

Nationalism or socialism in Latin America

A reply to a supporter of Chavez

Bill Van Auken
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The *World Socialist Web Site* received a number of letters in response to its March 8 Perspective column entitled “Hugo Chavez and socialism.” Several of these expressed outrage that we sought to subject Chavez’s rule to a Marxist analysis, defining it in class terms as bourgeois nationalist and placing it in the historical context of previous such regimes in Latin America.

Typical of these was a letter [see below] from LB in Britain, who declared himself “appalled” by the Perspective and declared, “At a time when the imperialist media attempts to discredit the Bolivarian Revolution with half-truths and ideological bias, the WSWS’s Bill Van Auken repeats the same myths to back up its essentially anti-Marxist position.”

What are these “half-truths” and “myths?” The correspondent objects to our pointing out that, while Venezuela has seen a sharp reduction in poverty under Chavez, the country’s poverty rate still remains above Latin America’s average, and that the 14 years of his rule have failed to alter the essential status of Venezuela as an oppressed country, dependent upon the major powers both for the export of a single commodity, oil, and for the import of the vast majority of its consumer and capital goods.

Why the urge to deny these objective facts, ignore class realities and paint Venezuela’s regime in the rosiest of colors? The answer is made clear by the following line in the letter: “At a time when crisis-ridden imperialist states like Britain are viciously cutting back on welfare and attacking the right of working class people to housing, the Venezuelan revolution allows Marxists to show that there is an alternative.”

While it is necessary for the working class in countries like the United States and Britain to defend Venezuela, an oppressed country, against imperialist aggression, to present the political and economic setup existing under Chavez as an “alternative” for US or British workers is ludicrous. What are they to do, wait until West Point or Sandhurst produces a “progressive” colonel to lead them to socialism?

The kind of “alternative” that is envisioned here is one that is imposed from above, not arising from the politically independent movement of the working class itself, striving to establish its own organs of power. The adulation of Chavez is bound up with a complete rejection of and deep-seated hostility toward any such movement.

This is the politics of those who want to have their consciences assuaged and to feel good about themselves on the cheap by supporting some head of state bringing “socialism” to the working class. In reality, this is a complete falsification of socialism, which can arise only through the struggle of the workers to liberate themselves.

In class terms, there is little to distinguish those who promote illusions in Chavez from the petty-bourgeois layers who nurture similar illusions in Barack Obama. Indeed, this was a point the Venezuelan president himself made last year, saying that if he were a US citizen he would vote for Obama. Chavez added that he believed if Obama were Venezuelan, he would have backed Chavez.

The correspondent goes on to write that the definition of Chavez as a bourgeois nationalist “is not only false, but ignores the central point.” He

continues: “As Lenin wrote in 1914, ‘The bourgeois nationalism of any oppressed nation has a general democratic content that is directed against oppression, and it is this content that we unconditionally support’. The movement towards socialism is driven by the oppressed people of Venezuela and found its expression in the revolutionary leadership of Hugo Chavez.”

Here one encounters a hodgepodge of half-baked and contradictory conceptions drawn from Stalinism and petty-bourgeois radicalism combined with an undigested quote ripped from Lenin.

The correspondent seems to be saying that it is a slander to define Chavez as a bourgeois nationalist, but even if he was, based on the counsel of Lenin, he would still deserve unconditional support as the expression and leadership of the movement of the “oppressed people of Venezuela” toward socialism.

In describing Chavez as a bourgeois nationalist, the term is not used as an epithet, but rather as a politically precise definition of the class interests and methods that characterized his rule. His social assistance programs and partial nationalizations notwithstanding, he led a bourgeois government in a country whose economy remained firmly capitalist.

The state that Chavez headed is based upon the institutions and bureaucracies that were in existence when he first took office 14 years ago—first and foremost the armed forces, which play a major role in the running of the government.

The private sector accounts for 70 percent of Venezuela’s gross domestic product (GDP), a greater share than when Chavez was first elected in 1998. The share of the wealth appropriated by employers versus labor has risen under Chavez, hitting a record 48.8 percent in 2008, a decade after he came to power. Venezuelan banks are the most profitable and its stock market the highest performing in the world, with share prices up almost 300 percent in 2012, even as real wages fell.

The object of slander here is not Chavez, but Lenin. The quotation used is torn violently out of its context, which was a discussion within the Russian Marxist movement over whether to include in its program what Lenin termed the “negative demand” for recognition of the right of Poland, then part of the Czarist empire, to self-determination.

The term “negative” was used to explain that the Marxists were not advocating secession, but rather recognizing the right as a means of overcoming national divisions and uniting the working class.

The same article warns against “subordinating the proletariat to the bourgeoisie’s policy” and stresses that for the working class, national demands “are subordinated to the interests of the class struggle.” It declares that “the important thing for the proletariat is to ensure the development of its class. For the bourgeoisie it is important to hamper this development by pushing the aims of its ‘own’ nation before those of the proletariat.”

Moreover, in 1917, in the period preceding the October Revolution, Lenin adopted the perspective developed by Leon Trotsky in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, which established that in countries with a

belated capitalist development, such as Russia, the democratic and national tasks historically associated with the bourgeois revolution could be carried out only under the leadership of the working class, which would be compelled to take power and go over to socialist measures.

The essence of Trotsky's position was the struggle for the political independence of the working class and the refusal to subordinate its struggle to the national bourgeoisie, no matter how "left" its policies.

In the last years of his life, Trotsky directly addressed this question in relation to the nationalist policies of President Lazaro Cardenas in Mexico, whose government was the only one on the planet to grant the leader of the Russian Revolution political asylum when he was being hunted down by the assassins of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy.

In March of 1938, responding to the increasingly militant struggles of the Mexican oil workers and the arrogant intransigence of the US- and British-run oil conglomerates, Cardenas nationalized the Mexican oil industry as well as the country's railroads, placing them under workers' management. These actions, taken nearly three-quarters of a century ago in defiance of the most powerful imperialist powers, had a far more radical and sweeping character than any of the measures taken by the Chavez government in Venezuela.

Trotsky insisted, however, on defining these measures in class terms and delineating the independent interests and tasks of the working class. He had every reason to be concerned about maintaining the good will of the Cardenas government, but he undertook a deeply principled analysis, one that did not preclude his defending this government against the threats of the imperialist powers.

Trotsky's assessment provides a firm theoretical foundation for understanding the character of regimes like that of Chavez in Venezuela, and the attitude Marxists must adopt toward them.

He wrote, within months of the nationalizations: "In the industrially backward countries foreign capital plays a decisive role. Hence the relative weakness of the *national* bourgeoisie in relation to the *national* proletariat. This creates special conditions of state power. The government veers between foreign and domestic capital, between the weak national bourgeoisie and the relatively powerful proletariat. This gives the government a Bonapartist character of a distinctive character. It raises itself, so to speak, above classes. Actually, it can govern either by making itself the instrument of foreign capitalism and holding the proletariat in the chains of a police dictatorship, or by maneuvering with the proletariat and even going so far as to make concessions to it, thus gaining the possibility of a certain freedom from the foreign capitalists. The present policy [of the Mexican government—*Translator*] is in the second stage; its greatest conquests are the expropriations of the railroads and the oil industries.

"These measures are entirely within the domain of state capitalism. However, in a semicolonial country, state capitalism finds itself under the heavy pressure of private foreign capital and of its governments, and cannot maintain itself without the active support of the workers. That is why it tries, without letting the real power escape from its hands, to place on the workers' organizations a considerable part of the responsibility for the march of production in the nationalized branches of industry.

"What should be the policy of the workers' party in this case? It would of course be a disastrous error, an outright deception, to assert that the road to socialism passes, not through the proletarian revolution, but through nationalization by the bourgeois state of various branches of industry and their transfer into the hands of the workers' organizations." [Emphasis added]

There has been a great deal of water—not to mention blood—under the bridge since Trotsky wrote these lines 75 years ago. The Theory of Permanent Revolution, attacked by Stalinism and the Pabloite revisionist tendency that broke with Trotskyism, has found confirmation again and again in the negative. A succession of bourgeois nationalist movements, from those in the newly independent states established in the former

colonies of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, through to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the African National Congress in South Africa, has proven incapable of consistently opposing imperialism or resolving the fundamental democratic and national questions, much less realizing socialism.

For those like LB who want to canonize Chavez, this history, and more specifically the history of Latin America, is a matter of indifference. The adulation he heaps on the late Venezuelan president and his denunciations of Marxists for opposing the subordination of the working class to Chavez's politics echo the positions taken by a whole layer of petty-bourgeois leftists in an earlier period, with disastrous consequences for Latin American workers.

In Argentina, these elements, including some who called themselves socialists and even Trotskyists, backed the subordination of the labor movement to Juan Peron, the nationalist military officer who was president from 1946 to 1955, and again in 1973-74, when he died and was succeeded by his widow. In Bolivia, they fostered illusions in the military president Gen. J.J. Torres, who held power briefly from 1970 to 1971, and in Peru they backed Gen. Juan Francisco Velasco Alvarado, who held power from 1968 to 1975 under the title of "president of the revolutionary government."

Like Chavez, they all carried out nationalizations, espoused left-nationalist policies and promoted social assistance programs for the poor. In each case, the effect of the petty-bourgeois politics of promoting bourgeois nationalism as "socialism" was to disarm the working class in advance of military coups in which tens of thousands paid with their lives.

The path to these defeats was also paved with the glorification of Castroism and petty-bourgeois guerrillaism as a new road to socialism. This perspective served only to isolate revolutionary elements from the workers, lead them into unequal armed confrontations with the state, and obstruct the building of revolutionary working class parties. Nowhere has support for such regimes or methods led to socialism.

LB charges that the WSWS "sees the only prospect for socialism as through setting up local branches of its own Trotskyist trend," as if this were some sectarian delusion. The bitter lesson of Latin America's history, however, is that the subordination of the working class to bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalism only paves the way to defeat. The struggle for socialism can be carried forward only on the basis of the complete political independence of the working class and the building of a revolutionary Marxist leadership.

The Perspective to which LB objects dealt with the class dynamics and interests that underlay the attraction Chavez held for petty-bourgeois ex-radicals and pseudo-lefts. It stated: "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."

This assessment is fully born out by the letter from LB, who is representative of this reactionary petty-bourgeois political layer.

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Letter from LB

I was appalled by the 8 March article on the *World Socialist Web Site* entitled "Hugo Chavez and socialism." At a time when the imperialist media attempts to discredit the Bolivarian Revolution with half-truths and

ideological bias, the WSWS's Bill Van Auken repeats the same myths to back up its essentially anti-Marxist position.

The article admits that there is "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 fact, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, Venezuela now has the third lowest levels of poverty in Latin America. When Chavez was first elected in 1998, poverty stood at 50.4 percent. By 2011, it had fallen to 27.8 percent and it continues to fall. About 2.5 million Venezuelans were helped out of extreme poverty in the same period and Venezuela achieved a drop in inequality "unparalleled in Latin America" (Brookings Institution), falling over 2 percent year on year to achieve the lowest levels of inequality in the region (after Cuba).

Venezuela has wiped out illiteracy, brought infant mortality down from 25 to 13 per 1,000 live births, provided free health care and education for all, and built 700,000 units of social housing in the last two years alone. At a time when crisis-ridden imperialist states like Britain are viciously cutting back on welfare and attacking the right of working class people to housing, the Venezuelan revolution allows Marxists to show that there is an alternative.

The WSWS deserts Marxism and ignores these facts to back up its reactionary position that "the 'Bolivarian revolution' has done nothing to alter Venezuela's status as a nation dependent upon and oppressed by imperialism." Venezuelans know that this is a lie. For most of the 20th Century, Venezuela was ruled by a corrupt elite allied to imperialist oil interests. Venezuela is an oppressed nation fighting for national liberation and socialism. The WSWS assertion that Chavez was a "bourgeois nationalist" is not only false, but ignores the central point. As Lenin wrote in 1914, "The bourgeois nationalism of any oppressed nation has a general democratic content that is directed against oppression, and it is this content that we unconditionally support." The movement towards socialism is driven by the oppressed people of Venezuela and found its expression in the revolutionary leadership of Hugo Chavez.

The WSWS fails to identify where support for Chavez came from. It is the working class which has directly radicalised the revolutionary process, from defeating the imperialist-backed coup in 2002 to the growth of comunas and new forms of socialist democracy. The WSWS is right to say that "the class struggle in Venezuela and throughout Latin America will intensify under the impact of the deepening global capitalist crisis," but sees the only prospect for socialism as through setting up local branches of its own Trotskyist trend. But the Venezuelan people are fighting in the real world. In continuing their struggle after the death of their heroic leader, they have the support of socialist Cuba and revolutionary movements throughout Latin America. They have the solidarity of oppressed people from Palestine to Greece. By attacking the achievements of the Venezuelan people, the WSWS ends up on the side of socialism's enemies.

LB



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