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Hugo Chávez: 'We Must Reclaim Socialism'

By John Riddell, Roger Annis, Cleto A. Sojo

Introduction by John Riddell and Roger Annis

On January 31, in a speech to a mass rally following the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez proposed socialism as the necessary goal of the revolutionary process within his country. An Associated Press report says that Chávez's speech drew "roars of approval ... from 20,000 activists." We reprint below a summary of the speech from Venezuela Analysis.

"It is impossible, within the framework of the capitalist system, to solve the grave problems of poverty of the majority of the world's population," the Venezuelan leader said. "We must transcend capitalism. But we cannot resort to state capitalism, which would be the same perversion of the Soviet Union. We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project, and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything."

Chávez's speech follows on six months of advance by Venezuelan workers and peasants. On August 15, the Venezuelan people voted down a referendum recall of President Chávez. The referendum was inspired and backed by the capitalist oligarchs in Venezuela and its allies in Washington and Latin America. Since then, there have been major advances toward the distribution of idle land to land-hungry peasants. In recent weeks, the government signed a major trade and political alliance with revolutionary Cuba [see *Socialist Voice* #26] and expropriated the country's largest paper mill. Meanwhile, some 20,000 Cuban volunteers continue to bring health and social services to working class neighborhoods.

These gains by working people in Venezuela have spurred the Bolivarian movement led by Hugo Chávez to raise its sights and open a discussion of the need for socialism. The Bolivarian leadership's radicalized discourse encourages working people in Venezuela and internationally to reclaim the historic goal of socialism and act more boldly to throw off the capitalist yoke.

Washington sulks with suppressed fury. Indeed, the U.S. government has identified breaking Venezuela's ties with Cuba as the first prerequisite in its plan to overthrow workers' power in Cuba. [see Venezuela Obstacle to US Plans for Regime Change in Cuba]

The upsurge in Venezuela marks a turn in the world class struggle. For the first time in more than two decades, a revolutionary upsurge is beginning to put in question capitalist power. Between them, the allied working peoples of Venezuela and Cuba offer the world an authoritative international pole of anti-imperialist leadership, such as we have not seen for decades.

Socialists in Canada now face the challenge of developing active solidarity with the Venezuelan process and deepening our understanding of events there.

We must join in the discussion Hugo Chávez has initiated about socialism, what it is, and how it will be achieved.

We must learn from the example provided by Cuban working people on how to overthrow capitalism and lay the foundations for a socialist society.

And we must tell the truth to workers in Canada about the Venezuelan struggle and prepare its defense against the inevitable imperialist onslaught.

'IMPERIALISM IS NOT INVINCIBLE'

Venezuela's Chávez Closes World Social Forum with Call to Transcend Capitalism

By Cleto A. Sojo

Caracas, Jan. 30, 2005 (Venezuelanalysis.com).- Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was warmly received at the 2005 edition of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where he held several meetings with local leaders, intellectuals and activists, and gave the closing speech at the Gigantinho Stadium. Chávez generated great interest among Forum participants, many of whom see Chávez and his project of political transformations being implemented in Venezuela, as an inspiration in the struggles for a more better world.

The Venezuelan President visited the Lagoa do Junco agrarian settlement in Tapes set up by Brazil's Landless Movement (MST), and later held a press conference with more than 120 media organizations, where he criticized the U.S. government for claiming to lead a fight against terrorism while undermining Democracy in Venezuela.

Chávez highlighted the recent creation of Latin American satellite TV network TeleSur, "which will allow us to tell our people's reality in our own words." He added that TeleSur will be at the disposal of the people, not of governments.

The leader added that his country's military forces are undergoing a period of modernization of its weapon systems and resources, but asserted that it is aimed at defending the country's sovereignty. "Venezuela will not attack anybody, but don't attack Venezuela, because you will find us ready to defend our sovereignty, and the project we are carrying forward," he added.

'The FTAA is death'

During the closing speech at the Gigantinho Stadium, the president added that 2005 arrived and the FTAA was not implemented. "The FTAA is death, what they go was mini-FTAA's because the U.S. imperialism did not have the strength to impose the neocolonial model of the FTAA."

The President highlighted the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), a proposal made by Venezuela in opposition to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), and which emphasizes social and cultural exchanges above profit-based economic deals. "We can't wait for a sustained economic growth of 10 years in order to start reducing poverty through the trickledown effect, as the neoliberal economic theories propose."

He praised the cooperation with Cuba, which, along with several Central American countries, receives Venezuelan oil at below market prices, in exchange for assistance in healthcare, education, agriculture and other areas. He highlighted that about 20.000 Cuban doctors work in Venezuela at free medical clinics in poor neighborhoods, and that Venezuela has used a Cuban literacy method approved by UNESCO that has allowed more than 1.3 million Venezuelans learn how to read and write. He said Venezuela is using Cuban vaccines, which now allow poor children to be vaccinated against diseases such as hepatitis.

The President criticized alleged media distortions with regard to plans by Fidel Castro and him to spread Communism in the Americas, overthrow governments and set up guerrillas, "after 10 years it seems like we haven't been very successful."

"Cuba has its own profile and Venezuela has its own, but we have respect for each other, but we celebrate accords and advance together for the interest of our peoples." He said that any aggression against either country will have to confront the other, "because we are united in spirit from Mexico down to the Patagonia."

Chávez said U.S.-Venezuela political relations are unhealthy because of "permanent aggressions from there". He criticized U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who recently asserted that Chávez was "a negative force in the region." He said those relations will stay unhealthy as long as the U.S. continues its policies of aggression. "The most negative force in the world today is the government of the United States," he said.

The President criticized the U.S. government for asking other countries to pressure Venezuela in the crisis with Colombia over the kidnapping of a Colombian guerrilla activist in Caracas last December. "Nobody answered their call... they are more lonely everyday." He praised the cooperation of other Latin American countries in the resolution of the crisis, and mentioned that Cuban President Fidel Castro held talks with Colombian President Jorge Uribe to try to help in the resolution of the crisis. Chávez agreed to meet Uribe early in February to settle the dispute.

'Imperialism not invincible'

Chávez added that U.S. imperialism is not invincible. "Look at Vietnam, look at Iraq and Cuba resisting, and now look at Venezuela." In reference to the recommendations of some of his close advisors, he said that "some people say that we cannot say nor do anything that can irritate those in Washington." He repeated the words of Argentine independence hero José de San Martín "let's be free without caring about anyone else says."

“When imperialism feels weak, it resorts to brute force. The attacks on Venezuela are a sign of weakness, ideological weakness. Nowadays almost nobody defends neoliberalism. Up until three years ago, just Fidel [Castro] and I raised those criticisms at Presidential meetings. We felt lonely, as if we infiltrated those meetings.”

He added that those ideological and economic weaknesses will continue to increase. “Just look at the internal repression inside the United States, the Patriot Act, which is a repressive law against U.S. citizens. They have put in jail a group of journalists for not revealing their sources. They won’t allow them to take pictures of the bodies of the dead soldiers, many of them Latinos, coming from Iraq. Those are signs of Goliath’s weaknesses.”

‘The south also exists’

He said there were old and new actors in the geopolitical map who are coming into the scene and have an influence in the weaknesses and strengths of the U.S. hegemony. “Today’s Russia is not Yeltsin’s... there is new Russian nationalism, and I have seen it in the streets of Moscow... there is a good president, Mr. Putin, at the wheel.” He also praised China’s fast economic growth, and highlighted the new Spanish socialist government, “which no longer bends its knees in front of U.S. imperialism.”

“The south also exists... the future of the north depends on the south. If we don’t make that better world possible, if we fail, and through the rifles of the U.S. Marines, and through Mr. Bush’s murderous bombs, if there is no coincidence and organization necessary in the south to resist the offensive of neo-imperialism, and the Bush doctrine is imposed upon the world, the world will be destroyed,” he said.

Chávez warned of drastic weather changes that would bring catastrophic events if no action is taken soon, in reference to uncontrolled or little regulated industrial activity. Chávez added that perhaps before those drastic changes take place, there will be rebellions everywhere “because the peoples are not going to accept in peace impositions such as neoliberalism or such as colonialism.”

‘The U.S. people are our brothers’

He added that all empires come to an end. “One day the decay inside U.S. imperialism will end up toppling it, and the great people of Martin Luther King will be set free. The great people of the United States are our brothers, my salute to them.”

“We must start talking again about equality. The U.S. government talks about freedom and liberty, but never about equality. “They are not interested in equality. This is a distorted concept of liberty. The U.S. people, with whom we share dreams and ideals, must free themselves... A country of heroes, dreamers, and fighters, the people of Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chávez.”

Christ ‘revolutionary’

Chávez thanked Spanish intellectual and director of Le Monde Diplomatique Ignacio Ramonet for saying that Chávez was a new type of leader. He said he is inspired by old types of leaders such as Christ, whom he described as “one of the greatest anti-imperialist fighters, the redeemers

of the poor, and one of the greatest revolutionaries of the history of the world.” The President mentioned Venezuela’s independence hero Simon Bolivar, Brazil’s José Ignacio Abreu Elima, Che Guevara, “that Argentine doctor that traveled through the continent in a motorcycle and who was a witness of the U.S. invasion of Guatemala in 1955, one of the many invasion of the U.S. empire in this continent,” and Cuban President Fidel Castro.

‘Capitalism must be transcended’

“Everyday I become more convinced, there is no doubt in my mind, and as many intellectuals have said, that it is necessary to transcend capitalism. But capitalism can’t be transcended from with capitalism itself, but through socialism, true socialism, with equality and justice. But I’m also convinced that it is possible to do it under democracy, but not in the type of democracy being imposed from Washington,” he said.

“We have to re-invent socialism. It can’t be the kind of socialism that we saw in the Soviet Union, but it will emerge as we develop new systems that are built on cooperation, not competition,” he added.

Chávez said that Venezuela is trying to implement a social economy. “It is impossible, within the framework of the capitalist system to solve the grave problems of poverty of the majority of the world’s population. We must transcend capitalism. But we cannot resort to state capitalism, which would be the same perversion of the Soviet Union. We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything. That’s the debate we must promote around the world, and the WSF is a good place to do it.”

He added that in spite of his admiration for Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara, he said Che’s methods are not applicable. “That thesis of one, two, or three Vietnams, did not work, especially in Venezuela.”

The President cited Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky by saying that “each revolution needs the whip of the counterrevolution to advance.” He listed actions by the opposition and the U.S. government to drive him out of power. “But we resisted, and now have gone into the offensive. For instance, we recovered our oil industry... In 2004, from the oil industry budget we utilized \$4 billion in social investments, education, health, micro-credits, scholarships, and housing, aimed at the poorest of the poor, what neoliberals call waste of money. But that is not a waste of money because it is aimed at empowering the poor so that they can defeat poverty. He added that “that money before stayed out of Venezuela or just benefited the rich.”

He criticized privatizations by saying that “privatization is a neoliberal and imperialist plan. Health can’t be privatized because it is a fundamental human right, nor can education, water, electricity and other public services. They can’t be surrendered to private capital that denies the people from their rights.”

Defends Lula

Chávez defended Brazilian President Luis “Lula” Da Silva, who has been sharply criticized by the Latin American left, and who was booed during his speech at the World Social Forum.

“I say this from the bottom of my heart. In Venezuela at the beginning of my presidency, many of my supporters criticized me and asked me to go at a faster pace [to implement changes], and be more radical, but I considered that it was not the right moment because each process has several phases and different rhythms that not only have to do with internal situations in each country, but with the international situation at the time. So, risking that you make some strange noise, I want to say that I like Lula, I appreciate him, and he is a good man, of a great heart. He is a brother, a comrade and I send him a hug, my love and affection. I’m sure that with Lula and the people of Brazil, with Nestor Kirchner and the Argentine people, with Tabaré Vasquez and the Uruguayan people, we will be opening the path to realizing the dream of a united Latin America.”

Socialist Voice #35, February 21, 2004

The Revolutionary Process in Venezuela An Embryonic Workers and Peasant State

by Coral Wynter

Introduction. As we said in Socialist Voice #35, current developments in Venezuela represent “the first major revolutionary upsurge the world has seen in fifteen years.” To encourage broad discussion of this critically important experience, Socialist Voice has begun posting articles and documents about the Bolivarian Revolution, written by various international socialist currents.

The following article was published in in 2005 in Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal, issue #26 The author is a member of the Democratic Socialist Perspective (formerly Democratic Socialist Party) in Australia. She lived in Venezuela for two years from 1975 and recently spent three months working there in early 2004.

The article is not dated, but based on internal evidence, it was written in the spring or early summer of 2004.

On February 27, 1989, in the poor hillside barrios that surround Caracas, Monday morning began like any other. As they made their way down the precipitous paths and stairways to the main roads, they found that bus fares had doubled and student discount fares were no longer valid. An elderly President Carlos Andrés Pérez had been elected three months previously to the presidency for the second time in twenty years. Obeying the dictates of the IMF and the World Bank, Pérez had increased the price of petrol overnight. Arguments started at the bus stops, and the first violence erupted at the Nuevo Circo bus station in the city centre. Buses were overturned and burned. Within hours, Caracas was gripped by insurrection. The police happened to be on strike for a pay increase and were ill prepared for a riot. Some members of the armed forces, sympathetic to the misery of the poor, helped to organise an orderly looting of supermarkets. Grateful slum dwellers passed presents through the smashed shop windows to the soldiers.

Major Francisco Cardenas told his troops, “Hands up here those who are members of the Country Club [an exclusive club for the very rich]!” No one put their hand up. They all remained silent. Cardenas told them, “The people who live here are like us, they are the people, our brothers. No one must fire without authorization. No one must shoot unless we are attacked.” (1) When the television showed people pushing trolleys crammed with food, white goods and clothes and the police standing around, people in other cities saw it as an invitation to join in. Protests had spread to every major city by the afternoon, Maracay, Valencia, Barquisimeto, Ciudad Guyana and Merida.

After two days in which the government didn’t know what to do, because the National Guard refused to enter the barrios, a massive military operation retook control of the streets on the orders of President Pérez. The armed forces arrested thousands as they swept through the barrios searching for stolen goods. People who appeared suddenly at windows in the poor shanties were

shot dead by nervous troops. The government admitted to only 372 deaths, but the real number was closer to 3000 with at least 2000 dead in Caracas and thousands more wounded. None of this was reported in the West or it appeared as a paragraph in a column of world news on the back pages. It was the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and this was Venezuela, a small Latin American country where such things are expected to happen.

But the Caracazo, as it became known, was the beginning of the end of Venezuela as the playground of the corrupt bourgeois-democratic parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and COPEI [Social Christian Party]. The Caracazo was to have a dramatic effect on the political events of the next decade in Venezuela. Venezuela, a country of 24 million people, is a huge melting pot, with a large population of Black Africans imported as slaves who worked on sugar plantations or who escaped from the West Indian islands of Trinidad and St. Lucia. Some seventy per cent of the population define themselves as mixed race.

The country is blessed with one of the world's largest oil deposits under Lake Maracaibo, and new deposits have been discovered in the Caribbean. However, none of the poor eighty per cent have benefited from this vast wealth since its discovery in 1917. Former caudillos and politicians live a fabulous life on this stolen wealth.

Role of the army

The armed forces of Venezuela have been the engine of the revolutionary process in the last ten years. Their conversion from a repressive apparatus of the state to a force allied to the working class and the peasantry illustrates the dialectical law of the transformation of something into its opposite.

Some seven years before the Caracazo, in 1982, Major Hugo Frías Chávez, an instructor at the National Military Academy in Caracas, began organizing a political conspiracy with other military officers called the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200 (MBR-200)—referring to the 200th anniversary of the birth of Simón Bolívar. Chávez and his fellow officers were to influence a new generation of young soldiers. For the poor and dispossessed peasantry, the only way out of a life of poverty was enlistment in the armed forces. One noted difference between the Venezuelan armed forces and the Chilean army is that the Venezuelan officer corps has always been recruited to a certain extent from the peasantry, with promotions depending on merit, not just family connections. After the transformation of military training in 1971, the army was no longer educated in the infamous US-directed School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, but in the National Military Academy in Caracas. Thus there is an organic link between the soldiers and the peasantry. The extravagant lifestyle of some generals was in sharp contrast with the soldiers' own early lives, subjected to poverty, arduous hours of hard work in the fields and abuses of the landowners.

The savage repression of the Caracazo forced on the army was another factor accelerating the organization of MBR-200 and the conversion of more soldiers to the idea of a more equitable society. It also led indirectly to a premature uprising in 1992 by the 6000 officers and soldiers of MBR-200, which failed for the lack of a timely uprising of the people, promised by the left social movements, especially La Causa R.

Chávez has often spoken of the role of the army in civilian life. He argues, “We can’t have the soldiers enclosed in their barracks, when there are battalions of engineers, thousands and thousands of men, engineers, scientists, teachers and sportsmen ... No, they must unite with the people to leave this poverty behind, together with the governors, the mayors, the communities, our university graduates, the colleges and the agricultural cooperatives.” (2) This new role for the army was put into practice with Plan Bolívar 2000, announced on May 7, 1999. The plan aimed to mobilize 100,000 soldiers to carry out massive social works programs, constructing housing, health and education institutions, laying roads and footpaths, building drains and sewers, giving out medicines, providing dental treatment and removing parasites that affect children, building fishing fleets and organising cooperatives. This work is still ongoing.

During the April 13, 2002, coup against Chávez, the new consciousness of the army was evident. In many places in the streets of the city, the soldiers, waving flags, appeared as political activists in the struggle to maintain the new democracy and the constitution. It was the armed forces’ loyalty to Chávez, including from approximately 80 out of 100 generals, that prevented the coup being successful. A parachute brigade inside the palace ousted the coup plotters together with a mass mobilization of people from the barrios, who came in their thousands to surround Miraflores, the presidential palace. (3) It will not be easy to erase this memory from the ranks of the armed forces.

The coup was a blessing in some ways because it exposed many of the generals and admirals who had mouthed support for Chávez but whose real sympathies lay with imperialism. After his return to power, Chávez was able to purge about 400 high-ranking officers in the army who were aligned with the opposition, further consolidating his support in the military. In addition to the sweeping powers precipitously announced by Pedro Carmona, the reactionary forces were exposed by the dissolution of the National Assembly, the loss of many democratic rights, the blatant disregard of the new constitution, the withdrawal of Venezuela from OPEC, the privatization of PDVSA, the Venezuelan Petroleum Company, and the immediate suspension of oil exports to Cuba, the abolition of a wage increase and a new agreement with the IMF. This forced many of the undecided to take a stand. Hence many soldiers, officers and sections of the middle class who were previously equivocal now gave their support to Chávez. Many candidates for political positions have come from the armed forces, partly because they are people Chávez can trust and partly because they developed a public face as they stepped forward at crucial moments to save the country from descending into chaos. In April I went to a rally in Valencia for Luís Felipe Acosta Carles, preparing for the September 2004 elections for governor of the important industrial state of Carabobo. He is the brother of Felipe Antonio Acosta Carles, who was possibly shot dead by military intelligence, during the Caracazo, on the orders of Andres Pérez. Luís Acosta Carles was persuaded by Chávez to resign from the army to be a candidate for the governorship, now held by the opposition. Acosta Carles became famous during the bosses’ lockout of January 2003, when he liberated the Coca-Cola plant in Valencia, which had been hoarding drinks. On television he took a can of Coke and spat it out with gusto, implying that he himself could never drink the stuff. Many army officers with a public face are reviled if they venture out with their families to expensive places frequented by the middle class. Acosta

Carles and his family were driven out of a resort hotel at Easter by the hotel's middle-class clientele throwing rubbish. Another general who was actively involved in saving Chávez during the coup was driven out of a fashionable restaurant by the banging of spoons on wine glasses. Virtually no well-known member of the Chávez government can go into a public restaurant where the middle class, the "escualidos", are in attendance.

Democratic reorganization of government

Latin American governments regularly give their regimes a new sense of legitimacy by holding a constituent assembly that drafts a new constitution. Chávez brilliantly used this stratagem to reshape Venezuelan politics, to decentralize, to empower the grassroots, to reorganize the political superstructures and as a prerequisite to changing the direction of the economy. In his years in the wilderness after his prison sentence, he had determined that if the country was to have a new direction, that task couldn't be undertaken by the old Congress, and that a clean break with the past and the old 1961 constitution was essential. In addition, Chávez was anxious to prove he was no military strongman or dictator: his every move would be subject to the will of the majority of the people. In his first year as president in 1999, he held an unprecedented number of votes. In April, a referendum was held on the desirability of elections to a new constituent assembly; in July, there were elections for this assembly; in December, a second referendum ratified the new constitution. Massive changes to the constitution, with 396 articles, including removal of the upper house, were approved in the national referendum by seventy-one per cent of the people. The new constitution also renamed the country the "Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela".

Venezuelans for the first time were informed of their rights to education and health, the rights of women, the rights of indigenous people and a host of civil liberties, now enshrined in the constitution. For example, Article 123 states, "The indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and promote their own economic practices, based on reciprocity, solidarity and exchange, their traditional productive activities and their participation in the national economy, and to define their priorities. The indigenous people have the right to professional training services and to participate in the drafting and execution of specific programs of training, technical and financial assistance services which strengthen their economic activities within the framework of local sustainable development." The little red book of the Venezuelan constitution became a best seller on the streets. It was a master stroke, a way of engaging in politics Venezuelans who had never before thought about their fundamental rights as citizens.

Social programs

Chávez began the education and health campaigns in earnest after the failed coup. First, "Mision Robinson" was a program designed to carry out a thorough literacy program for adults and teenagers who had been excluded from schooling because of poverty. This program finished in June last year, after some 1,230,000 people had been taught to read. The government considered that for the first time in 102 years, it had eliminated illiteracy. "Mision Robinson II" is now in place and is educating 900,000 adults up to the end of sixth grade. At the same time, "Mision Ribas" had been inaugurated to give everyone a high school education, called a bachillerato.

(The names Robinson and Ribas refer to Venezuelan national independence leaders from the nineteenth century.) Another 1,420,100 people were enrolled in this program with the help of 100,000 government scholarships, using the income from oil. The government had set up schools in all 336 municipalities of the country, using volunteers as well as teachers, paid about US\$100 a month.

The government has taken control of all the offices of the old PDVSA and is using these facilities as schools and administrative centres to run the educational programs. These programs have a life of their own, organized through the offices of PDVSA in each town, and carried out with transport provided by the armed forces. In addition, Chávez has changed the public primary and high school timetables. For the previous thirty years under the old regime, there were two daily sessions of school, from 8 am to noon and from 1 to 5 pm. Working parents had the worry of leaving young children alone at home or knowing the kids were unsupervised, running around the streets, an easy target for drug dealers and attraction to petty crime. Now the public school timetable has only one session, from 8 am to 4 pm, totally supervised and with breakfast, a hot lunch and afternoon tea provided free to each child.

About twenty years ago, the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) stopped accepting all students who had obtained a high school certificate. In the 1970s, UCV was a radical hotbed of student activism. Entry is now by exam, meaning that students with a private education achieve better results, and the exam system itself is open to abuse and corruption. It was too difficult for the Chávez government to change the university system, especially at UCV, the country's oldest university, with its entrenched, elitist and often corrupt practices. To get around this problem, the government this year set up a new university, Simón Bolívar University, in the luxurious and well-appointed buildings in Caracas that were previously the home of PDVSA executives. All students who have a bachillerato can apply, but only those who live in the poor barrios gain entry. Students with an address in the middle-class suburbs and who attended private schools are automatically excluded. The Simón Bolívar students are also given a scholarship to study and a hot meal daily. Adults are taking advantage of this opportunity in their thousands. International obligations have not been forgotten. Since university education in Chile is now privatised and very expensive, the Venezuelan government gave scholarships to poor Chilean students to study in Venezuela. A group of Chilean parents marched in the May Day rallies in Santiago to praise this generosity.

Another offensive is on health. "Mision Barrio Adentro" was created to deal with the lack of health facilities in the poor barrios. A small health centre, called an ambulatorio, has been built by the armed forces in each barrio to serve 500 families or 1200 people. Initially, Venezuelan-trained doctors were asked to provide services at a lower wage than that to which they were accustomed. Only a very small number agreed, so 15,000 doctors from Cuba were invited into the country to provide these services. Now there are 250 Venezuelan doctors working in the barrios and another 1500 in training. Medicines are paid for by the government. Any patient with a major health problem is sent to the armed forces hospital in Caracas, the second largest in the country. This program has brought a massive change in health practices. People used to wait until a problem was serious before seeking medical help. (4) The government, again with the

money from oil, hopes to have 5000 ambulatorios built as soon as possible, with two floors, one upstairs for living quarters and a consultation room downstairs. So far, more than 1.2 million people have been treated in these centres, with 26 million visits recorded.

“Mision Vuelvan Caras” was established to supply credit to small farmers and those who work the land. One such program will buy cattle from Argentina, with ten cows and one bull given to each farming cooperative as a loan. Within two years, the cooperative must pay back the loan, not with money, but with the same number of cows and a bull to give to another peasant cooperative. The government is also setting up a seed bank with \$600 million in funding and has bought potato seeds to start supplying the country. “Mision Mercal” ensures that food is sold cheaply to people in financial difficulties.

“Mision Identidad” will provide 400,000 identity cards or cedula per month to people who have lived 20-30 years in Venezuela but were born in another country. Previously they were ineligible for an identity card and therefore had no citizenship rights, including no right to vote. One man had spent eighty-nine years in Venezuela without a cedula because he was born in Colombia and brought to Venezuela as a child. This will change the voting patterns of Venezuela because so many poor people have been disenfranchised over decades by government neglect, a dysfunctional bureaucracy and legal obstacles. For instance in the state of Portuguesa, the government found during a recent census that 80,000 Venezuelan-born people in just three towns had no cedula and had never voted. So far, another 1.7 million voters will appear on the electoral register for the August 15 recall vote. Two new banks, the Women’s Bank and the Economic and Social Development Bank, have been established by the government to provide micro-credit and low interest loans to small enterprises. The government is desperately trying to provide employment to the masses. Instead of importing every item in exchange for oil, the government is intent on manufacturing products in Venezuela, firstly because it will mean greater economic security in the long run, and secondly to provide work for as many people as possible. As an example, the government has given credit to a small cooperative to buy a truck to transport petrol in its area, instead of giving the contract to one large private company for the whole country. Another example is providing work in areas where the peasants live. A small pueblo, close to the location of giant electricity cables, has been given the job of cleaning the vegetation beneath the wires in the municipality instead of the contract going to a single company for the whole country. The government hopes to set up about 50,000 cooperatives that will generate work. The Bolivarian Circles, with 2 million members, were initially set up with the idea of forming a self-defence unit but now will start working for the social transformation of communities.

Bosses’ strike

Another attempt at dislodging Chávez was the bosses’ lockout and oil strike from December 2002 to February 2003. This tumultuous event stopped the entire Venezuelan petroleum industry and most production for two and a half months. Banks and supermarkets were closed, people were forced to stay at home and watch endless soap operas on television. Some 40,000 key employees of the oil industry walked out. It was another make-or-break point for Chávez. It was discovered that the refining of the oil pumped from 6000 metres below the surface of the lake was actually controlled in the United States through computers, with communication by satellite.

Only a handful of top executives knew the computer passwords. Refineries were sabotaged, pipelines were blocked, water from the lake flooded the oil pipes.

In a massive effort, with help from university computer experts, soldiers, retired oil workers, the oil workers themselves and some private corporations, working day and night, petroleum refining was finally rescued. Again, Chávez used the attempted sabotage of the economy to deepen the revolutionary process because he could legally fire all those who had abandoned their jobs in the oil industry, some 18,000 oppositionists.

There were two more advantages from the takeover of the oil industry. One was the prevention of the imminent privatization and sale to North American corporations organized by the former oil executives. The other was the availability of large amounts of cash to fund much-needed social changes. A handful of oil executives had paid themselves annual salaries of millions of dollars. Further, it was later discovered that the oil moguls paid for experimental drilling without previous investigations in order to avoid payments to the government. This explained why less than twenty per cent of oil income was reaching the public purse, and in some years none at all. In April 2004, an economist at the new PDVSA found \$1 billion hidden in foreign accounts. This has meant that Chávez has funds to pay for the social programs, even more so now that oil has reached \$40 a barrel, from a low of \$10 in 1998. Perhaps the outcome of the Nicaraguan revolution would have been different if the poverty-stricken Sandinistas had had money to fend off the US-funded contra war.

Workers and peasants state

The mass mobilization of workers and the positive role of the army that led to the return of President Chávez on April 13, 2002, was a turning point in the evolution of the Chávez government. The spontaneous uprising of the barrios around Caracas radically changed the relationship of forces between the working class and the capitalists to the advantage of the former. (5) This was a defining moment, which changed a bourgeois executive presidency into an embryonic workers and peasants state. Chávez has used these two events to advance the revolutionary process further, making enormous ideological gains and exposing the reactionary plans of the opposition. He has not weakened in his resolve to change fundamentally the distribution of wealth in the country, using the oil income, as well as to encourage the growth of self-organization of the masses. Chávez has had to operate in a framework in which he did not come to power through a revolutionary struggle that immediately gave him the core of a workers and farmers state, such as Fidel Castro achieved in Cuba in 1959, as head of the Rebel Army. In Venezuela, there has been no armed insurrection to overthrow the previous government as in Cuba and Nicaragua (1979), where both the existing governments and armies were destroyed. Chávez did attempt this, but the military coup of 1992 failed. Since then, he has relentlessly pushed a pro-working-class social reform program, as detailed above. Further, this is not strictly a dual power situation such as existed in Russia from February to October 1917, with two competing centres of authority, representing different and antagonistic class forces, which ended in 1917 with the arrest of the provisional government by the workers' militia. In Venezuela, there is only one governmental authority, although the power of the bourgeois is still not broken. This situation could be described as a form of dual power. There is still a bourgeois-dominated

judiciary and legislature, the National Assembly, municipal and provincial governments dominated by the opposition as well as local police forces controlled by the opposition. Proof of the judiciary's domination by the bourgeoisie is that more than 120 peasants have been murdered while attempting to carry out the legally constituted agrarian reforms, but no landowner has been successfully prosecuted for these murders. In addition, no bourgeois leader or general has been charged for sedition over their activities during the April 2002 coup. (The courts decided that there was never a coup; Carmona called it a power vacuum, and the judges decided that Chávez had been taken into custody for his own safety!) Many of the coup plotters simply returned to their houses as if nothing had happened.

There is no national police force; each governor has control of his own police. Thus opposition Mayor Alfredo Pena of Caracas has control over the metropolitan police. Many allege they are corrupt and that theft from tourists and locals is deliberately tolerated in order to blame Chávez for the lack of order. This is another reason that Chávez has often turned to friends in the army for civilian posts, since many politicians who gained their positions with political support from the Movement for a Fifth Republic (MVR) have suddenly changed their political stripes once in power. Pena, previously a journalist, was elected mayor with the support of Chávez but is now a bitter opponent. Six of twenty-four provinces are governed by opposition, and another by a turncoat.

As a result of the changed class character of the state, since April 2002 the Chávez government no longer had to accept blackmail and sabotage from bourgeois civil servants but could increasingly rely on the organizations of the workers, peasants and soldiers in the form of the misiones. The misiones were a new concept needed for the new government to carry out its social programs.

The Chávez administration had been blocked and sabotaged by the bureaucrats appointed by previous regimes, especially in the ministries of Education and Health. As an example, free vaccinations provided by the state for all children were “accidentally” destroyed or lost in transit. Videos and televisions in trucks on their way to the provinces to teach illiteracy programs suddenly “disappeared”. The Chávez government was forced to bypass the bureaucratic structures of the ministries, where many officials simply ignored the requests of the elected government. Sacking disruptive public servants would create more difficulties for the government, as their permanent jobs are protected by the old trade union system, the CTV (Confederation of Venezuelan Workers). A virtual parallel government has been set up, based on both paid and volunteer labour. As Karl Marx noted: ... the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purpose. The centralized state power with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy and the judicature—organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labour—originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle-class society as a mighty weapon in its struggles against feudalism. (6)

Opposition forces

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Venezuelan middle class descended into an orgy of extravagant spending. A section of the middle class became so greedy and avaricious that many owned apartments in Miami and flew there for weekends to enjoy a shopping spree in expensive Florida shops. The big bourgeoisie have control of the mass media, the television stations, Globalvision, Venevision, cable TV, Direct TV, broad band internet, telecommunications, the food sector, the soft drink and brewing industries plus the mass daily bourgeois papers, in particular El Nacional. They have control of the finance sector and the big banks.

Originally from Cuba, Gustavo Cisneros, the 57-year-old billionaire media magnate, whose wealth is estimated at \$5000 million and who is at position 64 on the Forbes 500 richest men in the world list, is a close friend of George H.W. Bush and was invited to the White House when Ronald Reagan was in residence. Cisneros is a major owner of Univision, the principal Spanish-language TV station in the US, ChileVision, Colombian Caracol television, the Caribbean Communications Network and the bottling company Panamco, and is a big player in the transnational Coca-Cola. The Cisneros family was also linked with laundering money from cocaine according to evidence found in 1985 in an airplane confiscated by US Customs. His brother Ricardo Cisneros was accused of fraud in a 1994 banking scandal.

Gustavo Cisneros was named by Newsweek as the boss and the brains behind the 1992 coup, after Carmona was seen scuttling out of his office on his way to Miraflores to be sworn in as provisional president. It has been rumored that Cisneros will be Bush junior's choice to confront Hugo Chávez in any future presidential election. The reactionary forces are now organized in the Democratic Convergence with the extreme right-wing group, Primero Justicia. There appear to be two groupings, a political wing acting on the legal, electoral and propaganda fronts and another organizing military operations such as the 150 Colombian paramilitaries found in an outer suburb of Caracas in May of this year.

A run on the bolívar started under Andres Pérez, but the middle class blame Chávez for the current state of the currency. In the 1970s the rate of exchange was four bolívares to the dollar. In 1989, it fell to 35 to the dollar, and in July 1994, some 170, with inflation at 100%. Despite the oil income, the foreign debt in 1994 was \$38 billion. The official exchange rate in 2004 is approximately 2000 bolívares to the dollar, and the black market rate 3000. In January 2003, Chávez introduced controls over the purchase of foreign currencies. Buying dollars requires government approval; even the use of a credit card over the internet is now not allowed. This was a necessary control, which the government was forced to introduce to prevent the flight of capital and a further run on the currency. These measures have further alienated a sector of the middle class.

Neo-liberalism took its toll on the middle class during the 1990s in Venezuela. However, the ruling class, unlike the Chilean bourgeoisie in 1973, does not have a unified political leadership with a clear program of how to win over a traumatized and fearful middle class. As an example, in the coming elections for governors, mayors and councilors, the opposition has put up several candidates for one position due to internal squabbling over the spoils.

Left parties

In 2003, the Chávez government set up the Comando Ayacucho as an umbrella group to coordinate the work of the pro-Chávez grassroots organizations. This was the third attempt to bring together such an organisation. The first, called the Polo Patriótico, had been created to support Chávez's presidential bid and was pulled together by a long-time political figure, Luís Miquilena, who has since deserted the government. A second organization, the Political Command of the Revolution, led by long-term Communist Party member Guillermo García Ponce, fell apart because of differences with Patria Para Todos (Country for All—PPT). The PPT had been formed from a previous left split in La Causa R. The Comando Ayacucho was to play the role of coordinating the work for the presidential recall referendum and to coordinate the work of MVR deputies in the National Assembly. It included all the left political parties—MVR, PPT, Podemos, the People's Electoral Movement (MEP), Socialist League and the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV)—and the social groups such as the Bolivarian Circles, the National Union of Workers, Clasa Media en Positiva, the Civic, Professional and Technical Front and the Retired Group of Elderly Citizens. The Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) had split into a left group, Podemos, and a right wing, which retained the name MAS and joined the opposition.

The immediate aim of Comando Ayacucho was to prevent the presidential referendum taking place. Its long-term aim was to form one united party of all the Bolivarian groups, including all the left parties and the social groups, on a common platform. Through its deliberations and discussions, Comando Ayacucho achieved an agreement on local candidates, proposing only one candidate for all the governors, mayors and deputies for the provincial elections in September. Only the candidates for governor of three states remained to be resolved: Bolívar, Apure and Portuguesa. The PCV played an exemplary role, demanding few political positions for itself and concentrating on unifying the diverse groupings. When I interviewed Dario Rivas, the director of Comando Ayacucho, he saw four major threats facing the government: There is a serious problem of: 1) The conspiracy against democracy. This prevents the government from tackling social problems. 2) The poverty and unemployment of the population. 3) The manipulation by the mass media, the TV, the lies and misinformation and the lack of proper information. 4) The massive de-industrialisation and the lack of investment from the private sector.

Disappointed at the failure of the Comando Ayacucho leadership to prevent the referendum, Chávez disbanded it in June 2004 and set up another structure called Comando Maisata. This organization will mainly concentrate on the August 15 presidential recall referendum, giving a greater role to the grassroots organizations in the barrios, the misiones, the Bolivarian Circles, the student and youth organizations and the middle-class groups that support Chávez, as well as encouraging newly formed groups in workplaces. Groups of ten will be set up in each locale to enroll people on the register and to visit house to house. Again this is a reflection of the tension between Chávez and the organized left parties and the weakness of the organization of the grassroots across the country, depoliticized during the reign of Acción Democrática and COPEI over the last fifty years. Chávez is also a victim of the accepted cultural practice throughout Latin America of exaggerating the reality, being over-optimistic, taking on tasks that are difficult or impossible to fulfill and stating that something will be done but not doing it. One advantage of the pro-Chávez forces is that, despite the opposition slanders, they do not face a barrage of

anticommunist propaganda. Chávez continually uses the examples of national independence heroes: Robinson, Zamora, Rivas, and of course Bolívar. There is not one reference to Marx, Engels or socialism in his often three-hour discourses on the government television channel. It is extremely difficult for the opposition to criticize the statements of Simón Bolívar in 1829 when he warned, “The USA appears destined by fate to plague America with misery in the name of liberty”.

The referendum

The attacks on people’s democracy by the opposition forces have been constant and fierce. Of course it is not argued in these terms, but quite the opposite, painting Chávez as a dictator with the aim of “Cubanizing” Venezuela. Well aware of the endemic corruption of so many politicians in past regimes, Chávez personally insisted that a clause giving the right of recall be inserted in the new 1999 constitution. Venezuela became the only country in Latin America to grant citizens the right to recall elected officials, including the president. The opposition, having failed to oust Chávez by a coup and the lockout, is now attempting the “Nicaraguan solution”, forcing an early election at an inopportune time.

The opposition first attempted to collect the 2.34 million signatures needed to force a referendum on the presidency, in November 2003. The opposition had agreed to the appointment of a number of officials by the Supreme Court to the National Electoral Council (CNE). The first problem arose when the opposition delayed three weeks before submitting the signed petitions just before Christmas. More than 800,000 signatures were not filled out by the petitioners, and a massive fraud was perpetrated with the signatures of dead people, under-aged children and foreigners. Had the CNE followed the letter of the law, these signatures could have been invalidated immediately, stopping the recall campaign in its tracks. However, the CNE adopted a more conciliatory approach, agreed to by the government and the opposition, and allowed a “repair” process to take place, giving time for citizens to verify the signatures that were called into question. When the CNE decided in March that signatures would have to be ratified, fewer than 1000 people in the whole country took to the streets in protest. Some burned tires and rioted and fired at the National Guard. These actions and images went all around the world, creating the impression that there was political instability and no human rights in Venezuela. Some 1.8 million valid signatures were ratified in April by the CNE. This left another 505,000 to collect. The government had no experience in a centralized collection of signatures and the whole process was chaotic, with a lack of diffusion of proper information and errors in the forms for the collection of signatures. It was another example of the government not having the command of the bureaucratic and technical machinery of state. There was no time to put in place a proper infrastructure to organize and verify such a massive collections of signatures, cedula numbers and fingerprints. The final collection of the remaining signatures was ratified by the CNE in June, and a referendum on the Chávez presidency will go ahead on August 15.

It is hoped that the new Comando Maisanta will be able to do its job and confirm Chávez in the presidency. It is a dangerous moment for the revolutionary forces, as the opposition has access to expensive technology to commit fraud and access to US funds to campaign as well as the television and newspapers to spread misinformation. In the last election, in July 2000, 2.53

million voted for the opposition and 3.73 million for Chávez, but 5.12 million abstained out of a total of 11.72 million voters on the register. Of course, since then, the coup and the oil strike will have convinced many to support Chávez.

US invasion?

The US government keeps a close watch on every development in Venezuela, through its embassy and its Latin American Affairs Department in Washington, and through the Organization of American States. The US now operates through proxies, funding the Venezuelan opposition through the National Endowment for Democracy with a total of \$1 million a year. A grant of \$53,400 was given to the Venezuelan group Sumate to organize the recall referendum. The Carter Center falsely clamors about a lack of democratic rights. The opposition has visited many European countries to persuade the European Parliament of the “lack of human rights” in Venezuela.

The US program of \$1.6 billion to destroy the guerrilla groups in Colombia, the FARC and the ELN, has not been able to achieve its objectives. According to a FARC spokesperson, it has doubled the numbers of its fighting forces and supporters. The FARC is fighting in the north, near the border with the state of Zulia in Venezuela. This fact has not been taken into account when mention is made of the possibility of a US invasion much like the Contra war on Nicaragua’s border with Honduras. It would be extremely difficult for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to manage both the civil war and an invasion of Venezuela, even with US backing. For the near future, the US is so bogged down in the war in Iraq that the US public would not likely tolerate another foreign adventure. The relationship between the Vietnam War and the survival of the Cuban Revolution has many similarities with the present situation of the Iraqi war and any US-sponsored armed attack on Venezuela. When Che Guevara used the slogan “Create two, three, many Vietnams”, he was referring to other revolutions having the possibility of avoiding a US military attack. The US government is also well aware that Chávez would use any foreign invasion to deepen the revolutionary process.

Conclusion

Any preconceived schema of the revolutionary process in a Third World country has been shattered in the case of Venezuela. The Chávez government, after surviving the April 2002 coup through the mass mobilizations of workers and sections of the army, can be described as an embryonic workers and peasants state, backed by the armed forces. The bourgeoisie have not yet been defeated and still control important sectors of the economy, the mass media, telecommunications, the food and brewing industries, as well as the judiciary and the bureaucracy of state ministries. But the government has control of the oil industry, and sectors of the nickel and iron industry are state-owned. A direct US invasion or a ferocious economic blockade is unlikely, but financial destabilisation and a vicious campaign of misinformation on an international scale is certain to occur for the duration of the Chávez government. The referendum on his presidency on August 15 is another crucial test. This politically unstable situation cannot last indefinitely. Venezuela is at a critical point where it can continue the

revolutionary process or be forced back by the coalition of opposition forces, backed by the US government and Latin American governments such as Colombia and Chile.

Venezuela needs all our solidarity and support to win the ideological battle. At present, there is a great vacuum of knowledge about Venezuela and a shameful lack of international solidarity work. It is something we can do to educate, to inform, to tell the story of a social revolution in progress. If it is successful, this will not only change the face of the entire Latin American continent but will inspire people everywhere to prove that another world is possible.

Notes

1 Quoted in R. Gott, *In the shadow of the liberator*, 2001, London, New York, Verso.

2 N. Francia, *Que piensa Chávez, Aproximacion a su discurso politico*, Venezuela, 2003.

3 M. Harnecker, *Hugo Chávez Frías, Un Hombre, Un Pueblo*, 2003.

4 M. Ceaser, *Lancet* 363,(June 5), 2004, pp. 1874-75.

5 See Samuel Moncada. *Debate Abierto* VI: 5, 2004. Professor Moncada is Director of the School of History at the Central University of Venezuela.

6 K. Marx, "The Civil War in France", *The Class Struggles in France from the February Revolution to the Paris Commune*, 2003, Sydney, Resistance Books, p. 254.

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Quebec Left's Merger Plans Spark Discussion

By Roger Annis, John Riddell, Richard Fidler, Benoit Renaud

INTRODUCTION

By Roger Annis and John Riddell

This issue of *Socialist Voice* features comments on the fusion discussions in progress between two Quebec left-wing political formations, the **Union des forces progressistes** (UFP) and **Option citoyenne** (OC).

- **Quebec: Toward A New Left Party in 2005** by Richard Fidler, will be published in the forthcoming issue of *Relay: A Socialist Project Review*.
- **The PQ Is Not an Alternative to Charest** by Benoit Renaud, was published in the January 28, 2005, issue of *Socialist Worker*, and was originally published in French in *Résistance*. Both are publications of the International Socialists.

Both Fidler and Renaud warn that the projected fusion, while it could have a positive outcome, could also give birth to what Fidler terms a “left appendage” of the pro-capitalist Parti Québécois (PQ). Their articles give an informative picture of the evolution of the two Quebec left organizations and reflect current discussion in Quebec socialist circles.

In the view of *Socialist Voice*, the debate surrounding the Quebec fusion process raises fundamental questions facing the working class movement internationally. What should be the goal and program of those who seek an end to the greed and destructiveness of the capitalist order? Which social classes have the material and ideological interest in challenging the leading position of the capitalist classes in today's world?

Venezuelan example

Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez addressed these questions at a rally in the recently-held World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. “It is impossible, within the framework of the capitalist system, to solve the grave problems of poverty of the majority of the world's population,” he said. “We must transcend capitalism...we must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project, and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything.” (See *Socialist Voice* #29)

The Bolivarian political movement that Chavez heads in Venezuela has led the working people of Venezuela in the streets, in the workplaces, and in the countryside in mass struggle with the forces of reaction. It has won several electoral confrontations along the way. The decisive difference has been its willingness to overcome political obstacles by leading the working masses in militant struggle.

Electoralism

In Canada, the “left” parties—the Parti Québécois in Quebec and the New Democratic Party in other provinces—stand aside from mass struggle. They stake all on electoral victory and promise

that conditions will improve if they are elected. And they end up producing governments that loyally defend capitalist stability.

Electoral parties whose starting point is far more radical, such as Workers Party (PT) in Brazil, the Green Party of Germany, or the Stalinist Communist Party of France have also proven to be compliant partners in capitalist governments. (See “The Nader Campaign in the U.S. Elections,” *Socialist Voice* #8)

Toward a mass workers party

In Quebec, as in Canada as a whole, the fate of a new left-wing party will be determined by its stand in the fundamental conflict tearing at the social fabric—that between the class of employers, on the one hand, and the laboring classes in the farms, factories and offices who produce the wealth of society, on the other. A new party needs to place itself squarely on the side of the laboring classes and to champion their needs and aspirations.

As Richard Fidler points out, the trade unions in Quebec have important historical experiences in efforts to build a mass workers’ party committed to the goal of socialism. In the present discussion, he advises the new party “to renew and pursue” this legacy.

A bold step down this path by the forces involved in the UFP-OC merger would be an immense contribution to the struggles of working people in Quebec and right across Canada.

Documents of the Quebec discussion can be found at Union des forces progressistes and Option citoyenne.

QUEBEC: TOWARD A NEW LEFT PARTY IN 2005?

by Richard Fidler

Quebec’s new left party, the Union des forces progressistes (UFP), itself the product of a regroupment process, hopes to continue this process through a projected merger with Option citoyenne (Citizen’s Option, or OC). The two groups are now engaged in formal negotiations with the goal of combining forces by the end of 2005. At present the UFP claims about 1,300 members, the OC 1,500.

At a November membership convention, Option citoyenne voted by a substantial majority to appoint a negotiating committee which would meet at intervals with UFP representatives to discuss various “themes” and establish and clarify points of agreement and disagreement. A further national meeting of OC will be held in the spring of 2005 to discuss the process and develop OC’s position on issues such as the national question, about which OC members are deeply divided.

This process will continue through the summer, with the perspective of creating by the end of the year a new party “centered on the public interest, social justice, respect for the environment, equality between men and women and solidarity among peoples”.

In December, the UFP's Council accepted the OC's proposal. Negotiating committees from the two groups have held three joint meetings since mid-December, most recently on February 6. Both groups report wide agreement on the topics discussed so far: the economy, feminism and "functioning and culture of a left-wing party", according to perfunctory reports submitted to the members of the two organizations.

Different political cultures

Understandably, there is much optimism and hope in both groups that the process will result in a party of several thousand members with a correspondingly greater political impact and attraction than the two groups could have as separate organizations. However, a number of key issues need to be clarified if this potential is to be realized.

It is already clear that a new party will not simply be a larger version of the UFP. For one thing, the fusion process involves two groups with somewhat different backgrounds and orientations.

The UFP, which describes itself as "independentist, feminist, ecological and internationalist", was formed in 2002 in the wake of the enthusiasm generated by the massive demonstrations at the Quebec Summit of the Americas, the mobilizations around the World March of Women, and a successful by-election campaign in Montreal's Mercier riding in which the candidate of a broad coalition of left groups and community grass-roots activists won 24% of the popular vote.

The party was initiated by an informal coalition of three groups: the Rassemblement pour l'alternative politique (RAP); the Quebec Communist party; and the Parti de la démocratie socialiste (PDS), all of which became affiliated "entities" or formal tendencies within the UFP. (The RAP has since dissolved, DS is now Québec socialiste, and the International Socialists became an entity in November 2002.) But most of the UFP's members are individuals not aligned with any of these formations.

The UFP's founding platform, adopted after wide debate by the members, sets out clear positions and demands on international solidarity, rejection of imperialist military alliances and capitalist trade and investment agreements, and defense and extension of workers', women's and immigrants' rights and social programs, etc. Although the UFP does not define itself as anti-capitalist or socialist, that is the thrust of its platform. And two of its founding principles were opposition to the parties of "neo-liberalism", including the Parti québécois, and support for the independence of Quebec.

(For background on the UFP, see <http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/2003/565/565p25.htm>)

Option citoyenne originated as one of three groupings or "options" that developed in a discussion within D'abord solidaires, an ad hoc coalition formed before the 2003 Quebec general election to defend social programs and fight the far right-wing party led by Mario Dumont, Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), which at one point in the months before the election was registering 40 percent support in public opinion polls. D'abord solidaires was officially indifferent between the governing Parti québécois and the opposition Liberals, not opposing a vote for either as a "lesser evil" to the ADQ.

The OC option favoured political action to the left of the PQ, although it initially rejected an invitation to join the UFP. In the summer of 2004, OC leader Françoise David, a former president of the Quebec women's federation (FFQ), toured the province promoting her book *Le Bien commun* (the "common good" or "public interest") and probing support for a new left party independent of the UFP. David encountered much support for uniting the political forces to the left of the PQ and widespread criticism of her support for "asymmetrical federalism". David has since come out in favour of both unity with the UFP and Quebec independence.

To some degree the UFP and OC represent different milieus. The UFP's members include young people from the altermondialiste global justice movement — internationalist, anti-capitalist, and strong supporters of Quebec independence — along with an older layer of members, many with long experience in left and far-left politics. The political experience of many OC members, on the other hand, has been within feminist and community organizations — 60% are women — and in local organizing around tenants' rights, food and housing co-ops and the like, where the politics of consensus and accommodation of conflicting views and even interests are valued.

UFP observers at its November convention found that OC had few members under the age of 25, and "very few" trade union members. On the other hand, its predominantly female membership would compensate for the gender imbalance in the UFP, where only a quarter of the members are women.

An anti-capitalist party?

Option citoyenne, while defining itself to the left of the PQ, is certainly not anti-capitalist. Its program, in so far as it is developed, reads at best like a pale echo of the classic social democracy long associated with the NDP. For example, at its November convention the members adopted a resolution on "the economy" that contained few specifics while promoting "values and principles" such as economic security, distribution of wealth, democratic participation, the regulatory role of the state, etc. — all of which is completely compatible with liberal or "neo-liberal" capitalism. A resolution opposing trade and investment deals that are "opposed to our fundamental values" (without naming any specific deal) was simply tabled. The capitalist state was described as "an instrument of the community" and "guarantor of the public interest". Similar positions are developed at length in Françoise David's book. David and OC do not mention the NATO and NORAD alliances, opposition to which is a basic plank in the UFP platform. OC has no position at present on Quebec independence.

Is the OC a clear break from the PQ? Significantly, the OC resolutions do not mention the PQ. But in her book, David says the left should not "contribute to the re-election of the Liberals", and that "When the elections come, we will see what we have to say to the PQ". These statements, of course, are not inconsistent with the lesser-evil politics she and D'abord solidaires defended in the 2003 election. In fact, David states on the very first page of her book that she does not want to be "the Ralph Nader of Quebec and contribute to the defeat of the PQ" as U.S. Democrats allege Nader helped defeat them in 2000.

Fusing organizations with such different political cultures is unlikely to be a smooth process, notwithstanding the agreement on rather abstract principles professed by both groups. A major

challenge is clearly the conflict between, on the one hand, the UFP's support of Quebec independence and opposition to the PQ and, on the other, OC's tendency to adapt to the PQ despite its own ambiguity and divisions on the national question. At its December Council meeting, the UFP identified opposition to the PQ and support for independence as "principles" that should in its view be adopted by a new party. It is common ground for most members of the UFP that a party seeking to outflank the PQ must be independentist.

The ambiguities of Option citoyenne have prompted a few members of the UFP to question whether the new party will be as independent of the PQ as the UFP now is. In articles posted on the UFP's web site and intranet, they draw attention to statements by David and others, including a few UFP leaders, indicating that the party might consider a deal by which, for example, the PQ declines to contest one or more ridings against the left and in return the left desists from running against the PQ. Any such deal, these critics point out, would make the new party a hostage of the PQ and discredit its claim to be a consistent opponent of "neo-liberalism". The new party would become a barrier to building an anti-capitalist movement if it degenerated into a left appendage of the PQ.

Debate just beginning

The fusion debate in both the UFP and OC is still in its early stages. So far it has focused on relations with the PQ and election strategy. It may well expand to cover other topics relevant to the fusion.

One topic both UFP and OC activists might consider is the history of previous attempts to build a united party of the left in Quebec. For example, in the 1960s Quebec supporters of the Canadian "new party", the NDP, attempted to build an autonomous counterpart in Quebec, the Parti socialiste du Québec (PSQ), that was sympathetic to the nationalist upsurge. In the early 1980s another attempt was made to build a united left party, the Mouvement socialiste. Both the PSQ and MS failed but there are valuable lessons to be learned from those experiences.

A much more positive development occurred in the early 1970s, when all three major union centrals in Quebec — the FTQ, CSN and CEQ — debated and adopted radical anti-capitalist manifestoes. While only the CSN's was explicitly pro-socialist, all three advanced the concept that working people should take control of society. A labour-based municipal party in Montreal, the Front d'action politique, or FRAP (headed by Paul Cliche, now a leader of the UFP) campaigned around the central slogan "Les salariés au pouvoir" — workers to power. For a while it seemed that Quebec labour might manage to establish a mass workers party.

Unfortunately, this movement was subsequently deflected into support for the PQ. Much smaller parties to the "left" of the PQ (such as the Maoists), opposed to Quebec independence, were unable to mount successful resistance to that diversion.

But today the PQ, after a total of 18 years in office, stands exposed to many for its anti-labour, anti-worker record. And while the labour movement is still reeling under the blows of the neo-liberal offensive, there are encouraging signs that politics are returning to the agenda in the unions. In the fall of 2003, the unions spearheaded massive demonstrations in opposition to the Charest government's assault on union rights and social programs, even forcing the government

to retreat on some of its objectives. Although the strike movement eventually fizzled, the march of more than 100,000 workers in Montreal last May Day demonstrated the ongoing potential for a militant labour-based fightback.

These developments indicate the need for the new party to start probing the possibilities to link up with militants in the unions — the natural constituency for an anti-capitalist party — and to develop a long-term strategy for building a class-struggle socialist tendency in the labour movement. The new party needs to renew and pursue the positive legacy of the union manifestoes, not the discredited record of futile lesser-evil reliance on the PQ and other capitalist saviours.

Significantly, opponents of the UFP and Option citoyenne are already mobilizing in the unions. For example, a new grouping, Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre (SPQ-Libre), initiated in part by some leaders of the major union centrals, is attempting to channel “progressive” trade unionists and working-class sovereigntists into the PQ where it will function as a recognized “club”. So the PQ remains a key issue for debate both in left unity initiatives and within the broader working class milieu.

These and many other challenges will have to be worked through in the months ahead as the fusion process proceeds. The process would be advanced, in my opinion, if the two groups could now develop some joint campaigns in which their respective memberships work and discuss with each other and begin to build a common organizational framework in which agreements can be solidified and disagreements can be clarified and resolved.

Of course, in the new party there need not and will not be 100% unity on all issues, even some important ones. Many questions can be resolved through common action and debate within the unified party — especially a party characterized by rank-and-file democracy with pluralist structures that recognize tendency rights, as the UFP has pledged to establish.

For further information:

- UFP: <http://www.ufp.qc.ca>
- Option citoyenne: <http://www.optioncitoyenne.ca>

THE PQ IS NOT AN ALTERNATIVE TO CHAREST

By Benoit Renaud

An opinion poll published December 17, 2004 in *Le Devoir*, revealed that 10 per cent of the Quebec electorate intends to vote for a party “other” than the three currently represented in the National Assembly — the PQ (Parti Québécois), the Parti libéral du Québec (PLQ) and Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ).

Because the poll did not delve further into the “other” category, it is difficult to assess where this support would be going — to the Union des forces progressistes (UFP), the Greens or for a new party uniting the UFP with a new left grouping called Option citoyenne (OC).

But it is clear that a significant portion of the population wants an alternative, and that this is not the moment for the left to abandon its independent profile and slip back into a call for a “strategic vote” for the PQ against their comrades in the Liberal Party.

However, just such a vision is coming from Françoise David, principal spokesperson for Option citoyenne, a vision which is exerting an increasing influence inside the UFP.

The Hated Charest

Since the election of April, 2003, we have suffered under a neo-liberal offensive directed by Charest. This is a continuation of the similar policies applied by all Quebec governments, péquiste or Liberal — from the vicious anti-labour laws used by Lévesque against the public sector unions in 1982, to Bouchard’s “deficit zero” policies in 1996. These of course are in line with the whole programme of the ADQ. As the spokespeople for the UFP said a few weeks after Charest’s victory, “the PQ has paved the way for the Liberals to apply the programme of the ADQ!”

But the PQ — since its return to the opposition benches — has distinguished itself by its ineptitude and its complete unwillingness to in any way contribute to the anti-Charest resistance movement — which should not be surprising, considering the extent to which the Liberal policies are the same as those of the PQ.

Clearly, the struggle against Charest must be based on the mobilization of the labour and social movements, rooted in a complete rejection of neo-liberalism. Such a struggle is possible. We saw this in the mobilization against the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) in Quebec City in 2001, the massive demonstrations against war in Iraq in 2003, the “day of disruption” December 11 of 2003, the 100,000 who marched on May Day in 2004, and the many solid votes for a 24-hour general strike (or in some cases for a general strike, full stop) carried out by CSN and the CSQ and by many unions affiliated to the FTQ, over the last 18 months.

Left unity

It is in this context that two new left groups have emerged — SPQ-Libre and Option citoyenne.

SPQL squarely rejects the perspective of a big, independent party of the left, and opts instead for a perspective of uniting all Quebec sovereigntists.

Their project involves the organization of a left (including Pauline Marois and François Legault!) inside the PQ. The independent project of the left, in their view, will have to wait until sovereignty is achieved.

This is the discourse which led to the dissolution of an earlier generation of left-wing currents — the RIN (Rassemblement pour l’indépendance nationale) and the journal Parti Pris ... in 1968! Four electoral victories by the PQ and two failed referenda later — we are still expected to wait!

For its part, Option citoyenne follows on the heels of d’Abord Solidaires, a political education movement which in the main campaigned against the ADQ when polls in 2002 indicated that it might win the election. The logic of this campaign was “anybody but Dumont”, to the point that they refused to choose between the PQ and the PLQ as an alternative.

After the April 2003 elections, d'Abord Solidaires split into three groups, of which one — Option citoyenne — put its attention towards forming a political party.

An independent left

But what type of party, and to accomplish what? From the first page of her mini-platform, David says that she does not want to be “the Ralph Nader of Quebec and contribute to the defeat of the PQ” the way Nader is said to have contributed to the defeat of Gore in 2000. This is consistent with other statements asserting that the left must not “contribute to the re-election of the Liberals,” or again that “We are all intelligent and strategic people. When it comes to the elections, we will know what to say to the PQ”.

But what does this amount to other than support for the PQ as a “lesser evil” than the Liberals?

The leading group of Option citoyenne is trying to reconcile the irreconcilable — tactical support for the PQ and left political autonomy. But in truth you have to choose, either the one or the other.

By contrast, we should focus on the huge step forward for the left beginning with the UFP campaign in Mercier in April, 2001 (4,000 votes and a solid third-place finish).

And what about the general election in 2003, where the UFP won 5,000 votes in Mercier and stood candidates in 72 out of 125 ridings. The PQ lost that election, but that loss had nothing to do with the votes won by the UFP — it was a loss that they accomplished all by themselves.

The fusion between the UFP and Option citoyenne (which is being openly discussed) can therefore be carried out in two opposing directions. We can succeed in convincing the members of OC (and the members of the UFP who agree with their perspective) to reject the politics of “lesser-evilism” and to work for the development of a real alternative to the three neo-liberal parties. Or David and her supporters (in both the OC and the UFP) will succeed in winning the left to their politics of a “strategic alliance” with the PQ.

This alliance could take two forms — either a formal electoral pact including a very unequal partition of the ridings (which is highly unlikely, given the sacrifice this would represent for the PQ), or a unilateral “standing down” by the left in a series of key ridings in order “to not divide the vote”.

But the worst result would be the fusion of the UFP and OC without a preliminary discussion on the question of participation in the elections. We could end up with the folding of the UFP only to discover that the new party, in its majority, provides tactical support for the PQ, and the independent left — as a minority — no longer has a party.

That is why we must first insist that this debate is carried out in both the UFP and OC, and that it must be prominent on the agenda of the fusion negotiations.

It would be a tragedy, not a strategy, if the left refused to stand candidates in the greatest possible number of ridings in order to offer a real alternative to the people of Quebec.

That will allow the five million electors in Quebec to choose how to punish the Charest regime for its first four years of devastation. And who knows, maybe they will do that without rewarding the PQ!

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Growing Protests Condemn Ottawa's Role in Haiti Coup and Repression

By Roger Annis

Growing numbers of people in Canada and around the world are raising their voices against the February 29, 2004 coup against the constitutional government of Haiti and the bloody repression that has reigned on that island ever since. Events in some thirty cities around the world will commemorate the one-year anniversary of the coup and condemn the widespread violations of democracy and human rights in that country.

Two events in Canada have helped galvanize people into action — the publication in late 2004 of a new report on the human rights situation in Haiti; and the recent speaking tour to four Canadian cities of journalist and filmmaker Kevin Pina.

New human rights report

The Center for the Study of Human Rights at the University of Miami published a shocking report in late 2004 on the current situation in Haiti. The 61-page document is based on a visit to Haiti from November 11 to 21, 2004, by a human rights team led by U.S. attorney Thomas Griffin.

The report's introduction states, "After ten months under an interim government backed by the United States, Canada, and France and buttressed by a United Nations force, Haiti's people churn inside a hurricane of violence. Gunfire crackles, once-bustling streets are abandoned to cadavers, and whole neighborhoods are cut off from the outside world. Nightmarish fear now accompanies Haiti's poorest in their struggle to survive in destitution. Gangs, police, irregular soldiers, and even UN peacekeepers bring fear. There has been no investment in dialogue to end the violence.

"Haiti's security and justice institutions fuel the cycle of violence.... As voices for non-violent change are silenced by arrest, assassination or fear, violent defense becomes a credible option." (The full report is available at the website of the Haiti Action Committee)

The report contains photos of Haiti's police and rightist gangs in action and their dead victims lying in the streets of the poor neighborhoods, often for days on end. Several thousand people have been killed in the past year at the hands of the rightists and their coup regime. Many of the poor neighborhoods of the capital Port-au-Prince cannot easily access food, water or health services because those who venture in or out become targets of the police. Hundreds of Haitians languish in prison in gruesome conditions with no charges or due process of law.

Griffin interviewed members of the United Nations-sponsored military force in Haiti, currently headed by the government and armed forces of Brazil. He reports on widespread evidence of the UN collaboration with the Haitian National Police (HNP) in repressing and killings opponents of the coup. The HNP, most of whose members were installed after the coup, receives training and

arms from police forces of the occupying countries, including the RCMP and many municipal police forces from Canada.

A commander of the UN Civilian Police Unit, from Quebec City, Canada, told the Griffin team that he is “in shock” over the conditions in Port-au-Prince. He said that his UN mandate is to “coach, train and provide information” to the HNP, but all he has done in Haiti is “engage in daily guerilla warfare.”

“Where are the newspaper reporters?” he asked Griffin’s team.

Human rights reports from earlier in 2004 reported the same pattern of killings and repression of supporters of President Aristide and his Lavalas party.

In a rare glimpse from the Canadian corporate media into conditions in Haiti, an article in the February 7, 2005 *Globe and Mail* detailed horrific conditions prevailing inside the prisons there. But the article made only the briefest mention of the Griffin report. The mainstream press in Miami, where a large Haitian exile population lives, was silent on the report until February 22. An article by Jim Defede appeared in the *Miami Herald* that day.

Journalist Kevin Pina speaks in Canada

“There is a systematic campaign taking place in Haiti today to physically eliminate the Lavalas movement of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide,” charged journalist and filmmaker Kevin Pina in Vancouver, BC on February 9.

“And there is a reason for that. President Aristide was elected in 2000 by an overwhelming majority of the Haitian people. The coup regime and the foreign occupation forces are talking about holding an election later this year to legitimize their rule. But this would be illegal and unconstitutional.

“The Lavalas movement says it will boycott an election, and this would prove a major embarrassment to the U.S. and Canada. If they don’t have long lineups on election day to show to the international press, their game will be up. So the repression aims to silence opposition to a sham election.”

Earlier, Pina told a press conference in Montreal, “The United Nations military forces have been part and parcel of this machine that is physically exterminating the majority political party, the Lavalas movement of President Aristide.” He charged that Canada — particularly the RCMP — is playing a key role in whitewashing crimes carried out by the Haitian National Police.

Pina toured Canada from February 5 to 12. He spoke to several thousand people at public meetings and seminars in four cities—Montreal, Ottawa, Vancouver and Victoria. He also gave many interviews to local and alternative media outlets. He has lived in Haiti for the past five years and has reported from there for the last fifteen. The tour featured his 1994 film on Haiti, “Harvest of Hope,” and his forthcoming film, “Haiti: Betrayal of Democracy.”

Canada: key force in the occupation

The Canadian government was centrally involved in the planning and execution of the coup in Haiti. Five hundred Canadian soldiers occupied Haiti from the time of the coup until July. They

have been replaced by police drawn from the RCMP and other provincial and municipal police forces. Military and political officials from Canada and other countries of the UN occupation force play a decisive role in all government decision making in Haiti. They are members of the governing committees of the illegal, coup regime.

A key element of Canadian and UN plans for a future Haiti is the holding of a national “election” later this year. Denis Coderre, special adviser on Haiti to Prime Minister Paul Martin, told a political conference on the future of Haiti, held in Montreal on December 10 and 11, 2004, “What we are looking for is to have a secure environment for elections at the end of 2005.”

Martin visited Haiti on November 15. “We must be here for the long term,” he told reporters. When questioned about the “justice” system in Haiti, he acknowledged that acts “slowly,” but he also stated, “There are no political prisoners in Haiti.” (<http://canada.news.designerz.com/pm-martin-canada-in-haiti-for-long-run.html>)

Two months later, on January 28, 2005, Coderre met with Haiti’s most prominent political prisoner, the lawful prime minister, Yvon Neptune. Coderre spent one hour with Neptune ... in the latter’s jail cell. (Neptune’s supporters succeeded in removing him from prison on February 20, out of concern for his life. They delivered him to UN forces, who promptly handed him back over to the Haitian police.)

Canada embarks on aggressive course

The invasion of Haiti is a centerpiece of the Canadian government’s declared aim to make Canada a more aggressive and influential imperial power in the world. Other features of that policy include:

- A commitment to participation in a long-term occupation of Afghanistan and pursuit of the internal war there.
- Deepening Canada’s participation in the occupation of Iraq by agreeing to join in training the new, repressive Iraqi army.
- Closer alignment at the United Nations with the colonial settler state of Israel in the latter’s suppression of the national rights of the Palestinian people.
- Significant boosts in military recruitment and spending.
- A plan to create a more powerful military strike force.

The head of Canada’s armed forces, General Richard Hillier, outlined plans for a beefed-up strike force in a series of press interviews in mid-February. “We’re talking about taking army task forces, navy task groups and air capability ... and have it ready to deploy either in Canada or around the world as an entity that says ‘Canadian’ on it....”

“What we need is something that is going to allow us to project power across the shore ... whether that’s in the north part of Canada, the coast of Canada, or around the world.” (*Vancouver Sun*, February 15, 2005). Hillier says the military wants an assault ship capable of carrying up to 1,500 troops, heavy equipment, and helicopters.

The claim that such a military force serves a “humanitarian” purpose was exposed as a fraud during the recent Asian tsunami disaster. The federal government did not deploy the military’s Disaster Assistance Relief Team (DART) until public pressure forced it to do so. By the time the force reached Sri Lanka, sixteen days after the disaster, local and international humanitarian agencies had already met the most pressing emergency needs.

Why Haiti?

Why have the world’s richest powers ganged up on one of the world’s poorest countries?

The government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide implemented modest social reforms for the poorest people of Haiti. It promised more. It enjoyed the support of the overwhelming majority of the Haitian people, and its existence embodied the deep aspirations of that people for more radical and far-reaching reforms. Quite simply, a people engaged in their country’s politics in this manner represent a potential threat to the banks, mining companies, and sweatshop manufacturers that are reaping big profits from the cheap resources and labor of the Caribbean and Latin America.

Demonstrations and rallies will condemn the first anniversary of the coup

Rallies are planned in Vancouver and Montreal on February 26 to condemn the coup in Haiti, demand the return of the constitutional government, and call for the end of political repression. Thomas Griffin will be in Ottawa on February 28, meeting with political, trade union, and human rights figures. He will speak at a public meeting that evening.

In Vancouver on that same day, activists will visit the offices of cabinet minister David Emerson, deliver the Griffin report, and demand an explanation for Canada’s support to the repressive regime in Haiti. Members of Parliament in the Vancouver area will receive letters asking the same question.

For details on events in these cities and others around the world to mark the first anniversary of the coup: <http://www.quixote.org/hr/>

Many solidarity activities will take place in the United States. A major conference took place in Washington, DC, on February 5 and 6 to discuss and coordinate this. Titled (from the Creole language) the “Kongre Bwa Kayima”, it was attended by more than one hundred people, including Haitian exiles, democratic forces from Haiti, and human rights organizations.

In Brazil in late January, thousands of delegates attending the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre approved a sweeping resolution in support of the Haitian people. For the full text: http://www.haitiaction.net/News/FL/1_30_5.html

There is an urgent need in Canada for student groups, trade unions, the New Democratic Party, and others concerned with human and social rights to join in condemning the coup and demanding an end to the criminal role of the Canadian government. Too much time has already been lost since February 29, 2004, a now-infamous date in Canadian history.

(For background to the coup, its aftermath, and Canada’s role, see Socialist Voice #11 and 27)