

# Venezuela: Is the CIA preparing another coup?

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With a “strike” organized by Venezuela’s employers now entering its second week, there is every indication that the South American country is being subjected to a classic destabilization campaign organized in collaboration with US intelligence.

Having failed to topple Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in a US-backed coup last April, Venezuela’s ruling circles, working in conjunction with Washington, are attempting to force him to resign or provoke a new military seizure of power.

The threat that Washington will intervene directly in Venezuela—a strategic source of imported petroleum for the American market—cannot be ruled out.

The “strike”—in reality an employers’ lockout—began on December 2. It is the joint creation of FEDECAMARAS—Venezuela’s big business association—and the CTV, or Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, a corrupt labor bureaucracy that is closely tied to the AFL-CIO in the US. The CTV is also a recipient of substantial funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, a US agency created to funnel funds to foreign organizations that had previously been financed directly by the Central Intelligence Agency.

The joint big business-CTV action has had its most visible effect on the wealthier neighborhoods and downtown shopping districts of Caracas, where well-heeled demonstrators—backed by thugs on motorcycles—have forced stores to close. In the working class areas and the impoverished shantytowns in the hills surrounding the capital, there has been little impact on daily activity.

Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators poured into the capital from these neighborhoods on Saturday in a demonstration “for democracy and in defense of the constitution” called by supporters of the government, a mobilization far larger than anything the organizers of the FEDECAMARAS-CTV action have been able to mount.

In a county in which 80 percent of the 26 million inhabitants live in poverty, it is hardly surprising that a “strike” organized by and for a wealthy oligarchy has failed to mobilize the masses. To make up for what it lacks in popular support, those leading the attempt to bring down Chavez have turned to terrorist violence, economic sabotage and a barrage of media propaganda that amounts to a psychological warfare campaign against the population.

Last Friday night, as the leaders of the protest were debating whether they could continue their action, shots rang out in a plaza in the wealthy Altamira section of Caracas. The square has been the scene since October of a farcical demonstration by a group of military officers against Chavez. Most were implicated in last April’s aborted coup and have since been relieved of their commands. Working out of a luxury hotel nearby, the generals, admirals and colonels had designated the plaza as “liberated territory.”

A number of supporters of the anti-Chavez demonstrations were in the plaza when the shooting began, and at least three lay dead and over a score wounded when it was over.

No sooner had the smoke cleared, than General Enrique Medina Gomez, one of the dissident officers, took to the airwaves to blame Chavez for the bloodshed and call for the military to overthrow him “like it did on April 11,” when the Venezuelan president was held incommunicado for two days and a civilian-military junta was formed. That coup quickly collapsed in the face of mass protests and dissension within the military.

Meanwhile, the country’s main television channels—whose owners are all aligned with the anti-Chavez forces—began broadcasting scenes of the carnage in the plaza over and over again.

In the aftermath of the shootings, however, it was revealed that the principal suspect, captured at the scene, was Portuguese national Joao Gouveia. Appearing to be mentally unbalanced, he said he had arrived from Lisbon the day before and had carried out the attack with the aim of retaliating at one of the television networks for persecuting him.

A Congressman and journalist who supports the Chavez government claimed, however, that Gouveia was feigning his mental problems and had confessed to carrying out the attack after being contracted for money by General Medina Gomez. Meanwhile, there were press reports in Venezuela that another suspected gunman filmed at the scene had been seen earlier the same day with the mayor of Caracas, a leading figure in the anti-Chavez movement.

This strange assault follows the pattern set last April, in which 18 people were killed and 30 wounded when unknown gunmen fired on an anti-government demonstration. The bloodshed provided the pretext for military coup leaders to lead an assault on the government palace, arrest Chavez and announce the formation of a provisional junta. On that occasion, the rebel generals taped a recording—hours before the shooting—declaring themselves against the government and blaming the government for a number of deaths at the demonstration. Several of those arrested for the shootings were released almost immediately by the short-lived junta.

Meanwhile, the strike’s effect has been greatly amplified by the actions of management of the state-owned oil corporation, PDVSA. It was Chavez’s attempt to reorganize this institution—long used as a cash cow by the wealthy supporters of Venezuela’s old ruling parties, Copei and Acción Democrática—that provoked last year’s coup attempt. He subsequently reached an accommodation with these managers, even agreeing to provide them with hefty salary increases.

Ships’ officers on oil tankers and private companies that operate oil trucks have been recruited to the anti-Chavez plot in a bid to paralyze the country’s oil industry and thereby shut down its entire economy. Venezuela, the fifth-largest petroleum exporter, is dependent on oil exports for 80 percent of its foreign earnings. It supplies 13 percent of the crude oil imported by the US. The US consumes 70 percent of the 2.5 million barrels of oil Venezuela produces daily.

“Petroleum export activity has been paralyzed; the activity of the ports has been paralyzed; the activity of the refineries is beginning to be paralyzed and of course the activity of production as well,” said Ali

Rodriguez, president of the PDVSA, on Monday.

"We are threatened with a national disaster; no worker who loves his company or his country will permit this to continue," he said. He warned that unless PDVSA could resume the normal distribution of oil, it would be unable to meet payrolls and payments to suppliers and would be liable to massive fines for failing to meet delivery contracts. Rodriguez is the only one of the eight PDVSA directors who did not resign in protest against Chavez.

While refineries are reportedly full to capacity, they are unable to distribute the oil because of the transportation stoppage. As a result, gas stations have begun closing down and at least one major airline canceled scores of flights because of concerns over a lack of fuel. Some foreign carriers were also reportedly stopping flights to Caracas, supposedly out of concern that their aircraft could be stranded there.

In response, Chavez ordered the military to take control of refineries, oil distribution centers and those oil tankers that had halted operations.

In a further attempt to undermine Venezuela's already depressed economy, banks announced a one-day shutdown Monday and indicated that they would maintain reduced hours and services indefinitely.

The atmosphere of provocations and employer-organized economic sabotage recalls the CIA campaign to destabilize the Popular Unity government of Chile's President Salvador Allende in 1973. It was subsequently revealed that US intelligence, working through both business associations and corrupt right-wing unions, funded a truckers' strike that paralyzed the country. The economic dislocation set the stage for the September 11, 1973 military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet that led to a bloodbath of the Chilean working class and 15 years of dictatorship.

There can be little doubt that Washington is deeply involved in instigating the disruptions in Venezuela. Before it launches a war against Iraq, the Bush administration will most certainly assure itself a secure supply of Venezuelan oil. In the long term, the US ruling elite, together with the Venezuelan oligarchs, look to a substantial profit windfall through the privatization of the state-owned oil company.

Since last April, Chavez has sought to accommodate himself to Washington, toning down his nationalist rhetoric and even making a public declaration that Venezuela would remain a "reliable" oil supplier to the US market in the event that an invasion of Iraq disrupted supplies from elsewhere.

Even though the Venezuelan government has largely abided by the economic prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund, the Bush administration is determined to oust Chavez, whose condemnations of US bombings in Afghanistan and friendly ties to Castro's Cuba provoked Washington's ire. Like the Venezuelan ruling class, the US administration sees Chavez's limited reforms and populist appeals to the country's impoverished masses as an intolerable threat to wealth and privilege.

Following the ouster of Chavez last April, US officials welcomed the coup. It was revealed at the time that senior Bush administration aides, including Assistant Secretary of State Otto Reich and White House advisor Elliott Abrams—both key players in the Reagan administration's covert network for supporting the contra terrorist war on Nicaragua in the 1980s—had met repeatedly in Washington with the coup's organizers.

Loyally echoing the position of the administration in Washington, the mass media in the US has deliberately distorted the nature of the events in Venezuela. The *New York Times* refers to it, for example, as a "national walkout," when in reality relatively few Venezuelan workers have joined the anti-government actions, while most have been locked out by their employers. In some instances, workers have occupied shutdown plants in protest.

Similarly, the confrontation is presented as one between a democratic opposition demanding that Chavez submit to a national referendum on his presidency, and an authoritarian regime that is determined to prevent such

a vote.

Thus, the *Times* writes that the opposition's aim is "to avoid having to wait until the next presidential election in 2006" to resolve the crisis.

In reality, Venezuela's constitution, approved by popular vote in 1999, provides for just such a referendum midway through the presidential term, which will be in August 2003. The political representatives of the Venezuelan oligarchy, however, are demanding that Chavez submit to an extra-constitutional vote on February 2.

Their unwillingness to wait seven months is bound up with concerns over pending legislation on land reform and the reorganization of the PDVSA, as well as fears within the Venezuelan "democratic" opposition that it cannot achieve the number of votes needed to oust Chavez in any case. (The constitution requires that a referendum get the support of a greater percentage of the electorate than what was won by the president in the previous election, in Chavez's case, 57 percent.)

In Venezuela, outrage over the local media's role as a propaganda arm for those seeking to topple the Chavez government led to mass demonstrations outside of television stations Monday night, with thousands of protesters chanting "Coup-mongers, tell the truth!" The five privately owned television networks have openly promoted anti-government actions, while broadcasting false stories to undermine the government. In Maracay, demonstrators occupied the station.

The protests were met with an angry condemnation from Organization of American States Secretary General César Gaviria, who condemned them as "intimidating actions" and demanded that the government "take action" to defend "freedom of the press and of expression."

The comments exposed the bias of Gaviria, a former Colombian president, who is supposed to be mediating a settlement between Chavez and his opponents. Like the US State Department, he has increasingly indicated his support for the early elections demanded by the country's oligarchy.

Chavez has himself indicated a willingness to negotiate on this demand. The opposition, however, is now seeking to use the economic disruption to press for his immediate resignation, while insisting that it will not accept his vice president, José Vicente Rangel, even as a temporary successor.



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