

Ruling Venezuelan party cuts off recall petition drive, provoking protests

Alexander Fangmann
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Protests and rallies took place across Venezuela on Wednesday, organized by right-wing opposition parties in response to the National Electoral Council's (CNE) halting of the signature drive for a recall referendum that would remove President Nicolás Maduro from power. In several areas of the country there were violent clashes between police and armed demonstrators mobilized by right-wing parties. A policeman in the state of Miranda was reportedly shot dead while trying to clear a roadblock on the Pan-American Highway.

A subsequent "civic strike" called by the right on Friday appeared to have little effect. Separately, however, hundreds of workers from the Hipódromo de La Rinconada, Caracas's main racetrack, blocked a key highway to protest delays in the paying of food tickets, a government-mandated benefit that allows workers to buy food.

Since the crushing defeat suffered by the *chavista* United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in legislative elections last December, the Maduro government has increasingly taken measures to sideline the National Assembly, raising the danger of dictatorship just as conditions for the Venezuelan working class are becoming increasingly dire in the face of the country's economic collapse.

The CNE based its ruling last week on earlier decisions in four regional court cases, which upheld challenges to the validity of signatures collected during the first step of the recall process. The government is claiming that an enormous percentage of the signatures gathered by the opposition were fraudulent. This move in all likelihood means that the recall is effectively off the table because, according to the constitution, after January 10 a recall would only result in Maduro's replacement by the vice-president, rather than in new

elections as would occur if the recall took place before that date.

Underscoring the deep crisis and divisions between the main factions of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie, the opposition-controlled National Assembly voted to put Maduro on trial following the CNE decision, hoping to emulate the recent impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil. Meanwhile, Diosdado Cabello, the former speaker of the National Assembly and a leading figure in the PSUV, said in regard to the claims of electoral fraud, "We hope that those responsible will be found, will be detained and will go to prison for what they have done."

Since the PSUV's loss of control of the National Assembly, the Maduro government has become increasingly reliant on the courts and other institutions made up primarily of *chavista* appointees to allow it to circumvent the legislature. Aside from the decision on the recall referendum, the CNE also announced that elections for state governors, which had been scheduled for December, will instead be held in June of next year, likely to prevent further layers of government from being lost by the PSUV.

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court ruled that the Maduro government could send its budget directly to the courts for approval, bypassing the normal legislative process. To provide a fig leaf of legality for its moves, the Maduro government has leaned heavily on a dispute that opened up last year just after the National Assembly voted to seat three deputies from the state of Amazonas, despite a ruling by the Supreme Court which barred those deputies from taking their seats after a challenge to their election results by the PSUV. Since that time, the *chavistas* have considered all acts of the National Assembly as null and void. As vice-president Aristobulo Istariz put it, "Legally, the

National Assembly does not exist."

The bypassing of the National Assembly on the part of the ruling PSUV poses a grave danger for the Venezuelan working class. The move toward extra-constitutional rule is unfolding as social conditions in the country are rapidly deteriorating due to an economic collapse following from a fall in the price of oil, itself ultimately conditioned by the continued downturn in the world economy. While the recent measures have been aimed in the first instance at the PSUV's right-wing opposition, the concentration of power will be directed against the working class once it begins to organize itself independently to defend its living conditions.

Conditions in the country are dire. On Thursday, October 27, the government announced it would be raising the minimum wage, including food subsidies, by 40 percent. This does not begin to erase the erosion in purchasing power that has occurred due to the rampant inflation, which the IMF expects will exceed 1,600 percent next year.

There are widespread reports of hunger in the country, with many people skipping meals. It was widely reported earlier this month that workers from the state-run oil giant PDVSA, previously considered among the best-paid in the country, have been selling their uniforms to get money to buy food.

The health care system also appears to be in almost total collapse. Infant mortality has increased by 18.5 percent from the previous year, and is up 50 percent from 2012. Hospitals lack all kinds of basic supplies, which the country has not been able to import, due to the fall in export earnings.

The Venezuelan Health Observatory, part of the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas, says that fewer than 10 percent of operating rooms, emergency rooms, and intensive care units are operational. In addition, over 76 percent of hospitals have a scarcity of medicines, 81 have a scarcity of surgical materials, and 70 percent do not have reliable access to water. Diseases that had once been eradicated are returning to the country, such as diphtheria.

The oil industry is also suffering from a vicious cycle of neglect, as lack of imported parts, machinery, and funds to pay oil service companies have led to a decline in production. According to government figures, oil production fell 11 percent over the past year and the

number of working rigs declined by 25 percent. In parts of the countries, wells are simply flaring off oil and gas due to a lack of processing equipment. Oil service companies such as Halliburton and Schlumberger are winding down their operations and exiting the country.

Despite this economic and social meltdown, Venezuelan bonds are providing excellent returns of 46 percent as the Maduro government continues to prioritize paying back its creditors over funding imports that would allow it to meet workers' needs or even to continue producing the oil it needs to fund imports. In fact, banks and financial firms around the world have historically profited quite handsomely from the so-called "Bolivarian socialist" policies pursued by Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chávez.



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