Venezuela: 21st century socialism faces 20th century coup

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Of course, socialists and revolutionaries in Venezuela and worldwide should oppose the counterrevolutionary forces trying to overthrow Maduro and the PSUV, despite all the disastrous errors and unjustified repressions they have committed. A victory for the misnamed Coalition for Democratic Unity, MUD, will unleash a far greater attack on the social and democratic gains of the masses. But support against reaction should not mean support for either the threadbare strategy of Chávez or the policies of Maduro.

Constituent Assembly

Maduro has attempted to outmanoeuvre the opposition by convening a Constituent Assembly, which has the power to overrule the National Assembly. He hopes thereby to reclaim the ?democratic? legitimacy lost to the MUD after they won a big majority in the last Assembly elections. He is evoking the Constituent Assemblies elected under Chavez, which enacted sweeping reforms that significantly shifted rights and political power towards Venezuela?s working class, rural poor and indigenous peoples.

However, by leaving the greater part of the economy in the hands of the Venezuelan and international capitalist class and leaving the bourgeois state intact, the possibility of a counterrevolution, whether ?legal? and parliamentary, or military and dictatorial, remained. Indeed, it became inevitable the moment a serious economic crisis undermined the material basis of Chavismo; Venezuela?s oil wealth.

While large numbers of urban workers and supporters of the regime participated in the Constituent Assembly election, the massive abstentionism and the conditions of political and social breakdown make this Assembly a pale imitation of previous incarnations.

Fundamentally, it is an attempt by Maduro to overcome the effective dual power of an elected presidency, co-existing and competing with an opposition-dominated parliament, by summoning into existence a higher democratic body.
It is incapable of resolving the crisis in favour of the working class, since it is not representative of the popular masses, but in fact a tool of the nexus of government officials, PSUV bureaucrats and the newly enriched bourgeois running ‘nationalised’ enterprises.

The reality is that its purpose, far from deepening the gains of the Chavez era, is to give an after-the-event legal basis for the near total eradication of those gains, which began even during the later period of Chavez’s presidency, and which massively escalated under his chosen successor, Maduro.

In fact, prolongation of the agony is exactly what Maduro intends, hoping the Assembly, which has voted itself a two-year mandate, will split his opposition between the hardliners pushing for the overthrow of his regime, and those elements of the democratically elected opposition among city and regional governors, who want to participate in forthcoming elections.

The Assembly was not elected in conditions of free debate and contested parties, but rather regroups those who are essentially committed to defending the Maduro-PSUV regime. While it contains members critical of the government, it is not in fact a sovereign body, whose delegates command the loyalty of significant sectors of the urban working class and rural poor, and through that claim the mandate to make decisions which will be carried out. This Assembly can only carry out its decrees with the cooperation of the repressive state apparatus; the police, army and secret services which, for now, remains loyal to Maduro and the PSUV.

Counter-revolution
The opposition recognise that a military coup would be likely to split the army and, if it did, this could still provoke the working class to block them in the streets. Their great fear is that, unlike in 2002, this might even lead on to the total disintegration of the state’s apparatus of repression. Then a real dual power, not so different from February 1917, would probably emerge. The Venezuelan bourgeoisie and their backers in Donald Trump’s White House are unwilling to risk this. Instead, they have prepared for a ?democratic? overthrow straight out of the CIA’s Colour Revolution playbook.

Uniting the disparate Venezuelan opposition around a ?democratic? strategy did not come easily to venal right wing politicians, used to ruling as of right and treating the people, especially the indigenous and mixed-race population, as their serfs, and living parasitically off the proceeds of auctioning its natural resources and labour to foreign imperialists.

But their unity was aided by the policy and structure of the Bolivarian revolution, which existed in an uneasy alliance with sections of capital that it refused to expropriate, hoping these ?patriotic capitalists? could be won over, if not ideologically, then materially, by allowing them to share in the profits of the booming oil industry.

This ?compromise? between different classes, typical of left populist or social-democratic governments, was bound to break down once the global crisis hit Venezuela. Once the oil revenue could not finance either the social programmes or the rake-off by the swollen Bolivarian bureaucracy, the regime aimed to maintain them by devaluing the currency and incurring greater and greater foreign debts.

Since 2013, the IMF estimates that the country’s GDP has shrunk by 35 per cent, a sharper contraction than the US economy experienced between 1929 and 1933. Hunger has become a widespread phenomenon, not only, or primarily, as a result of food shortages, but because of speculation, hoarding and an expanding black market.

An overthrow of the government by the right wing would not only be a defeat for Maduro and his circle but, above all, for the Venezuelan masses. Like the Popular Front in Spain in 1936-39, or the Allende government in Chile in 1970-73, Maduro’s is a regime of crisis in the midst of a terrible economic decline, political chaos and the potential of an armed class struggle. For the masses, Maduro will either be overthrown by a pro-imperialist counter-revolution or he will have to be replaced by a workers’ government capable of expropriating the bourgeoisie and establishing a workers’ state.

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