

Workers' protests grow in Venezuela: Who is responsible for mass hunger and destruction of living standards?

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Speaking Monday at the World Food Forum of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome, Delcy Rodríguez, who has run Venezuela on Washington's behalf since US forces abducted Nicolás Maduro on January 3, boasted of her country's "experience" in the fight against hunger. "Venezuela is a country that managed to reach its goal of zero hunger, and then we had this whole process derived from international sanctions," she said, announcing a new program. "We are very close to achieving it again."

The same day, the polling firm Consultores 21 published a survey finding that 56 percent of Venezuelan households suffer from food insecurity, meaning they do not know whether they will eat dinner or what they will eat the following day. Among the poor, nearly 60 percent of the population, the figure is 60 percent. Average household income is \$435 a month, against roughly \$900 needed to cover basic needs, while the food basket alone costs more than \$750.

On Tuesday, health and education workers, university employees and retirees marched in Caracas toward the Miraflores presidential palace, carrying more than 50,000 signatures demanding the unfreezing of wage scales, the restoration of collective contracts and the calculation of year-end bonuses on total income rather than a base wage that, as one education worker said, "doesn't reach a dollar." The Bolivarian National Police (PNB) blocked their path by force. Similar protests took place before state governors' offices across the country.

Rodríguez blames "the process," that is the destruction of living standards, on the sanctions while presiding over a protectorate of the very power that imposed them. US sanctions have indeed been associated with more than 100,000 excess deaths, according to a UN special rapporteur. Today Washington keeps Venezuela's oil revenue in US Treasury accounts, and the Pentagon has taken a 35 percent stake in a consortium holding 100-year rights to 17 oil fields. Rodríguez's government has accepted every one of these terms.

Workers entering into struggle must ask: who, then, is responsible for the mass hunger and social devastation they suffer? Primary responsibility lies with US imperialism, which strangled the country with sanctions and now plunders it under military occupation. It is also part of the public record that the Chavista regime has served as imperialism's client and enforcer even before the January 3 invasion, loading the crisis onto the backs of workers since the collapse of oil prices in 2014. The transformation of Chavismo into the direct administrator of colonial servitude is not a betrayal of bourgeois nationalism but its logical outcome.

But political responsibility for leaving the working class disarmed and blocking any alternative lies with the pseudo-left tendencies that spent a quarter century presenting the bourgeois nationalist regime as a "revolution" and extolling its pretensions about pursuing "21st century

socialism."

Socialist Alternative (SA), one of Chavismo's most persistent promoters in the United States, has now drawn up its own balance sheet. In "The Rise and Fall of Venezuela's 'Bolivarian Revolution,'" published September 20, its author, George Martin Fell Brown, writes that "Delcy Rodríguez rapidly transformed herself into the Trump administration's lapdog." SA dates a "counterrevolution by Maduro against the gains of a Bolivarian Revolution" to the privatizations and Chevron deals that followed the crisis of 2017-18. And it delivers its verdict on the Venezuelan workers: "In 2026, the masses kept quiet and many even welcomed the coup."

Each of these claims is false. There was no revolution for Maduro to overturn. Rodríguez did not transform herself: her policies were the continuation of the direction Chavismo had been implementing. And the working class is not quiet. The article is not a reckoning with the past, but an attempt to rescue the illusions that delivered Venezuelan workers, bound hand and foot, to the present catastrophe, and to keep them available for the next "pink tide."

There was no revolution

The recognition Rodríguez invoked was an FAO diploma Maduro collected in Rome in June 2013, after undernourishment had fallen, by the government's own figures, from over 13.5 percent of the population in the early 1990s to under 5 percent.

The gains were real, and they were the product of the oil boom. Hugo Chávez, a former army lieutenant colonel who had led a failed coup in 1992, was elected in 1998 amid the collapse of the old two-party system that had drowned the 1989 *Caracazo* working-class uprising in blood. As oil prices climbed from about \$11 a barrel in 1998 to more than \$100, his government built up the state food corporation CASA and launched the Mercal network in 2003, selling subsidized food at half the price of private chains. These programs and the health and education *misiones* were financed with a portion of oil rents.

None of this touched capitalist property. SA itself reports that, over the Chávez years, the private sector's share of the economy grew from 65 to 71 percent. A new layer of capitalists, the *boliburguesía*, grew rich on state contracts and import licenses. The social programs bought social peace, and that peace gave the regime leverage to bargain with foreign oil companies and finance capital for a larger share of the profits extracted from Venezuelan workers.

When oil fell from over \$100 in mid-2014 to under \$30 in early 2016,

and the first Trump administration aggressively escalated sanctions, the Chavista government made the working class pay. Mercal and PDVAL withered amid corruption, and the CLAP food bags that replaced them became a business for figures such as Alex Saab, later Maduro's minister of industry. Only 6 percent of households now receive a bag monthly, and 52 percent never receive one.

At the center of workers' demands today is the minimum wage, which has been frozen at 130 bolívares since 2022, a few cents of a dollar, with income paid in bonuses that count toward neither benefits nor pensions.

Long before the January invasion, Chavismo had carried out one of the most brutal shock therapies in Latin American history. The "counterrevolution" SA attributes to Maduro was the response of a capitalist government to the end of the boom, carried out by the same state, the same political party and largely the same personnel.

The purpose of SA's "balance sheet" is to rescue the claim that there was a revolution in the first place and that it had a working-class character. However, even SA's own evidence refutes it. After the masses defeated the US-backed coup of April 2002, it notes, Chávez called for "national reconciliation and for people to return to their homes." The working class never held power. No soviets or workers' councils ever existed. The communal councils were created by law and financed by the presidency. "Popular power" became merely a label with no real popular content: the same "Ministries of Popular Power" now administer the US protectorate.

SA builds its argument on a passage from Marx, repeated by Lenin: "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin explained that the passage means the working class must "smash the bureaucratic-military machine" and replace it with organs of its own rule, as the Paris Commune did.

The passage presupposes that the working class has taken power. In Venezuela, an army officer took office through elections at the head of the existing bourgeois state. Yet SA writes that Chávez "still failed because seizing the state machine ready-made is a fundamentally wrong strategy." The bourgeois nationalist is presented as the leader of the working class, and his policy becomes an error in "strategy," not the expression of its real class character.

Chávez did not smash the state. He strengthened it, placing officers at the head of ministries, PDVSA and the mining zones.

After Maduro's abduction, Trump brushed aside María Corina Machado, whom Washington had sponsored for years, saying she lacked "the respect within the country," and turned to Rodríguez. Chavismo controls the army, the SEBIN political police, the PNB, the PSUV and part of the trade unions, and has years of experience imposing austerity and repressing protests. A protectorate built on the handover of oil and minerals requires cheap labor and a population kept in desperation. Chavismo has delivered both.

How SA falsifies permanent revolution

In 2007, Chávez began speaking of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and urging his followers to study it. That a bourgeois nationalist head of state could invoke the legacy of Trotsky was the work of tendencies whose common origin lies in Pabloism. In the early 1950s, Michel Pablo, then secretary of the Fourth International, argued that under the pressure of the masses, Stalinist bureaucracies, social democrats and bourgeois nationalists would be pushed to carry out the revolution, and that Trotskyists should dissolve themselves into these movements. In November 1953, James P. Cannon's *Open Letter* rallied the orthodox

Trotskyists against this liquidationism, insisting that the overthrow of capitalism "can be accomplished only under the leadership of the working class in society," led by its revolutionary party. The International Committee of the Fourth International was founded on that basis.

Ted Grant took Pablo's side. Grant had already refused to join the Fourth International at its founding in 1938, and he spent the following decades practicing Pabloism without Pablo, burying his supporters inside the British Labour Party. In 1992, Grant and Alan Woods split from the majority led by Peter Taaffe, which kept the name Committee for a Workers' International (CWI). Socialist Alternative remained the CWI's US section until a further split in 2019, when the SA established the International Socialist Alternative. None of these splits involved a break with Pabloism.

Woods became Chávez's most enthusiastic cheerleader. He met with Chávez repeatedly, was recruited to speak at a pro-government rally, and after one meeting in 2005 wrote, "The identity is complete." The CWI presented itself as the more "orthodox" and critical alternative, but it operated entirely within the same framework. In 2007, it declared it "extremely positive that Chávez has put the idea of the permanent revolution on the political agenda," adding that "the crucial question is how it is understood and applied." Its criticisms lent Trotskyist credentials to the "Bolivarian Revolution" among workers and youth repelled by Woods' open cheerleading. The more "critical" the revisionism, the more damaging its effects on the consciousness of the working class.

The theory of permanent revolution actually explains why Chavismo ended in directly overseeing the recolonization of Venezuela. For countries of belated capitalist development, Trotsky wrote, "the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation." This must be part of an international socialist revolution that extends to the advanced capitalist countries.

The national bourgeoisie, tied to foreign capital and terrified of the workers, cannot carry out the anti-imperialist struggle. Trotsky described the regimes this produces in Latin America: "The government veers between foreign and domestic capital, between the weak national bourgeoisie and the relatively powerful proletariat. This gives the government a Bonapartist character *sui generis*."

That is Chavismo. It confronted Washington and the old oligarchy in words, while expanding the profits of US corporations. When Chávez "nationalized" the Orinoco oil belt in 2007, Chevron accepted minority stakes and stayed, later receiving the licenses negotiated with Maduro under Biden.

SA, for all its talk of smashing the capitalist state, paints a different picture: "each time, the masses carried Chávez a bit farther to the left." This is Pabloite revisionism in a nutshell. The bourgeois nationalist is cast as the first stage of the revolution, the masses as the force that pushes him along, and the building of an independent revolutionary party becomes unnecessary. Promoting Chávez served to paint in "revolutionary" and "anti-imperialist" colors these tendencies' own operations within the political establishment at home. In SA's case, for instance, this meant campaigning for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party.

"The masses kept quiet"

Having credited the working class with pushing Chávez forward, SA now blames them for the outcome: they "kept quiet and many even welcomed the coup." First the workers are made co-authors of a "revolution" that never was. Then they are made accomplices of the

counterrevolution. Never does SA hold responsible the leadership that subordinated them to the capitalist state and imperialism or its own role in promoting it. Behind this lies the rejection of the working class as a revolutionary force that runs from Pablo through Grant to the present day. A tendency that sees in Chávez the motor of history sees capitalism as given and workers as only a passive mass to be exploited, praised when it follows and condemned when it does not.

Less than four months ago, Venezuelan workers buried more than 6,500 victims of the June 24 earthquakes, killed in a country whose hospitals and housing had been gutted by a decade of crisis. They live on base wages worth a few cents. And they are fighting. SA's article was written while teachers and nurses were already joining protests that culminated in Tuesday's march on Miraflores.

SA concludes that Venezuela is "at a political low point" and that the "struggle, organization, and historical memory of the working class need to be rebuilt from scratch." To start "from scratch" means to wipe away the lessons of one of the great strategic experiences of the working class internationally. If nothing is to be learned, anything goes. SA already points to the "second pink tide" of Claudia Sheinbaum, Gustavo Petro and Lula, governments that are "facing the same tests" and "have been found wanting," as if bourgeois governments might be pressured to pass such tests. The way is being prepared to promote the next Chávez.

The lesson of Venezuela is that bourgeois nationalism, however radical its rhetoric, cannot free an oppressed country from imperialism. The struggle of Venezuelan workers against hunger is a struggle against the US protectorate, its Chavista administrators and their pseudo-left apologists. It can be won only through the independent mobilization of the working class, united with workers across the Americas and in the United States itself, on the program of permanent revolution fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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