

# Hugo Chavez and socialism

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Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans filled the streets of Caracas to accompany the casket of President Hugo Chavez to the military academy where he began his career and where his body lay in state before today's funeral.

The former paratrooper lieutenant colonel had been in power for 14 years, and the outpouring reflected popular support for the undeniable, albeit limited, improvements in social conditions for the country's most impoverished layers under his presidency. This includes a halving of the poverty rate, which still remains above Latin America's average.

In Washington, the Obama administration issued a cautious statement calling Chavez's demise a "challenging time" and declaring its hope that the change in leadership in Caracas would promote "a constructive relationship with the Venezuelan government."

Republican leaders in Congress openly celebrated the Venezuelan leader's death. Typical was Ed Royce, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, who declared, "Good riddance to this dictator."

Chavez's nationalist rhetoric, his government's diversion of revenues from the country's protracted oil bonanza to pay for social assistance programs and its forging of extensive economic ties to China earned him the hatred of both Washington and a fascistic ruling class layer in Venezuela. They did not, however—as both he and his pseudo-left supporters claimed—represent a path to socialism.

Chavez was a bourgeois nationalist, whose government rested firmly on the military from which he came and which continues to serve as the crucial arbiter in the affairs of the Venezuelan state.

While bitterly resented by a reactionary Venezuelan oligarchy, whose preferred method of dealing with the country's impoverished masses is murder and torture, Chavez's *misiones*, or programs to improve living

standards, housing, health care and education, made no serious encroachment on profit interests.

Both the share of the country's economy controlled by the private sector and the portion of national income going to employers as opposed to labor were greater under Chavez than before he took office. An entire new ruling class layer—dubbed the *boliburguesia*—was spawned by *chavismo*, growing rich off of government contracts, corruption and financial speculation.

Meanwhile, the "Bolivarian revolution" has done nothing to alter Venezuela's status as a nation dependent upon and oppressed by imperialism. The country's economy is still wholly dependent upon the export of oil (the largest share to the US) and the import of both capital and consumer goods.

In last November's presidential election, Chavez publicly appealed for the support of the wealthy and privileged, insisting that his policies promoted social peace and stability and warded off the threat of civil war.

Chavez had ample reason to promote his policies with the left rhetoric of an ill-defined "21st Century Socialism." The aim, first and foremost, was to divert and contain the militancy of the Venezuelan workers, whose struggles, to the extent they escape the control of the ruling PSUV (Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela) and its affiliated Bolivarian trade union federation, are often branded as "counterrevolutionary."

However, an entire layer of the international pseudo-left—including various organizations and individuals who have in the past cast themselves as "Trotskyists"—attempted to lend credence to this "socialist" rhetoric. This reached ludicrous levels, such as the hailing of Chavez's call for a "Fifth International," which was issued in a rambling speech to a November 2009 gathering of "left" parties in Caracas that included delegations from the Chinese Communist Party, the Brazilian Workers Party,

Argentina's Peronist Partido Justicialista and the PRI of Mexico.

The reaction of Francois Sabado, a leading member of both the Pabloite international and the French New Anticapitalist Party, was typical. He described this bringing together of right-wing, anti-working class ruling parties as "an important instrument to fight the ruling classes, not only in Latin America, but in the whole world." He went on to insist that political "divergences" could be overcome and that there was no need of "discussing the historical balance sheets of different currents."

Such "balance sheets" could only lay bare the long and tragic historical experience—particularly in Latin America—with the attempts by political charlatans like Sabado to portray bourgeois nationalist regimes as "revolutionary" and "socialist," subordinating the struggles of the working class to them.

In the 1970s, this took the form of the political tendency led by Nahuel Moreno working to subordinate the Argentine working class to both Peronism and Castroism, politically disarming it in the face of the savage military coup of 1976. A similar role was played by the party of Guillermo Lora in Bolivia in 1971 in relation to the "left" general, J.J. Torres, whose presidency was ended with the right-wing military coup of Gen. Hugo Banzer.

Similar adaptations to the regimes of Gen. Velasco Alvarado in Peru and Gen. Omar Torrijos in Panama led to betrayals and defeats for the working class in these countries, as did the promotion of Castroism and Guevarism throughout the continent.

The painting of *chavismo* in socialist colors by today's pseudo-lefts is a matter not merely of failing to learn these historical lessons, but rather of deep-rooted class interests. They are drawn to Chavez's "21st Century socialism" precisely because of their hostility to the Marxist conception that a socialist transformation can be carried out only through the independent and conscious struggle of the working class to put an end to capitalism and take power into its own hands. These petty-bourgeois political elements are instead attracted to a policy designed to save capitalism from revolution, imposed from above by a charismatic *comandante*. These layers have moved far to the right since the heyday of their adaptation to Castroism in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, before his death, some of them who had

lauded Chavez turned against him because of his opposition to the US wars for regime change in Libya and Syria, which they themselves have embraced along with imperialism.

Whatever the immediate fate of the unfolding attempts to fashion a new *chavismo* without Chavez, the class struggle in Venezuela and throughout Latin America will intensify under the impact of the deepening global capitalist crisis. The crucial question is the building of new, independent revolutionary parties, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class as part of the worldwide struggle against capitalism.



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