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Socialist Voice #51, June 1, 2005

**The Sixties As They Really Were**

**By Ian Angus**

*Editors' Note: This review was originally published in the May 31 issue of Seven Oaks, a Vancouver-based magazine of politics, culture, and resistance. Ian Angus is the author of Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada, and Director of the Socialist History Project.*

*Barry Sheppard, the author of The Party: A Political Memoir, will speak in Toronto, on June 23, at 7:30pm, at the Centre for Social Justice, 489 College Street, 3rd floor. The meeting is organized by the Socialist Project.*

Barry Sheppard. *THE PARTY: A POLITICAL MEMOIR. The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988. Volume 1: The Sixties.* Resistance Press, Australia, 2005. Distributed in North America by Haymarket Books. 354 pages: US\$16.00

**Reviewed by Ian Angus**

If you believe the mainstream media, the Sixties were all about counterculture and hedonism. Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Tune in, turn on, drop out. Don't trust anyone over 30. Hippies, flower power and the summer of love.

There were dramatic shifts in popular culture in the Sixties, but they weren't the whole story, or even the most important part of it. The Sixties were above all a period of intense political radicalization, a time when revolution swept the globe and millions of people fought for political and social change.

The people of Cuba threw out a U.S.-client dictator and began the first socialist revolution in the western hemisphere. The civil rights movement gained momentum in the southern U.S. and spread across the country, leading to massive rebellions in most major cities. Ottawa declared martial law in an unsuccessful attempt to crush the nationalist movement in Quebec.

Czechoslovakia rose up against Stalinist tyranny. Student protests and a massive general strike brought France to the brink of revolution.

And the people of Vietnam, aided by an unprecedented antiwar movement in the United States itself, won a heroic war against the world's most powerful imperialist power.

When the media does deal with the political side of the Sixties — usually as a brief montage in a nostalgia-driven made-for-TV movie — we get Martin Luther King saying “I have a dream,” but not the ghetto uprisings in Detroit, Watts and Harlem. We get the shooting of antiwar demonstrators at Kent State, but not the killing, just two weeks later, of black college students in Jackson, Mississippi. Malcolm X is mentioned, but his revolutionary, internationalist and anticapitalist ideas are hidden from sight.

A complete history of the Sixties remains to be written, but Barry Sheppard's *The Party: A Political Memoir* makes a very strong start. It deserves to be read and studied by everyone who wants to understand the radicalization — and above all by everyone who wants to understand what lessons the Sixties can teach socialist organizers today. This is the Sixties as they really were, seen through the eyes of an active participant.

In 1959 Barry Sheppard, then a student at MIT, joined the Young Socialist Alliance, beginning a lifetime commitment to the cause of Marxism and socialism. During the period described in this book, he became a central leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), editor of its newspaper, and its representative at international events. He traveled widely, including accompanying the SWP's 1968 presidential candidate to Vietnam, taking the party's antiwar message to U.S. troops.

As an outline history of the Sixties, *The Party: A Political Memoir* is a powerful antidote to the media's trivialization. But it is much more than that. It is an insider's account of how a small socialist organization broke out of isolation to play a key role in the new radicalization, and in the process built the most effective revolutionary organization the U.S. had seen in decades. (By 1970, as FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover wrote, the Young Socialist Alliance was “the largest and best organized youth group in left-wing radicalism.”)

Tiny and isolated at the end of the McCarthy witch-hunt era in the 1950s, the SWP and YSA understood and responded to the new radicalization better than any other political current in the United States. Despite very limited resources, it redirected all of its efforts into participation in the new movements for social change. Sheppard's book provides invaluable insights into how that was done.

The radicalization of the Sixties in the United States, Sheppard writes, was driven by two engines — “the Black liberation struggle and the fight against the war in Vietnam.” Both won major victories— the war was stopped, and the Jim Crow system of legal segregation in the south was smashed. But eventually the radicalization stalled, and the mass movements for social change declined. Many writers have attributed that decline to errors made by left-wing groups at the time — if only they had adopted some other strategy, tactic or slogan, a revolution might have been possible.

Sheppard certainly doesn't suggest that the SWP was error-free. As a party formed in the 1930s and badly battered in the witch-hunt years of the 1950s, it sometimes had difficulties in responding to new developments such as the gay movement. *The Party: A Political Memoir* honestly describes the mistakes the SWP made, some of which it corrected quickly, and others that Sheppard believes were not dealt with adequately.

At the same time, he avoids suggesting that revolutionary socialists could somehow have changed history by a subjective act of will. Ultimately, he writes, the radicalization declined because it "did not reach the stage of a generalized radicalization of the working class." In the absence of the ultimate engine of social change, the radicalization could not move forward to revolution, and a retreat was inevitable.

Nonetheless, the Socialist Workers Party of the 1960s made impressive progress in building what an earlier generation of North American Communists termed a "party of a new type" — an organization simultaneously steeped in Marxist theory and deeply involved in practical activity; inspired by a vision of the ultimate goal of socialism and participating in day-to-day battles; focused on the working class as the key agent of social change and a partisan of all oppressed people, everywhere.

Barry Sheppard deserves great thanks for recording that experience, and for bringing the organizational and political lessons of that era to the attention of yet another generation of revolutionaries, in the 21st century.

Socialist Voice #52, June 8, 2005

## **Canada's Governmental Crisis: Rooted in Quebec Independence Struggle**

**By Roger Annis and John Riddell**

The revelations by the federal government commission of inquiry headed by justice John Gomery have deeply shaken the stability of capitalist politics in Canada. They are placing the issue of Quebec independence at the center of politics in this country, once again.

The minority Liberal government is still clinging to power thanks to support from the New Democratic Party and the split of multi-millionaire Belinda Stronach from the right-wing, opposition Conservative Party. But the evidence presented to the Gomery Commission of widespread Liberal Party graft and corruption have undermined the party's authority. Liberal support in Quebec is reaching new lows, while the governmental crisis has paradoxically weakened the Conservatives, strained by divisions within their own ranks.

### **Rampant graft and corruption**

The Gomery commission was created during the run-up to the 2004 federal election to investigate the practices of federal government spending on "sponsorship" programs whose purpose was to subvert the democratic will of the Quebec people and promote the profile of the Canadian government in Quebec's economic and social life. This so-called Sponsorship Program was set in motion shortly before the 1995 referendum vote in Quebec on national sovereignty. The pro-sovereignty forces lost that vote by less than one percent, creating panic in corporate boardrooms across Canada and the halls of power in Ottawa. The Sponsorship Program was quickly expanded.

The commission's investigation has revealed that hundreds of millions of dollars were spent. Some went into sponsorship of cultural and sporting events and media advertising. Much was directed to funding political events and the Liberal Party itself, sometimes in violation of Quebec's stringent laws limiting the role of big finance in funding political parties and activities. A lot of the money was simply stolen, or went into the pockets of corporate advertising firms and criminal elements with connections to the Liberal Party.

The findings have provoked anger and outrage in Quebec. The broadcasts of the daily hearings of the commission attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers. Quebecois are rightly offended by the notion that their political allegiance can be bought with federal money doled out by sleazy politicians and business people like those who have appeared before the commission.

Liberal Party leader Paul Martin hoped that by the time the commission's hearings and report were finished, the country's attention would have moved on. But Martin failed to win a majority government in 2004, and the revelations have been more damaging than expected.

### **Federal subversion of democracy**

Corruption is endemic in capitalist politics, so the findings of the Gomery Commission should not be a big surprise. The dilemma faced by the federalists is that corruption has become more and more central to their domination over Quebec as support for the federal system has progressively fallen away over the past 25 years.

In an article in the May 23, 2005 *Globe and Mail*, R  al S  guin describes one side of a decades-long effort by the federal government to destroy the Quebec independence movement. The article opens:

“Years prior to the 1980 Quebec referendum, former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau put it bluntly:

““One of the means to counterbalance the attraction of separatism is to use the time, the energy and enormous sums of money at the service of Canadian nationalism.’

“For Mr. Trudeau and the federal Liberals, all means were justified to preserve national unity.”

He describes how Jean Chr  tien, Canada’s prime minister from 1993 to 2004, took graft and corruption to new heights.

### **Erosion of Liberal Party support**

The Liberal Party, both its federal and Quebec wings, is a vital prop of the Canadian federal system. It is the party that ushered in the so-called Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, the modernization of social and political institutions of capitalist rule that had become necessary to combat rising Quebec nationalism. The party withstood the battering ram of the independence movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, it is the only federalist party in the Canadian Parliament with elected representatives from Quebec, and its Quebec wing, the governing party in the province, is the only federalist provincial party that can compete with the pro-independence Parti Qu  b  cois.

The Liberal Party was decisively weakened in 1982 when the Trudeau government imposed a new Canadian constitution against vehement opposition from the Quebec government of the time. The constitution denies both the existence of the Quebec nation and the rights that should flow from its national status.

In 1992, a Conservative Party government in Ottawa tried to repair the damage from 1982 with the so-called Meech Lake Accord, which would have transferred modest constitutional powers to all the provincial governments. The Quebec wing of the Liberal Party favoured Meech Lake, but the federal party opposed it, and played an important role in defeating it.

With their principal Quebec party in decline, Canada’s capitalists today face growing difficulty in creating a federal government with serious representation from Quebec. The Conservatives have not benefited from the disarray of the Martin government. The only alternative government to the Liberal Party in Ottawa would be a Conservative Party coalition with the pro-sovereignty Bloc Qu  b  cois, which won 54 of 75 Quebec seats in the 2004 federal election, but that prospect does not sit well with Canada’s rulers.

Despite all the gains made by Québécois during the last 40 years, national oppression is a persistent reality. It is shown in the economic disadvantages faced by Quebecois (lower incomes, higher unemployment, etc.), and, above all, in the increasingly extreme stance of the federal state against Quebec self-determination. Ottawa has adopted a law (the “Clarity Bill”) authorizing it to ignore the verdict of a future Quebec sovereignty referendum. Government leaders have proposed various options for the use of federal authority to block Quebec independence (“Plan B”), including military intervention.

### **The NDP-Liberal alliance**

The weakening of the Liberal government in Ottawa should be an opportunity for the union-based New Democratic Party to make gains on behalf of working people. The party could campaign to end the deep cuts in living standards and democratic rights that successive Liberal Party governments have imposed. It could call for an alternative foreign policy, one that seeks alliances with peoples in other countries who oppose the war drive of the imperialist powers. And, most relevant to the current crisis in Ottawa, it could support the aspirations of Québécois for independence or sovereignty. In parliament, the NDP could find common ground on this question with the Bloc Québécois.

While the Bloc is a pro-capitalist party, its stand for Quebec sovereignty is in the interests of workers across the country. And its proposals for social reform are no more or less timid than those of the NDP. A “bloc with the Bloc” would enable the NDP for the first time in its history to stand as a convincing alternative for government.

The NDP could also use the weakening of the federal government to aid the fight of Canada’s Native Indian peoples for sovereignty and radical improvements to social programs. Natives are the poorest of the poor in Canada, and most live in calamitous social and economic conditions.

Instead, the party has chosen to ally with the Liberals. In exchange for a promise of four billion dollars in increased spending on social programs, the party is supporting the minority Liberal government’s proposed budget, thus allowing them to stay in office.

Many people see the spending promises made to the NDP as a significant gain. But the budget’s most important feature is its commitment to a rapid increase in military spending, while increased spending for social programs is left for the future, and can be repudiated by the Liberals later on, as they have done in the past.

In allying with the Liberals, the NDP leaders have once again stood for maintaining Quebec’s oppression. This stand, more than anything else, has doomed the party since its inception to irrelevance in Quebec and minority status in federal politics.

### **United struggle needed**

In the early to mid-1970s, a powerful upsurge of Quebec labour struggles took place. The main trade union federations adopted manifestos supporting Quebec independence and socialism. Their stand won wide respect from the unions across the rest of Canada. Several major pan-Canadian unions took positions in support of Quebec self-determination, as did a strong minority in the NDP.

The lesson from this period is that unity of the working class in Canada becomes more possible as struggles deepen on both sides of the Ottawa River, and that support for Quebec self-determination must be an integral part of that unity. The oppression of the Quebecois is a central and decisive feature of capitalist rule in Canada, and it is the responsibility of the entire working class movement to join the fight against it.

Today, an important part of that fight is simply telling the truth about Quebec's struggle and enabling the voice of Québécois youth and working people to be heard elsewhere in Canada. There were massive strikes in Quebec earlier this year of students opposed to education cuts and of workers protesting cuts to jobs and social programs. These struggles — like other progressive movements in Quebec — have faced a conspiracy of silence by the media outside Quebec. We need to act to break through the silence.

Quebec independence may come to fruition while Canada remains a capitalist country. Or it may be won as part of the victory of workers across all of Canada over the capitalist rulers. In either case, victories for the Quebecois in their struggle for national liberation weaken the common capitalist foe and strengthen the potential for unity of workers across the country. Defense of Quebec self-determination is the prime duty of the working class across the rest of the country. And as long as Quebec remains imprisoned within Confederation, the goal of the working class movement must be a united struggle for a workers' government in Ottawa committed to guaranteeing the right of Québécois to independence if they so choose.

The establishment of a workers and farmers government in Ottawa would be a first giant step in a process of social and economic liberation. Active support for self-determination of Quebec and other oppressed nations in Canada is a vital precondition to achieving that goal.

Socialist Voice #53, June 29, 2005

## **Time for Labour to Act in Defense of Medical Care**

**By Suzanne Weiss**

### **Supreme Court Decision Opens the Door to Deeper Attacks**

The Supreme Court of Canada's June 9 decision overruling the Quebec government's ban of private health insurance for services covered by the public health care system is a significant move toward a two-tier medical system, with inferior care for working people and high-cost, higher quality care for the rich. The decision, adopted by a 4-3 majority, is another step in a lengthy government offensive to reduce social benefits for working people and give greater tax and other fiscal benefits to the wealthy class.

In the 1960s and 1970s, working people in Canada won government-funded health care for all residents. Parallel, private services for those willing to pay became restricted by law to services deemed "cosmetic" or otherwise non-essential to life and limb. In contrast to many advanced capitalist countries, all residents of Canada are served by the same publicly-financed health system.

Most Canadians have come to regard the universal health care system as a human right, even a symbol of national identity, taking pride in its superiority over private insurance in the United States. But over the past two decades, big business and its national and provincial governments have run down the quality of publicly funded care, aiming to blackmail the public to accept the need for parallel services outside the insurance plan. Their aim is to allow the privileged to receive treatment they can afford, even if the poor suffer or die for lack of care.

Governments have not dared legislate a two-tier system. Now the Supreme Court has weighed in and many political and corporate leaders intend to use its decision to open the door to expanding private services.

### **Canada's health system is sick**

The health care system in Canada is fundamentally driven by the private, profit-seeking system of capitalism. Pharmaceutical and equipment-supply companies earn fabulous sums from sales and research. Professionals—from doctors to hospital and government administrators—are paid a very high price for their skills. Public insurance is absent or limited for dental and optical services, physical therapy, care for the mentally ill, and scores of other basic medical services. Breakthrough diagnostic and advanced drug treatments are often unavailable, or only available for exorbitant fees.

The greatest victims of diminished care are women, many of them immigrants. They are the ones who perform the hard labor in hospitals and other public institutions for the least pay. When the health system is cut back, it is mainly women who lose their jobs and union protection.

The system utterly fails to address the urgent health problems of Aboriginal people.



Canada's health insurance downgrades the prevention of disease. This is largely left to the alternative medical practitioners whose often high-priced services are not covered under the plan. In its 2001 submission to the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, the United Steelworkers union quotes James Gilligan, author of *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes*, in which he writes, "the acute health care services can be thought of as the ambulance waiting at the bottom of the cliff to retrieve the victims cast off by the violent aftermath of societal structure."

In their attack on publicly-funded health care, governments have:

- Restricted the numbers of doctors that can practice in Canada, preventing many fully qualified physicians and nurses from other countries from practicing here. Canada lags behind even the U.S. with only 2.1 physicians per 1,000 population.
- Reduced health care by closing hospitals and other institutions, and eliminating thousands of nursing and health assistant positions in the institutions that have remained open. The number of hospital beds per capita in Canada has dropped, and patients are routinely released prematurely.
- Imposed long delays in hospital emergency wards and in obtaining essential tests and surgical treatment—delays that cause needless suffering, permanent injury, and death.
- Downgraded service and cleanliness within hospitals.
- Reduced community care services in the home, even for those with chronic and grave illnesses.
- Radically reduced the number of nurses, health care aides, and support staff in long-term care for the sick or elderly.

Government attacks have not gone unchallenged. Whenever given the opportunity, voters have sought to defend the public insurance system. Health care workers have staged strikes and protests throughout the country, and they have won the support of other unions and the general population. The union-backed Ontario Health Coalition, is currently mobilizing against attempts to privatize 23 hospitals in that province. In June, 2000, 10,000 health care workers defied Alberta's restrictive labour legislation, forcing a settlement of their contract issues, including raises. In April/May of 2004, more than 40,000 health care workers went on strike in British Columbia. On May 1, in the midst of the strike, several tens of thousands of people marched in support of the strikers and against strikebreaking legislation aimed at the Hospital Employees Union. A general strike movement was underway in the province in support of the strikers. (For a report on that strike, see *Socialist Voice* #3.)

It was this and many other examples of steadfast resistance to health care cuts that led enemies of public health care to turn to the courts for assistance.

### **The Supreme Court decision**

The case before the Supreme Court was brought by a Quebec physician, Jacques Chaoulli, who wanted to set up a clinic for private medical services, and his patient, George Zeliotis, who

waited nearly a year for a hip-replacement surgery. Chaoulli and Zeliotis argued that Quebec's ban on buying private insurance for services already covered by the public health-care system (but in practice not readily accessible due to long wait times) violated both the province's Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom.

Dr. Amir Khadir of the Union des forces progressistes, a left-wing Quebec political party, responded to the court decision in these terms, "See where the cutbacks have landed us! The waiting and suffering imposed on sick people by these cutbacks give Dr. Chaoulli the pretext to attack the Quebec public health system." In fact, Chaoulli was merely a tool of a massive legal and publicity campaign bankrolled by the super-rich Desmarais family, whose Power Corporation owns two large private health insurance companies—London Life and Great-West.

### **Morgentaler case is no precedent**

Ironically, this court ruling was based on the 1988 Supreme Court of Canada decision that struck down Canada's restrictive abortion laws. The Chaoulli/Zeliotis ruling draws on more than two pages of comparisons between the two cases. The 1988 decision, named after the abortion rights hero Dr. Henry Morgentaler, established that women faced systematic delays and obstruction in obtaining abortion from public hospitals and therefore had a human right to seek treatment from private clinics. This decision was a huge victory for women's rights, paving the way first to create private abortion clinics across the country and then to win the inclusion of abortions in these clinics in the public health insurance plan.

The Chaoulli case is similar in legal form but opposite in its essence: its goal is not to strengthen and expand public health care, but to weaken and limit it by expanding private services.

The Supreme Court majority claims its decision is a remedy for overly long wait times. In fact, as the Ontario Health Coalition points out, "two-tier health care will pull precious human resources out of the public health care system and will mean longer waiting lists for most people in order that a select few are able to buy their way to the front of the line."

### **Health care and Quebec sovereignty**

The Chaoulli decision is a blow to the justification for Canada's rule over Quebec. As Pierre Dubuc in *l'Aut Journal* explains,

"In this decision, the two pillars that have come to be defined as the basis of English-Canadian identity have collided: the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the public health system.... The Supreme Court decision has destroyed one of the last myths of Canadian federalism, namely, that federal institutions stand as a rampart against privatizing our health system."

Throughout Canada's history, Dubuc says, "this theory of the federal guardian angel is part of the federalist arsenal against Quebec sovereignty.... It is now clear that the way to preserve our public health system [in Quebec] is to achieve national independence." This Supreme Court decision is all the more irritating to Quebec national feeling coming on the heels of the Gomery revelations on the Liberal Party "sponsorship" scandal in Quebec. (see *Socialist Voice* #41.)

### **The two-tier society**

The example of Cuba shows that there is no need nor excuse for long waiting times for health care. Cuba has found the means not only to care for its own population, but also to extend international medical aid throughout Latin America and to other underdeveloped countries. (See “Cuba’s Development”.)

Cuba has received the highest praise from the World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property organization, and International Labor Organization for its medical accomplishments. The Latin American Medical School of Havana has trained tens of thousands of health professionals from more than 123 countries, including the United States. Twenty thousand Venezuelan citizens have recently regained their sight after receiving free cataract and other eye operations from Cuban doctors.

Cuba provides an example of what can be achieved when workers are in government and organize society to meet human needs.

Perhaps the Paul Martin government should ask Cuba to add Canada to its list of medically deprived countries in need of help. The Cubans would gladly train Canadian doctors, and they could help ease wait times here for medical procedures.

But the Canadian health care system is rooted in the profit system which runs counter to human needs. Industry and corporations want to increase their capacity to use health care, like any other piece of merchandise, as a source of private accumulation. Canada’s rulers do not aim at this time to destroy the public insurance system—it is even lauded by some capitalists as a way to reduce the burden of employee benefits. But they do aim to degrade public care to the point where many people will come to accept a two-tier system. Two-tier health care is the logical outcome of a two-tier society.

### **Labour’s reaction**

The Supreme Court decision prompted quick protests from labour organizations. Ken Georgetti, President of the Canadian Labour Congress called on all federal and provincial governments to “move quickly to reassure Canadians that our cherished public medicare system is still in place and will be there for us all when we need it.” In fact, it is these very governments that have devastated the “cherished system,” to the point where it is often not “there for us when we need it.”

Jack Layton, federal leader of the union-based New Democratic Party, and Jean Crowder, its health critic, echoed Georgetti’s sentiment, saying the decision “should be a wake-up call to Paul Martin to honour the promises the Liberals have made to patients in four elections.”

Claudette Carbonneau, President of the Confederation des syndicats nationaux (CSN), states that the Supreme Court decision is “a major defeat for Quebec’s health system, which opens the door to a two-tier medical system.” She notes that “the decision will worsen the shortages of personnel because many doctors will be tempted to make the leap into private medicine,” but makes no call for action.

By contrast, Henri Massé, President, Federation des travailleurs et travailleuses du Quebec (FTQ), pledges that the unions will “prepare a most vigorous response, because this decision is very serious.

“More than 30 years ago, we as a society made our choice in favor of a system of free access to quality health care,” says Massé. “We can’t allow four individuals, even if they are Supreme Court justices, to overturn this decision.”

Indeed, the court cannot on its own authority overturn a health insurance system so strongly supported by the Canadian population. In estimating the relationship of forces, the ruling class has utilized the Supreme Court to give their opinion that the time has come for a frontal attack. But is their estimate correct? It is up to the labour movement and its allies to prove them wrong.

It is not enough to elect politicians who promise to defend health care—only to betray those promises when elected. As Quebec’s left-wing political parties, Option citoyenne and Union des forces progressistes, propose, what we need is “a true united front of social movements, political parties, and citizens to defend a health system that is free, universal, and accessible.” The Ontario Health Care Coalition has set a modest example with their untiring and consistent demonstrations of resistance.

It is not enough to defend the “cherished system.” The public health care system must be rebuilt and expanded—for example, by including in its coverage dental and optical care, physical therapies, prescription medications, and expanded care for the mentally ill. Steps are needed to challenge and restrict profiteering—for example, by developing a publicly owned pharmaceutical industry. Preventive health care needs to be emphasized. And health sector workers need better wages, staffing ratios, working conditions, and an assured right to union protection to allow a delivery of high-quality care.

The Supreme Court decision should be a wake-up call for labour throughout Canada and the NDP to educate and mobilize sentiment of working people. We need to rally massively behind the unions of health care workers. Our focus should be not the courts but the streets—with large and loud public demonstrations throughout Canada. That is the only language that will be understood, particularly by the owners of industry and the insurance moguls. There is more strength in our numbers than in their laws!

Socialist Voice #54, June 30, 2005

## **Reflections on a Recent Visit to Venezuela**

**By Alan Woods**

*Socialist Voice Note: For many years Alan Woods was a leader of the “Militant” tendency in the U.K. He is now editor of the British journal Socialist Appeal and a frequent contributor to the website In Defense of Marxism, where this article first appeared.*

*[Several weeks have passed since my recent visit to Venezuela, and until now I have been unable to publish a report. An intense work schedule has prevented me from putting a modicum of order into the voluminous notes, written in my barbarous handwriting, that fill several notebooks. But despite the delay I have decided to publish my notes in the form of an article, because in some respects they can give a clearer and more concrete idea of the stage through which the Revolution is passing than a fully worked-out article. Any formal defects may be excused on the grounds that this piece does not pretend to be such an article but rather a more or less disjointed series of notes.]*

In the second week of April the Third International Gathering in Solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution was held. This is an annual event held to commemorate the defeat of the April coup of 2003, when the masses rose up to confront the forces of the counterrevolution. This was the second time I was invited to attend this event, as regular readers of *Marxist.com* will know from the reports from last year.

During this visit I noted a change in the situation in comparison to a year earlier. The victory in the recall referendum in August 2004 had dealt a shattering blow against the Counterrevolution. The correlation of class forces was, and remains, enormously favourable to the Revolution. As we predicted, the masses have pressed home their advantages and are demanding that the Revolution take a decisive step forward.

A decisive new element in the equation is the emergence of the working class as a key protagonist in the Revolution. This is most clearly expressed in the movement for workers' control (the expression “cogestion” is somewhat confused but that is what the workers understand by it.).

The fact that President Chavez has come down publicly in favour of socialism is a further clear indication as to where the Bolivarian Revolution is moving. The nationalization of Venepal, and now also of CNV, confirms this direction. Those people who criticized us for pointing out that the Bolivarian Revolution would have to take the socialist road or fail, have been shown to be completely wrong.

At the rank and file level there is a burning desire to push the revolutionary process forward, to confront the forces of the counterrevolution and move to socialism. But this mood is not replicated at every level of the Bolivarian Movement. One has the distinct impression that the higher up one goes, the less the enthusiasm for the Revolution.

This does not apply to the President, who has made it clear that he is in favour of a Revolution within the Revolution. But in the level immediately beneath the President, there are elements who do not share his radicalism and are, openly or otherwise, pushing in the opposite direction. At the inaugural meeting of the gathering, President Chavez once again reiterated his support for socialism. I was sitting near the ministers, and I noted that, whereas these remarks were received with enthusiasm by almost the entire audience, more than one minister was sitting on his hands. This little detail strikingly reveals the real state of affairs.

A prominent Bolivarian official assured me that many of the President's instructions are being sabotaged by elements in the state apparatus who do not believe in the revolutionary process. The same person told me: "There are three factions: those who are for the revolutionary process; those who want to halt the revolutionary process because they have already made their careers; and those who are simply corrupt."

Though they put on red shirts and call themselves "chavistas" and even "Marxists", they are profoundly hostile to the revolutionary process and particularly to the movement in the direction of socialism proclaimed by President Chavez. They have infiltrated the movement under the guise of functionaries and "advisers". One person I met described this phenomenon very graphically as "parasites looking for another host."

In the inaugural speech already alluded to, President Chavez made an honest self-criticism. He stated that his earlier attempt to find a "third way" between capitalism and socialism was "a farce". He added that the only alternative to capitalism is socialism. This has had a big effect in galvanising the rank and file and increasing the interest in socialist and Marxist ideas. The comrades of the CMR produced 20,000 pamphlets on "*What is Socialism?*" for the meeting and it was very well received.

In every meeting I saw that the ideas of socialism and Marxism are readily accepted by the workers and youth of Venezuela if they are explained clearly. On 11 and 12 of April I spoke at two big meetings at the Bolivarian University in Caracas organized by the Revolutionary Marxist Current with the official backing of the Bolivarian University (UBV). The meetings were advertised on 300 posters and 8,000 printed leaflets. In the second meeting, on the subject of socialism, comrade William Izarra, who is now Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs responsible for the Middle East and Asia and who stands on the left of the Bolivarian Movement, also spoke. Present in the meeting were quite a few workers from the occupied CNV factory, who had already come the day before and were very enthusiastic.

The great interest in the ideas of socialism and Marxism is illustrated by the following detail: in the course of two weeks I was interviewed on quite a few occasions on television, for example on channel eight and Vive TV, the two state television channels. I was also interviewed on two television programmes in Barquisimeto that are seen in all the neighbouring states (Falcón, Portuguesa, Guàrico y Yaracuy). In addition I was interviewed for one hour on Telesur, the new TV channel set up on Chavez's initiative to broadcast to all the countries of Latin America. I was also interviewed by different journalists of other Latin American countries.

We held many formal and informal meetings with workers and activists – like the one with 25 comrades from Caracas, Vargas and Miranda. A young worker from a factory in Petare (a working class suburb to the east of Caracas) turned up with a group of comrades from the factory, where they are forming a trade union. The comrades of El Algodonal, a hospital of more than 2000 workers, situated in one of the poorest suburbs (Antimano – a stronghold of chavismo) in Caracas, sent their apologies, but were committed to support future meetings and activities. I also had a number of discussions with Adan Chavez, William Izarra, Orlando Chirinos, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Rodriguez, and other leaders of the Bolivarian and trade union movement. But perhaps the most important intervention was in the debate on workers' control in Carabobo.

### **The Debate on Workers' Control**

The format of this year's Rally was different to last year's event. This year the delegates were distributed to different regions of the country to participate in different workshops on a variety of subjects. I elected to go to Carabobo, where the subject was "cogestion" (workers' self management). Initially, the idea was to hold it in the Venepal plant, but problems with the installations meant that it had to be transferred to the state capital, Valencia.

The main leaders of the left trade union, the UNT spoke in the debates and their speakers reflected the general revolutionary and militant mood of the rank and file. This was further manifested on the magnificent demonstration of 1 of May, in which the UNT spoke openly of the fight for socialism and similar questions. Another speaker was the Minister of Labour, a young woman who is very left wing and a firm advocate of workers' control and nationalization. The following account is not to be taken as a stenographic record but rather an impressionistic series of snapshots. I was unable to make detailed notes, mainly because I was involved in all sorts of discussions and interviews outside the meeting. However, I hope that these sketchy notes will give something of the flavour of the discussions and the mood of the workers present.

Although the subject of the debates was officially "workers' participation" (cogestion), it soon became clear that those present wanted to discuss workers' control. This "workshop" was really a kind of mini-conference of trade unionists where for the first time the worker activists of Venezuela had the opportunity to meet and debate the problems of workers' control. There were about 500 workers, union leaders and activists present. The workers, dressed in the bright red t-shirts and baseball caps that are a kind of uniform of the Bolivarian Movement, participated enthusiastically, often speaking with great passion. The level of debate was very high, and all the discussions centred on socialism, with repeated references to Marx, Lenin and particularly Trotsky. At different times the speeches and debates were interrupted with loud chants of: 'Sin Cogestion no hay revolucion!' (Without workers' control there is no revolution!) and "power to the workers!"

The big electrical company Cadafe is also moving towards workers' control (cogestion). The same is true of Alcasa and several other factories. One anecdote will serve to illustrate the attitude of the workers. The main leader of the workers in the occupied (and now expropriated) CNV factory, Jorge Paredes, a young, energetic and intelligent workers' leader, told it to me.

Shortly after the workers had occupied the factory, a completely unknown individual turned up and informed the workers that he was the “new Bolivarian manager”. The workers looked at each other, completely mystified. Who had elected this man? Nobody. Who knew anything about him? Nobody. So they said to the new “boss”: OK. You go and sit in the corner and we will let you know what we decide!

The speakers included a number of prominent Left intellectuals from different countries who have supported the Venezuelan Revolution. These included Isobel Rauber from Cuba and Canadian Leftist Mike Lebowitz. Mike spoke on the Yugoslav experience of workers’ self management, pointing out the dangers that could face the movement in Venezuela, the risk of bureaucratic tendencies, corruption and the danger of setting one group of workers against another. At the same time he emphasised the positive side, the ability of the workers to participate effectively in the running of industry, etc.

Another speaker was the veteran Catalan Marxist, Victor Rios, who gave a very interesting lecture, starting out with the observation that the important achievement of the co-operative movement of Robert Owen was to prove that the workers could run industry without capitalists. He gave some very illuminating quotes from Lenin and Trotsky. This was no exception. The Brazilian trade union activists Serge Goulart, who is himself involved in a campaign to support a number of factory occupations in Brazil, commented that he had never attended a trade union meeting where Marx, Lenin and Trotsky were quoted so frequently.

I delivered a one-hour lecture in Spanish on “Socialism of the XXI century”, in which I pointed out that it was impossible to make half a revolution: “How can we speak of the Revolution being irreversible when three years after the coup those responsible are walking free in the streets? The same old bureaucrats remain at their posts, the same old governors and mayors. Above all, how can we speak of a Revolution being irreversible when the economic power of the oligarchy remains more or less intact? It is necessary to finish the job. It is necessary to expropriate the oligarchy and introduce a socialist planned economy. This is the only way to solve the problems of the Venezuelan people.”

This message was enthusiastically received by the delegates. Afterwards the leaders of the oil workers invited me to address their own commission on workers’ control. The general enthusiasm for the ideas of Marxism was shown by the fact that the bookstall run by the comrades of the Revolutionary Marxist Current (CMR) sold out of books and pamphlets by Trotsky. The comrades sold a total of 707,400 Bolivars worth of books and documents and 50 copies of the Marxist paper El Topo Obrero.

### **Venepal**

Alexis Olmeda spoke on behalf of the workers of Venepal (now Invepal), which was nationalised in January. He explained the process whereby the workers took over the factory. The owners owed large sums of money to the workers. At first the workers appealed to the courts. But they also decided to set up a committee to keep up maintenance work in the plant. The committee was based in the union’s office. It met on a daily basis, analysed the statistics and made daily reports.



On the basis of this information, the workers were able to work out their own statistics and obtain a very clear idea of the real state of affairs of the business. On opening the books, they could see the true position of sales, production, maintenance – and even the Holy of Holes – profits. The bosses could no longer say: “We cannot pay your wages.” Armed with the necessary figures, the workers were able to go to court and prove otherwise:

“The bosses saw that we had learnt what the real position was, and the proof was that we had mastered the whole process of production,” he said.

The next step was predictable. The bosses decided to close the plant. In order to prevent this, the workers took it over and ran it for four months. The workers met in a mass meeting and voted in favour of workers’ control. The results were good. The workers broke records for productivity and quality. But the owners were manoeuvring behind the scenes, and in December 2004 the factory was declared bankrupt. The intention of the owners was to asset-strip the plant. The workers – following a proposal originally raised by the CMR – demanded that the government nationalize the factory. Finally, in January of this year, President Chavez signed the decree of nationalization.

This was a big victory for the workers and has been the signal for many others to follow the same line. It also demonstrated the correctness of the position taken from the start by the Venezuelan Marxists of the CMR, who pointed out that workers’ control could only develop into something serious if the occupied plants were nationalized. We therefore greeted the nationalization of Venepal in January. But at the same time we pointed out the need for a clear programme for workers’ control and nationalization. Otherwise there could be a danger that confused and ambiguous formulas could lead to an abortion, in the form of bourgeois co-operatives and so on.

Some were critical of the speech made by the representative of Venepal (now Invepal), who seemed to imply that the firm ought to be run on the lines of a bourgeois co-operative. One of the delegates from the big oil company PDVSA spoke against this:

“I see a big difference between what President Chavez said yesterday and what the comrade from Venepal said. What is the objection to workers’ control? In PDVSA, we took control and ran it without any special preparation or training, and we defeated the bosses’ sabotage. There was an internal revolution in PDVSA. One of the speakers said we need a law of workers’ control from the National Assembly. That is correct, but first we have to find out what are the interests that are blocking workers’ control.”

An older coloured worker from Guyana spoke on workers’ control and the unions:

“Workers’ control cannot mean the elimination of the trade unions. The unions are the fundamental organizations of the working class in its struggle against Capital, whether it be private Capital or state capitalism. We do not want workers’ participation or any other reformist ideas, but workers’ control and management. The workers are in a fight against another class – the bourgeoisie. We must base ourselves on scientific ideas. I mean dialectical materialism. I mean Marxism, comrades!” (Wild applause and cheers)

“What are we talking about here? In Latin America we are talking about a fundamental change. We do not only require a discussion about workers’ control but a political, philosophical and ideological discussion about where we are going. I cannot conceive of workers’ control that would eliminate the trade unions. We must run, not only the factories but society itself. What we do not want is class collaboration.”

A woman worker from the big electrical company Cadafe spoke next:

“In our factory for the first time we have a voice and a vote – a real participation – we are the real protagonists. And I want to make it clear that our sector does have unions.” A worker from PDVSA followed her: “The workers of PDVSA are fighting for a change but there are many on the management side who argue that the company is too complicated for us to run it. Well, in that case we will learn the necessary skills! We propose the setting up of a workers’ university to train the workers.”

### **Workers oppose bureaucracy**

Since President Chavez began to speak about socialism, everybody is suddenly interested in it, looking for books and pamphlets and anxious to find out about socialism. But there are also serious problems. The main problem is bureaucracy, corruption and careerism. The right wing of the movement tries to water down the socialist message and divert the movement along “safe” (i.e., capitalist) channels. But the workers are increasingly aware of this and sharply critical. The following are extracts from speeches made by worker activists in the debate in Carabobo:

- “We all know that there are people in the Party and in the Movement who wear red shirts and red baseball caps but who are not in favour of the President and who are against workers’ control. Comrades! The Revolution and workers’ control are not worn as shirts but are carried in the hearts of every one of us. These people are a Trojan horse and they are placing the Revolution in danger. We want to see all the factories and workplaces under workers’ control. I hope that in the next year Venezuela will be ruled by people who believe in the revolutionary process.”
- “There are counterrevolutionaries within the revolutionary movement and these people are accusing the true revolutionaries of being counterrevolutionaries.”
- “We workers are the backbone of the Revolution, but the authorities are hindering us and even repressing us. We demand that the National Assembly fulfil the role that they ought to play in this Revolution. We demand that the National Assembly pass a law of workers’ control (cogestion). Many sections are blocking us, but we workers are the only ones who can transform society.”

An older worker got up to speak: “Class brothers and sisters, I would like you to clarify the difference between workers’ control (cogestion) and workers’ participation. In Lara, there is a factory where they are supposed to have workers’ control, but there the workers have no say. In Guyana, the working class are electing the head of the company. That is what I understand by workers’ control, not participation. The working class must not only manage the company but also society and the state.”

In the commission of the oil workers, there was a heated debate on workers' control. The workers present were emphatically in favour of carrying the revolutionary process forward and in particular of introducing workers' control in the state-owned oil company PDVSA. I was asked to state my views and did so in the following sense:

“What we are talking about here is not workers' participation but workers' control. However, workers' control is a transitional stage that must lead to the nationalization of the company, if it is not to be merely an ephemeral episode. Even this is not really sufficient. We support the nationalization of individual enterprises, but there cannot be islands of socialism in a sea of capitalism. What is needed is a socialist planned economy based on the nationalization of the land, the banks and the big industries.

“What concrete steps should be taken? You will draw up a resolution on workers' control in this commission. What then? You should take the resolution to the shop floor, call a mass meeting in every section of the plant, organize a debate with contributions for and against, then put it to the vote. I guarantee not only that you will get a majority, but that those workers who voted against will agree to carry the resolution into practice, once it has been accepted as the majority view.

“The same process should be repeated at plant level. You should elect delegates and convene a conference at local level, inviting other workplaces to send delegates: then call conferences at regional level, at state level and so on, culminating in a National Workers' Convention that can vote on a proposal for workers' control and nationalization.”

This idea was readily accepted by most of the workers present. But not everybody shares the enthusiasm of the rank and file for workers' control and socialism. There is a layer of people – bureaucrats, careerists, Stalinists and Social Democrats – who are striving by every means to halt and derail the revolutionary process. I had a close look at one such specimen in this commission. He assured everybody of his “Marxist” and “Communist” credentials, and then proceeded to pour a bucket of cold slops over the movement for workers' control. The workers of Venezuela, he assured us, were “backward”, “corrupt” and even “rotten”. How could they ever move to socialism?

This individual was put firmly in his place by comrade Ricardo Galindez, the editor of *El Topo Obrero*, and a veteran activist in the Venezuelan revolutionary workers' movement, who asked him “What working class are you talking about? What country are you talking about? You are certainly not talking about the working class of Venezuela.” Comrade Galindez then proceeded to innumerate, one by one, the revolutionary movements of the Venezuelan working class and masses, starting with the heroic Caracazo of February 1989, passing through the sweeping election victory of Chavez, the defeat of the April coup of 2002, the defeat of the counterrevolutionary bosses' strike, the referendum victory and now the movement for workers' control...

Contempt for the creative abilities of the working class is the most fundamental hallmark of Stalinism and of bureaucrats of all kinds. These “clever” intellectual ladies and gentlemen who imagine themselves so superior to the masses and see themselves as the “vanguard” in reality are

on a lower level than the most backward and politically ignorant sections of the workers and peasants. They play the role of an obstacle in the path of the masses and the revolution, spreading the poison of scepticism and pessimism to all who listen to them. No matter what their subjective intentions may be, they play an extremely negative role in the movement. With “friends” like these, the Venezuelan Revolution really needs no enemies!

Fortunately, the good sense and sound revolutionary instincts of the masses mean that all this rubbish usually flows off them like water off a duck’s back. One woman worker after the commission said that the role of such “clever” speeches as this was only to demobilise the workers. That is absolutely correct. But the workers who were not prepared to be demobilised by the guns and clubs of the counterrevolution in April 2002 are not likely to allow themselves to be demobilised by the sophistry of reformist “advisers”, no matter how many letters they may have after their name.

### **Other meetings**

In addition to the discussions in Carabobo, I also addressed a number of other important meetings. One of the most interesting was the meeting held in the occupied CNV (Construcción Nacional de Valvulas) factory. This is situated in Los Teques, about thirty kilometres from Caracas. It is situated at the top of a hill, with a spectacular view over a lush green valley. It would be a good place to build a tourist hotel. But the workers of CNV are not on holiday. They are engaged in a struggle for the survival of the plant, which means the survival of themselves and their families.

The comrades of the CMR in Los Teques have been intervening in the factory practically from the beginning of the occupation, visiting the plant every day, supporting the occupation and discussing with the workers. They have won a great authority. As a result a comrade from the CMR was invited to attend the ceremony where Hugo Chavez signed the expropriation order for CNV. At the meeting, on behalf of the CMR, Jorge Paredes presented the President with a copy of Trotsky’s book *The Revolution Betrayed* and a report of the work of the Hands Off Venezuela campaign. In a meeting held in the Central University (UCV) on Thursday, April 28, at which workers from Venepal and CNV were present, both groups of workers publicly thanked the comrades of the CMR for their support.

As you enter the gates that lead to the factory, you are greeted with a huge placard announcing the occupation. The gate is guarded by watchful pickets. A little further up the road there is a tent and outside the tent is a large table with plates, cups and cooking pots. This is the kitchen and canteen improvised by the workers to support the occupation. I was invited to lunch at this open-air canteen before the meeting. The food was excellent and the company even better.

The CNV meeting took place inside the occupied factory, with the presence of 50 workers. It was chaired by Jorge Paredes, and I was the only speaker. Once again, the workers gave an enthusiastic response to the ideas of socialism. It is difficult to convey in words the intense atmosphere of this meeting. One could see by the faces of the workers, men and women, old and young, an intense concentration on everything that was said. They hung on every word as if their future depended upon it – which in fact it does.

I can still see these faces now: the honest, open and intelligent face of the working class. But it is impossible to convey what I saw on those faces. One has to live this in order to see what a revolution is good for. What it is good for is to sweep away the accumulated dirt of decades of inertia, to bring the working class to its feet, to drag it out of the swamp. Men and women raise themselves up to their true height and begin to think and act as free individuals, not slaves. What a contrast to the smirking mask of the professional cynic and bureaucrat, whose only aim in life is to destroy the illusions and hopes of the young generation and drag it down into the fetid swamp of mental and spiritual stagnation into which these miserable creature have long since sunk.

The meeting in Vargas was just as interesting. This is a town situated on the Atlantic coast, about the same distance from Caracas as Los Teques. It has a long revolutionary tradition. The elegant Spanish colonial building where the meeting was held was in earlier times the scene of meetings by famous revolutionaries who organized the resistance against Spain. Now it was full of Bolivarian activists – the true descendants of those fighters of old.

I spoke together with comrade Celia Hart from Cuba in a very good meeting of activists, who were previously known as the Colectivo Vargas Revolucìon, with about 2,000 activists, which obtained 10% of the votes in the regional elections. They later joined the Movement for Direct Democracy (Movimiento Democracia Directa), a left party that has been set up by William Izarra, and have very good relations with the CMR. They were very enthused with the meeting, which was attended by about forty people, most of them leaders and candidates in the elections.

In Vargas we discussed the fundamental problems of the Revolution. The same questions cropped up time and again. A young woman called Laura complained bitterly about the corrupt bureaucratic elements: “The problem is that the genuine revolutionaries are being crushed and annihilated by the same old people.” (“están siendo aplastados y anulados por los de siempre”). We discussed the need for anti-bureaucratic measures, such as the right of recall, the limitation of the salaries of all officials, inspection of expenses, etc. These measures were very well received by all the activists.

The question was raised: what precisely is the “socialism of the 21st century?” Is it necessary to invent an entirely new and original model? I answered that there was really no need to re-invent the wheel. There is no particular merit in inventing new ideas just for the sake of it. The wheel is a very old invention. Should we try to develop an alternative for the sake of originality? Maybe we ought to try a square wheel, or a triangular one instead? The point was taken, and most people accepted that, although they could be developed and adapted to the specific conditions of Latin America, the ideas of Marxism remained completely valid and relevant.

I drew a parallel with the ideas of Simon Bolivar. I said: “Bolivar took his ideas originally from the Great French Revolution of 1789-93. But he applied these ideas creatively to the concrete conditions in Latin America. Marxists must do the same today. The Bolivarian Revolution has its own peculiarities, its specific features, its own character and personality. But the Venezuelan revolutionaries will learn from the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, just as their forefathers learned from the French Jacobins, not mechanically but creatively.”

In Barquisimeto, I spoke at two well-attended meetings – one of about a hundred workers and another of a hundred and fifty in the local Polytechnic. As in Vargas, fundamental questions were asked. As the Pope had just died, it was perhaps inevitable that the question of religion and the attitude of Marxism to it should be raised. I answered along the following lines: “It seems to me that there are two Catholic Churches in Venezuela. On the one hand there is the Church of millions of poor and oppressed people, seeking hope and justice. On the other hand there is the Church of the hierarchy that supports the rich and powerful. We Marxists are opposed to the latter but to the former we extend our hand in friendship and offer to fight together against injustice and oppression for a better world.”

In all these meetings I found the people to be very open to the ideas of Marxism. In fact, there was a thirst for ideas and theory, a burning desire to understand. That, too, is what a Revolution is good for.

I left Caracas with the clear impression that the Revolution is advancing, although with increasingly determined resistance from the representatives of the old order. Although the latter have suffered some severe defeats, they still form a solid barrier to further advance. Having been repulsed in a frontal assault, they have been compelled to resort to “guerrilla warfare” against the Revolution, which they are attempting to derail, undermine and destroy from within.

The problem of bureaucracy, corruption and careerism is at the centre of the equation. These are the tools used by the counterrevolution to halt the Revolution in its tracks. The oligarchy and imperialism are trying to find points of support within the Bolivarian Movement, striving to introduce a Trojan Horse into its ranks that can overwhelm its defences. The struggle for power in Venezuela will be determined by the struggle of opposing tendencies within the Bolivarian Movement that in the last analysis reflect the struggle of opposing and mutually incompatible class interests.

The victory of the counterrevolution is not a foregone conclusion – but neither can the final victory of the revolutionary forces be taken for granted. But we remain optimistic. The consciousness of the masses, and particularly the proletarian vanguard, is growing by leaps and bounds. The workers are discussing socialism, fighting for workers’ control, and opposing the attempts of the bureaucrats and careerists to hijack the Revolution. Millions of workers are passing through the school of the Revolution. They are drawing the most advanced conclusions from their experiences. They are preparing to take power into their hands – not only in the factories, but also of society into their hands.

In all these battles the Marxists stand shoulder to shoulder with the Revolution, against the conspiracies of the oligarchy and imperialism. We also stand together with the workers and peasants in their struggle against the bosses and landlords, for workers’ control and socialism. We stand with the genuine revolutionaries against the reformists, bureaucrats and fifth columnists of the oligarchy. Experience will teach the masses that the ideas of scientific socialism – of Marxism – can provide them with the only weapons that can bring this struggle to a victorious conclusion.