

# In Chavez's Venezuela

## Continued repression of popular protest

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

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Just the headline above alone probably condemns us to the gulag by uncritical leftist supporters of Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian socialist revolution. But like most issues that vex the left, a look beneath the surface always provides more than what initially presents itself, and almost always, something worse.

Most leftists and even some anarchists are enthralled by the popular Venezuelan president's policies of oil wealth redistribution, programs to aid the poorest, and his energy aid to the impoverished of the hemisphere including those in the United States.

Plus, his anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and socialist rhetoric hits a chord among many, and certainly it's hard not to enjoy Chavez's pokes to the eyes of George Bush, labeling him a "political cadaver" and "the devil" among other choice words. His plan to destroy U.S. imperial hegemony in its region of traditional imperial looting by crafting economic trade agreements unfavorable to American corporations had Bush running around South and Central America in March trying to outdo Chavez as a champion of the poor (and, failing miserably, and comically).

There's much to enjoy about Hugo Chavez when he's tweaking the nose of El Coloso del Norte, and even much to support in a country that historically featured governments which facilitated massive wealth extraction by U.S. companies. Local client regimes siphoned off enough to enrich a corrupt, domestic elite, while leaving the poor in miserable conditions.

Even our Venezuelan comrades writing on this page attest to the success of some of the Chavismo programs aimed at the country's poorest. However, as I noted in my Spring 2006 article about the Caracas World Social Forum which I attended, the Bolivarian Revolution model is based on an intensified industrialism (in this case, an energy sector that while producing great wealth, expands the damage done to the planet and to people, such as the ones in the photograph above protesting against coal exploration taking place on their traditional lands).

Two points seem relevant before turning to the voice of our comrades from *El Libertario*; one, increasing trends within Chavismo toward authoritarian rule; and, two, the uncritical support given to the Venezuelan government by leftists.

A major point of the *El Libertario* essay (see "Report from Venezuela" in this issue) is that while turning back large amounts of energy profits to the poor, the government has disabled, mostly by cooptation, autonomous popular-based organizations, and turned them into part of the Chavez electoral machine.

They've become essentially a clique, relinquishing their independence and the capacity for independent criticism of the government. *El Libertario* looks at the increasingly repressive nature of the Chavez government towards those unwilling to submit to the pressure to be submerged into his United Socialist Party which he has pledged to construct by year's end.

Leftists have historically been fooled (a "willful ignorance," as Noam Chomsky terms Americans who ignore reality for political myths) by the worst, most corrupt, brutal dictators such as Stalin and Mao, and been willing to call it "socialism." Some still retain a loyalty to one-party states such as Cuba; still others, the worst of them, even to

the psycho-family clique in North Korea, so we know they're a bad judge of what constitutes an authentic revolution or even socialist democracy.

However, anarchists should know. The philosophy of anarchism views the state, not only as the guarantor of capital and ruling class domination, but its bureaucratic structure assures that it will have a nasty character to it by virtue of its function. Certainly, Venezuela is no Zimbabwe or even the United States, for that matter, in terms of repressiveness, but when a group, or movement, or government declares itself as socialist, it has to be judged on its own historic definitions.

At this juncture, Venezuela is an industrial, capitalist state, with a strong ruler (yes, popular, and elected by a great margin) but who appears to be centralizing control. How many more times will the left have to sing, "Won't Get Fooled Again," only to fall for another police state dictator claiming to be a socialist?

Chavez bash Bush? Good. Chavez give social services to the poor? Good. But, there's more to a revolution than that.

It seems clear we should be, at a minimum, suspicious of centralizing and repressive moves on the part of Chavez, as we would of any political state. What is now popular—the Missiones, insulting the criminal Bush—can lose its appeal to Venezuelans, particularly if the vaunted Bolivarian Revolution fails to achieve the elimination of widespread poverty and its attendant problems such as the Caracas housing crisis.

Caracas itself, with its quickly increasing population, its horrible pollution, its skyrocketing crime—a massive murder rate (even of two clowns killed recently), frequent kidnappings, and high incidence of robberies and street crime—may defy solution. One wonders, if there is a sense of rising revolutionary expectations, why there is so much criminal activity.

And, with the process of hyper-urbanization striking Caracas no less than cities on other poor continents, how enough services—medical care, schools, food, and most of all, adequate housing—are going to be able to be made available no matter how much oil is pumped out and sold.

The task would seem to be keeping a clear head about the process currently taking place in Venezuela—to remain critical of further industrial assaults on the planet, to defend indigenous people's land rights, to oppose centralization and repressive measures, and to support those autonomous organizations that refuse to be smothered within the ruling consensus. The left is incapable of such criticality, so as we have historically, it's up to us.

Chavez is a great show, and helps a lot of people in the hemisphere, but it's not revolution; it is still capitalism, and probably will begin to exhibit more authoritarian tendencies as time passes. Remember: forewarned here.

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