

The crisis of Venezuela's "Bolivarian" revolution and the political independence of the working class

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One month after its razor-close presidential election, Venezuela remains in a state of political crisis. The aftermath of the victory by Nicolas Maduro, the hand-picked successor of the late Hugo Chavez, who had led the country through 14 years of his self-proclaimed "Bolivarian Revolution," has seen the right-wing opposition, with the backing of the Obama administration in Washington, relentlessly disputing the validity of the vote and the legitimacy of Maduro's presidency.

These challenges, coming from a US ruling establishment that installed an un-elected president in 2000 by quashing the popular vote, and from the right-wing representatives of the Venezuelan capitalists, who sought—with Washington's backing—to oust the elected Chavez government with a coup in 2002, are utterly cynical and reactionary.

While Maduro defeated his right-wing rival Henrique Capriles by just a few hundred thousand of the nearly 15 million ballots cast, the right has presented no valid evidence of vote fraud or a stolen election. Its early attempts to call masses into the streets against the supposedly rigged results produced only scattered protests—as well as a series of attacks by fascist gangs that left nine people dead and scores wounded.

At the same time, it is evident that the condemnations of the right by Maduro and the chavista movement and their charges of an attempted coup have produced no great popular mobilization in favor of the government either. This stands in stark contrast to the spontaneous popular outpouring in April 2002, which played a decisive role in defeating the genuine coup of that year.

The overriding question politically in the election results is how to account for the sharp shift in the vote from last October, when incumbent President Chavez beat the right's candidate Capriles by a margin of 55 percent to 44 percent, to the April 14 vote, in which Maduro bested the same candidate by barely 1.7 percent.

This cannot be attributed merely to the death of Chavez and the failure of Maduro—who ran as the late president's "son"—to exhibit the same kind of populist charisma as the deceased *comandante*.

Rather, under conditions in which the Venezuelan working class lacks its own independent mass party, mounting hostility toward the "Bolivarian" government among broad layers of workers and other sections of oppressed found its expression in an increased protest vote for the right.

The sources of this popular anger are by no means obscure. The highest inflation rate in Latin America along with a 31.75 percent currency devaluation last February have combined to slash workers' real wages. Social services, including the popular social assistance

Missions that served to redistribute some of Venezuela's oil revenues to the most oppressed sections of the population, have deteriorated.

Meanwhile, there is increasing consciousness of corruption within the government and the ruling PSUV (Venezuelan United Socialist Party) and of the record profits of the financial aristocracy and the banks, which still control the commanding heights of the economy, 71 percent of which remains in private hands.

Among organized sections of the working class, there is increasing outrage over the criminalization of strikes and protests and the refusal of the government to negotiate long-expired contracts, as well as hatred for the officially connected bureaucrats who work to subordinate their interests to those of the ruling party.

Under these conditions, Maduro and other chavista leaders have denounced opponents of the government as "fascists" and supporters of imperialism, while courting the continued support of the Venezuelan capitalists and cementing profitable deals with foreign capital. There are reports that workers who failed to vote for Maduro are being threatened with the loss of their jobs in state-owned enterprises.

Sections of the Latin American and international "left" have responded in much the same fashion. Instead of drawing the lesson from the election results that the unpostponable task is the building of an independent revolutionary party of the working class in opposition to all sections of Venezuela's capitalist ruling class—both chavista and right-wing—they demand unconditional support for the Venezuelan government and the subordination of the Venezuelan workers to Maduro's leadership.

In essence, they blame the working class for strengthening the right and in response call on the state to carry out repression.

An example of this trend is to be found in the Brazilian group known as Movimento Negacao da Negacao (MNN).

In the wake of the Venezuelan elections, the MNN has posted two articles on its web site. The first, entitled "Class struggle in Venezuela: Growing conflict with imperialism," places the entire blame for the steep fall in the chavista vote on a "dirty and systematic game played by imperialism to destabilize the government and influence the outcome of the election."

It uncritically quotes Maduro's charge that the systemic blackouts that have plagued Venezuela for years are the result of an "electricity war" and "sabotage" by unnamed opponents of the government, rather than the government's failure to invest sufficient resources in upgrading an antiquated infrastructure, under conditions in which wealth has been siphoned off to pay generous compensation to the

former owners of nationalized industries and to boost the profits of Venezuelan and foreign banks.

The response of the new Maduro government has been to place the electrical industry under the supervision of the country's military. At the same time the latest "mission" announced by Maduro bears the title "Homeland Security" and will mobilize regular army and national guard troops to carry out domestic policing.

For the MNN, such measures are to be welcomed. It praised Maduro's banning of demonstrations in Caracas, affirming that otherwise "possible new conflicts would have opened up a spiral of instability with incalculable results." In other words, it places its confidence in the repressive forces of the state, not in the independent strength of the working class.

The article goes on to justify "a policy of tactical unity with the Maduro government" with the arguments that "Maduro himself comes from the working class and the trade union movement" and "for the first time in the history of chavismo, a worker is taking control of the armed forces, marking a new stage."

For an organization based in Brazil that calls itself socialist and revolutionary to make such a statement is indicative of the profound political disorientation and opportunism of the petty-bourgeois left in Latin America. After all, from 2003 to 2011, Brazil also had a president who came "from the working class and the trade union movement." Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva presided over the record growth of Brazilian capital and the profits extracted from the labor of Brazilian workers, while leaving untouched a military that had exercised two decades of dictatorship.

The suggestion that the answer to a threat from imperialism and the Venezuelan right is to rally around the "working class" president and the military he "controls" is politically misguided to say the least.

It is the Venezuelan military—from which the former paratrooper colonel Hugo Chavez came—that exercises decisive control over the government and staffs a large share of its political posts. If a coup is to come, it will be from within this political pillar of chavismo, with the emergence of a Venezuelan Pinochet from among the "Bolivarian" officer corps. The line promoted by the MNN serves to politically disarm the Venezuelan working class in the face of such a threat.

The political reality is that Venezuelan workers can rely only on their own independent strength to defend social gains won over the past period and to defeat the threat of a right-wing coup. To the extent that they remain politically shackled to the ruling PSUV and the Maduro government, they will be powerless to do either.

The MNN's article adopts a notably provocative tone on this score. After making its case for a "front with Maduro," i.e., a popular front between the working class and a bourgeois government, it goes on to denounce anyone opposing such a front.

It condemns as "purists" those who chose not to "dirty their hands by calling for a vote for Maduro and defended the casting of blank ballots in April. This was a position taken even by most so-called 'Trotskyists' who work in Venezuela. In practice, they served as a tool for Capriles and his coup supporters."

Here one has resurrected the language of Stalinism during the Popular Front period, when Trotskyists and others who fought for the political independence of the working class were denounced as fascists and agents of imperialism.

In its second article, the MNN takes as good coin Maduro's rhetoric in his inauguration speech about achieving socialism in Venezuela. In the same speech he recounted how he had "extended his hand" to Venezuelan capitalists. He also announced that his government was

working on special economic zones, allowing that he found the example of China's Guangdong province, a massive center of super-exploitation of Chinese labor by foreign capital, "very interesting."

The article goes on to equate community councils (*consejos comunales*) and workers councils (*consejos de trabajadores*), created by the Venezuelan government to cement its political control in the poor neighborhoods and suppress worker militancy in the state-owned enterprises, with the workers councils advocated by Marx as independent organizations for the mobilization of the working class to take power. Based on this false premise, it raises the prospect that Maduro will expropriate all capitalist enterprises, destroy the existing state and govern on the basis of these councils.

There is nothing new here. It is just the recycling of similar illusions promoted by petty-bourgeois left and Pabloite revisionist tendencies in Latin America and internationally in bourgeois nationalist trends ranging from Peronism in Argentina, the FLN in Algeria and Castroism in Cuba. All of these elements reject the independent revolutionary role of the working class and search for a *comandante* to lead the revolution.

Whatever illusions the MNN has in Maduro carrying out a socialist revolution, they are not shared by the Brazilian bourgeoisie. Brasilia was among the first foreign stops for Maduro after the election, and he received a warm state welcome from the government of President Dilma Rousseff. The visit saw the negotiation of new multibillion-dollar contracts with the Brazilian conglomerate Odebrecht and other sections of Brazilian capital, which sees the Venezuelan market as strategically vital.

What is striking about the MNN's position on Venezuela is the about-face the organization has executed. As recently as 2009, the same group was writing that the "so-called Bolivarian revolution" was "a farce, a true Bonapartist and authoritarian state that is taking large steps toward a fascist regime."

What has changed in the intervening four years? The protracted crisis of world capitalism and the growth of class struggle internationally has had a definite impact on a whole layer of political organizations that proclaim themselves to be left, socialist and even Trotskyist.

To the extent that such a tendency bases itself on calculations of an entirely nationalist and tactical character, rather than the strategic experiences of the international Trotskyist movement over the course of the 20th century and of the International Committee of the Fourth International over the last 60 years, it inevitably comes under immense class pressures and is condemned to commit political errors and betrayals.

The terrible political price to be paid for such an orientation is the shifting of their political line into alignment with the needs of their "own" ruling classes. That is the danger evident in the evolution of the MNN's perspective on Venezuela.



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