

The Venezuelan working class at a crossroads

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16 June 2016

Growing spontaneous working class demonstrations, road blockades, food warehouse break-ins and a national strike of bus drivers have raised the specter of social revolution in Venezuela.

The first five months of 2016 have seen an average of 19 protests per day over food scarcities and the breakdown of basic social services. Three demonstrators were killed during demonstrations last week as the Chavista government of President Nicholas Maduro ordered police and the national guard to break up demonstrations with force. Another demonstrator was killed on Tuesday, and videos showing the armed forces firing indiscriminately into crowds of civilians chanting "We want food" are being widely circulated on the Internet.

Conditions increasingly resemble those that erupted into the bloody *caracazo* of 1989, when masses of workers and urban poor descended on Caracas and other major cities in an outpouring of rage over an IMF austerity package imposed by the government of Carlos Andres Perez. Then, as now, oil prices had plummeted reducing the ability of the capitalist government to ameliorate the immense class tensions that pervade Venezuela, one of the most socially polarized countries on the planet.

It was fundamentally the *caracazo* that gave rise to the Chavista movement, which emerged first as a dissident faction of junior army officers, disgusted by the government's use of the armed forces to shoot down thousands of Venezuelans in the street.

In 1992, the late Hugo Chavez, then a paratroop lieutenant colonel, led an abortive military coup. Under conditions in which all the major parties as well as the existing trade unions had been completely discredited, the uprising captured the popular imagination, and, after a brief imprisonment, Chavez was elected president in 1998 on a populist and left-nationalist platform.

The pro-capitalist, bourgeois nationalist policies of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) have produced a social catastrophe for Venezuelan workers. For-profit corporations—both foreign and national—have shut down operations, throwing tens of thousands into destitution. A total absence of planned economic development has left the economy entirely dependent on oil exports and vulnerable to price fluctuations on the international capitalist commodity markets.

The private foreign and domestic banks remain in firm control of the commanding heights of the economy, while the Venezuelan government continues to slash desperately needed imports of food and medicine in order to continue funneling tens of billions of dollars to meeting interest payments to Wall Street bondholders.

Throughout 17 years of Chavez/Maduro rule, pseudo-left groups worldwide have heralded the PSUV as a model of "21st century socialism." In reality, under the Chavistas, a new ruling class layer of financiers, politically-connected businessmen and contractors as well as top government officials has enriched itself at the expense of the Venezuelan masses. The minimal social assistance programs implemented during this period have proven woefully incapable of preventing roughly 80 percent of the population from living in poverty and 51 percent in extreme poverty.

Leading politicians in the right-wing opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) have warned that the country is on the verge of "social explosion," and that "society will erupt as a result of the growing daily tension." They are seeking a recall referendum, not only to remove Maduro, but to provide an escape valve for the increasing social tensions.

Washington attempted to overthrow Chavez in a failed 2002 coup and has since designated the Venezuelan government as an "extraordinary threat to

US national security.” For his part, Maduro only weeks ago was invoking a supposedly imminent US invasion to justify mobilizing the military in the face of mounting popular unrest.

Yet on Tuesday at a meeting of the Organization of American States in the Dominican Republic, Secretary of State John Kerry announced the US will be hosting high-level negotiations to mediate the political conflict in Venezuela and hopefully alleviate social tensions. After meeting with Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodriguez, Kerry said Washington was determined to “improve the relationship” and “overcome the old rhetoric.”

For his part, Maduro called for the immediate exchange of ambassadors and voiced enthusiasm for the new talks with Washington. “I very much like President Obama,” he said Tuesday night. “He is a nice person ... Why can’t I say that?”

What brings the two sides together is their mutual fear of and hostility towards the Venezuelan working class. While US imperialism has long viewed the Chavez-Maduro government as an irritant that it would like to eliminate, it has no interest whatsoever in achieving this aim by means of a mass revolt from below.

The US ruling class, as well as the Latin American bourgeoisie, are well aware that the grievances of Venezuelan workers are shared by workers throughout the hemisphere. In Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and across Central America and Mexico, strikes and protests are growing in frequency and intensity. Latin America today is the most unequal region of the world, a social powder keg waiting to explode.

The emergence of the class struggle, moreover, is not limited to Latin America. It is a global phenomenon, marked by the French movement against the Khomri Law and the strike wave in Belgium, as well as the strikes of telecommunication workers in the United States and the millions of votes for a self-proclaimed “socialist” presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders.

The Venezuelan working class is at a crossroads. It faces hostile enemies in the Maduro government, the military, the right-wing official opposition, the trade unions, and in the form of US imperialist intervention. The Venezuelan pseudo left, epitomized by groups like Marea Socialista and the International Marxist

Tendency, blames the working class for the crisis of the Venezuelan bourgeois government and seek to bolster waning illusions in the PSUV.

Seventeen years of PSUV rule shows that workers can trust no section of the bourgeoisie—no matter whether they clothe themselves in radical phraseology—to represent their class interests. The brutal suppression of the *caracazo* in 1989 points to the stark dangers in the present situation. Today, just as then, the Maduro government ultimately relies on the military to drown a revolutionary uprising in blood. US imperialism, for all its democratic and human rights pretensions, will support whatever measures are required to uphold private property and profit interests.

Workers and youth can rely only on their independent mobilization to meet the need for food, healthcare, and other basic necessities of life that the capitalist system is unable to provide.

The International Committee of the Fourth International calls on workers and youth to form neighborhood and workplace committees to seize food warehouses from private hoarders, black marketeers, and the ruling party-controlled food distribution committees (CLAP), and to distribute food to all those in need.

Factories and workplaces must be seized from private and state owners and placed under the democratic control of the working class so that production can be directed to meet the basic needs of the population. Strike committees must be formed to coordinate work stoppages in key industries across the country.

Workers must prepare to defend themselves from PSUV paramilitaries and from the police and military. But most importantly, workers must arm themselves theoretically with an independent, internationalist socialist program. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages workers and youth in Venezuela to contact us today and fight for the establishment of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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