

A reply to discussion on the Venezuelan elections

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The *World Socialist Web Site* received a large number of comments in response to its December 11 perspective, “The Venezuelan elections and the dead end of Latin America’s “turn to the left.” Inevitably, several of these comments expressed outrage that the WSWs subjects the “left” governments that came to power in a number of countries over the past decade and a half to a Marxist analysis. The perspective insisted on defining them in class terms as bourgeois governments, their left and pseudo-socialist rhetoric notwithstanding.

The perspective went on to point out that crises engulfing one after another of these governments are the inevitable product of the deepening crisis of capitalism both internationally and within each of these countries, which has reversed the conditions that made such governments both useful and possible for the capitalist ruling classes in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil and elsewhere in the hemisphere.

The WSWs treated last week’s debacle for the ruling party of President Nicolas Maduro, the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) as symptomatic of this deepening objective crisis and of the increasing turn of the masses of working people against these governments.

In Venezuela, large numbers of workers and poor cast their ballots for the right-wing opposition of the MUD (Roundtable of Democratic Unity), not out of any conviction that this collection of reactionary and semi-fascist politicians would improve the increasingly intolerable conditions in Venezuela, but as a “punishment vote” (*voto castigo*) against the government, which they blame for these conditions.

We pointed out that the defeat for the PSUV, the party of Maduro and the late Hugo Chavez, followed on the heels of the victory of the right-wing candidate Mauricio Macri in Argentina, ending a dozen years of rule by the *kirchneristas*, a faction of the Peronist movement that postured as “left,” and came in the midst of the profound crisis of the Workers Party (PT) government in Brazil, where polls show a majority of the population supporting the drive of the Brazilian right to impeach President Dilma Rousseff.

Our perspective is that this new so-called turn to the right in Latin America represents a rightward turn by the capitalist ruling class and all its representatives, from the MUD to the PSUV in Venezuela and from the PSBD to the PT in Brazil, as masses of workers and oppressed are being driven to the left and into struggle by the deepening crisis of capitalism.

The burning question is that of revolutionary leadership, i.e., the necessity of building new parties based on the struggle for the political independence of the working class from all of these bourgeois movements, armed with a socialist and internationalist program for putting an end to capitalism.

Those who wrote in to express their differences with this perspective took issue with the assessment of the Venezuelan government and the roots of its present crisis. Some presented it as a question of apportioning blame for this crisis. The crisis in Venezuela, they argue, is the fault not of the Venezuelan government and its *chavista* ruling party, but of US imperialism and the Venezuelan oligarchy.

Some of the comments suggest that we are insufficiently sensitive to the pressures placed upon Venezuela by US imperialism and its allies within the country’s ruling class.

This is far from the case. The WSWs has continuously warned of the sharp dangers to the Venezuelan working class posed by the imperialist conspiracies and aggression, but we have insisted at the same time that those pseudo-left elements who have cast “*chavismo*” and “Bolivarian Socialism” as some new road to socialism have worked to politically disarm workers in the face of these threats.

By painting in rosy colors a situation in which the grip of private capital over the country’s economy is greater than before Chavez took office nearly 17 years ago, and in which finance capital is reaping super profits while workers’ living standards are decimated, our critics are providing cover for some of the most dangerous enemies of the Venezuelan working class. These include two pillars of the *chavista* government: the so-called *boliburguesia*, which has enriched itself through government connections and wholesale corruption, and the military, which wields immense power within the government and may yet emerge from the wings to impose a political settlement, Pinochet style.

One reader writes: “The ones to blame are US government, the Republican Party and the Venezuelan oligarchic class, and the Venezuelan middle class. We have to remember that the middle classes are very far to the right-wing in all countries of the world.”

Such an assessment only serves to cover up the failure of the Maduro government to mount an effective struggle against either US imperialism or the Venezuelan oligarchy. Moreover, it obscures the fact that this government, which has left intact both the financial oligarchy and the key institutions of the capitalist state, including the military, is organically incapable of doing so.

As for the Venezuelan middle class, such an assessment has nothing to do with Marxism and would essentially rule out the victory of the socialist revolution in any country. If the Venezuelan middle class turned to the right, it was because it saw no solutions coming from the “left.”

As Leon Trotsky wrote in his work “Whither France?” (1934):

“The petty bourgeoisie is distinguished by its economic dependence and its social heterogeneity. Its upper stratum is linked directly to the big bourgeoisie. Its lower stratum merges with the proletariat and even

falls to the status of lumpen-proletariat. In accordance with its economic situation, the petty bourgeoisie can have no policy of its own. It always oscillates between the capitalists and the workers. Its own upper stratum pushes it to the Right; its lower strata, oppressed and exploited, are capable in certain conditions of turning sharply to the Left.”

Under conditions of extreme crisis, such as exist in Venezuela, and in the absence of a genuine revolutionary leadership, “the petty bourgeoisie,” writes Trotsky, “begins to lose patience. It assumes an attitude more and more hostile towards its own upper stratum. It becomes convinced of the bankruptcy and the perfidy of its political leadership. ... It is precisely this disillusionment of the petty bourgeoisie, its impatience, its despair, that Fascism exploits. ... The fascists show boldness, go out into the streets, attack the police, and attempt to drive out Parliament by force. That makes an impression on the despairing petty bourgeois.”

In Venezuela, the middle class, together with the workers, has suffered a sharp decline in its real income and continuous scarcities, along with sharply deteriorating public services, under conditions in which the Maduro government has taken no actions against the capitalists who it endlessly accuses of waging an “economic war” against it.

Rather, it continues paying tens of billions to Wall Street to service Venezuela’s foreign debt, while opening up Venezuelan oil to exploitation by Chevron and other capitalist oil conglomerates. It provides dollars (supposedly for imports) to the capitalists, both the oligarchs and its own supporters in the *boliburguesia*, at favorable exchange rates, only to see them diverted into obscenely profitable currency speculation and smuggling schemes that both drive up inflation and deepen scarcities.

Meanwhile, the government has joined the economic war on the working class, laying off workers in the public sector and treating workers who resist the attacks as “labor criminals.” That it defends such reactionary policies with phony-left rhetoric only makes them all the more odious.

Some of the comments criticizing the WWSWS perspective appear to reflect genuine questions about the complex political situation in Venezuela and the nature of the relationship between US imperialism, the national bourgeoisie and the Maduro government. Others express a worked-out perspective common to a number of pseudo-left groups that have long tailored their politics to subordinating the working class to counterrevolutionary bureaucracies—both Stalinist and trade union—and to various bourgeois nationalist movements.

In the latter category is “WVN,” who denounces the perspective as “sophistry” and a “rant” that fails to appreciate “the fact that US imperialism permeates... it cannot be whisked away with rhetorical flourishes by armchair revolutionaries who never missed a meal.”

He continues: “Latin Americans are showing the world what revolution looks like.... bloody, with set backs, long with many lofty minded critiics [sic] far from the front calling the revolt they do not bleed for ‘dead.’” He sums up a second posting with “Viva Fidel! Viva Che, Viva Hugo, Viva the Latin American fighters!”

There is nothing revolutionary or even radical about such politics. The invocation of all-powerful US imperialism as an alibi for the reactionary policies of the Maduro government can be, and is, employed by the same people to justify support for Barack Obama.

At the time of Hugo Chavez’s death in March 2013, describing those pseudo-left elements who extolled *chavismo* as some new road to socialism, we wrote: “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.”

Abstract rhetorical invocations of the “Latin American revolution” only serve to obscure the bloody lessons of past struggles and the bitter price paid by Latin American workers for policies pursued by petty-bourgeois leftists who worked to subordinate the working class to one form or another of bourgeois nationalism.

They promoted illusions in bourgeois nationalist military officers from Juan Peron in Argentina to Gen. J.J. Torres in Bolivia and Gen. Juan Francisco Velasco Alvarado in Peru, who, like Chavez, carried out partial nationalizations, engaged in anti-imperialist rhetoric and promoted minimal social assistance programs for the poor. In each case, these regimes served as antechambers for military coups and right-wing dictatorships that murdered tens of thousands.

These same elements extolled the “Chilean road to socialism,” in which the government of President Salvador Allende, backed by the Stalinist Chilean Communist Party, subordinated the revolutionary upsurge of the Chilean workers to capitalism and, by 1973, was taking back by force the factories taken over by the workers and inviting the generals, including Pinochet himself, into its cabinet to better coordinate repression. The result was 17 years of fascist-military dictatorship.

The road to the bloody defeats in Latin America in the 1970s was also paved by those who spouted “Viva Fidel!” and “Viva Che!”, portraying petty-bourgeois guerrillaism as some new road to socialism. This retrograde 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.

We have no illusions that this history will hold any interest for those whose politics amount to trying to make themselves feel good by cheerleading bourgeois nationalists supposedly bringing “socialism” to the masses.

What is involved in this outlook is a deep-seated conviction that a successful revolutionary struggle by the workers is impossible—above all in the United States—and a bitter hostility toward those who fight to prepare such a struggle through the development of Marxism and the building of independent revolutionary parties of the working class.



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