

Contents

- 141. Mexico Rising! Contested Election and Oaxaca Strike Movement Shake Republic.
Ian MacDonald
- 142. An Ecosocialist Manifesto.
Joel Kovel and Michael Lowy
- 143. Immigration Laws Serve Only the Bosses.
James Haywood
- 144. 'More Than One Revolution Could Happen in Latin America When the United States Least Expects It.'
An interview with Fidel Castro
- 145. Chávez Calls for United Socialist Party of Venezuela.
John Riddell
- 146. Bolivia's Government Faces Right-Wing Offensive.
Federico Fuentes
- 147. Ecuador's President Calls for Socialist Latin America.
Duroyan Fertl
- 148. Confronting the Climate Change Crisis.
Ian Angus

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Mexico Rising! Contested Election and Oaxaca Strike Movement Shake Republic

By Ian MacDonald

Ian MacDonald is a frequent contributor to Socialist Worker. He gave the following report to a meeting organized by the International Socialists in Toronto on December 15, 2006.

There is a paradox in Mexican history and politics which should be kept in mind when discussing the current post-electoral crisis. On the one hand, Mexico is a very stable society. Unlike the rest of Latin America, there have been no coups, military governments or revolutions in Mexico for over 80 years. For most of those years, the ruling party was able to incorporate the major classes in Mexican society with remarkable success. On the other hand, the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20 was such a thoroughgoing conflagration, throwing millions of people into political activity from one end of the country to the other, that all other Latin American revolutions are put in the shade by comparison.

In other words, while the Mexican ruling bloc is well entrenched in the state, there is a tradition of revolution in the country that is never very far away from the popular consciousness. The Mexican Revolution, even though it happened almost a century ago, looms over national political life. A precedent has been set for peasant armies seizing the land and occupying Mexico City, of the working class forming red battalions and fighting for its own anti-capitalist program.

No political party or group can claim the mantle of this revolutionary tradition. Nevertheless, its memory is collectively preserved.

The system of political control that contained this revolutionary tradition was perfected by the PRI (Party of the Institutional Revolution) in its 70 years in power. The PRI-state incorporated unions and peasant organizations into a bourgeois, one-party state by means of corrupting leaders, extending real reforms to the organized sections of the working class and peasantry, and meting out severe repression to those who rebelled against the system or fell outside of it. Revolutionary nationalism was a crucial ideological crutch.

Movement for democracy

This system is now in an advanced state of decomposition. The movement for democracy can be traced directly back to the student movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The PRI's exhaustion as a vehicle for legitimate political rule can be dated to the 1968 Tlatelolco Square massacre in Mexico City, prior to the Olympic games of that year. The ferociousness of the repression – hundreds of students were killed – turned important layers of the un-incorporated population against the regime. The activists who survived the ensuing dirty war against students and the left went on to form the National Democratic Front (FDN) in 1988, which became the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) a year later. The PRI spent massively to shore up the legitimacy of the state in the wake of '68, but the stain of Tlatelolco could not be expunged.

The economic crisis which broke out in the early 1980s meant that the PRI regime could no longer count on the loyalty of its mass base. It began a brutal program of neoliberal reforms, the most extreme of Latin America after Chile. The left of the party, those most directly tied to its social base, bolted to form the FDN. The new party also included left groups and the Mexican Communist Party, which dissolved itself into the new formation. The FDN ran in the 1988 elections, putting forth the candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the 1930s-era radical president of the country, Lázaro Cárdenas, who nationalized the country's oil industry. Despite widespread ballot stuffing, the FDN most likely came out ahead in the final vote tally. During the middle of election night, however, the computers counting the votes went offline – a result, electoral authorities later claimed, of “atmospheric conditions.” When the computers came back online, the PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas, was ahead.

The electoral fraud of 1988 is an important touchstone for the current movement against the fraud committed during the elections held July 2, 2006. Cárdenas called demonstrations after ballots were found in garbage dumps. Hundreds of party militants were murdered by PRI vigilantes as a preventative measure against mobilization. At one demonstration of three million in Mexico City, a decision was made not to seize the national palace. Instead, Cárdenas decided to negotiate with Salinas. This badly split the new party and was profoundly demoralizing. The FDN — now PRD — resolved to continue working for democratic opening within the compromised system.

The upheaval produced by the stolen elections, combined with the Zapatista uprising six years later, convinced the Mexican ruling class that some reforms were needed to shore up their legitimacy. A new electoral body, the IFE, was formed which was supposed to be independent

and beyond corruption. The tribunal is composed of a group of judges selected by Congress and paid over \$400,000 a year in salary. They are consistently labeled as the most neutral and respected electoral body in Latin America by the international press.

The PRD's political perspective during this period posited that Mexico was moving slowly towards democracy, and that once democracy was achieved, then reforms leading to socialism could be put on the agenda. The party was damaged by the sellout in '88, and only slowly rebuilt its electoral base. In the 2000 elections, many on the left voted strategically for the PAN's candidate, Vicente Fox. The thinking was that it was the PRI in particular that was holding up the democratic transition. The PRI had to be ejected from national office. If the principle of party alternation in office could be secured, the opportunity of alternating in power would ultimately fall to the PRD.

This is important to note because it explains Fox's victory and wide base of support, the high hopes that many Mexicans held when he took office. He was a neoliberal, socially conservative, closely allied with the U.S., a former president of Coca Cola Mexico, but he was trusted to oversee political reform.

Fox's project was contradictory and oversold. The PAN was formed by big capital based in the north of the country in 1940 to confront the radicalization of the PRI following the nationalization of oil. It includes the hierarchy of the Catholic church, which was kept at arms length by the secular PRI. It has also managed to gain significant middle class support, due in large part to the fact that it is seen as a vehicle for the democratization in Mexican society.

As President, Fox was confronted with the basic contradiction in Mexican society, namely, the need of the capitalist state to enforce neoliberal rule in the face of its rejection by the majority of society. Democracy cannot survive, let alone emerge, in this context. Fox's support began to decline immediately upon his assumption of power and never recovered. In mid-term elections, the PAN lost control of Congress. What is remarkable about the Fox administration is that he came in with so much credibility, a real popular mandate, and he was ultimately able to do nothing. He has no legacy to speak of. None of the major neoliberal reforms pushed during his administration – privatization of oil, reform of the country's labour legislation, and privatization of social security – have been achieved. And Fox has fallen into the old way of ruling favoured by the PRI: finding representatives in the major unions and peak associations with which to cooperate, remove those who reject this embrace, and repress any resistance to the system.

Lopez Obrador

The most formidable challenge to the Fox government came from the mayor of Mexico City, Lopez Obrador. Obrador is a former PRIista from Tabasco state. He led a PRD campaign in state elections, and was denied victory as a result of fraud. He then led a street movement to overturn the fraud (which is common practice in Mexico; even the PAN has a history of this) which failed. He then spearheaded the PRD campaign against the terms of the corporate bailout in 1994. In very shady deals, billions of dollars were paid out to the country's capitalist class to keep them out of bankruptcy. The Mexican working class will be paying this debt for the next 70 years, down to the third generation. Obrador wrote the book on the scandal. To their credit, the

PRD published the names of who received how much money and called for the program to be dramatically scaled back to cover only small business.

Obrador became a national figure when he won the mayoralty of Mexico City in 2000. At first, he built a strong base on the left. He passed a municipal pension scheme, which though small makes an important difference in the lives of impoverished seniors. It is a universal system based on bank cards that are credited every month with about \$10. Since there is no administration for the program, it was hailed as a liberal welfare state initiative. He kept a lid on the price of the metro, of gas and water. And he ran a clean administration, ending (as far as anyone can tell) kickbacks paid by developers to city bureaucrats.

The left considers honesty in government to be Obrador's most important legacy. Once he had secured this left credibility, he moved to the centre. He built a second level of a highway linking the better off sections of the city together, a project much appreciated by the city's car-owning class. He initiated private-public partnerships in sprucing up the main boulevard of the city, Paseo de la Reforma, which boosted the property values of Carlos Slim, the world's third-richest man. Obrador's policies in office are best described as "neoliberalism from below" along the lines of a Lula in Brazil.

Throughout his time in office, he attacked Fox incessantly. As Fox's popularity inexorably declined, Obrador's rose in inverse relation. By 2003, it was clear that Obrador was headed to the presidency. In 2006, Obrador ran a centrist campaign around the slogan "For the good of all, the poor first." He promised job creation strategies, new state pensions, a vague renegotiation of NAFTA, and aid to the countryside. In fact he made no less than 50 promises – a little something for everyone. He promised foreign and domestic capital that he would continue with the neoliberal model while telling his base that the current model was a failure.

The foreign press accepted Obrador's self-presentation to them as a modernized, neoliberalized social democrat, and he received the backing of all the high-profile business publications. I think there was a recognition in these quarters that there was need of some reforms to maintain stability in the country, and that neoliberalism could only be implemented by the centre-left. The Economist argued explicitly that the PAN candidate, Felipe Calderon, was too close to the big monopolies that had so effectively infiltrated every level of state power. An Obrador government might rule in the interests of capital in general, rather than favouring domestic monopoly capital.

Ruling-class response

The domestic ruling class saw things very differently. The monopoly sector opposed him because they feared losing the privileged position that they had built up in the state throughout the PRI and PAN years. But the feeling against Obrador was very strong in the bourgeoisie as a whole. They saw past Obrador's moderate electoral rhetoric to his base in the country's devastated working class and peasantry, and they were afraid that he would have to give them something.

On the face of it, their reaction appeared to be paranoid. They saw Obrador as a Chavez, not a Lula. They thought he would undo all of the gains they had made in the neoliberal era. I think the logic here was simply that no matter what the politics of the candidates or the narrowness of the

electoral choice on offer, the poor and working class had solidly lined up behind Obrador and had some hope that he would rule in their interests. The election was a direct expression of the country's deep class divide, in which half of the working class makes less than \$8 a day while the ruling class is among the wealthiest in the world. Any political expression of this divide is frightening to the ruling class. Nevertheless, they overreached.

A determined campaign to deny him the presidency can be traced back to 2003, when both the PRI and PAN moved to block the PRD's allotted representation on the IFE, thus laying the groundwork for what in Mexico is referred to as a "state election". (In talking up the IFE, the international press never to my notice mentioned this fact).

In 2004, the PAN attempted to disqualify Obrador from running based on a legal technicality. This was overturned by massive demonstrations in the streets of Mexico City, after which the right retreated shamefaced and Obrador's stature only grew. The country's largest corporations spent millions in an illegal advertising crusade against him, and the media duopoly ran a smear campaign. Also contravening the country's electoral rules was Fox's intervention in support of Calderon during the electoral process. Finally, ballot stuffing was organized at the state level while the electoral authorities ensured the final tally would put Calderon slightly ahead.

Electoral fraud

There should be no doubt that the elections were fraudulent. There are two forms of electoral fraud practiced in Mexico. One is called "a la antigüedad" – the old way of simple ballot stuffing, and the new one called "fraude cibernético" – the new way done through the computers used to tally the votes.

With regards to the first form, citizen scrutineers chosen at random were replaced at many polls at the last moment by staff loyal to Elba Ester Gordillo, the gangster president of the very powerful teachers' union. Gordillo recognized that the PRI was finished and could no longer serve her political ambitions, and she has transferred her support to the PAN. She played a central role in convincing PRI governors that it was useless to continue supporting the PRI campaign, and that they should throw their machines behind Calderon. This was how much of the ballot stuffing was organized, especially in the states controlled by the PRI and PAN, largely in the North.

The PRD did not expect this, and only sent party scrutineers to 40 percent of the polls, and very few in the North where it doesn't have a strong organization. Significant irregularities were found in those ballot boxes opened after the election, with more votes than voters in some case, less votes than voters in others. Votes had been systematically taken from Obrador and added to Calderon. Then boxes of ballots started showing up in garbage dumps. An electoral worker resigned complaining that his supervisors were pressuring him to favour Calderon.

Fraud was also organized at the level of the IFE itself. The computer program used in the tally was designed by Calderon's brother, of all people. Mathematicians have looked at the results and concluded that the pattern they show could not be random. It is very difficult to hide patterned outcomes, especially since electoral returns display a certain randomness within overall

trajectories. In the last 20 percent of returns, Obrador's votes begin to fall rapidly never once to recover. Calderon's votes exhibit the mirror opposite, and the PRI's votes flatline.

Popular anger

The popular anger begins to build. On July 8, Obrador holds a rally in Mexico City of half a million people. The movement takes up the slogan "vote by vote, polling station by polling station." A taped message is played of Gordillo calling a PRI state governor implicating both in the fraud. A second march is held on the 16, drawing a million. And then a third on the 30, at which two million show up. A decision is made to occupy the centre of the city, the Zócalo square, and seven miles of streets leading from the political centre to the financial district, effectively cutting the city in half. The plantón or encampment is a traditional form of protest in Mexico, but the country had never seen a "mega-plantón" like this.

At this point, the bourgeoisie hates Obrador, and he has lost the centre of Mexican politics. But in the capital city, at least, the middle of Mexican politics seems to be thinning out.

I arrived late in August and the plantón was still going strong. You could walk all day and not see it all. In fact I never in two weeks there saw the entire plantón, though I walked it every day. It is perhaps best described as a city within a city. You could sleep there, eat three meals a day, take books out of improvised libraries; there were child care facilities, soccer games and chess matches. Artists showed their work, musicians – both amateurs and some of the biggest names in the country – gave free concerts. There were political meetings and video showings at all times on every block. In the evenings and on weekends, thousands would be engaged in discussions dealing with all aspects of Mexican society.

At first, Obrador's demand was simply to hold a full recount. The supposed margin of victory of Calderon was a mere 2 votes per polling station. The electoral authorities and the PAN refused. A partial recount of 9 percent was held, a very non-transparent process which did not change the result substantially.

When it became clear that he would not be able to overturn the fraud through the existing state institutions, Obrador's position radicalized. By late August he was calling the legality of the institutions into question and was speaking some hard truths about the corruption of the entire country's political system and just how entrenched large corporations are in it. New social demands emerged for a redistribution of the country's wealth, the dissolution of the big monopolies, especially in the media, and a new welfare state.

Radicalization of the movement

The radicalization of the movement around Obrador brought in many of the traditional actors on the Mexican left, including the electrical workers, dissident union groups – the teachers most prominently – and the social security workers. Absent was any intervention by the Zapatistas, however. Marcos was residing in a northern section of Mexico City at the time, but issued no statements and made no appearances in the city itself. The Zapatistas had run an ambiguously abstentionist "other campaign" during the elections, which, while not calling for a boycott of the ballot, argued that there was no meaningful difference between the candidates. Much of the

campaign was devoted to attacks on Obrador and the PRD. Communiqués issued in August repeated these critiques and levelled new ones of Obrador's leadership of the movement to reverse the electoral fraud.

On September 5 Calderon was declared the victor and the elections validated despite what the electoral authorities called "grave irregularities." On September 16, Obrador was declared legitimate president of Mexico in a million-strong popular assembly in the Zócalo, and plans were made for a Constitutional Assembly in March to dissolve the current constitution and refound the republic. The movement is currently organizing for this, while Obrador has formed an alternative government. The first acts of the Obrador government were to send a bill to congress taking aim at the monopoly sector, and later, an alternative budget with big spending increases in health education, pensions, etc. Meanwhile, the new Calderon government's budget imposes austerity, but with spending increases for the police and army.

Oaxaca struggle

During this time, a class struggle was developing in the Southern state of Oaxaca, which normally would have been front page news in Mexico and picked up around the world. The crisis began with an economic strike and escalated from there to an insurrectionary situation. I wasn't in Oaxaca, but Mexico News and Analysis, an email news service, published this email communication by an American living there which gives the flavour. It is worth quoting at length:

Report from Oaxaca

May 22-24, 2006: 70,000 Oaxaqueño school teachers go on strike. And the first indications that this was to be a "different" kind of strike were immediately apparent in and around the city's historic centre. There, for the first time, the teachers, in the thousands, erected a tent and awning city, occupied day and night in the Zócalo and in the streets surrounding the Zócalo. It's a peaceful occupation of the city's center, but it is also immediately apparent that more teachers are coming into the occupied area on a daily basis. And these teachers are not just from the City of Oaxaca. They're swarming in from the outlying villages and towns in the Valley, as well as from the mountain regions and the area of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The government's reaction to this mobilization? "This strike will be like all the others. Its a minor inconvenience that will be over in weeks," (!) a government spokesperson says.

June 14, 2006: The day the economic strike by the teachers becomes a political strike. And it's a day that will change Oaxaca's history.

It began in the early morning at about 3:30 a.m.. The state evidently decided to crush the teachers' strike, and it did so by launching an "operation" to clear the City Center of all the striking teachers and their tent and awning occupations. Several thousand uniformed and plain clothed state and municipal cops launch an all-out attack on the teacher's enclaves. Buses, driven by both plain clothed and uniformed police, roar, often three abreast, down city streets, smashing the flimsy and impromptu barricades and then crushing the tent and awning enclaves of the teachers. Some get as far as the Zócalo. The

teachers flee from the onslaught, because to remain in their tents would mean being crushed. Overhead, there are helicopters (state police and municipal) and from various vantage points around the city center, police can be seen hurling tear gas canisters onto the city center. For those residents who lived far from the city center, it was the whomping of the helicopters that presented the first indications that something was terribly amiss in the city center.

By 7:00 a.m. there was gunfire to be heard. First the crumping of shotguns firing tear gas canisters, then the thudding of shotguns discharging pellet loads, and then, finally the cracking of automatic weapons firing. The killing and wounding of the teachers was now fully under way.

I was by then on my way back from the city airport where I had seen my daughter off on an early morning flight. A friend of mine was driving me back to the hotel and we were encountering increasing difficulties getting back to the hotel. Groups of police and teacher's security units were trying to direct traffic but we were continually redirected in circles. Then at one intersection, we saw a group of teachers, bandanaed against the gas, fleeing from the sound of what appeared to be automatic weapons fire farther up the street. Ignoring any directions from cops and teachers alike, we got the hell out of there. On arriving at the hotel, the first whiffs of tear gas could be felt and this was six to seven blocks away from the chaos in the city center.

It was then, back at the hotel, when I saw and heard the first indications that what had happened had changed the entire nature of the teacher's economic strike. Small groups of teachers, again in bandanas against the tear gas, were marching past the hotel, armed with clubs and axe handles, and chanting "Ulises Asesino!" (Ulises the Assassin!) and "Fuera Ulises" (Away with Ulises!). In those few short hours the strike had changed. It was no longer a strike for economic gains. It was now a full-blown political strike. The demands were no longer of salaries and benefits, but rather, for the resignation of the most unpopular governor that Oaxaca had seen in years. By 9:00 a.m. the slogans of the chants, while continuing, were also being seen on the graffitied walls of buildings as far as a mile from the center of the action in the Zócalo. And in the Zócalo itself, the anarchists seemed to be holding some sway. Instead of directing their actions against the police assaults, small groups of anarchists were busy smashing up business' windows around the Zócalo. Most of the teachers and their legitimate supporters were too busy repelling the police attacks.

By 11:00 a.m. most of the cops had been pushed out of the encampment areas and/or withdrew. The state's "Operation Clear the City Streets" had failed. How the teachers and their supporters maintained their discipline remains a mystery to me. But it stands as a tribute to their organizational capabilities. It was enough to make an old organizer proud.

From that day in June till the federal invasion of October 28, the teachers and the popular assembly of the people were essentially in control of the city and many municipalities throughout the state.

On October 28, Fox sent the Federal Preventative Police (PFP) to retake the state capital. Fox's move was intended to bring a quick military resolution of the crisis before Calderon's assumption of the presidency. Street fighting and demonstrations have continued into the Calderon era, however, and much of the state remains beyond effective police control. The repression has taken a heavy toll on the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) rank and file, and a number of its leaders have been taken prisoner by federal forces.

Conclusion

The social composition of the movement in Oaxaca is essentially the same as the movement around Obrador in Mexico City: public sector workers, urban social movements, students and pensioners, but with a more pronounced indigenous participation. The underlying cause of the uprising is identical: illegitimate political rule, overwhelming rejection of neoliberalism. The APPO is led by socialists from different traditions, however, and rejects social democratic forms of political organization. It distances itself from the PRD in particular. At its policy convention in mid November 2005, the APPO called for new autonomous and democratic forms of governance in the state and reiterated its rejection of the country's ruling institutions. Its main demand continues to be for the federal government to declare the disappearance of the state governor's powers, which is in any event the reality on the ground.

The crisis in Oaxaca is a concentration of the national crisis, but is at most regional in scale. The APPO's central demand and emphasis on community autonomy does not resonate strongly at the national level. And yet, the APPO will have to generate organized national support if it is to emerge from under the heel of the PFP. The movement in Mexico City is still attached to the figure of Obrador, and is caught between the streets and a return to parliamentary politics. The merging of the Oaxaca and Mexico City struggles could strengthen both in their confrontation with the Mexican state, although this remains but one possibility among several. A nationally organized left capable of bringing this possibility about does not exist, however.

The current crisis is best described as the expression of a contradiction between democracy and neoliberalism. Given Mexico's deteriorating position in the world economy, the pressures for continued neoliberal rule will not ease. Neither are the movements resisting this backing down. This is a structural crisis which will develop over the foreseeable future, inspiring us in the rest of North America and calling on our solidarity.

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An Ecosocialist Manifesto

By Joel Kovel and Michael Lowy

Introduction

The idea for this ecosocialist manifesto was jointly launched by Joel Kovel and Michael Lowy, at a September, 2001, workshop on ecology and socialism held at Vincennes, near Paris.

We all suffer from a chronic case of Gramsci's paradox, of living in a time whose old order is dying (and taking civilization with it) while the new one does not seem able to be born. But at least it can be announced.

The deepest shadow that hangs over us is neither terror, environmental collapse, nor global recession. It is the internalized fatalism that holds there is no possible alternative to capital's world order. And so we wished to set an example of a kind of speech that deliberately negates the current mood of anxious compromise and passive acquiescence.

This manifesto nevertheless lacks the audacity of that of 1848, for ecosocialism is not yet a spectre, nor is it grounded in any concrete party or movement. It is only a line of reasoning, based on a reading of the present crisis and the necessary conditions for overcoming it.

We make no claims of omniscience. Far from it, our goal is to invite dialogue, debate, emendation, above all, a sense of how this notion can be further realized. Innumerable points of resistance arise spontaneously across the chaotic ecumene of global capital. Many are immanently ecosocialist in content. How can these be gathered? Can we envision an "ecosocialist international?" Can the spectre be brought into being?

Manifesto

The twenty-first century opens on a catastrophic note, with an unprecedented degree of ecological breakdown and a chaotic world order beset with terror and clusters of low-grade, disintegrative warfare that spread like gangrene across great swathes of the planet—viz., central Africa, the Middle East, Northwestern South America—and reverberate throughout the nations. In our view, the crises of ecology and those of societal breakdown are profoundly interrelated and should be seen as different manifestations of the same structural forces.

The former broadly stems from rampant industrialization that overwhelms the earth's capacity to buffer and contain ecological destabilization. The latter stems from the form of imperialism known as globalization, with its disintegrative effects on societies that stand in its path. Moreover, these underlying forces are essentially different aspects of the same drive, which must be identified as the central dynamic that moves the whole: the expansion of the world capitalist system.

We reject all euphemisms or propagandistic softening of the brutality of this regime: all greenwashing of its ecological costs, all mystification of the human costs under the names of democracy and human rights.

We insist instead upon looking at capital from the standpoint of what it has really done.

Acting on nature and its ecological balance, the regime, with its imperative to constantly expand profitability, exposes ecosystems to destabilizing pollutants, fragments habitats that have evolved over aeons to allow the flourishing of organisms, squanders resources, and reduces the sensuous vitality of nature to the cold exchangeability required for the accumulation of capital.

From the side of humanity, with its requirements for self-determination, community, and a meaningful existence, capital reduces the majority of the world's people to a mere reservoir of labor power while discarding much of the remainder as useless nuisances.

It has invaded and undermined the integrity of communities through its global mass culture of consumerism and depoliticization.

It has expanded disparities in wealth and power to levels unprecedented in human history.

It has worked hand in glove with a network of corrupt and subservient client states whose local elites carry out the work of repression while sparing the center of its opprobrium.

And it has set going a network of transtatal organizations under the overall supervision of the Western powers and the superpower United States, to undermine the autonomy of the periphery and bind it into indebtedness while maintaining a huge military apparatus to enforce compliance to the capitalist center.

We believe that the present capitalist system cannot regulate, much less overcome, the crises it has set going. It cannot solve the ecological crisis because to do so requires setting limits upon accumulation—an unacceptable option for a system predicated upon the rule: Grow or Die!

And it cannot solve the crisis posed by terror and other forms of violent rebellion because to do so would mean abandoning the logic of empire, which would impose unacceptable limits on growth and the whole “way of life” sustained by empire. Its only remaining option is to resort to brutal force, thereby increasing alienation and sowing the seed of further terrorism ... and further counter-terrorism, evolving into a new and malignant variation of fascism.

In sum, the capitalist world system is historically bankrupt. It has become an empire unable to adapt, whose very gigantism exposes its underlying weakness. It is, in the language of ecology, profoundly unsustainable, and must be changed fundamentally, nay, replaced, if there is to be a future worth living.

Thus the stark choice once posed by Rosa Luxemburg returns: Socialism or Barbarism!, where the face of the latter now reflects the imprint of the intervening century and assumes the countenance of ecocatastrophe, terror counterterror, and their fascist degeneration.

But why socialism, why revive this word seemingly consigned to the rubbish-heap of history by the failings of its twentieth century interpretations?

For this reason only: that however beaten down and unrealized, the notion of socialism still stands for the supersession of capital. If capital is to be overcome, a task now given the urgency of the survival of civilization itself, the outcome will perforce be “socialist, for that is the term which signifies the breakthrough into a post-capitalist society.

If we say that capital is radically unsustainable and breaks down into the barbarism outlined above, then we are also saying that we need to build a “socialism” capable of overcoming the crises capital has set going. And if socialisms past have failed to do so, then it is our obligation, if we choose against submitting to a barbarous end, to struggle for one that succeeds.

And just as barbarism has changed in a manner reflective of the century since Luxemburg enunciated her fateful alternative, so too, must the name, and the reality, of a socialism become adequate for this time.

It is for these reasons that we choose to name our interpretation of socialism as an ecosocialism, and dedicate ourselves to its realization.

Why Ecosocialism?

We see ecosocialism not as the denial but as the realization of the “first-epoch” socialisms of the twentieth century, in the context of the ecological crisis. Like them, it builds on the insight that capital is objectified past labor, and grounds itself in the free development of all producers, or to use another way of saying this, an undoing of the separation of the producers from the means of production.

We understand that this goal was not able to be implemented by first-epoch socialism, for reasons too complex to take up here, except to summarize as various effects of underdevelopment in the context of hostility by existing capitalist powers. This conjuncture had numerous deleterious effects on existing socialisms, chiefly, the denial of internal democracy along with an emulation of capitalist productivism, and led eventually to the collapse of these societies and the ruin of their natural environments.

Ecosocialism retains the emancipatory goals of first-epoch socialism, and rejects both the attenuated, reformist aims of social democracy and the the productivist structures of the bureaucratic variations of socialism. It insists, rather, upon redefining both the path and the goal of socialist production in an ecological framework.

It does so specifically in respect to the “limits on growth” essential for the sustainability of society. These are embraced, not however, in the sense of imposing scarcity, hardship and repression. The goal, rather, is a transformation of needs, and a profound shift toward the qualitative dimension and away from the quantitative. From the standpoint of commodity production, this translates into a valorization of use-values over exchange-values—a project of far-reaching significance grounded in immediate economic activity.

The generalization of ecological production under socialist conditions can provide the ground for the overcoming of the present crises. A society of freely associated producers does not stop at its own democratization. It must, rather, insist on the freeing of all beings as its ground and goal. It overcomes thereby the imperialist impulse both subjectively and objectively.

In realizing such a goal, it struggles to overcome all forms of domination, including, especially, those of gender and race. And it surpasses the conditions leading to fundamentalist distortions and their terrorist manifestations. In sum, a world society is posited in a degree of ecological harmony with nature unthinkable under present conditions.

A practical outcome of these tendencies would be expressed, for example, in a withering away of the dependency upon fossil fuels integral to industrial capitalism. And this in turn can provide the material point of release of the lands subjugated by oil imperialism, while enabling the containment of global warming, along with other afflictions of the ecological crisis.

No one can read these prescriptions without thinking, first, of how many practical and theoretical questions they raise, and second and more dishearteningly, of how remote they are from the present configuration of the world, both as this is anchored in institutions and as it is registered in consciousness.

We need not elaborate these points, which should be instantly recognizable to all. But we would insist that they be taken in their proper perspective.

Our project is neither to lay out every step of this way nor to yield to the adversary because of the preponderance of power he holds. It is, rather, to develop the logic of a sufficient and necessary transformation of the current order, and to begin developing the intermediate steps towards this goal.

We do so in order to think more deeply into these possibilities, and at the same moment, begin the work of drawing together with all those of like mind. If there is any merit in these arguments, then it must be the case that similar thoughts, and practices to realize these thoughts, will be coordinatively germinating at innumerable points around the world.

Ecosocialism will be international, and universal, or it will be nothing. The crises of our time can and must be seen as revolutionary opportunities, which it is our obligation to affirm and bring into existence.

Socialist Voice #143, January 8, 2007

Immigration Laws Serve Only the Bosses

Unions Must Defend and Organize Immigrants

By James Haywood

James Haywood is a Socialist Voice Contributing Editor. He lives in London, England.

In a December 8 speech, British Prime Minister Tony Blair gave orders to the country's immigrants: Conform to British society!

After a tirade against Muslim "extremists" that the Muslim Association of Britain termed "alarming," Blair hypocritically cited "toleration" as a core British value. "So conform to it, or don't come here." Immigrants have "the duty to integrate," he said. "That is what being British means." (*BBC News Dec 8; Telegraph Dec. 12*)

Blair's speech provides a licence for reprisals against those who do not "integrate" into the profit-driven values of Britain's rulers.

The capitalist media are quick to seize every opportunity to attack immigrants. For example the *Daily Telegraph* on November 25: "a bogus asylum seeker committed a series of armed robberies following his early release from jail." Or the *Sun's* headline earlier last year, "450,000 illegals in UK."

This kind of hysteria helps the government increase harassment of working people through increased spying (CCTV cameras, phone tapping, internet monitoring, etc.) The Home Office recently announced a doubling of their budget to massively increase deportations in the UK. And the government announced in December plans to make deportation easier, introduce measures such as scanning eyes and taking fingerprints, and allow the arrest of "suspicious" people. Note also the government's stated aim of introducing national ID cards by 2008.

Labour's Response

The labour movement needs not only to resist these measures but to combat the racist and anti-immigrant ideology that stands behind them.

The Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers, the National Assembly Against Racism, and other groups have done good work in fighting back against government and media scapegoating. Unionists need to make this campaign their own. To do this, we must make the cause of immigrants our own. Immigrants, whether documented or not, are fellow human beings with whom we *must* unite, in order to fight effectively against the brutal reality that capitalists impose on us all.

Yes, there is a shortage of council housing, but this is not the immigrants' fault: it is the *government* that doesn't provide enough housing. Yes, real wages are declining, but immigrants don't set wage rates: it is the *bosses* who super-exploit foreign labour in order to drive down *all* wages.

Immigrant workers aren't "stealing" jobs: it is the bosses who are closing down factory after factory; it is the bosses who slash staffing to increase their profits. Who took away hundreds of thousands of jobs in the coal industry?

It is the *bosses and their government* who brutalize immigrant workers the moment they set foot on UK soil, to force them to accept nineteenth-century-style exploitation. The government claims that immigration is out of control. While the bourgeoisie talk about managing immigrants, we should be talking about *organizing* them.

If we aim our fire at the ruling class and its government, joining with immigrants as fellow workers oppressed by capital, then we can mount a powerful movement.

Road Out of Unions' Crisis

The union movement urgently needs such a campaign. Union bureaucrats are in crisis in Britain, as in every imperialist country today. In 1979, the union membership made up 55% of the UK workforce; in 2004 this percentage had fallen to 26%, and is still falling to this day. Last year Britain saw the lowest level of strike action since records began.

The bosses' success is based in large part on the principle of "divide and rule"—keeping immigrant workers isolated, oppressed, and fearful. Immigrant workers now make up a large proportion of the industrial work force. This partly reflects the bourgeoisie's efforts to displace older and British-born workers who had won many gains and rights over the years. The immigrant workforce is mostly unorganized. They work under the watchful eye of the cops, ready to deport an undocumented union militant at a moment's notice.

Encouraging Beginnings

The labour movement needs to commit resources for focused recruitment drives aiming to help immigrant workers organize. Some efforts of this type are under way. The huge Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) has begun an organizing campaign targeted specifically at Polish immigrants – the biggest nationality of immigration here – especially at the massive Grampian meat factories.

The Gate Gourmet strike last year was an example of how important immigrant workers' role is in the union movement. The strikers, overwhelmingly immigrants from Asia, fought a long battle to defend their union, and were joined by an unofficial walkout by a thousand workers at the British airways airport, where their factory supplied food for in-flight meals.

The TGWU has also made encouraging gains in London among contracted cleaners of big buildings. Immigrants in their overwhelming majority, they are paid barely £2 per room. For example, at the Hilton hotel, for cleaning a room that rents at up to £500 a day, the cleaner receives no more than £2.50. Cleaners have protested such conditions recently with pickets and leafleting outside these buildings, including top city banks. Some of the contractors targeted have already agreed to make some concessions.

In December grant workers detained at Harmondsworth made headlines with a militant protest against conditions at this notorious prison, which has a filthy record of abuse, solitary

confinement, and suicides. The rioting was sparked by prison officers who refused to let these people see a TV report of their own prison!

‘Rescue the Unions’

In the United States, immigrant workers carried out a mighty uprising in 2006, including several mass strikes, which constituted the greatest uprising of the U.S. working class in sixty years. Ricardo Alarcón, president of Cuba’s National Assembly, summed up the significance of these actions on May 6:

“The struggle for the rights of immigrants and against discrimination expressed in public demonstrations that mobilized millions of people and in the historic May Day protest — a date that never before had been expressed in this way in the United States — brings to the forefront a political force that now cannot be easily ignored....

“To free the immigrants from their exploitation becomes, therefore, essential for the emancipation of the workers in the developed countries. To forge a union between both exploited sectors, in an area that has had advances that are still insufficient but whose importance cannot be underestimated, is today a task that cannot be postponed.

“To rescue the role of the labor union, true bulwark of civil society, and to guarantee the rights of all workers, without exceptions, to organize oneself is an indispensable response to a capitalism that ever more openly casts off its ‘liberal’ mask and demonstrates the perverse face of tyranny.” (www.counterpunch.org/alarcon05082006.html)

Successful recruitment among immigrant workers will change the unions profoundly – with the potential of revitalizing the working class as a whole. With a strong base among immigrant workers, the unions will be well placed to oppose attacks on immigration by the government and to counter the super-exploitation of immigrant workers by the bosses. If unions are in the thick of these struggles, they can strike massive blows against the employers and set labour on the path of growth and increasing strength. We are seeing signs of this today.

Unions Must Champion Immigrant Rights

But to do this — in Alarcón’s words, to “rescue the role of the labour union” — the unions must themselves change profoundly. Many unions today are incompetent to reach to workers outside their own ranks. Union campaigns tend to be exclusively devoted to legal packages and cheap loans for its membership, rather than hitting the streets and fighting to win the millions of unorganized. Too often, when the government lashes out against immigrants, union officials stand by in embarrassed silence. Unions must be outspoken defenders of the rights of all workers, regardless of where they were born or whether they are documented.

Within a framework of action, we can begin to discuss with co-workers and unionists how the question of immigration can be resolved in a revolutionary spirit. We will have a good occasion for this in March 2007, when No One Is Illegal is holding a trade union conference to discuss immigration controls. The conference, to be held in Liverpool, has initial sponsorship from seven local trades councils. The conference announcement explains: “The well-known slogan ‘Workers

of the World Unite' means what it says. It does not mean 'Only workers with the correct immigration status unite.' ”

Conference organizers are rightly concerned with slogans such as “No to harsh immigration controls,” which could suggest support for “fair” controls. Workers should be outspoken in the call for “No borders.” We should call for full civil rights to anyone in the UK, regardless of whether the government considers them legal or illegal, and the right for working people to travel freely wherever we choose.

The No One Is Illegal conference is a good beginning. We should urge unions to send delegates.

The conference can take as its starting point the need to defend the political and economic rights of *all* workers, whether documented or not, whether born here or elsewhere. And to achieve that goal, labour needs a targeted campaign that focuses energy and resources in building a broad alliance for immigrant rights.

In this framework, we need to work up specific demands to counter the oppression of immigrants, such as:

- Stop deportations. Release inmates of immigrant prisons.
- End police harassment of immigrants and their detention on phoney “security” pretexts.
- End waiting periods for citizenship and access to social services.
- Open up professions, technical trades, and other job trusts that generally exclude immigrants.

Build the March 31, 2007 Conference!

Socialist Voice #144, January 10, 2007

More Than One Revolution Could Happen in Latin America When the United States Least Expects It'

An Interview with Fidel Castro, Translated from *Cien Horas Con Fidel*

Cien Horas Con Fidel (One Hundred Hours with Fidel), published in Cuba in 2006, consists of conversations between Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet, Editor of the French monthly Le Monde Diplomatique, recorded between 2003 and 2006.

In the following excerpt, which was translated and published by the Cuban newspaper Granma on January 9, 2007, Fidel Castro discusses radical movements and trends in Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador and especially Venezuela. Of special interest is his extended discussion of how he advised and assisted Hugo Chavez during the attempted right-wing coup in 2002.

Comandante, I would like to ask you a question on Subcomandante Marcos. January 2004 saw the 10th anniversary of the eruption of the Zapatistas in Chiapas on the occasion of the coming into force of Mexico's Free Trade Treaty with the United States and Canada. I would like to know what you think of that exceptional figure, who has become so popular in the heart of the alternative globalization movement. Do you know him, have you read his texts?

I cannot judge him, but I have read some of your material on Marcos and what is said about him is really very interesting, it helps one to understand his character, including why he was assigned that grade of "*subcomandante*." Before that everyone involved in wars or campaigns were generals. From the Cuban Revolution a custom was established, that the chiefs were "*comandantes*." That is the grade that I came with in the *Granma* (yacht). As I was the chief of a small Rebel Army and in the Sierra we had to assume a military organization, we couldn't say "general secretary of the guerrilla column." Thus I acquired the description of "*Comandante en Jefe*." *Comandante* was the most modest grade in the traditional army and had one advantage: that 'in chief' could be effectively added to it.

Never again, since that era, has any revolutionary movement utilized the title of general. However, Marcos used that of subcomandante. I had never properly understood that, I saw it as an expression of modesty.

Yes, he says: "The comandante is the people; I am the *subcomandante*, because I am at the orders of the people."

It has to be explained: he is the *subcomandante* of the *comandante pueblo*. Very good. From your book on conversations with him, I learnt many details, of his ideas, his concepts, his struggle for the indigenous cause. I read it with much respect, and I am happy to have had information of that kind on his character and the situation in Chiapas.

That was daring, without any doubt, when he then made that journey. It has been debated whether or not it was right to do so, but in any case I have followed it with much interest.

You are referring to the “march for peace” on Mexico that Marcos made in April 2001.

Yes. I have observed everything with much interest; I see in Marcos an integrity; it is indisputable that he is a man of integrity, concepts, talent. He is an intellectual, whether or not he is the person with whom he was identified when little was known about him. I am not sufficiently informed, but that is not important; what is important are ideas, constancy, the knowledge of a revolutionary combatant.

Are you following the battle of the indigenous peoples in Latin America?

With much interest. As you know, I was a great friend of the painter Guayasamín. I had great admiration for him and conversed a lot with him and he often talked to me of the problems and tragedies of the Indians. Moreover, from what one knows from history, there have been acts of genocide over the centuries, but now a greater awareness is appearing. And the struggle of Marcos and of the Mexican Indians is yet another testimony of combativeness.

This is what I can say in relation to Marcos. We are observing, with much respect, the line that he is following, and we respect the line of any organization, of any progressive party, of any democratic party. I have never had the opportunity, there has never been any possibility of a personal conversation with Marcos, I do not know him personally, I only know him via all the news and references I have read about him, and I also know of many people, among them many intellectuals, who feel great admiration for him.

There is also a strong indigenous movement in Ecuador, right?

I admire, naturally, the organization of the Ecuadorian Indians, the Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONAI) and Pachakutik (Our Land), their social organization, their political organization and their leaders, both men and women. I have also met very valiant leaders in Bolivia, where there is a formidable combativeness, and I know the principal Bolivian leader of today, Evo Morales, an outstanding man, a very outstanding person.

I imagine that you must have been happy at Evo Morales' victory in the presidential elections in Bolivia, on December 18, 2005.

Very happy. That election, resounding, indisputable, moved the world, given the fact that it was the first time that an indigenous president was chosen in Bolivia, which is extraordinary. Evo possesses all the qualities to lead his country and his people at this difficult time which is unlike any other.

Located in the heart of the Americas, Bolivia takes its name from the liberator Simón Bolívar. Its first governor was Marshall Antonio José de Sucre. It is a country rich in its people and its subsoil, but currently classified as the poorest nation in the region, with a population of close to nine million inhabitants, distributed throughout an essentially mountainous territory of more than one million square kilometers.

That is the framework and within that framework, Evo Morales is planning for the future as a hope for the majority of his people. He embodies the confirmation of the collapse of the political system traditionally applied in the region, and the determination of the large masses to gain a genuine independence. His election is the expression of the fact that the political map of Latin America is changing. New winds are blowing in this hemisphere.

Initially, there was no security of Evo's advantage in the December 18 elections, and there was concern because manipulations could have occurred in Congress. But when he won with close to 54% of the votes in the first round, and also won in the Chamber of Deputies, that eliminated any kind of controversy.

It has been the miracle election, the election that shook the world, which shook the empire and the unsustainable order imposed by the United States. It demonstrates that Washington can no longer have recourse to dictatorships as in other eras, that imperialism does not have the instruments of before, nor can it apply them.

Cuba was the first country that Evo Morales visited, on December 30, 2005, right after being elected president, and even before his investiture on January 22, 2006. Do you think that that visit has created problems for him with Washington?

The friendly visit of brother Evo, president elect of Bolivia is inserted in the framework of the historic and profound relations of sisterhood and solidarity between the Cuban and Bolivian peoples. Nobody could be annoyed at that. Nor even on account of the agreements signed. They are agreements for life, for humanity; they don't constitute a crime. How could the government of the United States be offended by Cuba helping to increase the life expectancy at birth of Bolivian children? Could the reduction of infant mortality or the eradication of illiteracy possibly offend anybody?

Do you think that other Latin American countries will now have to take the indigenous component into account?

There are highly critical social situations in three countries where there is a great force and large indigenous component: Peru and Ecuador, in addition to Bolivia. There is also a large component in Guatemala, but the course there has been distinct from the rest of the countries, in terms of the indigenous component, of course; the Mexicans have a very large one too. I can only say that, in this hemisphere, it is perfectly explicable that there is a Marcos fighting for the rights of the indigenous peoples, as there might be ten or one hundred. The seriousness of the indigenous leaders that I know impresses me in particular. I have talked a lot with the Ecuadorians. They talk seriously. They inspire respect, they inspire confidence, they have much integrity. And in Ecuador, as in Peru and other countries, they will have to take them into account.

You have said that you have great admiration for Hugo Chávez, the president of Venezuela.

Well, yes, there we have another Indian, Hugo Chávez, a new Indian who is, as he states “a mix of Indian and mixed-race;” he is really saying a bit of black, a bit of white and a bit of Indian. But you look at Chávez and you are seeing an autochthonous son of Venezuela, the son of that Venezuela which was a mix of races, with all the noble traits and an exceptional talent. I am in the habit of listening to his speeches and he is proud of his humble origins and his ethnic mix, where there is a bit of everything, principally from those who were the autochthonous Indians or slaves brought from Africa. He could have some white genes, and that’s not a bad thing; the combination of the so-called ethnicities is always good, it enriches humanity.

You have closely followed the evolution of the situation in Venezuela, in particular the destabilization attempts against President Chávez?

Yes, we have followed events with great attention. Chávez visited us in 1994, nine months after leaving prison and four years before his first election as president. He was very brave, because he was much reproached for traveling to Cuba. He came and we talked. We discovered a cultured, intelligent, very progressive man, an authentic Bolivarian. Then he won the elections. Various times. He changed the Constitution, with formidable support from the people. His adversaries have tried to sweep him away via a coup or economic coups. He has been able to stand up to all the assaults by the oligarchy and imperialism against the Bolivarian process.

During the famous 40 years of the democracy that preceded Chávez, according to calculations we have made with the help of the most experienced cadres in the banking system, there was a capital flight of some \$300 billion from Venezuela. Venezuela could have been more industrialized than Sweden and its people could have the education of that country if there had existed a distributive democracy, if those mechanisms had functioned, if there was something certain and credible in all that demagoguery and its colossal publicity.

From when the Chávez government came into power to the exchange controls established in January 2003, we calculate that an additional flight of some \$30 billion has taken place. As we stated, all those phenomena make the order of things in our hemisphere unsustainable.

On April 11, 2002, there was a coup d’état in Caracas against Chávez. Did you follow those events?

When we saw at midday on April 11 that the demonstration called by the opposition had been diverted by those involved in the coup and was approaching Miraflores Palace , I immediately understood that serious events were about to take place. In fact we were watching the march on Venezolana de Televisión, which was still transmitting. The provocations, the shooting, the victims, happened almost immediately. A few minutes later, Venezolana de Televisión transmissions were cut. News began to arrive in snatches and via different routes. We knew that some senior officers had publicly spoken out against the president. It was affirmed that the Presidential Guard had withdrawn and that the army was to attack Miraflores Palace. Some Venezuelan personalities were calling their friends in Cuba by phone to make their farewells, because they were prepared to resist and to die; they talked specifically of sacrificing themselves.

That night I was in a meeting in a room at the International Conference Center with the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers. An official delegation from the Basque Country, headed by Lehendakari, had been with me since midday and had been invited to a lunch at a time when nobody imagined what was going to happen on that tragic day. They were witness to the events from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. on April 11.

I was trying to communicate with the Venezuelan president by telephone from early afternoon. It was impossible! After midnight, at 12:38 a.m. on April 12, I received news that Chávez was on the telephone.

I asked him about the situation at that moment. He replied: “We are entrenched here in the Palace. We have lost the military force that could decide things. They’ve taken away the television signal. I am powerless to move and am analyzing the situation.” I asked him rapidly: “What forces do you have?”

“About 200-300 very exhausted men.”

“Have you got tanks?” I asked him.

“No, we did have tanks but they were withdrawn from their barracks.”

I asked him again: “What other forces can you count on?”

And he replied: “There are others at a distance, but I don’t have any communication with them.” He was referring to General Raúl Isaías Baduel and the paratroopers, the Armored Division and other forces, but he had lost all communication with those Bolivarian and loyal units.

With great delicacy I said to him: “Would you allow me to express an opinion?” He answered: “Yes.”

I added with the most persuasive note possible: “Insist on the conditions of honorable and dignified treatment and preserve the lives of the men that you have, who are the most loyal. Don’t sacrifice them, or yourself.”

He replied with emotion: “They are all ready to die here.”

Without hesitating I added: “I know, but I believe that I can think with more serenity than you can at this point. Don’t resign, demand honorable and guaranteed conditions so that you are not the victim of a felony, because I think you should preserve yourself. Moreover, you have a duty to your compañeros. Don’t sacrifice yourself!”

I was very aware of the profound difference between the situation of Allende on September 11, 1973 and the situation of Chávez on that April 12, 2002. Allende didn’t have a single soldier. Chávez could count on a large section of the soldiers and officers of the army, especially the young ones.

“Don’t step down! Don’t resign!” I reiterated to him.

We talked on other subjects: the way in which I thought he should provisionally leave the country, communicate with some soldier who had real authority in the coup ranks, put to him his disposition to leave the country, but not to resign. From Cuba we would try to mobilize the Diplomatic Corps in our country and in Venezuela; we would send two planes with our foreign minister and a group of diplomats to collect him. He thought about it for a few seconds, and finally accepted my proposition. Everything would now depend on the enemy military chief.

In the interview given to the authors of the book *Chávez nuestro* (Our Chávez) by José Vicente Rangel, then minister of defense and the current vice president, who was with Chávez at that moment, one can read textually: “Fidel’s call was decisive in there being no self-sacrifice. It was determining. His advice allowed us to see better in the dark. He helped us a lot.”

Were you encouraging him to resist with weapons in hand?

No, on the contrary. That was what Allende did, in my judgment correctly in the circumstances, and paid for it heroically with his life, as he had promised.

Chávez had three alternatives: to dig in in Miraflores and resist until the death; to leave the Palace and try to rejoin the people to unleash a national resistance, with negligible possibilities of success in those circumstances; or to leave the country without resigning or stepping down, in order to renew the fight with real and rapid prospects of success. We suggested the third one.

My final words to convince him in that telephone conversation were in essence: “Save those valiant men who are with you in that battle which is unnecessary now.” The idea came from the conviction that a leader as popular and charismatic as Chávez, defeated in that treacherous way in those circumstances, if they didn’t kill him, the people— in this case with the support of the best of their Armed Forces – would reclaim him with much more force and his return would be inevitable. That is why I assumed the responsibility of proposing to him what I proposed.

At that precise moment, when there was a real alternative of a victorious and rapid return, the slogan to die fighting, as Salvador Allende did very well, had no place. And that victorious return was what did occur, although far earlier than I could have imagined.

At that time, did you try to help Chávez in some way?

Well, at that point we could only act using the resources of diplomacy. In the middle of the night we called all the accredited ambassadors in Havana and proposed to them that they should accompany Felipe (Pérez Roque), our minister of foreign affairs, to Caracas to peacefully rescue alive Chávez, the legitimate president of Venezuela.

I did not harbor the least doubt that, in a very short time, Chávez would be back on the shoulders of the people and the troops. Now, he had to be saved from death.

We proposed to send two planes to collect him in the event of the coup leaders accepting his exit. But the coup military chief rejected the formula, also communicating to him that he would be subjected to a war council. Chávez put on his parachutist uniform and accompanied only by his

faithful aide, Jesús Suárez Chourio, went to the Tiuna Fortress, the headquarters and military command post of the coup.

When I called him again, two hours later, as I agreed with him, Chávez had been taken prisoner by coup soldiers and all contact had been lost with him. The television continually broadcast news of his “resignation” to demobilize his followers and all the people.

Some hours later, now fully into April 12, a telephone call was arranged and he talked with his daughter María Gabriela. He affirmed to her that he had not resigned, that he was a “president prisoner.” He asked her to communicate that to me so that I could inform the world.

His daughter immediately called me on April 12 at 10:02 in the morning, and transmitted her father’s words to me. I immediately asked her: “Would you be prepared to inform the world in your own words?” “What wouldn’t I do for my father?” she replied with that precise, admirable and decided phrase.

Without losing a second I communicated with Randy Alonso, journalist and director of the “Roundtable,” a well-known television program. With telephone and tape recorder in hand, Randy called the cell phone number that María Gabriela had given me. It was almost 11:00 a.m. The clear, felt and persuasive words of the daughter were recorded, immediately transcribed, given to the accredited news agencies in Cuba and transmitted on the National Television News at 12:40 p.m. on April 12, 2002, in Gabriela’s own voice. The tape had also been handed over to the accredited international television channels in Cuba. From Venezuela, CNN was gleefully transmitting the news from coup sources; its reporter in Havana, on the other hand, rapidly circulated the clarifying words of María Gabriela from Cuba at midday.

And what consequences did that have?

Well, that was heard by millions of Venezuelans, in their majority against the coup, and the soldiers loyal to Chávez, those people who they had tried to confuse and paralyze with barefaced lies of his alleged resignation.

At 11:15 that night, María Gabriela called again. Her voice had a tragic tone. I didn’t let her finish her first words and asked her: “What’s happened?” She replied: “They’ve taken away my father by night in a helicopter, destination unknown.” “Quickly,” I told her, “in a few minutes you have to expose that in your own voice.”

Randy was with me in a meeting on programs of the Battle of Ideas with youth leaders and other cadres; he had his recorder with him, and the history of midday was immediately repeated. Venezuelan and world opinion were thus informed of the strange nocturnal transfer of Chávez for an unknown destination. This occurred between the night of the 12th and dawn on the 13th.

On Saturday 13th, very early, an Open Tribunal had been organized in Güira de Melena, a municipality in Habana province. Back in the office before 10:00 a.m., I called María Gabriela. She said that “Chávez’ parents were anxious;” they wanted to talk with me from Barinas, they wanted to make a statement.

I informed her that a cable from an international press agency had communicated that Chávez had been transferred to Turiamo, a naval port in Aragua on the northern coast of Venezuela. I gave her my opinion that based on the type of information and details, the news seemed accurate. I recommended her to make as many inquiries as possible. She added that General Lucas Rincón, Inspector General of the Armed Forces, wanted to talk to me, and also wanted to make a public statement.

Chávez' mother and father talked with me: everything normal in the state of Barinas. Chávez' mother told me that the military chief of the garrison had just spoken to her husband, Hugo de los Reyes Chávez, governor of Barinas and Chávez' father. I transmitted as much calm to them as I could.

The mayor of Sabaneta, the town in which Chávez was born, in Barinas, had also been in touch. He wanted to make a statement. He related in passing that all the garrisons were loyal. His great optimism was perceptible.

I talked with Lucas Rincón. He affirmed that the Parachute Brigade, the Armored Tank Division and the F-16 hunter bomber base were against the coup and ready to act. I dared to suggest to him that he should do everything possible to seek a solution without fighting among soldiers. Obviously the coup was defeated. There was no statement from the Inspector General, because the call was interrupted and could not be reestablished.

A few minutes later, María Gabriela called again: she told me that General Baduel, chief of the Parachute Brigade, needed to get in touch with me and the Maracay loyal forces wished to make a statement to the people of Venezuela and to international opinion.

An insatiable desire for news prompted me to ask Baduel three or four details on the situation before continuing the dialogue. He satisfied my curiosity in the right way; he exuded combativeness in every sentence. Immediately I told him: "Everything is ready for your statement." He said: "Wait a minute; I'll put you on to Divisional General Julio García Montoya, permanent secretary of the National Council of Security and Defense. He has arrived to offer support for our position." This officer, an older man than the young military chiefs from Maracay, did not have command of the troops at that time.

Respectful of the military hierarchy, Baduel, whose Parachute Brigade was one of the fundamental axes of the powerful force of tanks, armored infantry and hunter bombers located in Maracay, state of Aragua, put General Montoya on the line. The words of this high-ranking officer were really intelligent, persuasive and appropriate to the situation. In essence he stated that the Venezuelan Armed Forces were faithful to the Constitution. With that he said it all.

I had turned into a kind of press reporter who received and transmitted news and public messages via the simple use of a cell phone and tape recorder in Randy's hands. I was witness to the formidable counter-coup of the people and the Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela.

The situation at that moment was excellent. The April 11 coup didn't have the most minimal chance of success. But a terrible risk was still hanging over the sister country. Chávez' life was in extremely grave danger. Kidnapped by the coup forces, the oligarchy and imperialism, the person of Chávez' was all that was left in the hands of the fascist adventure. What would they do with him? Would they assassinate him? Would they quench their thirst of hatred and revenge on that rebel and daring Bolivarian fighter, the friend of the poor, the unbowed defender of the dignity and sovereignty of Venezuela? What would happen if, as was the case in Bogotá on account of the death of Gaitán, the people received the news of the assassination of Chávez? I couldn't get the idea of a similar tragedy and its bloody and destructive consequences out of my head.

During the midday hours, after the abovementioned communications, news of popular indignation and rebelliousness was coming in from all sides. In Caracas, the main center of events, a sea of people was advancing along streets and avenues on the Miraflores Palace and the central installations of the coup organizers. In my desperation as a friend and brother of the prisoner, a thousand ideas were running through my head. What could we do with our little cell phone? I was at the point of calling General Vázquez Velasco himself . I had never spoken to him nor did I know where he was. I didn't know if he would respond or not, or how he would do so. And for that singular mission I couldn't count on the valiant services of María Gabriela. I thought more about it. At 4:15 p.m. I called our ambassador in Venezuela, Germán Sánchez. I asked him whether he believed that Vázquez Velasco would respond or not. He told me that he might.

"Call him," I asked, "use my name, express to him my opinion that a river of blood could run in Venezuela derived from the events. That only one man could avert those risks: Hugo Chávez. Exhort him to release him immediately in order to prevent the probable course of events."

General Vázquez Velasco responded to the call. He affirmed that he had Chávez in his power and was guaranteeing his life, but that he could not accede to what was being asked of him. Our ambassador insisted, he argued, he tried to persuade him. Annoyed, the general broke the communication. He hung up.

I immediately called María Gabriela and told her what Vázquez Velasco had said, particularly the part related to his commitment to guarantee Chávez' life. I asked her to put me on to Baduel again. Contact was made at 4:49. I related to him in detail the Germán-Vázquez Velasco exchange. I expressed my opinion on the importance of the fact that Vázquez Velasco acknowledged having Chávez in his power. Those were circumstances propitious for pressuring him to the maximum.

At that moment, it was not definitively known in Cuba if Chávez had been transferred or not, nor to what point. The rumor had been circulating for a few hours that the prisoner had been sent to the island of Orchila. When I spoke to Baduel, at almost 5:00 p.m. the brigade chief was selecting his men and preparing helicopters for the rescue of President Chávez. I imagined how

difficult it would be for Baduel and the parachutists to obtain the precise and exact data for such a delicate mission.

During all the rest of the day up until midnight of the 13th, I devoted my time to the task of talking to as many people as I could on the issue of Chávez' life. And I spoke to many people, because during that afternoon, the people, with the support of the chiefs and soldiers of the Army, were setting about controlling everything. I still do not know at what time and in what way Carmona el Breve left Miraflores Palace. I knew that, under the direction of Chourio and the members of the Presidential Guard, that the guards had already taken and occupied strategic points of the building and Rangel, who stood firm the whole time, had returned to the Ministry of Defense.

I even called Diosdado Cabello right after he had taken possession of the Presidency. Due to the communication being lost because of technical problems, I transmitted a message to him via Héctor Navarro, minister of higher education, suggesting that in his condition of constitutional president he should order Vázquez Velasco to release Chávez, warning him of the grave responsibility he would incur if he disobeyed that order.

I spoke with almost everyone, I too felt part of that drama into which I was introduced by María Gabriela's phone call in the morning of April 12. Only when all the details of Hugo Chávez' Calvary were known, from when he was taken to an unknown destination during the night of the 12th, could the incredible danger to which he was exposed be confirmed, and into which he put into play all his mental acuteness, his serenity, sang-froid and revolutionary instinct. More incredible still is that, until the last minute, the coup members kept him uninformed of what was occurring in the country, and up until the last minute insisted on him signing a resignation that he never signed.

A private aircraft, said to be owned by a known member of the Venezuelan oligarchy, whose name I will not mention for lack of total certainty as to the information, was waiting to transfer him to who knows where and in the hands of who knows who.

I have narrated to you everything that I know; one day other hands will write this history with all the details that are missing.

Chávez is a representative of progressive military officers, but in Europe, and also in Latin America, many progressives reproach him precisely for being part of the military. What is your opinion on that apparent contradiction between being progressive and the military?

Omar Torrijos, in Panama, was an example of a military officer with a profound consciousness of social justice and his homeland. Juan Velasco

Alvarado, in Peru, also carried out important actions for progress. It should be recalled, for example, that among Brazilians, Luiz Carlos Prestes was a revolutionary officer who made a heroic march from 1924 to 1926, as did Mao Zedong from 1934 to 1935.

In one of his magnificent literary works, Jorge Amado , wrote a beautiful account of Prestes' march, *El caballero de la esperanza* (The Cavalier of Hope). That military feat was something impressive; it lasted more than two-and-a-half years, covering immense territories of his country without suffering a defeat. Important revolutionary deeds emerged from the military in the recently-concluded 20th century.

Among those are the names of illustrious officers like Lázaro Cárdenas, a general of the Mexican Revolution, who nationalized oil, carried out agrarian reforms and won the support of the people forever.

Some of the first rebels in Central America in the 20th century include a group of Guatemalan soldiers in the 1950s, who together with Jacobo Arbenz, a high-ranking officer in the Guatemalan Army, participated in historic revolutionary activities, including the noble and valiant agrarian reform that led to a mercenary invasion that, like the Bay of Pigs Invasion and for the same reason, was launched by imperialism against that government, which legitimately deserved to be described as progressive.

There are a good number of cases of progressive military officers. Juan Domingo Perón, in Argentina, also had military roots. One must look at the time when he emerged; in 1934, he was named minister of labor, and made laws benefiting workers, and, in recognition of that, when he was sent off to prison, it was the people who rescued him.

Perón committed some errors: he offended the Argentine oligarchy, he humiliated it; he nationalized the theater and other symbols of the rich classes, but the latter's political and economic power remained intact, and at a propitious moment, they overthrew him with the complicity and help of the United States. Perón's greatness lies in the fact that he appealed to the reserves and resources of that rich country and did everything he could to improve living conditions for the workers. That social class, always grateful and loyal, made Perón an idol of the working people until the end of his life.

General Líber Seregni, who until a few years ago was president of the Broad Front of Uruguay, is one of the most progressive and respected leaders ever known in Latin America. His integrity, decency, firmness and tenacity contributed to the historic victory of that noble people, full of solidarity, who elected Tabaré Vázquez, Seregni's successor, as president of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay and brought the Uruguayan left into government, when the country was on the edge of the abyss. Cuba is thankful to Líber Seregni for the solid bases that, together with many eminent Uruguayans, he forged for the fraternal and solidarity-based relations that now exist between Uruguay and Cuba.

We have no right to forget Francisco Caamaño, a young Dominican soldier who for months heroically combated 40,000 United States soldiers dispatched by President Johnson to the Dominican Republic in 1965 in order to prevent the return of the Constitutionally-elected President Juan Bosch. His tenacious resistance to the invaders, leading a handful of soldiers and civilians, which lasted for months, was one of the most glorious revolutionary episodes ever

written in this hemisphere. Caamaño, after a truce snatched from the empire, returned to his homeland and lay down his life fighting for the liberation of his people.

Without a man like Hugo Chávez, born in a poor family and trained in the discipline of the military academies of Venezuela, where so many ideas of liberty, unity and Latin American integration were implanted by Bolívar, there would not have emerged at this decisive time in Our America a process of such historical and international transcendence as the current revolutionary process in that sister nation. I do not see any contradiction whatsoever.

In Argentina, an Argentina where, to a certain extent, in December 2001, the neoliberal model collapsed with a loud crash, Perón and Peronism continue to have a considerable political influence. What do you think about recent events in Argentina?

When the news arrived in May 2003 regarding the election results in Argentina and the announcement of Néstor Kirchner's victory and the defeat of Carlos Ménem, I felt great satisfaction. Why? There is an important reason: the worst of unbridled capitalism, as Chávez would say, the worst of neoliberal globalization in that Latin American country that had become a symbol par excellence of neoliberalism, suffered a defeat.

The Argentine people, although far from achieving their most desired objectives, do not realize the service they have done to Latin America and the world by burying in the deepest basin of the Pacific Ocean – at more than 8,000 meters – an important symbol of neoliberal globalization. They have injected tremendous strength into the growing number of people who are becoming aware, in all of Our America, as to what a horrible and deadly thing it is that is known by that name.

If you like, we could recall that Pope John Paul II, who enjoyed universal respect, spoke of the “globalization of solidarity” when he visited our country in 1998. Could anyone be against that type of globalization in the fullest sense of the word, which covers not just relations between those who live within the borders of one country, but also within the sphere of the planet, and that solidarity should be implemented likewise tomorrow, in a world of true liberty, equality and justice, by those who today are wasting, destroying and squandering natural resources and condemning to death the inhabitants of this planet?

You can't get to heaven in a day, but believe me, the Argentine people have dealt an uncommon blow to a symbol, and that is tremendously valuable.

Latin America continues to have the problem of the foreign debt.

That debt, in the world, has grown proportionally with the population. Now the total foreign debt is as high as 2.5 or 2.6 trillion dollars! The developed countries this year are going to offer Third World countries, as official development aid, some \$53 billion. In exchange, they will charge them, as interest on their foreign debt, more than \$350 billion!

In Latin America, that debt has been growing nonstop, and now totals approximately \$800 billion. Nobody can pay it, and that makes all serious development policies impossible. Hunger

cannot be eliminated in Latin America while governments have to continue dedicating one-fourth of their income from exports to paying a debt that they have already paid almost twice over, and which is now almost double what it was 10 years ago...

Now the United States is proposing the FTAA, Free Trade Area of the Americas, as a solution. What do you think about the FTAA?

A disaster. But a disaster that can be avoided. Because we were witness to the battle waged in Mar del Plata on November 4 and 5 in 2005, during the so-called Summit of the Americas. It was a great fight against the FTAA. There were two fights, one in the streets and stadium, and the other in the building where the heads of state were meeting.

In Mar del Plata, the disastrous FTAA project was definitively defeated. The FTAA means opening up all the borders of countries with a very low level of technical development to the products of those nations with the highest technological and productive levels, those that make the latest models of airplanes, that dominate world trade, that want to obtain three things from us: raw materials, cheap labor, and customers and markets. A new form of ruthless colonization.

Do you think that that could increase Latin America's dependence on the United States?

If Latin America were devoured by the empire; if it swallowed us up, like that whale which swallowed up the prophet Jonah and was unable to digest him, it would have to expel it one day, and it would be born again in our hemisphere. But I don't think that it is easy to swallow, and I have hopes that it cannot be devoured. Events in recent years have been showing that: the world cannot be ruled with a solidier and bayonet in every school, every home, and every park.

I have always said that the U.S. people themselves must be reckoned with, the intellectuals and the U.S. people. Those people can be deceived, but when they learn the truth, as in the case of the child Elián... . Eighty percent of those people supported the return of the Cuban child Elián González.

Those people today oppose the blockade on Cuba. Those people, in a growing number, opposed the doctrine of the surprise, interventionist war, despite the artful attack on the city of New York on September 11, 2001. They should be reckoned with.

We must also count on the European intellectuals, because men and women like you have been making enormous efforts to create consciousness, and have contributed notably to the creation of that needed consciousness.

In addition, there are now several governments, in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and other countries, where progressive measures are being taken. How do you see what Lula is doing in Brazil, for example?

Obviously, I see what Lula is doing with the greatest sympathy. He does not have a sufficient majority in Parliament; he has had to base himself on other forces, even conservative ones, to be able to go through with certain reforms. The media has given a lot of publicity to a corruption scandal of parliamentarians, but they have not been able to involve him. Lula is a popular leader.

I have known him for many years; we have followed his itinerary, we have spoken a lot with him, a man of conviction, intelligent, patriotic, and progressive, of very humble origins and who does not forget his roots or the people who always supported him. I believe that everyone sees him like that. Because it is not a matter of making a revolution; it is a matter of meeting a challenge: doing away with hunger. He can do it. It is a matter of doing away with illiteracy. And he can do that, too. And I think that we should all support him.

Comandante, do you think that the era of revolutions and armed struggles is over in Latin America?

Listen, nobody can ensure that revolutionary changes are going to occur in Latin America now. But neither can anybody ensure that they could not happen at any time in one or more countries. If you objectively analyze the economic and social situation in certain countries, you cannot be in the slightest doubt that it is a matter of an explosive situation. The rate of infant mortality is, for example, 65 per 1,000 live births in several of those countries; ours is less than 6.5; 10 times more children die in Latin American countries, on average, than in Cuba. Malnutrition sometimes affects more than 40 percent of the population; illiteracy and semi-literacy continue to be too high; unemployment is affecting tens of millions of adult citizens in Our America, and there is also the problem of abandoned children, which total in the millions. The president of UNICEF once told me that if Latin America had the same level of medical attention and health that Cuba has, 700,000 children would be saved every year.

If no urgent solution is found to those problems — and the FTAA is not a solution, nor is neoliberal globalization — more than one revolution could happen in Latin America when the United States least expects it. And it will not be able to blame anyone for promoting those revolutions.

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Chávez Calls for United Socialist Party of Venezuela

Rank-and-file committees to be building blocks for new organization

By John Riddell

When supporters of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez rallied in the Teresa Carreña theatre in Caracas to celebrate their presidential election victory December 15, 2007, “there were cheers in the back half of the theatre,” writes Michael Lebowitz, “but few in the high-priced seats.”

This was not because Chávez spoke of going forward to socialism and combating corruption — that wasn’t new — but because “it was all about the new party,” which Chávez insisted must be built “from the base” by the popular committees that fought and won the election. (“Chávez Moves Forward,” *venezuelanalysis.com*)

The prospect of a united, fighting party of the Venezuelan masses is indeed unsettling to the conservative careerists who occupy many high posts in the pro-Chávez political parties. But for working people, it could be the instrument they need to break the present deadlock in Venezuela’s class struggle and move decisively against capitalist rule.

Victory Without Precedent

The victory of the Bolivarian movement in the December 3 presidential elections has created the most favourable conditions yet for such an advance. The Venezuelan people made the elections as the occasion for their largest mobilization ever in support of the Bolivarian movement and President Hugo Chávez.

The pro-Chávez vote of 7.3 million (63% of votes cast) was almost double his total in the last presidential elections, and 25% more than in the recall referendum of 2004. Moreover, Chávez supporters on election day massively occupied the streets, forestalling any opposition effort to challenge the vote.

So massive was the victory that the right-wing opposition, for the first time since the Bolivarians took office in 1998, conceded that they had indeed lost the election and that Chávez was Venezuela’s legitimate president. With characteristic generosity, Chávez congratulated the opposition for “their display of democracy” and invited them to “include themselves in the process of building the new Venezuela.”

Program for Change

When his new cabinet was sworn in on January 8, Chávez pledged to set a fast pace in carrying out the mandate of Venezuelan voters. Among his proposed measures: nationalization of key industries privatized under previous governments, including the giant telecommunications and electricity companies, and expansion of government ownership of oil projects. The national bank’s independence will be curbed.

More power will be transferred to the recently created communal councils (see below). What is needed, Chávez said, is to “dismantle the bourgeois state” and create a “communal state.”

Progress toward a new socialist party will be crucial in enabling these and other programs to advance.

Danger From Within

According to Lebowitz, a Caracas-based Marxist writer, the main danger to the Venezuelan revolution comes not from this opposition, its backers in Washington, or the capitalist class they represent. “The problem of the Venezuelan revolution is from within. It’s whether it will be deformed by people around Chávez.”

Many officials in the Bolivarian political parties “want Chávez without socialism,” Lebowitz says, and “want to retain the power to make decisions from above.” (See “Challenges for Venezuela’s Revolution,” in *Socialist Voice #100*)

Following the elections, officials of many of the two dozen parties of the Bolivarian movement made boastful statements regarding how many of the Chávez votes had been on their ticket. (Under Venezuelan electoral law, Chávez’s vote is the sum total of that of all the parties who named him as their candidate. The Movement for the Fifth Republic [MVR] picked up about two-thirds of the Bolivarian votes; the rest were widely scattered.)

“Let’s not fall into lies,” said Chávez on December 15. “Those votes were not for any party... they were votes for Chávez, for the people.” The audience then responded with an ovation to his call, “Don’t divide the people!”

A New Party

“The revolution requires a united party, not an alphabet soup,” Chávez said. “I Hugo Chávez Frias ... declare today that I am going to create a new party.” It will be “a political instrument at the service not of blocs or groupings but of the people and the Revolution, at the service of socialism.” To great applause, he proposed the name “United Socialist Party of Venezuela” (PSUV).

As for those who doubt the wisdom of this proposal, Chávez continued, “I don’t have time to bury myself in a debate ... they are entirely free to pursue their course.” But “obviously, they will leave the government.”

The new party will not be a copy of any existing organization. As for the dominant Bolivarian party, the MVR, which Chávez himself founded, “it work is completed; it must pass into history.” Nor would party officials be automatically carried over to the new formation: “You will not see me with the same old faces, the same party leaderships — no, that would be a deception.”

How then will the party be formed? Chávez recalled the battle of the recall referendum in 2004, which was won by thousands of Units for the Electoral Battle (UBEs), made up of working people across the country. “Afterwards, I asked everyone to maintain the UBEs ... but almost

everywhere they were lost... Let us be sure this does not happen after our great victory of December 3.”

Built by the Ranks

Hailing the great work of 11,000 Bolivarian battalions, 32,800 platoons, and innumerable squads in rallying the people for this victory, Chávez said, “Let not a single squad dissolve. Starting tomorrow, the leaders of the squads, platoons, and battalions must bring together their troops, their worthy troops, who are the people.”

Get hold of a computer, typewriter, whatever, Chávez said, and draw up a list — “a census of the activists, sympathizers, and friends” — for “the battalions, platoons, and squads will be the basic national structure” of the new party, a party built “from below.”

Chávez blasted the prevailing custom of hand-picking candidates and leaders from above — in the Venezuelan idiom, singling them out “with the finger.” “Enough of the little finger,” he said, “and generally it’s often my finger,” when he is “asked to take decisions on candidates.... This should all be done from below, from the base. The people should take these decisions, as has been written in our Constitution for seven years, except we haven’t done it. Now is the time to start.”

Elitist Models

Most Latin American left parties of the 20th century, Chávez noted, had “copied the Bolshevik model of the party,” which under Lenin’s leadership brought victory in the Russian revolution of 1917. Later, this party “went off course, which Lenin could not prevent because he was ill and died very young.” The Bolsheviks “ended up as an anti-democratic party, and the wonderful slogan, ‘All power to the soviets,’ ended up as ‘All power for the party.’

“In my humble opinion, this deformation took place close to the outset of the socialist revolution that gave birth to the Soviet Union, and we saw the results 70 years later” in the USSR’s collapse. Workers did not come out to defend the Soviet system “because it had become converted into an elitist structure that could not build socialism.

“We here will build Venezuelan socialism — an original Venezuelan model.”

The new party “must be created not for electoral purposes — even though it will carry out electoral battles as we have done,” Chávez said. “The task is to carry out the battle of ideas for the socialist project.” For this purpose, everyone must “study, read, discuss” and “distribute information, printed material.”

Roots of Socialism in Religion

Chávez took care to present socialism not as something new, invented, or imported, but as growing organically out of the traditions and beliefs of the Venezuelan people. The socialist project, he said on December 3, is “Indo-Venezuelan, indigenous, Christian, and Bolivarian.”

In his December 15 address, he utilized relevant passages in the Christian Bible to good effect.

The prophet Isaiah condemned those who accumulate wealth, “Woe to those who add house to house [and] join field to field, until there is no more room” (Isaiah 5:8)

Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount blessed the poor and denounced the rich: “Woe to you that are well fed, for you shall hunger.” (Luke 6:20-25)

“We are much more moderate than Christ,” Chávez said. “We don’t want anyone to go hungry” and that the rich “share with us the happiness of being free ... everyone free and equal.” But Jesus “was a radical, a revolutionary, an avenger, and that’s why he was crucified by the capitalists and imperialists of that time.”

Chávez pointed to the example of the early Christian church, quoting the Biblical account that believers who owned land and other property donated them to the community, “and distribution was made to each as any had need.” For the company of believers “were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.” (Acts 4:32-35)

Roots of Socialism in Venezuela

“Once Fidel [Castro] told me, speaking of Christ, ‘I’m a Christian in social questions.’” Chávez added, “Well, the atheists are welcome. This is not a religious movement.... I’m just searching for its roots.”

Then he pointed to the example of Simón Bolívar, “a pre-socialist thinker,” who believed that society must be based on equality. Among Bolívar’s companions, Simón Rodríguez was a “socialist thinker,” and the Brazilian revolutionary José Ignacio Abreu de Lima was author of “the first book on socialism written in the Americas.”

Chávez also recalled how the pioneer Peruvian socialist, José Carlos Mariátegui, had pointed to the socialist project’s roots in the indigenous societies of America. The indigenous peoples “lived in socialism for centuries,” Chávez said. Naming several aboriginal communities in Venezuela — including that of the Delta Amacuro, “where we won 100% of the vote” — Chávez called them “the bearers of the socialist seed in our land, our nation, our America.” They must be the vanguard, he said, “We are going to relaunch Indo-Venezuelan socialism.”

Referring to all these experiences, Chávez said, “We’re going to take these models to the neighbourhoods, to the housing developments; we’re going to create spaces for socialism.”

Scientific Socialism

Venezuela could not be satisfied with “utopian socialism,” Chávez said. It offered no practical solutions “until Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels launched the *Communist Manifesto*— the thesis of scientific socialism.”

They began to propose solutions based on “the transformation of the economic model” which is “fundamental if we wish to build a true socialism. Therefore we must socialize the economy,”

including the land, and create a “new productive model,” he said. All the “new spaces that we are creating or regaining” will be “nuclei of socialist construction.”

On January 8, Chávez was more explicit: the aim is “social ownership over the strategic sectors of the means of production.”

Barriers to Progress

It is not hard to enumerate the massive obstacles facing Venezuelan workers and farmers along this road. The capitalist profit-making system remains intact — in fact, has had a banner year. The capitalist right wing controls almost all the media and benefits from the sympathy or lethargy of many in the governmental apparatus. The enemies of the revolution stand ready to use violence and dictatorship to impose their will — backed to the hilt by U.S. imperialism.

Although the Bolivarian government’s measures have brought tangible benefits to the poor, poverty remains widespread and profound. Land reform has progressed slowly. Only a minority of workers have stable employment in the legal economy.

And the Bolivarian trade union movement that represents this minority is in disarray, wracked by factional divisions, and has done little to implement the government’s program to expand workers’ control.

But the most immediate barriers impeding further advances towards overturning capitalism in Venezuela lie in the political realm — the state bureaucracy ensconced in the ministries and different levels of government, and a vast layer of careerists operating in the traditional political parties, including pro-Chavist organizations.

Most political parties in Venezuela function as electoral machines dominated by parasitic elements who use them to control and dispense jobs and other favours to their clientele. By launching a new united socialist party, Chávez has made an important move to allow workers and farmers to push these elements aside and position themselves to fight more effectively for their class interests.

Strategy for Socialism

The Bolivarian movement has not developed any blueprint for the transformation of this economy. Chávez’s speech on the new party, however, gives evidence of a strategy for the struggle for socialism based on placing power in the hands of the working people who have beaten back capitalist assaults in each successive confrontation. “We will build it from below, an endogenous socialism,” Chávez said.

If built as Chávez advocates, the new party could solve the central challenge facing the Bolivarian movement: that of linking the worker and farmer base together with their chosen leadership in a cohesive, democratic political movement.

As for the government apparatus, the Bolivarians continue to focus on creating parallel institutions controlled by the worker-farmer ranks. On December 15, Chávez focused on the

Communal Councils (*Consejos Comunales*), of which 16,000 have been organized to coordinate action around the concerns of residents. “They are the key to peoples’ power,” he said, appealing for their extension to every party of the country.

These councils, he said, must “transcend the local framework” and achieve “a sort of regional federation of Communal Councils” that could elect coordinating bodies. On January 8, he went further, projecting the councils as the embryo of a new state.

A united socialist party will be key weapon in the fight to achieve such goals.

Challenge to Socialist Movement

On December 3, Chávez dedicated his election victory “to the Cuban people and to president Fidel Castro, brother, comrade, companion.” The inspiration, guidance, and practical help of the Cuban revolutionaries has been crucial in winning Venezuelan working people to support socialism. Today Venezuela, allied with Cuba, plays a similar role in winning new forces internationally to the goal of socialism.

The outstanding significance of Chávez’s new-party initiative, as of all the Bolivarians’ major struggles of the last couple of years, is that a vision of authentic socialism is taking root. Socialists around the world must ensure that the voice of the Bolivarians is heard and understood heard by rebels and activists everywhere.

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Bolivia's Government Faces Right-Wing Offensive

Popular forces struggle for unity against attacks

By Federico Fuentes

Federico Fuentes is a frequent writer for the Australian socialist newspaper, Green Left Weekly, and maintains the blog Bolivia Rising. He is a member of the Democratic Socialist Perspective, a tendency within the Australian Socialist Alliance.

A chain of events triggered by the passage of a new agrarian reform law, part of Bolivian president Evo Morales' "agrarian revolution" has brought to sharp relief the drive by the right-wing opposition to overthrow Morales' government, even if it means pushing Bolivia into civil war.

On November 28, in front of thousands of cheering campesinos in La Paz, the left-wing president announced that the Senate had managed to pass the law, after three senators broke ranks with the opposition, which has been boycotting the Senate and preventing it from convening. The previous day, Morales had threatened to issue the law as a simple decree to get around the Senate.

This determined move gave the government greater powers to redistribute land that was not performing a "social function." In retaliation, the right-wing opposition launched a new phase in its destabilization campaign, shifting the centre of gravity of the struggle to its home turf. A series of "cabildos" – open town meetings – were convoked for December 15 in the four eastern departments (provinces).

The core of Bolivia's right-wing opposition is the business elites from Santa Cruz, predominantly tied to gas transnationals and large agribusiness, and the U.S. embassy. Their public face is the civic committee of Santa Cruz and the four opposition-controlled governorships of the east.

The largest of these cabildos, held in Santa Cruz, brought around half a million people onto the streets. The meeting resolved to not recognize the new constitution being drafted by the Constituent Assembly if it did not include a form of departmental autonomy which would grant high levels of political, economic, and administrative decentralization to the governorships.

Rising tensions in the East saw clashes in the days leading up to and following the cabildo. Armed fascist youth organized by the Cruceñista [Santa Cruz] Youth Union patrolled the streets, threatening and attacking indigenous people, many of whom support MAS, having migrated east over the last few years in search of employment.

That same day, several thousand people rallied in La Paz and El Alto to condemn the divisive calls by the right and to proclaim themselves in favour of national unity and the process of change being led by Morales.

Conflict shifts to the heart of Bolivia

However it was the calls that day by the governor of Cochabamba, Manfred Reyes Villa, in favour of a new referendum on autonomy, and in support of “independence for Santa Cruz” which swung the site of battle to the heart of Bolivia. Despite attempting to clarify afterwards that he had been wrong in referring to “independence,” his statements – in a department where 64% voted against autonomy in the July 2 nationwide referendum, and where MAS and Morales are particularly strong – triggered a showdown.

Although there was an immediate response by the social movements, the mass mobilizations were deferred until after the New Year break. By January 8, tens of thousands of mostly indigenous campesinos, cocaleros (coca farmers), and water irrigators, together with workers and other social movements had occupied the centre of Cochabamba demanding Reyes Villa resign for not listening to the will of the people. Attacked by the police, protester anger grew as they burnt down part of the building housing the offices of the governorship

Events turned ugly on January 11, when residents from the middle class northern suburbs of Cochabamba, incited by Reyes Villa and the mass media, marched into the centre of the city armed with sticks, golf clubs, and even firearms to confront the campesinos. They broke through police lines and viciously attacked the protestors. During several hours of street clashes over a hundred people were injured – including five who remain in a critical condition – and two were killed.

In response, Evo Morales cut short his international agenda to attend to the growing crisis. He returned on January 12 in his dual capacity as president of the Republic and of the Six Federations of the Tropic of Cochabamba (also known as the Chapare region), a key force in the mobilizations. Although saying the conflict was one between the social movements and the authorities of Cochabamba, he squarely pointed the finger of blame at Reyes Villa, while asking the social movements to contribute to a solution via dialogue and remaining within the law.

“Now I am much more convinced that the indigenous peasant movement represents the moral reserve of humanity,” said Morales. He called on the social movements to reflect and avoid any further violence or revenge attacks. He proposed to rush through a new law to allow a recall referendum on all elected officials, to avoid further confrontations between those who held positions “legally,” but not “legitimately,” in the eyes of the population.

A national crisis?

That same day, a cabildo of the protestors voted to radicalize their actions by cutting off Cochabamba from the rest of the country and vowing not to leave until Reyes Villa resigned. Reyes Villa, fearing for his physical and political future, went into “exile” in Santa Cruz. The Santa Cruz Civic Committee welcomed Reyes Villa with open arms, having already called for a 24-hour stoppage on January 16 to support the besieged governor.

Three days later, a cabildo was convened in El Alto, where residents declared themselves in a “war to the death” until they received the resignation of both Reyes Villa and La Paz governor José Luis Paredes, who had also recently come out in favour of autonomy. They gave Paredes 48 hours to resign or else be forced out, as confrontation and violence threaten to spill out of the city of Cochabamba.

On the other side of the country, the story was different. A rally called for January 15 by the newly formed Popular Civic Committee of Santa Cruz – made up of organizations of the lower classes opposed to the official right wing controlled civic committee – suspended their mobilization, due to threats of violent attacks against them by the Cruceñista Youth Union.

Saturnino Pinto, president of the Popular Civic Committee said that the mobilization would be postponed “until the authorities follow the law and tell us where we can meet without confrontations.”

Reporting on the second cabildo held in Cochabamba on January 16, Pablo Stefanoni noted that the leaders of the key social organizations that had led the demonstrations were now “uncomfortably faced with the determination of the campesinos. They were facing pressure from both sides: the calls from the presidential palace and from their base, each time more radicalized after various days of sleeping in plazas and precarious trade union headquarters.”

In the end they put forward a resolution that, while continuing to call on the prefect to resign and maintaining the “state of emergency,” gave the departmental council – controlled by a MAS majority – a mandate to continue meeting in Reyes Villa’s absence to work out a legal way to remove him. Stefanoni wrote “persistent whistling blocked out the voice of the speaker and threats forced the [departmental] council to meet ‘in order to name a new prefect.’

“But the pressure coming from the government had its effect. Bit by bit the leaders who respond to Evo Morales – especially the coccaleros – began disappearing and the massive presence in the plaza diminished.”

Afterwards, a small group of ultra-radicals decided to proclaim their own new prefect and “revolutionary government” and to enter the governor’s office, only to be easily repelled by the police. By the following day, even the “new” prefect was complaining that he had been abandoned by everyone.

Whilst unrest continues in El Alto, it seems that Morales has been able to stop the right-wing offensive by winning a possible truce, albeit very temporary.

One country, two political projects

No one doubts, however, that the conflict is far from over as these two political projects – that represented by Santa Cruz elite, and that of the indigenous majority, led by Morales – continue to battle for the future of this country, situated in the heart of South America.

With the advent of neoliberalism in Bolivia in 1985, the Santa Cruz elite which had gained economic influence during the previous dictatorships, moved to directly occupy positions in the

state administration. Through the establishment of several pro-oligarchy parties who “fought it out” in Bolivia’s manipulated democracy, they were able to preside over an illusory stability.

However, the resurgence of struggle in 2000 by the indigenous people of the west (Aymara uprising in the altiplano) and centre (Water War of Cochabamba) in 2000, and the rise of the indigenous- and campesino-led Popular Instrument for the Sovereignty of the People – which runs under the registered name of MAS in elections – shattered this stability. The oligarchy’s traditional institutions and political parties become thoroughly discredited.

With the overthrow of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003, these elites were gradually displaced from the positions they traditionally held and lost the direct access they had to decision making at the national level.

Moreover, confronted with an organized indigenous-majority west, hostile to neoliberalism and where support for Morales is overwhelming (polls in December showed 62% support in La Paz, 79% in El Alto), they began to articulate a political bloc, geographically based in the east (where Morales support drops to a modest 35%). First they focused on defence of “autonomy,” later adding “democracy” to put up a better camouflage of their real goals.

Their aim was to solidify their hegemony in the east where the social movements are much weaker and in many cases aligned with the elites, shielding themselves from the encroaching west. Thus emboldened, they would move towards regaining their influence in the west.

The plan has been to confuse the population, projecting an image of instability domestically and internationally, coupled with calls for “international intervention” and stalling, by any means necessary, the “Democratic and Cultural Revolution” initiated by the massive election victory of Evo Morales in December 2005.

By demobilizing and promoting disillusionment among Bolivia’s combative social movements, they hope to create the conditions to bring down Morales and the MAS government.

A key element in the strategy of the right has been to try to paralyze the work of the Constituent Assembly. They have had some success at this. Despite having been convened on August 6, it has yet to resolve its rules of procedure.

Their calls for “autonomy” are aimed at securing control of national resources and wealth for the governorships they control, whilst they wait in the wings to recapture control of the central government. Their kind of “autonomy” would gravely undermine the ability of MAS government to implement its program.

At the same time, by playing up regional divisions and stoking up separatist sentiments with talk of “independence,” they are conjuring up fears of the disintegration of Bolivia.

Part of this project is the designation of Phillip Goldberg as the new U.S. ambassador to Bolivia on October 13. Goldberg’s history includes playing a key role in the break up of the former Yugoslavia, a skill which the U.S. government obviously believes could come in handy in Bolivia.

Clearly the current objective of the right is to overthrow Morales. However, the balkanization of Bolivia, including splitting the eastern departments away from the indigenous west and taking the majority of Bolivia's gas reserves and fertile land with them, cannot be ruled out. If the Santa Cruz elite come to conclude that they have lost all hope on the political level, they could well choose to plunge the country into a civil war, holding out the option of separation of the departments they control from Bolivia.

One reason why the division of the country seems unlikely in the immediate future is the situation in the armed forces. Most commentators agree that any attempt to carve up the country would be opposed, at least at this stage, by the overwhelming majority of the armed forces,

The spectre of separatism, however, could both work in favour or against the indigenous movement and the Morales government. The right wing is also using this fear as a way to gain a stronger foothold in the high command of the military.

Although Morales has been trying to incorporate the armed forces into his project, very few are willing to speculate as to what is happening internally within an army that has throughout its history intervened to back both pro-imperialist and nationalist regimes.

The shape of things to come

This latest push by the opposition has demonstrated its continuing hegemony over large sections of the population in the east, although it has also revealed an emerging, yet still very weak, popular movement amongst the poorer sections in the surroundings of Santa Cruz.

The street presence of the opposition, the concerted media campaign, along with the troubles in the Constituent Assembly, also seem to have swung a section of the urban middle class, who voted for Morales a year ago on the idea that "if a blockader is in government then the blockades will stop," behind the consolidating bloc that claims to defend "democracy" and "autonomy."

However it has also revealed that Bolivia's powerful social movements, who for now are almost entirely behind the Morales government in its democratic and cultural revolution, have not forgotten that their power lies in mass mobilization. They demonstrated this on the streets of Cochabamba and EL Alto.

Part of the political struggle is the need to project a viable and convincing course to defend the territorial integrity of Bolivia and overall social stability. These issues weigh heavily on the minds of middle-class elements and also important sections of the armed forces. They add weight to the need to concentrate on widening the scope of political struggle against the right. The right, well aware of this, seek to avoid political struggle through provocations, street violence, and threats to defy constitutional authority wherever they sense they have the strength to do so.

MAS Senator Antonio Peredo Leigue, writing on January 15, pointed out that "work needs to be done towards the organization and coordination of these movements. The right counts in their

favor these faults; they project their provocations confident of finding a reaction amongst the popular sectors. In this way, they want to justify the conspiracy against the government.”

He adds, “The leadership of Evo Morales has reined in, once again, the danger of a national confrontation. It is necessary that this leadership be recognized in order to halt provocations. In this context, the process of change will advance more decisively and the right will be left isolated. The task of the mobilized people is the deepening of democracy.”

The Bolivian masses have a huge task on their hands, and no one doubts that the big clashes are still to come. As the powerful opposition to the U.S. government continues to grow – led by Cuba and Venezuela, and recently joined by Ecuador and Nicaragua in the expanding Bolivarian axis – the U.S. is looking for how it can counterattack.

The role of Morales as an indigenous president within this alliance, who is consciously reaching out to awakening indigenous movements of the region, is crucially important. The indigenous government in Bolivia is the high-water mark in the struggle for indigenous self-determination in the Americas – the main reason it is so hated and despised by the imperialist powers and why they are determined to crush it.

The current push in Bolivia, perhaps seen as the weak link in this axis, is undoubtedly aimed at smashing this powerful piece of the Bolivarian alliance. The task of all progressives and socialists inside and outside Bolivia is to unite with and defend the Bolivian masses and their government against the attacks of imperialism and its Bolivian agents

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Ecuador's President Calls for Socialist Latin America

by **Duroyan Fertl**

(Green Left Weekly, 19 January 2007) On January 15, Ecuador's new president, Rafael Correa Delgado, was sworn in, promising to build "socialism of the 21st century" to overcome the poverty and instability of the small Andean country.

The previous day, Correa attended an indigenous inauguration ceremony in Zumbahua, the small Andean town where he did volunteer social work in his twenties. The presidents of Venezuela and Bolivia — Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales — were present as special guests.

Correa, a 43-year-old economist, used his inauguration to call for a "citizens' revolution", using wealth to meet social and environmental needs, rather than maintaining the current "perverse system" that has led to over 60% of Ecuador's 13 million people living in poverty and forced more than 3 million to emigrate in search of jobs.

"The long night of neoliberalism is coming to an end", said Correa, "A sovereign, dignified, just and socialist Latin America is beginning to rise."

In a speech laced with the indigenous language Quichua and references to revolutionary figures Simon Bolivar and Che Guevara, Correa called for Latin American integration on the basis of cooperation and complementarity, and called on governments to create regional legislation to protect workers' rights.

Correa's radical program for change has already begun. On January 16, Ecuador signed an energy agreement with Venezuela. Venezuela will refine Ecuadorian crude oil, and invest in developing new refineries there. Ecuador, despite being one of Latin America's largest oil exporters, currently has to import fuel at unfavourable prices.

Correa has also promised to renegotiate contracts with foreign oil companies, in order to free up money for spending on health, education, the environment and housing. The potential benefits for Ecuador are enormous: the oil company Oxy had its contracts cancelled a year ago, and the government has since made US\$1.1 billion from those oilfields alone.

Another priority for Correa is Ecuador's foreign debt, estimated in November last year at over 25% of the country's GDP. Correa has suggested that at least part of the debt may be illegal, and is planning to renegotiate, or possibly default on it. He has also called for an international debt tribunal to prevent the exploitation of debt-ridden countries and has threatened to cut ties with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

On January 17, agriculture minister Carlos Valejo declared the government's intention to redistribute idle arable land. Ecuador's vulnerable agricultural sector was a key issue in mass protests last year against a proposed free-trade agreement with the US. Correa is firmly opposed to such an FTA, preferring to focus on national development and Latin American integration.

The most important part of the new president's platform for change is the promise to convoke a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution to allow the recall of elected officials and greater participation by social movements and community sectors in government, weakening the traditional party system and making his reforms possible.

Correa, whose Alianza PAIS party ran no candidates for the Congress, faces a hostile legislature. His opponents in Congress, which is almost universally regarded to be run by a corrupt and inept "partyocracy", formed a bloc of 76 out of 100 law-makers to oppose Correa's reforms.

Correa threatened to call mass protests and to use his executive powers to bypass the Congress, but on January 12, the second largest party in Congress, the Patriotic Society Party (PSP), led by ex-president Lucio Gutierrez (who was overthrown in 2005), changed sides on the issue, giving Correa a temporary majority.

This was not before Gutierrez had expelled his own wife and another member of Congress from the PSP for supporting Correa's proposal. Neither Correa nor many of the social movements, such as the indigenous federatation CONAIE, trust Gutierrez and the about-face is widely seen as proof of the corruption of the current political system.

Assuming it is approved, there will now be a referendum on March 18 to endorse the initiative, and a Constituent Assembly of 87 members will be elected soon after from provincial, national and immigrant sectors of the population. The assembly will have 180 days to rewrite the constitution.

The task facing Correa is a challenging one. Previous governments that have promised reforms along similar lines have been unable or unwilling to carry them out, making only small reforms in the hope of placating big business and the people alike. In response, mass popular mobilisations, especially by the indigenous movements, have led to the overthrow of the last three elected presidents.

The hope is that Correa has broken the mould. "We're not talking about little reforms, about making things less bad", he said during his inauguration. "Latin America isn't living an era of changes", he explained. "It's living a change of eras."

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Confronting the Climate Change Crisis

Politicians and oil companies are jumping on the green bandwagon, but they have no solutions to a crisis that is rooted in capitalism

By Ian Angus

This month, we've been treated to the bizarre spectacle of George Bush and Stephen Harper each declaring their deep concern about "the serious challenge of global climate change." The U.S. president and Canada's prime minister, both long-time opponents of any action to limit greenhouse gases, now want us to believe that saving the environment has become a top priority of their governments.

Truly, the hypocrisy of capitalist politicians knows no bounds!

They and their corporate masters want to avoid action on climate change, and they have been doing just that for years. Their eagerness to clothe themselves in inappropriate green has everything to do with public relations — and nothing to do with saving the earth.

Denying Science

Knowledgeable scientists agree that climate change is real, and that the main cause is the use of fossil fuels, especially oil, gas, and coal. The earth today is significantly hotter than it was a few decades ago, and the rate of increase is accelerating. If we don't stop it, by the end of this century the planet will be hotter than it has ever been since humans began walking the earth.

Left unchecked, this will have catastrophic impacts on human, animal, and plant life. Crop yields will drop drastically, leading to famine on a broad scale. Hundreds of millions of people will be displaced by droughts in some areas and by rising ocean levels in others. Malaria and cholera epidemics are likely. The impact will be greatest in Asia, Africa, and Latin America — on the peoples whose lives have already been ravaged by imperialism many times over.

But that hasn't stopped corporations and politicians from claiming that they don't have enough information to decide whether the problem exists, let alone what can be done about it. Their denials have been supported by a bevy of climate change deniers who are frequently quoted in media reports on the subject.

A recent report from the Union of Concerned Scientists shows that the apparently large network of deniers is in fact a handful of people who make themselves seem more numerous by working through more than 30 front-groups. ExxonMobil, the world's largest publicly traded company, has been financial backer of all these groups — it paid them millions to "manufacture uncertainty" about climate change.

By no coincidence, ExxonMobil is the largest single corporate producer of greenhouse gases. If ExxonMobil was a country, it would be the sixth-largest source of emissions.

Meanwhile, other corporate and government agencies have been working hard to divert attention away from corporate polluters and onto individuals. They blame individuals for not cutting back, not driving less, not insulating their homes and not using low-power light bulbs. The Canadian government's "One-Tonne Challenge" campaign, and the imposition of a "Congestion Charge" on automobile commuters in London, England, are cases in point: they both say individuals are to blame and should pay the cost of cleaning up the atmosphere.

Obviously conservation is important. But so long as the fossil fuel giants continue business as usual, individual efforts will have very little impact.

The Age of Greenwash

Denying climate change and blaming it on individuals have worked well until now, but such tactics are now losing effectiveness.

The scientific evidence for global warming gets more overpowering every day. On February 2, the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change will release a major report on its causes. Journalists who have seen drafts of the report say that it confirms that most global warming since 1950 has been caused by man-made greenhouse gases, and warns that warming in the next 25 years will be twice as great as in the past century.

More generally, despite the confusion and misinformation, public concern about climate change is growing. Voters and customers want action: polls show that the environment has now passed health care as the number one concern of Canadian voters.

That's why George Bush and Stephen Harper are now demonstratively jumping on the green bandwagon and trying to grab the reins. That's why Bush felt compelled to mention global warming in his State of the Union message.

Even ExxonMobil is on side: the company says it has stopped funding climate-change-denial front groups, and its executives are meeting with environmental groups to discuss proposals for regulating greenhouse gas emissions.

Stephane Dion, recently chosen to lead Canada's Liberal Party, is setting the pace for politicians. While he was Environment Minister, Dion did nothing to stop Canada's greenhouse gas emissions from rising 30%. Now that he is leader of the Official Opposition, he says that he'll make the environment his top priority if he wins the next federal election.

Dion's real position on stopping greenhouse gas emissions was revealed in his response to expansion of the Alberta Tar Sands project. Extracting oil from tar sands generates two-and-a-half times as much greenhouse gas as conventional oil production. The Alberta Tar Sands project is the largest single reason why Canada's emissions have risen drastically since this country signed the Kyoto Accord. But when asked what he would do about it in May 2005, Dion shrugged: "There is no minister of the environment on earth who can stop this from going forward, because there is too much money in it."

That's the way it is in the age of greenwash — lots of talk about climate change, but no action that would interfere with the inalienable right of corporations to make money. Profits always come first, no matter how green the capitalist politicians claim to be.

Pollution Rights for Sale

In fact, there are major efforts under way to convince those who are concerned about climate that the solution is to increase the polluters' profits.

Last year, the British government appointed leading economist Nicholas Stern to study the problem of climate change. His report identified the source of the problem:

“GHG emissions are an externality; in other words, our emissions affect the lives of others. When people do not pay for the consequences of their actions we have market failure. This is the greatest market failure the world has seen.”

“Externality” is a term capitalist economists use when capitalist corporations don't pay for the damage they cause. Pollution is the perfect example — individual corporations pollute, but society as a whole bears the cost. Adam Smith's invisible hand, which supposedly ensures the best of all possible worlds, doesn't work on externalities.

Some naïve observers might conclude that this means we should stop relying on markets, but not Nicolas Stern, and not most policy makers. Their solution to market failure is — create more markets!

The most widely proposed “market solution” to climate change — the one that is enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol — is to set goals for emission reduction, and then put a monetary value on the right to pollute.

If a corporation decides it is too expensive to cut emissions, it can buy pollution credits from some other company, or it can fund green projects in the Third World. Ontario Hydro, for example, might keep using coal-fired power plants if it plants enough trees in India or Brazil.

George Monbiot has compared this to the medieval practice of selling indulgences. If you were rich and you committed murder or incest or whatever, the Church would sell you forgiveness for a fixed price per sin. You didn't have to stop sinning — so long as you paid the price, the Church would guarantee your admission to heaven.

The emissions trading schemes are actually worse than that. It's as though the Church just gave every sinner a stack of Get Out Of Hell Free cards — and those who don't sin enough to use them all could then sell them to others who want to sin more.

Carbon Trading, a report published by Sweden's Dag Hammerskold Foundation, shows not only that emissions trading doesn't work, but that it actually makes things worse, by delaying practical action to reduce emissions by the biggest corporate offenders. What's more, since there is no practical method of measuring the results of emissions trading, the entire process is subject

to massive fraud. Emissions trading has produced huge windfalls for the polluters — it instantly increases their assets, and does little to reduce emissions.

Another “market-driven” approach proposes levying taxes levied on corporate greenhouse gas emissions. But if the “carbon taxes” are too low, they won’t stop emissions — and if they are high enough, corporations will shift their operations to countries that don’t interfere with business-as-usual. In any event, it is very unlikely that capitalist politicians will actually impose taxes that would force their corporate backers to make real changes.

As Australian writer Dick Nichols has pointed out, anyone who argues that markets can overcome climate change has to answer difficult questions:

“Embracing capitalism — no matter how green the vision put forward — saddles pro-market environmentalists with a difficult case for the defence. They have to explain exactly how a system that has consumed more resources and energy in the last 50 years than all previous human civilization can be made to stabilize and then reduce its rate of resource depletion and pollution emission. How can this monstrously wasteful, poisonous, and unequal economic system actually be made to introduce the technologies, consumption patterns and radical income redistribution, without which all talk of sustainability is a sick joke?” (Environment, Capitalism and Socialism)

No Capitalist Solution

Any reasonable person must eventually ask why capitalists and their governments seek to avoid effective action on climate change. Everyone, including capitalists and politicians, will be affected. Nicholas Stern estimates that the world economy will shrink by 20% if we don’t act. So why don’t the people in power do something?

The answer is that the problem is rooted in the very nature of capitalist society, which is made up of thousands of corporations, all competing for investment and for profits. There is no “social interest” in capitalism — only thousands of separate interests that compete with each other.

If a company decides to invest heavily in cutting emissions, its profits will go down. Investors will move their capital into more profitable investments. Eventually the green company will go out of business.

The fundamental law of capitalism is “Grow or Die.” Anarchic, unplanned growth isn’t an accident, or an externality, or a market failure. It is the nature of the beast.

Experts believe that stabilizing climate change will require a 70% or greater reduction in CO₂ emissions in the next 20 to 30 years – and that will require a radical reduction in the use of fossil fuels. At least three major barriers militate against capitalism achieving that goal.

- **Changing from fossil fuels to other energy sources will require massive spending.** In the near-term this will be non-profitable investment, in an economy that cannot function without profit.

- **The CO2 reductions must be global.** Air and water don't stop at borders. So long as capitalism remains the world's dominant economic system, positive changes in individual countries will be undermined by countermoves in other countries seeking competitive advantage.
- **The change must be all-encompassing.** Unlike previous anti-pollution campaigns that focused on single industries, or specific chemicals such as DDT, stopping greenhouse gases will require wrenching change to every part of the economy. Restructuring on such an enormous scale is almost certainly impossible in a capitalist framework — and any attempt to make it happen will meet intense resistance.

Only an economy that is organized for human needs, not profit, has any chance of slowing climate change and reversing the damage that's already been done. Only democratic socialist planning can overcome the problems caused by capitalist anarchy.

Fighting for Change

But that doesn't mean we should wait for socialism to challenge the polluters. On the contrary, we can and must fight for change today — it's possible to win important gains, and building a movement to stop climate change can be an important part of building a movement for socialism.

A radical movement against climate change can be built around demands such as these:

- Establish and enforce rapid mandatory reductions in CO2 emissions: real reductions, not phony trading plans.
- Make the corporations that produce greenhouse gases pay the full cost of cutting emissions.
- End all subsidies to fossil fuel producers.
- Redirect the billions now being spent on wars and debt into public transit, into retrofitting homes and offices for energy efficiency, and into renewable energy projects.

Corporations and conservative union leaders (including one-time radical Buzz Hargrove of the Canadian Auto Workers union) play on the fear of job losses to convince workers to oppose action to protect the environment. All calls for restructuring industry must be coupled with opposition to layoffs. Workers must have access to retraining and relocation at the corporation's expense, at full union pay.

The movement must pay particular attention on the needs of the Third World. As ecology activist Tom Athanasiou has written, we must “spare the South from any compulsion to make an impossible choice between climate protection on the one hand and ‘development’ on the other.” The people of the Third World have suffered centuries of poverty while their countries were plundered to enrich the imperialist powers. Now they are the hardest hit victims of climate change. They are angered, and rightly so, by any suggestion that they should now be forced to

forego economic growth in order to solve a problem that was created by their exploiters in the North.

An effective climate change program will support the battles in the Third World against imperialist domination and distortion of their economies. It will oppose the export of polluting industries to the global south, support campaigns for land reform and to redirect agriculture to meet local needs, not export to the north. We must demand that our governments offer every possible form of practical assistance to assist Third World countries to find and implement developmental programs that are consistent with world environmental requirements.

The example of Cuba, a poor country with limited resources, shows what can be done. The World Wildlife Fund recently identified Cuba as the only country in the world that meets the requirements of sustainable development. Cuba achieved that while its economy was growing more than twice as fast as the Latin American average, so the problem isn't growth — it is capitalist growth.

Humanity's Choice

In 1918, in the midst of the most horrible war that the world had ever seen, the great German socialist leader Rosa Luxemburg wrote that the choice facing the world was "Socialism or Barbarism."

As we know, socialism did not triumph in the 20th Century. Instead we had a century of wars and genocide — the very barbarism that Rosa Luxemburg feared.

Today we face that choice in a new and even more horrible form. Prominent U.S. environmentalist Ross Gelbspan poses the issue in stark terms:

"A major discontinuity is inevitable. The collective life we have lived as a species for thousands of years will not continue long into the future. We will either see the fabric of civilization unravel under the onslaught of an increasingly unstable climate — or else we will use the construction of a new global energy infrastructure to begin to forge a new set of global relationships." (Boiling Point, p. 17)

Gelbspan, like many environmentalists, pins his hopes on persuading capitalism's decision makers that ending climate change is a "moral imperative." Past experience, and an understanding of the imperatives of capitalism, show that to be a vain hope.

Instead, echoing Marx and Engels and Luxemburg, we must say that humanity's choice in the 21st Century is *Ecosocialism or Barbarism*.

There is no third way.

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