

US Senate passes resolution calling on Trump to escalate regime-change in Venezuela

Alexander Fangmann
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On March 1, the United States Senate passed a resolution calling on President Donald Trump to escalate measures against the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. These moves are part of a concerted effort by American imperialism to oust the ruling *chavistas* and replace them with a right-wing regime more aligned with American interests.

While cast as a call for the restoration of democratic governance, with some clauses of the resolution calling for the release of jailed right-wing politicians such as Leopoldo López and Antonio Ledezma, and others calling on the Maduro government to respect freedom of assembly and expression, and the constitutional separation of powers, the essential content of the resolution's demands is that Maduro hand over the reins of government to the opposition or face more overt efforts at regime change from Washington.

This is all the more obvious given the resolution's expression of support for the efforts of the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, to invoke the so-called Inter-American Democratic Charter of the OAS, which could lead to a suspension of Venezuela from that organization on the basis of a breakdown of constitutional norms.

The resolution also urges Trump to "instruct appropriate Federal agencies to hold officials of the Government of Venezuela accountable for violations of United States law and abuses of internationally recognized human rights," code for an expansion of sanctions and other penalties against Venezuela, which is already reeling from an economic crisis brought on by the dramatic fall in oil prices since 2014.

Truly a bipartisan effort, the resolution's lead sponsor was Democrat Ben Cardin of Maryland, the ranking member of the Senate's foreign relations

committee. Other co-sponsors for the resolution were Republicans Marco Rubio, Tom Cotton, Roy Blunt, Cory Gardner and David Perdue. Co-sponsors from the Democrats were Dick Durbin, Bob Menendez, Bill Nelson and Tim Kaine. Underscoring both parties' unity of purpose when it comes to Venezuela, the resolution was passed by unanimous consent.

Indeed, one of Barack Obama's last acts as president was the early renewal of an executive order declaring a national emergency due to the "unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States" posed by Venezuela. The executive order allows sanctions to be applied against Venezuelan officials, which Trump has since done to Vice President Tareck El Aissami and one of his close associates, businessman Samark López, on the basis of alleged narcotics trafficking.

No doubt a significant basis for the ratcheting up of US hostility toward Venezuela has been the latter's increasing trade relationship with China, second now only to its commercial ties to the US. With US imperialism setting itself on a collision course with Beijing, it is looking to close China out of a strategic foothold in Latin America and to bring the entire region in line with the drive to war, an effort that has been helped by the dramatic decline in the price of oil and other commodities caused by the decline in China's economic growth.

Approximately 95 percent of the Venezuela's export earnings come from the oil industry. With prices dropping from over \$100 per barrel in 2014 to around \$50, the country's revenues have fallen accordingly. On top of that, production has also decreased, estimated at 2.25 million barrels per day, down from 2.4 million in 2015 and 3 million in 2009, though still higher than a recently agreed OPEC target of 1.972 million barrels

per day.

According to documents obtained by Reuters, Venezuela is even behind on oil shipments to China, having missed 27 shipments—nearly 9 million barrels—by the end of January. The country is also past due on 18 shipments to Russia totaling 4 million barrels. Due to the collapse in output by Venezuelan oil producer PDVSA, Fitch now rates a default at the state-owned company as “probable.”

In order to make its debt payments and finance imports, Venezuela has also been burning through its foreign reserves, and now only has about \$10.5 billion remaining, according to a recent report from the Central Bank of Venezuela. This is down from \$30 billion in reserves in 2011 and \$20 billion in 2015. Of the remaining reserves, \$7.7 billion are in the form of gold. The country has \$7.2 billion in debt payments to make over the rest of the year.

As oil revenue has declined, so have the dollars necessary to finance imports, which in 2016 totaled approximately \$18 billion, down from \$66 billion in 2012. The result has been shortages of food and other basic goods, including medicine and parts and equipment needed for the oil industry, further fueling the production declines.

Living conditions for Venezuelan workers have become increasingly dire. IMF reports have the country’s inflation set to hit 1,660 percent this year and 2,880 percent next year, meaning that many goods are now completely out of reach for the vast majority.

Hunger has become endemic among wide layers of the population, with a Living Conditions Survey produced by three Venezuelan universities finding that 75 percent of Venezuelans lost an average of 19 pounds in 2016. Venezuelans categorized as “extremely poor” reported having lost more than 20 pounds on average.

School attendance has also decreased, with more than 1 million school-age children no longer attending classes. While hunger has played a part in the decrease in school attendance, other contributing factors have been a lack of basic public utilities like water and electricity, as well as strikes.

The hospital system relied upon by workers is in almost total disarray, with basic supplies such as antibiotics and surgical supplies scarce. Diseases are also overwhelming public health authorities. Diphtheria, eradicated over 70 years ago, has returned,

with several suspected deaths in Bolivar state reported by public health sources.

The National Union of Workers (UNETE) issued a report this week recording 1,500 strikes and walkouts across Venezuela in 2016, the majority of them in response to layoffs, attacks on working conditions and the failure of public and private sector employers to renew existing contracts. According to the union federation, some 600,000 Venezuelan lost their jobs last year.

The Venezuelan working class is being driven into bitter struggles by the impact of the country’s protracted economic crisis, the increase in social inequality and the rapacious policies of both international capital and the native Venezuelan capitalists. These conflicts point increasingly toward a head-on confrontation with the *chavista* government, which has proven itself to be an utterly corrupt tool of Venezuelan capitalism.



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