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Venezuela: the capitalist offensive Has socialism failed?

An international campaign by capitalist politicians and media has been unleashed against president Maduro's Venezuelan government to try to discredit the idea of socialism, with Venezuela presented as 'another socialist failure'. Such charges from the mouths of the political representatives of the ruling 1% are dripping in hypocrisy. Nonetheless, socialists need to draw a balance sheet of the current devastating crisis in Venezuela in order to draw crucial lessons and to answer the propaganda of the defenders of capitalism.

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There is a catastrophic economic, social and political crisis in Venezuela. This has developed not because of a failure of socialism but as a consequence of the failure to break conclusively with capitalism and introduce a democratic, socialist, planned economy.

The tragedy of the current situation is that the opportunity to break with capitalism did exist in Venezuela and some other Latin American countries, especially Bolivia and Ecuador. The opportunity was lost. The crisis has allowed the counter-revolution to advance. It has also resulted in a rolling back of the reforms introduced by Hugo Chávez especially after 2002.

Chávez swept to power in 1998 promising a 'Bolivarian revolution'. What this meant was unclear but he threatened to take measures against the ruling class and introduce some significant although limited reforms to bring about more 'social justice and equality'.

Even this provoked the wrath of the ruling class and US imperialism. A military coup was attempted in 2002 and later the same year a bosses' 'lockout' whose main objective was to paralyse production. Both collapsed as the result of a spontaneous mass mobilisation.

Under the pressure of the movement, Chávez established the so-called 'Misiones'. These were very positive in the area of health and public education, opening these areas up to millions for the first time. These and other economic measures at this time resulted in an increase in living standards for the workers and especially the most oppressed. Enthused by these developments workers demanded nationalisation and workers'

control and at the same time occupied some important companies.

Chávez announced the nationalisation of some companies although, in the main, these were undertaken by buying shares in these companies. However, there was never a serious plan to extend the nationalisations to the decisive sectors of the economy. Even in those companies where it was accepted that the workers would elect Juntas Directivas (management councils), genuine workers' control was never allowed and government functionaries ended up running the companies. Many of these resulted in production being paralysed and they adopted capitalist, anti-worker policies similar to those adopted in the private sector.

Little remains of the reforms introduced by the Chávez government. Venezuela is now in the midst of what some economists dub the worst economic crisis in its history. Inflation has soared to over 500% and unemployment hovers officially around 20%. Shortages of medical supplies, food and every other item pervade the economy. This has resulted in hunger and an explosion of illnesses arising from dietary deficiency.

Alongside the economic disaster there is a social catastrophe. The failure of the Chavista movement to solve Venezuela's notorious crime and violence has plunged to new depths. In 2016, there were 28,479 violent deaths, a murder rate of 91.8 per 100,000 residents! This makes Venezuela the second most violent country outside an open warzone, only surpassed by El Salvador. There is now an element of a 'failed state' such is the degree of social disintegration.

Powerful vested interests

While capitalism has not been broken in Venezuela there has been a change in the makeup of the capitalist class. Although the traditional elite remains, a new wing of the capitalist class has emerged, the so-called 'Boliburguesia' who made a fortune on the back of the revolutionary movement.

This Boliburguesia is totally enmeshed with the Maduro-led government. It is the inevitable result of trying to maintain a capitalist state and private ownership of decisive sectors of the economy. Here, there is more than echo of what has happened to the African National Congress in South Africa. Following the collapse of the apartheid system a new layer of



Hugo Chavez & Nicolás Maduro

the upper-middle class and capitalists developed from within the ANC.

Even at the height of the revolutionary movement everything centred on Chávez as an individual. Even with the best of intentions, one person cannot carry through the socialist revolution. It requires the active, mass participation of the working class.

In Venezuela, socialists are confronted with an extremely complex situation arising from a failure to complete the socialist revolution and break with capitalism. It has provoked much discussion and debate, including among the revolutionary left. There can be no question of socialists supporting the capitalist reactionary opposition with the support of imperialism and international capitalism. At the same time, it is necessary to oppose the policies, programme and methods of the Maduro government. The aim must be to defeat the reactionary right-wing and capitalism, the bureaucracy and Boliburguesia, and to build a party and movement with a programme to achieve the socialist revolution.

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