

Venezuelan TV cuts broadcast after workers challenge Chavez

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Venezuela's national television network was forced to hastily terminate the live broadcast of a political rally in the northeastern state of Bolivar Monday night after industrial workers in the audience began shouting demands and drowning out remarks by President Hugo Chavez.

The Venezuelan president had come to the rally, organized at the Caruachi Dam hydro-electric complex on the Caroni River, to formally sign agreements between the Venezuelan state oil company, PdVSA, and the the state industrial holding company, Corporacion Venezolana Guayana (CVG), aimed at developing the country's Orinoco heavy oil belt in a deal that relies on a 30 percent stake by the US oil conglomerate Chevron Corp.

The trade union bureaucracy and workers from surrounding steel plants and other factories were organized into what was supposed to be a cheering audience. Instead, workers began chanting "contract, contract," calling attention to the fact that most of the work force in the area's state-owned industrial plants have not had a contract for 30 months or a raise for three to four years.

They shouted out demands for a local aluminum tube-producing plant that had been placed under the state oil company's management, leading to a breakdown in production, to be shifted back to the state-owned steel company SIDOR. Workers also called for the sacking of the newly installed president of the SIDOR plant, Rafael Gil Barrios, an ally of the local governor and leader of the Chavista trade union group, Frente Obrero Bolivariano. Gil Barrios was installed by the government after the representative elected by the workers was hastily removed, making a mockery of the claims that "Bolivarian socialism" is based upon workers' control.

After one union representative took a microphone and warned Chavez about the "disquiet" among the workers, adding that their demands could not be "shoved under the table," the president complained that there were "acoustical problems", though both the statement of the union official and the shouts of the workers were clearly audible in the television broadcast.

Workers continued shouting demands and interrupting Chavez's speech, leading him to counter with an assurance that new contracts could be discussed, but would have to be done "thinking not only in the interests of the workers," but "in the national interests." At one point he began intoning over and over again "loyalty, loyalty, loyalty" as workers continued shouting.

Shortly afterwards, the audio was cut off and the camera shifted from the scene of the rally to a long shot of the dam and finally to an announcement that the broadcast had ended.

The episode underscored tensions between the Chavez government and increasing sections of the working class. In the industrial plants of the Guyana region, where Chavez spoke, this has been fueled by government repression of workers' demonstrations, the heavy-handed overriding of workers' decisions under the supposed "workers' control" scheme, and the corruption of officials in the ruling Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

More generally, dissatisfaction has been growing over mounting prices (inflation last year reached nearly 28 percent and is running at 20 percent this year) and food shortages, as well as deteriorating public services and infrastructure.

As Chavez continued his campaign for re-election to a third term as president, Venezuela was shocked by

another prison massacre on Sunday, with some 25 inmates killed and dozens more wounded in an armed battle at the Yare 1 jail south of Caracas. The prison, which was built to house 750, now has 3,150 inmates crowded inside it. It was here that Chavez himself spent two years imprisoned after, as a paratrooper officer, he led an abortive coup in 1992.

According to the watchdog group Venezuelan Prisons Observatory, there have been 5,370 inmates killed and 15,131 wounded in Venezuela's prisons since 1999, when Chavez was first elected.

Chavez warned the workers in Guyana that a return of the Venezuelan right to power in the October 7 presidential election would lead to the re-privatization of the state-owned enterprises and a return to the days when the country's secret police were used to suppress strikes and kill militant workers.

In speeches in Caracas, however, he has appealed directly to the Venezuelan financial and corporate ruling class, insisting that he is the best custodian of their interests.

His victory will be "beneficial to the bourgeois class", as "rich people will continue enjoying their lives in peace," Chavez told the audience at a televised campaign event at the Caracas Municipal Theater last week.

"Take a look at the opinion polls, even the so-called social-economic sector A, the richest, Chavez obtains roughly 30 percent (of the votes)," the president boasted. "Not all rich people are against Chavez. No, they are not. There are rich people who are fully aware of the work Chavez has been doing for everyone so as to bring some stability to the country. That benefits them."

While in his lengthy speeches Chavez often talks of combating capitalism and building socialism, at the Municipal Theater event he called attention to the presence of representatives of some of Venezuela's major banks. "Here are my friends from private banking," he said. "Let's give applause for the bankers who are working with us." Finance capital has enjoyed some of the highest profit rates anywhere in Venezuela.

He also praised the role being played in Venezuela by the foreign oil conglomerates. "We have Chevron and Texaco here and we are working together marvelously," he said. "I am very happy that Obama said in Miami that Chavez is no threat to the US."

"Our triumph will guarantee even the rich that they can continue living their lives in tranquility," said Chavez. "A victory for the big bourgeoisie would destabilize our country and this is not in the interests of even the rich, as they like tranquility."

Chavez's chief opponent in the election is Henrique Capriles Radonski, candidate of the right-wing opposition coalition, the Democratic Unity Roundtable, known by its Spanish acronym MUD. Capriles, the governor of the northern province of Miranda, has cast himself as a proponent of the responsible "left", saying that he would maintain most of the social assistance programs instituted by Chavez, while adopting an economic and foreign policy similar to that of the Workers Party government in Brazil, centered on private investment.

Capriles, a scion of a wealthy bourgeois family, has a political record inextricably bound up with the country's political right. As a student, he was a supporter of Tradition Family Property, the extreme anti-communist Catholic group. In 2002, he was a mayor of a municipality in Caracas and a prominent supporter of the CIA-backed coup to overthrow Chavez. He was charged and jailed for leading a siege of the Cuban embassy and using local police to round up government officials.

Most polls have shown Chavez enjoying a double-digit lead over Capriles, but one released this week reduced the difference between the two candidates to the margin of statistical error.



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