



Newsletter of the Hands Off Venezuela campaign www.handsoffvenezuela.org September 2010

Venezuelans vote for new Assembly

Socialist United Party of Venezuela takes on opposition MUD coalition which boycotted 2005 poll

by Jorge Martín,
Hands Off Venezuela

On September 26 Venezuelans will go to the polls again, this time to elect 167 deputies to the National Assembly, as well as 12 representatives to the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino).

Since 1998, when president Chávez was elected, the Venezuelan people have been called to the polls on 15 different local, regional, national, presidential elections and referenda. Contrary to what the media would have you believe, the Venezuelan people have expressed themselves democratically and they have given overwhelming support to the Bolivarian revolution. In fact, the highest vote ever for the project led by Hugo Chávez was in the presidential elections in 2007, when the revolution declared its socialist objectives, receiving more than 7 million votes.

The two main contenders in the upcoming elections are the

Socialist United Party of Venezuela (PSUV) which is allied with a number of smaller revolutionary parties (the Communist Party, UPV, MRT, MES) on the one hand, and the Democratic Unity Table (MUD) of the opposition on the other.

For the first time, the PSUV held internal primary elections to select its candidates, after there had been much criticism from the rank and file about the way candidates had been chosen previously. More than 2.5 million members participated in these elections. The opposition MUD barely managed to get 360,000 to participate in its primary elections, which only affected a small fraction of its candidates, most of the others being chosen behind closed doors.

The previous national assembly elections in 2005 were boycotted by the opposition, who withdrew at the last minute seeing that all opinion polls were predicting their humiliating defeat. This left a National Assembly composed only of Bolivarian deputies. Currently the National Assembly is composed of a majority block of 139 PSUV and 3 PCV deputies. The opposition has only 25 deputies, from parties which were initially Bolivarian but later joined the opposition.

What is at stake in these elections is not just a new majority in the National Assembly, but the continuation of the revolutionary project. Wherever the opposition have won regional governors or local mayors, they have moved to dismantle the social programs (Misiones) which the revolution has created in the fields of education, health care, food, etc. Certainly the opposition would put an end to the experiences of workers' control in the basic industries and would reverse the nationalisations which have



Every election under Chavez has been verified as free and fair *pic: Andrés Azpúrua*

taken place. Moreover, the main leaders of the opposition and their parties were all involved in the coup which briefly overthrew president Chávez in April 2002, showing their real reactionary character.

Once again, the mass media, the opposition, and US imperialism have launched a campaign against the Bolivarian revolution which combines

diplomatic pressure, military exercises, economic sabotage, lies and slander in the media. It is vital that we step up our solidarity work. A decisive victory for the revolutionary candidates in these elections would allow the Bolivarian revolution to advance to socialism. A defeat would throw the whole country back and destroy what has already been achieved.

"The Bolivarian revolution has been an inspiration to all those of us fighting for a better world. While public expenditure is cut here, Venezuela has invested massively in health care and education. While public services and companies are being privatised, Venezuela has renationalised them. While trade union rights are under attack, the Bolivarian revolution has introduced workers' control. While capitalism is in crisis, Hugo Chavez has raised the need for socialism. We must defend the gains of the revolution and seek to make sure it is reported in a fair and balanced way."

— NUJ general secretary Jeremy Dear



Grafitos del Orinoco: Defending workers' control

The Bolivarian Revolution has suffered from the beginning from the economic sabotage of the employers. Workers, following Chavez's call, have responded by occupying some of these factories and running them under workers' control. This is one of the conquests of the revolution that workers will be defending on September 26.

Here is a short account of one such experience of workers' control.

by Carlos Rondón

Eight months ago no one could imagine that the small factory of Grafitos del Orinoco in the south of Venezuela could become an example of workers' control for the workers of Guayana and Venezuela.

This Swiss-owned company processed anthracite and produced liquid graphite and graphite drill bits for SIDOR, one of the largest steel mills in the continent. In October 2009 a conflict started when the owners said the company was bankrupt and refused to pay

wages and other benefits to the workers.

The union, Sintra Grafitos del Orinoco, led by Henry Escalona, William Ravelo and Cesar Barreto, amongst others, decided to occupy the premises and thus started an 8-month long struggle. Finally the government of President Chávez decided to expropriate the factory and put it under joint state-workers' control.

From the very beginning the idea was to re-establish the company on a new basis, allowing the workers to run the factory. All important decisions would be put to the workers' assembly. A factory council has been created, with elected representatives from all the different workshops and areas of work in order to manage production and administration of the company, much in the same way that Russian workers did during the revolution.

Grafitos del Orinoco is an example of how workers can manage factories. Since it was expropriated we have recovered 80% of productive capacity, linking our operations with SIDOR, Orinoco Iron and Ven-



Factories across the country are being taken over by the workers

elum. We have paid workers the 8 months wages that they were owed, as well as food bonuses and school materials for their children.

This is all thanks to workers' management, without having had to ask for credit from the state or private banks. The account books of the company have been opened so that everyone can see how the capitalist owners were running the factory, making obscene prof-

its out of the exploitation and humiliation of the workers.

The future of Grafitos del Orinoco will be written by the workers themselves. Part of building socialism is the ownership of the means of production by the workers themselves, so that the Bolivarian revolution, led by commander president Hugo Chavez can succeed and become a beacon of hope for all the exploited of the world.

Campaigner who denounced mass Colombia grave is killed

by Jorge Martín,
Hands Off Venezuela

On Tuesday August 13, Colombian human rights defender Norma Irene Pérez was found shot dead, according to the Permanent Committee in Defence of Human Rights.

Norma Irene Pérez had played an active role in the July 22 congressional hearing in La Macarena about the existence of a clandestine mass grave in this municipality. Human rights organizations say that this grave could contain up to two thousand bodies of civilians deposited there by the Colombian Army. The plot where the mass grave was found is next an Army barracks. Local residents fear that many of those buried in the grave could be cases of "false positives", civilians killed by the Army and then presented as "rebels killed in combat".

Norma Irene Pérez, a peasant and mother of four, disappeared on August 7, after participating in a local community meeting. Her body was found a



Excavation in La Macarena of possibly the largest mass grave found in Latin America week later.

Human rights organisations in Colombia point out that former president Uribe had pointed the finger at local people, human rights defenders and community organizers who participated in the July 22 Congressional hearing in La Macarena, as he called them "spokespeople of terrorism".

According to the Centre for International Policy, "La Ma-

carena, the site of the grave, has been a very important site of U.S. aided military operations since the mid-2000s. In this area, the U.S. government supported and advised the Colombian Army's 2004-2006 "Plan Patriota" military offensive, and since 2007 has supported the "Plan for the Integral Consolidation of La Macarena" or PCIM, part of the new "Integrated Action" framework that is now guiding much

U.S. assistance."

The Colombian authorities only acted on this issue under pressure from local human rights activists and after the visit of an international delegation of NGOs and trade union activists. One of the local Human Rights activists, Jhonny Hurtado, who accompanied a British delegation to the site in December 2009, was then killed on March 15, 2010. The Attorney General's office has admitted the presence of 2,000 bodies in the mass grave at La Macarena, but the presidency of the Republic still talks of only 449 confirmed bodies.

The revelations about the grave site at La Macarena are potentially extremely damaging for the Colombian government of Uribe and might have played a role in his provocation against Venezuela just before leaving office. This case is just the tip of the iceberg of a situation in Colombia in which human rights, trade union, peasant and community activists are regularly killed, threatened and intimidated by right wing paramilitaries and the state.

Watching democracy in action: A visit to the communal councils

by Mustafa Turus
and Erol Yesilyurt,
Hands Off Venezuela

We travelled to Caracas in July 2010 to see how the Bolivarian revolution was progressing. Of everything we saw, we found the degree of community level organisation the most impressive. Since 2006, thousands of communal councils have been set up by Venezuelans. The size of the communal councils can range from 150 families in cities to 10 families in rural areas. Following the tradition of social movements in Venezuela, communal councils are set up to deal with local problems such as schools, roads and cultural-political activities.

Before visiting Petare, one of the largest barrios (slums) in Latin America, to attend a communal council meeting, we did not fully realise the importance of these councils in the lives of local people as well as in the revolution. When we arrived, a well attended meeting was already underway. The main item on the agenda was decent accommodation for those who live in poor and unhealthy housing conditions. After an informative briefing by the speaker, who was a woman in her mid 50s, each individual worker (brick layers, guards, electricians, etc) involved in the housing project



Revolutionaries from the past help to inspire the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela

took a turn to explain what has been done and any obstructions faced so far.

Discussions were not restricted to the housing project and related problems. Several other issues were raised and discussed by the participants, including education and setting up a local supermarket.

There were people from all walks of life in the meeting: workers, unemployed, housewives, teachers etc. The eagerness of the people to actively participate in the work of the communal council was particularly striking.

The next day we went to La Bombilla, another barrio with

a communal council. This communal council was building a house for orphans. All the workers in the building site were local workers who were volunteering to support their community. La Bombilla also has its own social TV and radio station, which are run in collaboration with the communal council.

The communal council in the area has been dealing with education, health, transport, sports areas and many other things that affect life in the community. The experience of community organisation has transformed the community. As one of the volunteers said, "Before the only government officials we saw in our community were soldiers or police. But now we see doctors, teachers, and sports trainers in our community".

During our visit to 23 de Enero, a barrio with a population of 300,000 people, we were told that the area has been largely governed by the Socialist Commune, a coordinating body made

up of 7 communal councils. The Bolivarian government agencies have been providing assistance in many areas, including funding workshops and training local people. With the collaboration of Alexis Vive Commune, the Socialist Commune was successfully running several projects such as local shops to provide cheap food and clothing, setting up urban farms in empty lands, building sporting areas, repairing buildings, and providing security.

In many council meetings we witnessed lively political discussion about the laws relating to new forms of the governance and the coming election on 26th September. There is no doubt that in time, community councils could play an important role in determining the way the country is governed and priorities are set.

We came back to London feeling very hopeful about the future of the revolution. We think that Venezuelan revolutionary experience is an example not only for Latin America but for



Participation in communal councils has been key to the explosion of popular power

Barrio Adentro (Into the Neighbourhood) was created in 2003 to provide free health care in the community. Since then, it has carried out 420,387,197 consultations (45% of those in the patients' homes). It now has 507 Integral Diagnosis Centres, 124 Operation Theatres, 556 Integral Rehabilitation Rooms and 28 High Technology Medical Centres, covering 88.9% of all Venezuelans, with doctors who live in the communities.

An highly advanced and participatory democracy

by Samuel Moncada,
Venezuelan Ambassador to UK

The National Assembly elections to be held on 26 September will be very important for the future of the Bolivarian Revolution and also for Venezuelan democracy.

Usually the mainstream media in the United Kingdom portray Venezuela as an undemocratic country with no participation by the people in the political process. Nothing is further from the truth.

President Hugo Chávez has been democratically elected three times in the past 11 years (1998, 2000 and 2006). A total of 14 elections have taken place in Venezuela in the same period, ranging from presidential to local and parliamentary elections, as well as a series of referenda. In fact, the first ever recall referendum in Latin America was conducted in Venezuela in 2004, which President Chávez won by a margin of 60% of the popular vote. All these elections have been certified as free and fair by international and impartial observers such as the European Union, the Organisation of American States and the Carter Centre.

Because of all these achievements, Venezuela was recently

appointed by the United Nations to preside over the International Conference on New or Restored Democracies.

However, not only has Venezuela set an example in terms of representative democracy, it has also been a source of inspiration in terms of participatory democracy. There are 30,000 communal councils in Venezuela and they are mostly led by women. These horizontal organisations have been key to the process of planning, organising and implementing schemes for community development.

In addition, the Bolivarian Revolution has empowered indigenous communities throughout the country, as well as assisting in the democratisation of the trade union movement and enabling citizens to carry out social audits on public institutions.

Another important aspect of the upcoming elections in Venezuela is the level of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. They both go hand in hand and, in the case of Venezuela, the state has guaranteed these rights through the normal channels of government and citizenry, not just now but also during all the 14 previous elections.

It is worth remembering that there are 872 TV and radio sta-

tions in Venezuela, of which 65% are privately owned, 10% state-owned and 25% are community outlets. In addition, there are 107 newspapers in the whole country. Regarding this, the Venezuelan National Electoral Council (CNE) recently released a study which stated that 75.4% of televised campaign advertisements have been pro-opposition while only 24.6% have been pro-government since the race for 165 seats in Venezuela's National Assembly officially began.

Finally, the September election in Venezuela will witness the return of candidates from the opposition. In the previous parliamentary election five years ago, the opposition candidates decided to boycott the election by refusing to run. It was not a very wise decision and led to a landslide triumph for Bolivarian candidates.

This election, on the other hand, is set to be different. The opposition has realised the magnitude of the mistake it made in 2005 and now, reluctantly, will attempt to regain a presence in the National Assembly in order to pursue its agenda from there.

In fact, according to recently released documents from the United States, opposition political organisations and parties in Venezuela are expected



A revolutionary voter in Venezuela

to receive 50 million US dollars this year from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

In addition to all the social achievements made by the Bolivarian Revolution in the past 11 years, we must also add the progress made in terms of political participation, political freedoms and election fairness.

Our democracy is as solid as ever and the parliamentary election in September will further prove that Venezuelans rejoice and celebrate each time they have the opportunity to go to the polls and cast their votes.

Join Hands Off Venezuela!

The international broad-based Hands Off Venezuela campaign was established in 2002 to generate awareness about Venezuela, especially within the trade union and progressive movements. Our main task is to promote the social gains of the Bolivarian Revolution and mobilise public opinion against imperialist aggression towards Venezuela.

The basic aims of the campaign are to:

- Give full support to the Venezuelan revolution, which has repeatedly proved its democratic credentials, in its struggle to liberate the oppressed of Venezuela.
- Defend the revolution against the attacks of imperialism and its local agents the Venezuelan oligarchy.
- Support the new trade union confederation, the UNT, as the legitimate voice of the workers' movement.
- To counteract the media distortions and lies about Venezuela and mobilise the maximum support for the above aims.

Hands Off Venezuela organises public events, film shows, speaking tours and delegations to Venezuela, provides news and information about the latest events and promotes solidarity and links both in Britain and internationally.

To get your trade union or other organisation affiliated, here are the recommended annual affiliation fees: National trade unions: £500, regional bodies: £250, branches/trades councils: £50, others: £25. Membership fees for individuals are waged: £7.50 and unwaged: £5 (suggested)

Contact us at britain@handsoffvenezuela.org

To join, please complete this form
and return to the address below

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