up. Time is not on the side of the Venezuelan revolutionary movement. Whether or not the new revolutionary leaders being forged in the heat of battle can step up to the task is yet to be tested. In turn this will also depend in some part on the development of a unified revolutionary leadership, capable of providing an ideological compass and executing the necessary tactical decisions that will face the revolution in the near future. ■

A New Era of Latin American Rebellion & Revolution

Chavez concentrated on two fronts when first elected President — democratisation of the country and the construction of an international force that could support the Bolivarian revolution. Aware of the negative international relationship of forces, the Chavez government sought to give impetus to the process of South American and Caribbean integration and has tried to build an alliance against the ALCA, promoting the idea of an ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para las Americas).³⁴ The government also privileged relations with OPEC countries, developed closer links within all the Third World international forums such as the Group of 15 and the Group of 77 and built economic links with countries such as China, India and Russia. The political intent of these links and alliances is obvious — Venezuela stands side by side with Cuba's revolutionary foreign policy.

Each day the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean will be increasingly convinced that there is no other road but revolution. For us there is no other road but revolution.

(Chavez)³⁵

One of the greatest strengths of the revolution unfolding in Venezuela is that it is not isolated but part of a continental rebellion, one that compares to both the wave of radicalisation of the 1930s and that of the 1960s-70s. Neoliberalism in Latin America is in crisis. This is not so much an economic crisis but a political-ideological crisis. The market recipes of neoliberalism persist but they no longer enjoy the support of any significant sections of the population. The economic restructuring of neoliberalism has undermined the social base of the bourgeois states of Latin America, consolidated by the 1970s dictatorships and over decades of national development. This crisis of the ability of the ruling classes to rule involves a growing crisis of the state. In this context, struggles throughout the continent are taking not only defensive forms but in many cases offensive forms and the left is beginning to reconstruct.

The economic decline that now characterises the neoliberal model on the continent

underpins this crisis. Between 1990 and 2002 multinational companies acquired some 4000 banks, telecommunications, transport, petrol and mining interests in Latin America.³⁶ In many respects they have sucked the life out of the economies. Capital flows are increasingly speculative, many of the privatised firms are beginning to show signs of profit exhaustion, imports have smothered local production and the massively increased concentration of income has destroyed internal markets. In a place like Argentina, which had a strong internal market and relatively skilled labour force, the effects have been devastating — Argentinian professors and other professionals are now seen cleaning homes in the rich suburbs of Santiago Chile. In the poorer economies like Ecuador and Bolivia, the neoliberal reforms have destroyed what partial social nets previously existed — with life-threatening consequences for the poor majorities.

The consequence is the political exhaustion of the neoliberal model. The ruling class' alliances and political parties are being torn apart. The middle classes that previously provided the glue for bourgeois consensus are threatened with proletarianisation and increasingly unlikely to continue to support the old bourgeois parties. In this context it is also more difficult for the ruling classes to mediate their own divisions. Alongside this crisis of bourgeois politics there is a growing coordination of mass opposition. While five years ago popular struggle tended to be localised and atomised, today it is increasingly part of cross-sectoral and cross-city, regional and nationwide struggles against neoliberal measures. A campaign against privatisation of water or a labour struggle can easily spill over into a national political movement.

Three trends are emerging in this new period of crisis and intensified struggle. In some cases the bourgeois has the option of “Third Way” governments. Where the mass movement has suffered some defeats or is somehow in pause and the ruling class has no traditional parties of its own that can cohere sufficient social support — like Brazil, Chile, Uruguay — the ruling class is opting to support social-democratic parties who have managed to tie significant sections of the working class into the neoliberal agenda. This is the case with the Brazilian PT government, it's the way the Chilean ruling class has maintained peace with the support of the Partido Por la Democracia-Partido Socialista and it's the road Uruguay will likely take, with the possible election of the Frente Amplio.

The second political trend is the increasing militarisation of bourgeois rule. Where there is a landscape of generalised opposition as with Colombia or even where the threat exists, like in Argentina, Paraguay and Peru, the ruling class is already beginning to test the possibility of using the military to restore what “order” their political system has failed to maintain.

Thirdly there is the trend toward “rupture”. In Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, the ruling class seems unable to reweave any sort of political consensus. The movement in each of these countries has now been through an important accumulation of forces — in Ecuador there was the uprising of 2001, in Bolivia the national uprising in February 2003. In Bolivia especially, where the Movimiento al Socialismo represents a serious development in the political organisation of the movement, there is another potential front opening up alongside Venezuela.

Across the continent the left is re-accumulating forces and re-appraising its political perspectives. In many of the rural (peasant and landless) organisations and in the trade union movement also there are left currents coming to the fore. Left organisations are revisiting old debates but in the context of stepping out of the long-term retreat and tackling the challenges of real potential advances. Once again the questions of state and power are on the agenda. The fear of making a revolution “post-Cold War” is finally beginning to be broken. ■



Progovernment protest, Caracas, June 2002.

Appendix 1

Interview with Hugo Chavez: ‘Bolívar’s image is worn on the chests of young people’

The Bolivarian Movement was born in the barracks some 15 years ago when a group of soldiers came to the conclusion that the enemy was not communism but imperialism. For many years we worked carefully and gradually to develop a nationalist, patriotic movement with one hand in the barracks and another on the street. We developed a Bolivarian conception of revolution, which understands that we face a different empire to that confronted by [the leader of the movement for independence from Spain, General Simón] Bolívar. Bolívar, however, did foresee that North America was destined to plague us in the name of liberty. We also found inspiration in the ideas of one of his generals, Simón Rodríguez who said that it is necessary to take up not just the anti-colonial struggle but to make a revolution which tackles all the political, economic, moral, ethical and cultural questions of society.

Our revolt of February 4, 1992, in which over 300 young officers and 10,000 soldiers rose up, was unsuccessful because, despite our close links with the street, the people weren’t sufficiently prepared to be able to back us up. Nevertheless, we have continued to build a growing movement in strategic alliance with the residents of the poor suburbs and the universities. As we have neither huge finances nor media outlets, we spread the word face to face. In this way we find that we get to know the concerns of the people. We identify two fundamental problems facing Venezuela — poverty and national independence.

Abridged from an interview conducted by Stephen O’Brien at the São Paulo Forum in El Salvador in July 1996 for *Venceremos*, magazine of the Committees in Solidarity With Latin America and the Caribbean.

We pose the questions of independence and sovereignty by calling for a new continent-wide independence movement. The current political model is mortally wounded and no viable alternative can exist without breaking the bourgeois, neoliberal system that has operated in Venezuela since 1945. In our model of democracy, the people, civil society, are protagonists who participate in making political, even military, decisions. There are no half-measures on questions of sovereignty. There has to be direct democracy, people's government with popular assemblies and congresses where the people retain the right to remove, nominate, sanction, and recall their elected delegates and representatives.

As well as political democracy there has to be economic democracy. If an elite owns and controls big business such as oil and the mines there can be no real democracy nor social equality. Control over the productive apparatus of society has to be distributed. This can take forms such as community ownership, self-managed enterprises and cooperatives. We call for a people's revolutionary constituent assembly to help reconstruct from below the republic, the state and the nation of Venezuela.

As well as alliances with left and revolutionary forces, our strategy supports the idea of a people's civic-military movement which involves the democratisation of military power. We can't continue to tolerate the elite using the army against the people. We want to unite the people and army (like in Cuba where they have the concept of the people in arms) to create a civic-military alliance. This concept of people-army unity has to be part of a new continental alliance of defence and security and independence.

We know many currents within the defence forces of the continent who, while not necessarily revolutionary, are at least nationalist. There is one question which unites military professionals from Mexico to Argentina, as reactionary as they may be. Every military graduate who loves their profession opposes the further reduction, let alone elimination of their national army. The United States would like to see all of our armies reduced to instruments solely to combat drug trafficking or, as has happened in Panama, converted into a mere police force.

It will be a challenge to create this continental military alliance and to start interchanges of technology and experiences at different levels of the military hierarchy. In Panama, for example, we know young army personnel, especially those who are now police officers, who are inspired by General Omar Torrijos. [Torrijos negotiated the treaty which binds the United States to return the Panama Canal.] They still consider themselves soldiers and are willing to fight for the reinstatement of Panama's own defence force.

Recently, some retired colonels met with us and questioned the purpose of the antiguerrilla war, which they had fought some 30 years ago in Venezuela. “Who had been right”, they asked, “those who fought for the so-called democratic governments or the guerrillas who went to the mountains and raised the banner of communism?”

We want to establish a confederation of Latin American states for the new century. We want to create strong poles of development by joining the Caribbean basin through railways and linking them with the great rivers such as the Orinoco, the Amazon and the Plata. These are the arteries of our continent. We have resources of energy, gold, silver, petroleum and steel. If we use national capital and process them here in Latin America we can sow the seeds of a new continent and a new development. Europe is moving towards unity. We need to at least develop regional blocks, such as between Brazil and Venezuela.

There has been a resurgence of collective sentiments in Venezuela. The people are awakening and are in movement around a common project. Despite repression, people such as pensioners, school children and even the army have been prepared to go out of their houses into the street and not return until they have won what they are protesting for. Simón Rodríguez said that material force is in the masses. Moral force is with us. Fidel has said to us, “There you call the struggle Bolivarianism, here we call it socialism”. He also said something, which I never thought that I would hear from his lips, “If you called your movement Christianity I would even be in agreement”. We have taken up Bolívar’s anti-imperialist struggle. In the barracks if a reactionary officer hears a soldier mention Bolívar the word is put about: “Watch that soldier who has been talking about Bolívar!” Just the name Bolívar scares them.

Our movement is gaining strength and very soon the world will know about the Venezuelan people. In Washington nobody mentions George Washington, in France no one talks of Napoleon, but in Venezuela the image of Bolívar is painted on the walls and his image is worn on the t-shirts on the chests of young people. ■

Appendix 2

Bitter Lessons of Chile

Jorge Jorquera

Days after the bombing of the presidential house La Moneda, on September 11, 1973, we still waited for parents and family to return. Tens of thousands of workers had remained in their factories to defend the Salvador Allende government. We spent every night burning documents and burying what weapons we had left. The dream that millions of Chilean people buried during those nights was of the socialist future they thought they had begun to build three years earlier with the election of the Unidad Popular.

The UP was formed in 1969, consisting of Allende's Socialist Party, the Communist Party, Radical Party, Social Democrats, Independent Popular Action, Movement of Popular Unitary Action (MAPU) and the Christian Left.

The UP promised radical social reform. Popular support for it grew rapidly; 15,000 election committees were formed for the 1970 elections. The US responded with massive funds for the right-wing parties. US President Nixon saw the writing on the wall: "We cannot stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people."

The UP won the presidency with 36.3% to the National Party's 35%, a narrow but not unusual margin in Chilean elections. Even before Allende was sworn in a leading constitutionalist, General Schneider, was murdered by the right, sending clear signals that the bourgeoisie would preserve its rule by any means necessary.

Allende in government

Allende and the CP believed that a gradual transition to socialism was a strategic possibility. In fact, the UP reforms only opened a revolutionary process — pitting the

working class against the capitalists, pushing the middle classes to take sides and obliging both left and right to pose strategies to resolve the crisis fundamentally.

Within the first year of government, the UP nationalised copper, nitrate, iron and coal, as well as many banks and textile mills. The UP opposed US intervention in Vietnam, stepped up relations with Soviet bloc countries and increased trade with Cuba. Other reforms included the expropriation of 3300 large land holdings, increasing the wages of lower paid workers by 66%, introducing a litre a day of free milk for four million children and halving unemployment.

UP popularity increased in the polls to 49%. However, tensions increased between the working class and its leadership in the UP. Workers began to sense their ability to run society, while the UP remained hamstrung by its reliance on parliamentary means.

The Christian Democrat opposition took advantage of the UP's hesitancy. While the UP was expanding the state sector of the economy, it played down the participation and mobilisation of working people, because of its concern with keeping the Christian Democrats on side (whom they saw as direct political representatives of the middle classes).

Subsequently the Christian Democrats were able to propagandise against what they called bureaucratic state ownership. In the 1971 peak trade union (CUT) elections, the Christian Democrats got one third of the votes. The majority of the UP leadership interpreted the results as a sign that the UP needed to court the Christian Democrats even more.

A growing number of militants drew a different lesson. This was evident in the 1972 workers' revolt in the Cerillo Maipu suburbs of Santiago, where 250 enterprises employing 46,000 workers made it the densest industrial concentration in the country. During the demonstrations, the Comando de Trabajadores was set up. The program of the Cerillo Maipu Comando highlighted the increasing class consciousness of a growing number of workers:

To support the government ... in so far as they support the struggles and mobilisation of the working people ... To set up workers' control over production through delegates subject to recall ... To set up peasants' control through delegate councils, subject to recall by the base ... To create a State Construction Enterprise, under the control of a delegate council of tenants and workers ... To install a people's assembly to replace the bourgeois government ...

By September 1972 word was already public about the right-wing "September Plan" — using foreign help and the army to overthrow the government. The Christian Democrats were making an openly subversive alliance with the extreme right, euphemistically christened the Democratic Confederation. The social base of this

alliance included women from the upper classes, spoiled upper-class youth and Patria y Libertad, a neofascist paramilitary group.

Bourgeois strike

On October 9, 1972, truck owner-drivers in the south went on strike. On October 10 a Patria y Libertad demonstration in Santiago declared it time to act. On October 11 the National Confederation of Road Hauliers declared an indefinite national strike. On October 13 shopkeepers also declared a national strike.

These sectors were reacting to increasing inflation and economic strife, and were attracted to the growing decisiveness of the reactionaries as opposed to the timidity of the government.

On October 14 all the right-wing parties issued a joint declaration supporting the strikers. Other sympathy strikes followed — the Federation of Santiago School Students, bus owners in Valparaiso and Santiago and some bank employees.

But the bourgeois strike soon met a response — a mass mobilisation of the working class, which took it upon itself to maintain production. One after another, the industrial enterprises began moving towards real workers' control.

The Christian Democrats subsequently began to retreat from the September Plan. They realised that the strength of the working class could be overcome only by military force.

As the Christian Democrats retreated, the UP leaders interpreted this as a new opportunity to win their backing. The CP started to play up the constitutionalists in the army. On November 2 1972, the UP announced the entry into the cabinet of three generals, along with both national secretaries of the CUT. The CP paper's headline read, "A cabinet against subversion".

But by bringing the generals into cabinet and calling on the army and police to maintain social order, the UP leadership (the CP and the right wings of the Socialist Party and MAPU) contained the impetus of the mobilised working people.

During the October crisis the left of the UP and the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) conducted campaigns for "power to the people". These alliances continued beyond October. Sections of the left were coming to the understanding that a revolutionary rupture with the bourgeois state would be necessary; the working class would have to be organised and prepared for the decisive battles.

In December 1972, MAPU elected a new general secretary, who claimed MAPU had become a Marxist party. Its congress sketched out a new political line: "The Chilean revolution has an uninterrupted socialist character; democratic tasks and socialist tasks are increasingly bound up with each other, and become at the same time

the principal tasks ...”

On the other hand, the UP leadership responded with the Millas Plan. Orlando Millas, the CP minister of the economy, prepared a submission questioning the status of 123 industrial enterprises, most of which had been taken over by their workers during October. The UP was suspected of preparing to give these factories back to their bosses.

Opposed by the Socialist Party, MIR, MAPU, Christian Left and even many CP militants, the government had to back down on the Millas Plan. Under growing mass pressure, the UP went to the March 1973 provincial elections with a more radical program. As a result, the UP got an unexpectedly high vote of 44%.

As the intentions of the bourgeoisie became increasingly open, the cordones industriales and the comandos comunales (squatters, peasants and workers' community defence organisations) initiated plans for a meeting of all cordones and comandos in Santiago province. The president of the Cordon Cerillos expressed the sentiment growing among the politically advanced sections of the working class:

“The cordones are nuclei of popular power and must be developed because the government is locked into the framework of bourgeois institutions, which prevent it from thoroughly confronting the bourgeoisie.”

The coup

On June 29 came the first attempted coup. It involved only 150 soldiers and was obviously only a trial run.

By this stage, however, the army was in full preparation for the decisive coup. Using the arms control law passed by the right-dominated Congress in October 1972, the army had already begun mass raids for guns in workplaces and homes.

On September 11, in the early morning hours, the navy seized the port of Valparaiso. At noon the campus of the State Technical University (a centre of left students) was attacked by jet fighters, then by troops using mortars and machine guns. Within an hour, 700 students were dead.

Factories were attacked systematically, but many workers managed to defend their factories for hours. An Italian newspaper described the savage onslaught by the army on one of the major plants in the industrial suburbs of Santiago: “Although it was attacked by heavy artillery and bombed from the air, the workers held out for five days. When the troops finally entered the shops, bodies were lying all over the floor. Then there was a hand-to-hand struggle inside, a last desperate attempt to hold the factory.”

All socialist centres and offices were immediately attacked. Troops machine-gunned

the entire staff of the MIR paper *Punto Final* in their offices. In all some 25,000 people were killed in the first few days.

Many things are different today, but the tragic lessons of the Chilean coup — the failure of the gradualist parliamentary strategy — remain. ■



World Gathering in Solidarity with the Venezuelan Revolution, Caracas, April 11-13, 2003.

Notes

- 1 *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela*, Daniel H. Levine, Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 28.
- 2 *Clientalism* refers to a political relationship rooted in patronage and bureaucratically maintained influence.
- 3 *Barrio* refers to suburb but with the connotation of “neighbourhood”.
- 4 *FEV* and *UNE* were both national student organisations.
- 5 *El Petroleo de Venezuela*, Romulo Betancourt, Fondo de Cultura Economica, Mexico, 1976.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 8 The term popular is used here in the sense of the Spanish language word *popular*, which in English translates something more like “ordinary people”.
- 9 *The Political Feasibility of Adjustment in Ecuador and Venezuela*, Christian Morrisson (Editor), Development Centre of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994, p. 93.
- 10 *Corporatism* refers to the “incorporation” of trade unions or other community organisations into the mechanisms of government and state. The origins of the term date back to 19th-century conservatives, who instead of supporting the liberal idea of extending the franchise, wanted to give parliamentary representation to groups representing specific industries. It’s used quite commonly now to refer to the practices of social-democracy in coopting trade union and social movements.
- 11 Pieced together from local newspapers and other local sources.
- 12 *Protesta y Cultura en Venezuela: Los Marcos de Accion Colectiva en 1999*, Margarita Lopez Maya, Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2002, p. 13.
- 13 *Escuelas de las Americas* or School of the Americas (SOA), renamed in 2001 the “Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation”, is a combat training school for Latin American soldiers, located at Fort Benning, Georgia. The SOA has trained over 60,000 Latin American soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques, sniper training, commando and

psychological warfare, military intelligence and interrogation tactics.

- 14 *Campesinos* can refer to both rural workers and peasants.
- 15 *Militares Junto al Pueblo*, interviews by Marta Harnecker, 2002.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Marta Harnecker interview quoted in “Bursts of Life, not Gunfire or Death”, Stuart Munckton, *Venceremos*.
- 21 The *Polo Patriotico* involved a range of political organisations, including major parties such as the Partido Para Todos and the MAS.
- 22 Constitution of Venezuela.
- 23 “At Whatever Cost”, Paolo Moiola, www.lapress.org
Coordinadora Democratica is the umbrella group of most of Venezuela’s opposition forces. It includes traditional parties like COPEI, newer right-wing parties like Primero Justicia, who represent mostly young executives and lawyers, as well as key institutional forces such as the association of business owners FEDECAMARAS and the CTV.
- 24 From the time of its establishment, with the nationalisation of Venezuelan oil in 1976, the PDSVA was increasingly corporatised and became a sort of “state within a state”, with enormous political clout and the source of great wealth for the elite of Venezuela and its imperialist masters. Oxford University researcher Dr Carlos Boue estimates that the PDSVA’s practice, of selling oil cheaply to its “own” refineries based in the imperialist North, accounts for one of the greatest international flows of capital in the South-North direction.
- 25 “Denuncian Quinto Plan Conspirativo Contra el Gobierno de Hugo Chavez”, *Venpres*, May 9, 2003.
- 26 “At Whatever Cost”, Paolo Moiola, www.lapress.org
- 27 *Cacerolazos* are protests where people bang on their caceroles (pots and pans) as loudly as possible. They go back a long way in Latin American political tradition and recently have become most associated with the Argentinian popular rebellion against the neoliberal order.
- 28 *Fuerte Tiunia* is one of the major army forts in the Caracas area.
- 29 *Garcia Carneiro* is now the general commander of the Venezuelan armed forces.
- 30 *Militares Junto al Pueblo*, interviews by Marta Harnecker, 2002.
- 31 Chavez: “Con Golpistas no se negocia, se les derrota”, Danil Moser, www.rebellion.org, January 19, 2003.
- 32 *Guerillismo* refers to the generalisation of guerilla tactics into a political strategy.
- 33 *Punto Final*, issue 539, March 14-28, 2003.

- 34 The governments and business leaders of the US and Latin America have been promoting since 1994 the creation of what would be the biggest commercial bloc in the world, the Area de Libre Comercio de las Americas (ALCA). The aim is essentially to impose further and more direct US control over the Third World economies of the continent.
- 35 Chavez: "Con Golpistas no se negocia, se les derrota", Danil Moser, www.rebellion.org, January 19, 2003.
- 36 *La Izquierda Contraataca, Conflicto de clases en America Latina en la era del neoliberalismo*, James Petras, Westview Press, 2000. ■



World Gathering in Solidarity with the Venezuelan Revolution,
Caracas, April 11-13, 2003.

A revolutionary process is unfolding in Venezuela. The ruling class has launched a desperate campaign of sabotage and provocation. The working classes are increasingly organised and politically conscious. A real-life struggle for power is taking place. The outcome is by no means certain.

Much is at stake for imperialism. Likewise for the working people of Latin America. Revolution is on the agenda once again.

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