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Venezuela: 'When the working class roars, capitalists tremble'

By Federico Fuentes

From Green Left Weekly, May 30, 2009

Addressing the 400-strong May 21 workshop with workers from the industrial heartland of Guayana, dedicated to the "socialist transformation of basic industry", Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez noted with satisfaction the outcomes of discussions: "I can see, sense and feel the roar of the working class."

"When the working class roars, the capitalists tremble", he said.

Chavez announced plans to implement a series of radical measures, largely drawn from proposals coming from the workers' discussion that day.

The workers greeted each of Chavez's announcements with roars of approval, chanting "This is how you govern!"

Chavez said: "The proposals made have emerged from the depths of the working class. I did not come here to tell you what to do! It is you who are proposing this."

Nationalisation and workers' control

To the cheers of the workers, Chavez announced the nationalisation of six iron briquette, ceramics and steel companies, one after the other.

He said this started "a process of nationalisations" aimed at creating an integrated basic industry complex as part of building socialism.

Chavez also said it was necessary for there to be workers' control along "the entire productive chain." Plans for the industrial complex had to be "nourished with the ideas of the working class."

Throughout the day, workers from local steel, aluminum and iron companies raised demands for greater worker participation in managing production, more nationalisations, and the need to sack corrupt and counterrevolutionary managers.

The workers were affiliated to the Socialist Workers' Force (FST), which organises unionists in the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV — the mass revolutionary party led by Chavez).

Saying this new phase would have to be “assumed with responsibility”, Chavez called on the workers to wage an all-out struggle against the “mafias” rife in the management of state companies.

Chavez said he would approve a new law to allow workers to elect state company managers.

“Every factory should be a school, in order, as Che said, to create not only briquettes and sheets and steel and aluminium, but also, above all, new men and women, a new society, a socialist society”, he said.

Chavez also called for workers to organise an armed militia. Worker battalions in each factory should be equipped with weapons “in case anyone makes the mistake of messing with us.”

Post-referendum offensive

These moves are part of a push to deepen the Venezuelan revolution after the February 15 referendum that voted to remove restrictions on the number of terms public officials could stand for election.

At stake was the future of the revolution. Its central leader, Chavez, was unable to stand for re-election in 2012 under pre-existing regulation limiting a president to two terms.

The referendum initiative followed the November regional elections, in which the PSUV won a majority of governorships and mayoralties, yet lost some key states to the right-wing opposition.

The opposition used newly won offices to launch an assault on grassroots organisations and the government's pro-poor social programs.

The referendum was part of a counter-offensive to strengthen the organisation of the revolutionary forces and win another mandate for the revolution's radical program.

As part of the campaign, around 100,000 “Yes committees” were organised in factories and communities across the country. The “Yes” campaign, which won nearly 55% or 6.3 million votes, was a decisive mandate to deepen the revolution.

The campaign raised the level of organisation among the revolution's base — workers, students, peasants, the urban poor and other sectors.

After the referendum, Chavez called for the restructuring of the PSUV. The Yes committees were to be converted into “socialist committees” as grassroots units of the party.

Special emphasis was put on strengthening the social fronts.

In early May, Chavez reshuffled the PSUV regional vice-presidents, appointing those seen as his closest collaborators.

Attacks on capital

With this momentum, the government gave clear signals of how it intended to fight the global economic crisis and falling oil prices.

Rather than a pact with the capitalist class, as some within the revolutionary movement had called for, Chavez launched an offensive — with state intervention into, and in some cases expropriation of, capitalist firms.

This followed previous nationalisations in oil, steel, telecommunications, electricity, and other industries. This is part of ensuring state ownership over strategic sectors of the economy, to direct such sectors towards social needs.

Rice-producing factories owned by Polar, Venezuela's largest company, were temporarily taken over by the military in February after it was found the company was deliberately evading government-imposed price controls.

Under Venezuelan law, food companies are obliged to direct 70% of production towards selected products at a set price. This is to ensure enough affordable food is available to the poor.

Venezuelanalysis.com said on March 11: "During a recent surge in land reform measures, Venezuela's National Institute of Lands (INTI) [took] public ownership of more than 5000 hectares of land claimed by wealthy families and multi-national corporations."

INTI said it would review tens of thousands more hectares as part of its drive to ensure fertile land is directed towards food production for social needs, rather than corporate profits.

On May 7, the National Assembly passed a law ensuring state control over a range of activities connected to the oil industry, previously run by multinationals.

The next day, "the government expropriated 300 boats, 30 barges, 39 terminals and docks, 5 dams and 13 workshops on Lake Maracaibo, where there are large crude oil reserves", a May 9 Venezuelanalysis.com article said.

On May 20, it nationalised a gas compression plant in the eastern state of Monagas under the same law.

Five days before, the government took over a pasta processing plant owned by US multinational Cargill after government inspectors found it was not producing price-regulated pasta as required.

Food vice minister Rafael Coronado said that after the 90-day intervention period, inspectors "together with the workers, the communal councils" would decide what to do with the company.

Revitalised working class

On April 30, announcing plans to expropriate the La Gaviota sardine processing plant, Chavez told a gathering of workers that "wherever you see a private company, a capitalist company that is exploiting the workers and is not complying with the laws, that is hoarding, denounce it, because the government is willing to intervene."

La Gaviota had been shut for two and a half months by workers' protests demanding the boss comply with the collective contract.

The same day, the government and workers took over the Cariaco sugar processing plant, the scene of similar protests.

Some of the companies Chavez said would be nationalised on May 21 have also faced industrial disputes.

Chavez had previously threatened to nationalise Ceramicas Carabobo if the bosses refused to come to an agreement with the workforce. Workers at Matesi had called for the company be nationalised due to the unwillingness of management to sign a fair collective contract.

Matesi and Tavsa were part of the previously state-owned steel production complex, Sidor, before being sold off separately in the 1990s to Techint, an Argentine company.

After a 15-month dispute over the signing of a collective contract, the government nationalised Sidor, which was majority owned by Techint, decrying the "colonialist mentality" of the bosses overseeing super-exploitative conditions.

However, in Matesi and Tavsa, negotiations over collective contracts continued. Inspired by the Sidor example, where a collective contract was signed after nationalisation, Matesi workers demanded their factory also be nationalised.

This increase in industrial militancy has resulted in a number of factory occupations. This includes the Tachira-based coffee processing plant Cafea, which was closed by its bosses.

Its workforce, together with unions and the local community, have occupied the plant and are demanding it be nationalised.

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Uniting the Socialist Left: the Australian Experience

An interview with Peter Boyle

Peter Boyle is National Secretary of the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP), a Marxist tendency in the Socialist Alliance in Australia. He was interviewed by Socialist Voice co-editor Roger Annis.

SV: The Australian left founded a project of left unity and activism in 2001. Can you describe the early years of that project and what it achieved?

PB: The Socialist Alliance was formed in 2001 on the back of great optimism about the prospects for left revival in the wake of the rise of a movement at that time against capitalist globalization. Some 20,000 people had participated in a three-day long blockade of a summit of the World Economic Forum in Melbourne the previous year. That was Australia's "Seattle" [1] and it was followed up on May 1, 2001 with mass blockades of the stock exchanges in all the capital cities of the country.

The formation of the Socialist Alliance was just one of a number of initiatives at the time to take this political momentum forward. While it has not had a smooth road since then, the Socialist Alliance is the only one of these initiatives surviving today in Australia. Regroupment projects inspired by anarchist ideology and attempts to create local social forums all proved short-lived.

The Socialist Alliance experience has been shaped by the ebbs and flows of the social movements. It became clear after the forward momentum of the post-Seattle anti-capitalist movement was cut off – after the failure of the global mass movements to stop the 2003 invasion of Iraq – that we were overoptimistic in 2001. We have seen movement retreats since then. But there have been some advances, too.

We should also see the connections between the global wave of anti-capitalist sentiment a decade ago and the new rise of anti-capitalist sentiment today: one builds on the other.

SV: What political forces initiated Socialist Alliance, and what new forces have been won to it?

PB: The Socialist Alliance was initiated by the Democratic Socialist Party (the predecessor to the Democratic Socialist Perspective of today) and the International Socialist Organisation. A handful of smaller left groups joined in. Other left groups, such as the Communist Party of Australia and Socialist Alternative, were invited but declined to join the Alliance.

The groups that did join the Alliance agreed on a common political platform focused on immediate class struggle responses to neo-liberalism. It was also explicitly socialist. We agreed not to make the historical and theoretical differences between the groups a barrier to working together around what we agreed on. At the same time, the Socialist Alliance created forums for ongoing public discussion and debate.

The basic idea was that we didn't have to resolve all the ideological and historical disputes that divided the various factions of the left *before* agreeing to organize together on a fighting program against capitalist attacks and for socialist solutions to the urgent problems society faces today. Indeed, we were more likely to resolve these differences *after* we had gone through an extended experience of working together around what we agreed on – which was substantial.

Stress on inclusivity

We agreed on a basic structure and constitution which put the emphasis on inclusivity. As the biggest of the groups that founded the Alliance, the DSP made concessions which restricted itself to a minority vote on leadership bodies and in conferences. We saw this as an interim confidence-building measure.

The unprecedented unity of these left groups, which until then had spent lots of energy criticizing each other, made a significant impact on the much broader layer of left activists who had not joined any of the pre-existing socialist groups. Hundreds of them joined the Socialist Alliance, quickly becoming the majority of its members. Among those who joined were a number of militant trade unionists.

These included shop-floor delegates as well as a few elected leaders of militant unions. One of these leaders was Craig Johnston, the former Victorian state secretary of the powerful manufacturing workers union. Craig was later jailed for several months [2] for leading militant industrial action and lost his old leadership position. He remains an active delegate in the construction industry and is still a proud member of the Alliance.

The formation of the Socialist Alliance was preceded by a sequence of political collaborations of the militant trade unions with the radical left between 1998 to 2001. These occurred in the state of Victoria in particular, but also in the state of Western Australia. They included militant mass picketing against the Liberal-National government's failed attempt to destroy the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) in the late 1990s, and the anti-globalization protests mentioned above.

These were political collaborations that extended outside industrial struggles. They posed the challenge of building a common political party.

Every national conference of the Socialist Alliance since its formation has been attended by leading militant leaders in the trade union movement, some of whom are Alliance members and others are still in the Labor party or not in any party. A number of these conferences have had their venues paid for by militant unions, and the Alliance also received the first public donations by unions to a socialist organization in decades.

Indigenous Struggle

Sam Watson, a respected and militant leader in the Aboriginal community also joined the Alliance, and remains its spokesperson on Indigenous affairs. He has stood as a Socialist Alliance candidate in state and national parliamentary elections. Since then several other leading Aboriginal activists have also joined the Alliance.

The Indigenous struggle is very important in Australian politics because the social legacy of the colonial dispossession of the Aboriginal people is horrible. Aboriginal people suffer racism, extreme economic marginalization and Third World health and housing conditions. This in a one of the richest countries in the world. The indigenous struggle has massive moral weight and points to an alternative way of living based on sharing and working with nature.

Solidarity with the aboriginal rights struggle has an added urgency ever since the adoption by the federal government in 2007 of “emergency” legislation, known as the “Intervention,” which authorizes police and social agencies to intervene with draconian powers against the political, social and communal rights of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. This attack continues under the newly elected Labor Party government and is being extended into other states in the country.

Apart from movement leaders, a number of left-wing intellectuals also joined the Alliance. These included one of Australia’s most prolific Marxist historians, Humphrey McQueen.

A number of former Labor party members, former Communist Party members and a few former Greens members, including one former state secretary of the Greens, also joined the Socialist Alliance.

Test for left groupings

This was an important opening for the left in Australia, which was (and remains) small and relatively isolated in the labour movement. Would the left seize this as a chance to build a multi-tendency socialist party with a significant connection to the labour movement and other key social movements? This was clearly the wish of the large majority of Alliance members who were not members of any of the founding affiliate groups, and the DSP agreed with them. However, all the other affiliated revolutionary socialist groups disagreed. Each thought their own “correct” programs would be liquidated if they built the Alliance as our common party. They could conceive of the Alliance only as a site for their “real” revolutionary parties to intervene in or, at best, as a “united front of a special kind.”

This view, which is sectarian because it spurned a chance to unite politically with a broader layer of left leadership in the movements, was rejected by the majority of Alliance members in at least three national conferences in a row (in a situation where the DSP restricted its representation in both delegates and elected leadership bodies).

SV: Some groups and individuals who were a part of the founding of the Socialist Alliance or of its early years then departed. Were their departures justified, and did they end the project?

PB: Their departures were not justified and these departures did not kill off the Socialist Alliance.

By the Socialist Alliance’s May 2005 national conference, it was clear that all the other revolutionary groups affiliated to the Alliance were opposed to taking the Alliance forward. At most they were willing to participate in the Alliance as a loose electoral front in which a minority retained veto powers by right of their group affiliate status. They began to pull back even the

relatively modest resources they put into the Alliance. By 2007, all the founding affiliates aside from the DSP and Resistance, a youth organization allied to the DSP, had formally left the Alliance.

Also in 2005, a minority emerged in the DSP which essentially agreed with the sectarian approach of other affiliates who opposed building the Socialist Alliance as a new multi-tendency socialist party.

The DSP majority decided that it was be wrong to abandon the Socialist Alliance, arguing that the large majority of people who had joined and were not members of the founding affiliate groups still saw the Alliance as their party and that the Alliance had won a modest but significant broader recognition and respect in the labour movement.

The DSP then underwent a protracted three-year-long internal faction fight, which took significant energy away from building the Socialist Alliance. But through all this the majority of the non-affiliate group membership of the Socialist Alliance continued to see the Alliance as their party. Craig Johnson and Sam Watson are still members, as are most of the militant trade union shop-floor delegates and social movement activists.

Others have joined the Socialist Alliance since. A group of Sudanese communists affiliated to the Alliance last year. They produce *Green Left Weekly*'s Arabic-language supplement (a significant gain, as Arabic is one of the major minority language groups in Australia today).[3] A prominent Sinhalese public defender of Tamil rights in Sri Lanka has joined, as have some Salvadoran community supporters of the FMLN. And there is a small but steady stream of former Labor party members.

Continued growth

The majority of the members of the Socialist Alliance are still not members of any affiliate group. So the confidence of the DSP majority in the need to keep building the Socialist Alliance has been confirmed. The Alliance is the biggest socialist organization in the country, and it is continuing to regroup the left in a modest but nevertheless significant degree.

The groups that left the Alliance did so despite being able to agree on a common political platform and despite years of common experience working effectively together in the trade union and other social movements. This is the amazing part of our experience, and it should not be missed. Between 2001 and 2005, the Alliance proved that the fractious left could work together and that in doing so it could become more effective.

But it also showed us that the political will to do so has to be there as well. The various left groups that walked out of the Socialist Alliance can work together in the future if they have the will to do so. Everyone in the left has to confront the following questions sooner or later. Are you serious about your socialism? And what is more important – preserving many micro-parties, each defending its programmatic shibboleths and the ordained leadership role this is supposed to give them, or struggling to win real leadership authority in a bigger, broader and more effective party of left regroupment?

By and large, the Australian Greens party still claim most of the progressive vote in this country. This has discouraged smaller socialist groups from staying in the Socialist Alliance, at least to participate in elections. The fact is that the Socialist Alliance has usually struggled to get more than 1.5% in elections, though in local elections in NSW and Victoria last year, Alliance candidates received votes from 4.5% to as high as 18.9%.

Under increasingly draconian/exclusive electoral registration regulations, the relative breadth of the Socialist Alliance made it possible to get the word “socialist” onto ballot papers in most states/territories and nationally for the first time in decades. Our modest election campaigns also raised the profile of socialism.

Each one of the alphabet soup of small socialist groups say they’ll be in a new left party if what is on offer is a new *mass* party. They’d be in such a party even if its politics was reformist or liberal. The Socialist Alliance is not a mass party, but it is an opportunity to build a bigger party around a class struggle program, like that of the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France [4]. I don’t think the left should pass up on what we have achieved to date.

SV: What role did the Alliance play in last year’s federal election that saw the Labor Party returned to power?

PB: A major reason why the Alliance continues to hold the loyalty of forces broader than the smaller socialist groups is that it played an active role in building a mass fightback against a set of draconian anti-union and anti-worker laws introduced by the former Liberal-National federal government. These were laws that threatened to smash rights won by the labour movement over the last century and it was clear that the previous government had the will and the numbers in parliament to push them through.

The left had two choices at that point. It could retreat, circle the wagons around the revolutionary program (or rather their umpteen variations of it) and survive as little socialist groups living off a few idealistic youth recruits from the campuses. Or it could try and build the best possible mass fightback in the labour movement and continue with left regroupment.

We had this discussion in the DSP and in the Socialist Alliance, and a majority of members were in favour of fighting for the best mass resistance possible. Even if a fight could not stop these laws from being passed, a workers’ movement that put up a mass fightback would come out with the greatest strength to fight again another day.

In May 2005, alongside the Socialist Alliance national conference, we initiated a broader gathering of militant trade unionists called the Fightback Conference. [5] It was a powerful gathering, as all the affiliate groups at the time acknowledged.

The militant section was a minority in the trade union movement at that time, as it is now, but it resolved to fight. First, it won mass support among union delegates in the state of Victoria, initially for a mass response to the anti-worker laws which were outrageously named “Work Choices” by the Liberal-National government.

Mass actions for union rights

The first mass action against Work Choices took place in June, 2005. Some 350,000 workers mobilized around the country and did so against the wishes of the top trade union leadership, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). The ACTU leadership had decided that industrial and street action would put off voters and so the trade unions should wage the fight through multi-million dollar television advertisements instead.

But after trade unions in Victoria, Queensland, and Western Australia decided to break from this approach, the ACTU began to crumble. In the state of New South Wales, a panicked union leadership called mass delegate meetings to try and ram through the ACTU's "clever tactics" advertising perspective. But to their horror, the delegates voted for mass action. The Socialist Alliance was blamed for taking over these meetings. We wish we had had the strength to do that. In fact, this was a largely spontaneous expression of rank-and-file wishes.

The second national mobilization took place in November 2005. This time the ACTU backed the call-out and regained control of most of the platforms, though militant unionists still featured in some cities and led the platforms in a couple of regional cities. About 650,000 workers mobilized in what was the biggest single workers' movement mobilization in Australian history.

There were more mass mobilizations in the next two years, and although the anti-worker laws were passed into law in March 2006, the Liberal-National's Prime Minister John Howard became a widely reviled figure. Finally, Howard (who lost his own seat in a blue-ribbon Liberal district!) and the Liberal-National government was swept out in the November 2007 elections.

Since then, we've had a chance to test the theory that putting up a fight against the anti-union laws preserves the strength of the labour movement (and other social movements). We've done so in the more difficult context of the new, Labor Party federal government that remains very popular, in part because of the memory of the anti-worker actions of the previous government.

The Labor government is trying to preserve as much of the neo-liberal measures implemented by previous governments (both Liberal-National and Labor) while appearing to stand for change. Labor PM Kevin Rudd is like an Obama without the charisma!

It is very clear already that on the fronts of workers' rights, Indigenous rights, climate change, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Rudd Labor government is betraying its promises to the people who swept it into government. It is working hard to minimize opposition to its betrayals. It retains a huge influence over most trade union officials as well as the loyalty of a conservative top leadership of the environmental movement and influential but conservative Aboriginal figures. We are seeing growing dissent on all these fronts, and Socialist Alliance continues to be among the activists in each of these struggles. However, most of the left outside the Alliance is still in the mode of retreat and abstention.

On April 28, some 15,000 workers in the construction industry took to the streets in Melbourne to protest Labor's failure to remove anti-worker laws dating from the Work Choices era that specifically target unions in this industry. These workers are in the forefront of workers' struggles today and they are an example of the future coming toward us. The most militant sections of this struggle is in the state of Victoria again, because this is where the militant section of the trade unions is strongest. They have a strong base at the shop-floor level in several

industries. This is in part a legacy of the struggle of an earlier generation of socialists, led by militants influenced by Maoism the 1970s. But Socialist Alliance is now part of that section of militant unionists.

Another significant victory this year was at a national meeting of climate change groups in Canberra in February where the radical platform supported by Socialist Alliance and a number of other environmentalists, including a section in the Greens Party, was adopted. The first round of national mass mobilizations initiated through this process will take place in June to mark World Environment Day. Climate change is a critical political issue which the left needs to prioritize today.

SV: Your party has been reporting favorably on new parties of left regroupment and expansion in the Philippines, Indonesia, Venezuela and other countries. Are you encouraged by developments there, and are there lessons for the peoples of other countries?

PB: Australia is a rich imperialist country that is relatively isolated from the rest of the world. So in the DSP we have always attached great importance to staying in touch with struggles overseas. We seek to learn from these struggles as well as to make a modest contribution to the popularization of all struggles of resistance and progressive change – particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Our international collaboration has kept us inspired and also as open Marxists – Marxists who take seriously Marx’s own warning not to treat his powerful ideas as a religion.

The Venezuelan revolution is shaping the movement for socialism in the 21st century. Every real step forward for the socialist movement is worth more than a thousand paper manifestos. We are determined to learn from the experiences of the revolutions today. That is why we have DSP comrades in Venezuela and in Nepal, making links and facilitating deeper study of the revolutionary experiences there. That is why our comrades play a major role in leading brigades to Venezuela twice a year since 2005.

I recently traveled to the Philippines in order to learn about and report on the new, mass party of the left that has been formed there, called the “Party of the Masses.” We maintain fraternal ties with it and with parties and activists in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, India and many other countries.

Party-building perspectives

Over the next six months, in the lead-up to a DSP congress scheduled for January 2010, members of the DSP are going to have a serious discussion about party-building perspectives. How do we best build on the gains we have made through the DSP and the gains made through the Socialist Alliance? We’ll be involving Socialist Alliance members who are not members of the DSP in this discussion. It will be public.

My personal opinion is that it is time for the DSP to make a decisive turn towards building the Socialist Alliance as our new party. We’ve been held back by the hesitations of former Alliance affiliates and a former minority in the DSP for too long already. That’s behind us now and it is time we moved forward. This opinion has been strengthened through many discussions with a

broad range of our international collaborators who participated in the recent World at a Crossroads Conference in Sydney.[6] The DSP's broad international work allows us to think more creatively about what we can do to build a bigger and stronger socialist movement in our country.

SV: Could you explain what are some of the next steps that you might take in this direction?

PB: The DSP is serious about left regroupment and we are serious about revolutionary socialism. We don't have the infantile delusion that the DSP is the vanguard party of the revolution. A real revolutionary vanguard has to be built through a process of regroupment/s and accumulation of political experience and actual political authority in the labour movement. What we have done in our tendency over the last four decades is but one small part of this process. This is not to minimize what we've done since our beginning as a party project in the early 1970s, but rather to have a sense of the true proportion of the work we have done and what has yet to be done.

We confront the challenge of left regroupment in a time of severe, triple crisis of capitalism. First, the climate change crisis, which threatens human survival on a global level; second, the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression (though it is hitting Australia later than countries); and third, the widespread crisis of legitimacy of capitalist neo-liberalism. The legitimacy crisis of capitalist neo-liberalism is not a new phenomenon. It has been mounting up for more than a decade and underpins the revolutionary advances in Latin America and elsewhere, as well as wave of anti-capitalist globalization at the turn of the century.

The left in Australia is too small to force the pace of the movements needed to fight the capitalist "solutions" to these crises that are being prepared and beginning to be imposed. We have to be in the growing resistance to these capitalist "solutions." Any left group that is content to just shout from the sidelines "Capitalism has failed, embrace socialism!" is doomed to become ever more sectarian.

Discussion on popular power

That said, there is also an expanded room for political discussions about capitalism and socialism. If the left does this well, it will strengthen the forces that are building resistance movements to the triple crisis. So we need to put our minds to this challenge. Coming out of the World at a Crossroads Conference, we had some informal discussion about what to build in Australia as a next major international conference of socialist discussion, debate and collaboration. Michael Lebowitz, one of our guest speakers, suggested that we hold a conference next year about historical experiences in popular power and participatory democracy that takes in experiences (contemporary and historical) from around the world.

We've forged growing links with the comrades leading the communal councils/commune process in Venezuela, which seeks to become a new base institution of popular power. We've got links with numerous socialists who have studied the real experiences of the Soviet system, the Cuban democratic system, and other such historical experiences of popular power. We've got links with socialists involved in workers' management or who have done real studies in previous such experiments.

We have links with militant trade unionists in Australia with years of real experience in militant shop-floor and delegate organizing. We have links with local government activists who have explored participatory democracy at that level, and so on. Can we bring all these comrades together in a common discussion? Well, we are discussing this and other ideas with a broad range of collaborators. History has shown that the biggest problem for the world's oppressed majority is not coming to an awareness of the failures and injustices of the capitalist system but developing the confidence that the majority can exercise its democratic power in a participatory and sustainable way. It remains the key ideological question upon which turns the prospects for the transformation of socialism into a mass movement in the 21st century.

References:

[1] The politics of the new movement for global solidarity

[2] Craig Johnston, welcome back to the struggle!

[3] The Flame, Arabic supplement to Green Left Weekly

[4] France's New Anti-Capitalist Party: An exchange between Alex Callinicos (British SWP) and François Sabado (LCR)

[5] Union leaders: 'Defy Howard's laws!'

[6] Left activists discuss solutions at World at a Crossroads international socialism conference.

Also see http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2009/may_09/reports.html

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Unprecedented Insight Into Che's Economics

Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution

by Helen Yaffe

Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2009

Reviewed by Diane Raby

Helen Yaffe has produced a very important book which can only be described as essential reading for all socialists. Ernesto Che Guevara has been justly admired, indeed romanticized and even idolized, for his heroic role as revolutionary guerrilla fighter, his personal integrity and self-sacrifice culminating in martyrdom. But a vital period of his short life has been inexplicably neglected in previous accounts: the six years in which he served the Cuban revolutionary government, playing a crucial role in the transition to socialism.

As President of the National Bank, head of the Department of Industrialisation and then Minister of Industry, Guevara was responsible for many of the fundamental decisions in creating a distinctive Cuban model. Despite the importance of Soviet support in providing a lifeline to the young revolution, Che quickly made clear his reservations with regard to economic policies in the USSR.

Che's criticisms gave rise to a public polemic which came to be known as the "Great Debate," and several of the key contributions to this discussion were published in a useful volume edited by Bertram Silverman (*Man and Socialism in Cuba: The Great Debate*, New York: Atheneum, 1971). But we have had to wait until Yaffe's book for a detailed analysis of Guevara's arguments and of actual policies.

On the basis of 60 interviews with Che's former colleagues and extensive archival research, including consultation of Guevara's crucial notes for a critique of the Soviet Manual of Political Economy, Yaffe gives us unprecedented insight into Che's vital contribution to the Cuban Revolution and to Marxist theory.

The Law of Value under Socialism

The central issue at stake was the role of the Law of Value under socialism. [The Law of Value is the Marxist concept that market prices of products are proportional to the socially necessary labour time required to produce them.-*SV Editor*]

Ever since Lenin, Communists had recognised that this key component of capitalist economics would not simply disappear overnight and could not be legislated out of existence; in the USSR in the early 1920s, Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) was an explicit tactical retreat which authorised extensive use of capitalist practices and hence the Law of Value. Although Stalinist collectivisation appeared to eliminate or greatly restrict its operation, in fact it continued and

after Khrushchev's reforms in the late 1950s, the Law of Value was once again explicitly enshrined in Soviet economic manuals.

To Guevara, Soviet technological backwardness was a symptom of the stifling of socialist creative potential by trying to combine socialist planning at national level with capitalist management systems at enterprise level. In technical terms, the key issue was the use of the Auto-Financing System (AFS), promoted in Soviet manuals from the 1950s onwards, as against the Budgetary Finance System (BFS) favoured by Guevara. The AFS encouraged enterprise managers to maximize profits by using market mechanisms to determine prices, financing their own investments through credit and developing autonomous commercial relationships with other public enterprises with little regard for the national plan.

In contrast to this, under the BFS goods exchanged between public enterprises were transferred without payment; a cost price was administratively determined and the relevant adjustments were made in the respective enterprise accounts in the Treasury. Incentives were based on micro-management of costs and production contracts (determined by management consultations at all levels, with direct worker input) regulating quantity, quality and punctuality.

Che's argument for the BFS was that under socialism, the entire Cuban economy was essentially one big public enterprise, and therefore exchanges of products within it were not commodity transactions; there was no transfer of ownership and therefore no purchase or sale. Costs had to be recorded to prevent waste, but incentives for increased quantity or quality of production should be based on the collective interest and not market forces.

This principle of socialist exchange, in which the Law of Value does not operate, could not be applied to foreign trade with capitalist countries, where imports were necessarily priced according to the Law of Value. It followed that goods produced in Cuba with imported inputs (raw materials or machinery) would have to reflect the Law of Value in their pricing. Indeed, one of Che's major criticisms of the Soviet Bloc was the extent to which they applied capitalist market prices in their international trade.

The transformation of Cuba

It is fascinating to see how Guevara applied these abstract principles in practice to the management of the Cuban economy, at the same time that he was wrestling with all kinds of mundane practical problems. The nationalisation of virtually all large-scale enterprises in only two or three years, together with the sudden loss of Cuba's traditional commercial ties to the US and the need to replace American with Soviet technology, threatened to bring about complete economic paralysis.

What Helen Yaffe's book shows in this respect is how Che's extraordinary revolutionary dedication enabled him to deal with this daunting situation. While her discussion of the BFS refutes the widely held myth of Guevara as a pure voluntarist and idealist, her account of his practical administrative work shows how his personal will and commitment drove him to find solutions to apparently insoluble problems.

Yaffe gives amusing examples of the improvisation and spontaneity which characterised the revolution in its early years, such as Che's appointment as President of the National Bank despite having no economic training or experience and his decision to appoint his maths lecturer, Salvador Vilaseca (who was equally inexperienced) as his deputy; and the appointment of 200 teacher trainees, aged 15-20, as managers of nationalized enterprises.

These examples confirm the tendency to improvisation and spontaneity which characterised the revolution in its early years, and while such rash decisions sometimes had disastrous consequences, it is remarkable how often these young and inexperienced revolutionaries succeeded in their new tasks. The reason for this almost certainly lies in the dedication which Guevara (and Fidel and many of their associates) brought to everything they did, and the practice of giving real decision-making power to shop-floor workers.

Study and scientific rigour

The myth of Che as impractical idealist is further undermined by his respect for science and his quest to apply the most advanced scientific knowledge in all spheres. Whenever he assumed a new responsibility, he immediately began to study the relevant scientific disciplines, systematically and intensively – and he insisted on his subordinates doing the same.

This combination of dedication, theoretical rigour and attention to practical detail also characterised Che's approach to issues of workers' participation and socialist consciousness. His insistence on the crucial importance of developing consciousness – the “New Man” – was not just a matter of propaganda and exhortation. All kinds of mechanisms were introduced to promote workers' initiative and participation: Committees for Spare Parts, the Movement of Inventors and Innovators, Advisory Technical Committees, Production Assemblies and Committees for Local Industry. Most important, the human side of workers' involvement was a central concern.

Thus the encouragement of voluntary labour and moral (as opposed to material) incentives was accompanied by measures which showed a growing understanding of workers' practical problems. Health and safety were recognised as important issues, and “burnt-out” workers were given entitlement to rest and recuperation in holiday resorts. Guevara's medical training made him sensitive to workers' problems of stress and self-esteem, and of psychological issues in general; and he was forced (with some difficulty) to recognize the problematic impact of his own explosive character.

The Critique of the Soviet Manual

Guevara's contribution to socialist theory is summed up in an incomplete study which he was working on in 1965-66, before leaving for Bolivia. These notes, which amount to a comprehensive critique of the *Soviet Manual of Political Economy*, and which were so contentious that for 40 years they were kept under lock and key by Che's deputy Orlando Borrego Díaz, are analysed in Yaffe's chapter 9.

Guevara's ideas are certainly controversial, and a breath of fresh air for anyone familiar with the fossilised formulae of "orthodox" Communist (and in many cases also, Trotskyist) exegesis. He argued that in the USSR the NEP (which Lenin would surely have abandoned had he lived longer) had entrenched the structures of pre-monopoly capitalism, but centralised planning had prevented competition (and the Law of Value) from operating freely. The result was the worst of both worlds: technological stagnation and a situation in which "man neither develops his fabulous productive capacities, nor does he develop himself as the conscious builder of a new society." Stalinist dogmatism had frozen the system but had since been replaced by inconsistent pragmatism, which in turn would lead more and more towards capitalist restoration, pure and simple.

But Guevara's criticisms went far beyond this. He also rejected the *Soviet Manual's* acceptance of the idea of a peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism in some countries; condemned the working class in imperialist countries as accomplices of the system; identified landless peasants as the truly revolutionary force in most countries; and condemned the USSR for replacing internationalism with chauvinism, forcing other socialist countries into submission.

Che's Legacy

Yaffe recognises that Che's ideas have not been fully applied in Cuba since his departure and death, but neither have they been simply abandoned. Rather, she argues, the country's subsequent history "can be portrayed as a pendulum swinging between what is desirable and what is necessary – with Guevara's ideas being associated with the vitality of the Revolution," She also correctly draws attention to the importance of the new relationship with Venezuela and the ALBA, in which international exchanges take place on a non-commodity basis. She quotes favourable comments by Hugo Chávez on Che's ideas and the adoption by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela of "the strategic objective of neutralizing the operation of the law of value".

What this book has achieved, then, is to demonstrate that Guevara's greatness lies at least as much in his contribution to socialist thought as in his heroic example as a guerrilla leader. This does not mean, of course, that his ideas should be accepted uncritically; indeed that would itself be totally un-Guevarist.

In the humble opinion of this reviewer, two questions immediately arise. First, if the BFS is a desirable mechanism for avoiding the operation of the Law of Value at enterprise level, does it not create an enormous danger of bureaucratic centralism stifling workers' democracy and initiative? And secondly, while it may be desirable to view the entire economy of a socialist country as one single enterprise owned collectively by the working people as a whole, does this not pose a serious problem of the potential disparity between ideal and real possession of the means of production: i.e., workers may well feel that they are the owners of their particular workplace, but do they really feel – and do the objective conditions exist for them to function as – owners of the entire economy?

One thing is certain: for anyone engaged in the struggle for a better world, the thought of Che Guevara is a fundamental point of departure, and this book is an essential work of reference.

Diana Raby, professor emeritus of history at the University of Toronto, is a research fellow at the University of Liverpool. Her review is reprinted by permission from Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!

Socialist Voice #332, June 22, 2009

Support for Palestine Builds in Latin America

By John Riddell

In the last three years, a growing number of Latin American governments have expressed support for the Palestinian people through sanctions and other initiatives against the Israeli government. Their actions reflect increasing popular identification across the region with Palestinian rights.

An activist in Bolivia's governing party, Arturo Camahuaima, expressed this widespread sentiment in January to visiting members of Toronto Bolivia Solidarity. He strongly condemned Israel's crimes, which he blamed on U.S. lust for profits:

“Ours is the same struggle as the Palestinians, who are foreigners in their own land.... The Empire, the American élite, wants to subjugate them, because of their economic interests. They have committed genocide. So many people have been killed, so many children killed – murdered and bombed. But the Palestinian people will never be defeated.”

Such strong convictions about a faraway country express not only ideological commitment but experiences with the Israeli government in Latin America itself. In the 1960s, Bolivia's military dictatorship was one of several regional governments that adopted an Israeli program called Nahal, designed to tighten the local army's grip in the countryside. Young soldiers from twelve Latin American countries, including the entire graduating class of Ecuador's military academy in 1965, were sent to Israel for training.

Israel's war against Latin American peoples

These efforts were only a small part of a sweeping Israeli intervention in Latin America aimed at arming and training U.S.-backed dictatorships that conducted a 30-year war of state terrorism against their subjects. Often Israel worked in open partnership with the U.S., but during the decade after the end of the Vietnam war, when popular opposition to the brutality of U.S. client governments forced Washington to cut off open military assistance to the most notorious dictators, Israel was often their main source of arms and military advisors.

One of these wars still continues – in Colombia – and there, Israeli military experts are still active, assisting an authoritarian government's assault on its people.

During the 1970s, Argentina was the largest customer of Israel's booming arms export business, during a period in which its government “disappeared” – that is, secretly murdered – an estimated 30,000 Argentine citizens, mostly unionists, students, and activists. Israel was not deterred by the openly anti-Semitic character of the terror campaign, during which, according to Amnesty International, Jewish citizens were forced to kneel before pictures of Hitler and tortured

to accompanying chants of “Jew! Jew!” Only when the dictatorship was in its last days, in 1982, did Israel make inquiries regarding the disappearance of 1,000 Jews, including 30 Israeli citizens.

Israel was also a friend to the murderous Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet.

In Guatemala, Israel not only armed but helped to direct and organize a massive war against the Indigenous population, leaving at least 45,000 dead and, by 1983, one million internal refugees. Israeli specialists trained Guatemalan police in the techniques of repression, including coercing the Indigenous population into heavily guarded “model villages” aimed at destroying Indigenous culture and economy.

In nearby El Salvador, Israel backed the military in a terroristic war that claimed an estimated 75,000 victims between 1980 and 1992. In Nicaragua, Israeli arms helped the Somoza dictatorship kill approximately 50,000 of its citizens in the 1970s. Israel then assisted the U.S.-backed “contras” in a renewed war, this time aimed at overthrowing the democratically elected Sandinista government. In protest, Nicaragua broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, while the U.S. State Department blasted the Nicaraguans for supposed “anti-Semitism.”

A new rise of popular movements

By 1990, these terrorist wars, combined with the onslaught of neo-liberalism, had driven back socialist and liberation movements across most of Latin America. But the two decades that followed have seen a revival of popular resistance across the region. In a number of countries, this has led to the establishment of governments committed to varying degrees to efforts for national sovereignty against imperialism. Among major milestones are the election as president of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1999), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2005), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2006), and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2006).

These countries have forged close ties with revolutionary Cuba and built a network of agreements and alliances embracing, in different ways, almost every nation of South America and the Caribbean. The backbone of this movement is the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), a seven-nation partnership for international collaboration to counter U.S. domination of the region and promote trade and assistance based on solidarity and respect for sovereignty.

The ALBA nations have also defended Iran against U.S. threats and have included the Mideast nation in many development projects in their territories.

While more moderate, liberal regimes, like that of Brazil, have been more cautious in challenging the U.S. government, the ALBA countries have sought to forge ties across ideological lines, on a broad axis of regional sovereignty. Thus when U.S.-backed forces mobilized in August 2008 in an effort to forcibly overthrow the Indigenous-led government of Bolivia, they were firmly opposed by *all* the South American governments, including U.S. allies in Colombia and Peru.

Charges of anti-Semitism

In this new atmosphere, Israel's scope for interference in Latin American affairs has been radically reduced, and it faces renewed pro-Palestinian solidarity across the region. Israel has responded just as its defenders in Canada have – with unfounded charges of anti-Semitism.

This has been a central theme of attacks on Hugo Chávez throughout his presidency. Pro-Israeli forces in Venezuela took their place from the outset with the U.S.-backed right-wing opposition. They made much of gestures of support by Chávez to the Palestinian resistance, beginning in his first year in office. They were untroubled by the presence of genuine far-right anti-Semites in the anti-government alliance.

Accusations of Venezuelan anti-Semitism have become a staple of the pro-Israeli press in Canada.

This slander campaign has taken no note of the Venezuelan government's support of Jewish institutions and the Jewish people in Venezuela. This solidarity sometimes has a Bolivarian touch. Thus Venezuela's ambassador to the Organization of American States, Roy Chaderton Matos, recently hailed the contributions to humanity of "illustrious Jews" such as Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Noam Chomsky, and Bob Dylan, as well as that of the countless Jewish fighters against "ultra-Catholic military dictatorships" in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile.

Recently, pro-Israeli media cited a burglary in a Caracas synagogue as supposed evidence of governmental anti-Semitism. The real perpetrators were soon arrested – a disaffected synagogue employee and two rogue policemen, none of whom had ties to the Bolivarian movement.

But pro-Israeli forces continue to blame Chávez. Liberal MP and former attorney general Irwin Cotler, for example, solemnly presented a petition to the House of Commons in April – on April Fool's Day, as it happened – expressing alarm over supposed "government-sponsored anti-Semitic attacks" like the synagogue incident, which have supposedly led Jews in Venezuela "fear for their personal safety and their denial of religious freedom."

This is the same charge Cotler and other pro-Israeli advocates make regarding the impact of pro-Palestine educational events in Canadian universities, such as Israeli Apartheid Week.

On May 25, Israeli authorities leaked a government document charging that Bolivia and Venezuela were selling uranium to Iran, supposedly in violation of UN sanctions and with evil intent toward Israel. Both the South American countries have undeveloped uranium deposits.

Bolivia denied the report, which it called a "barbarity." Chávez called the charges yet another affront to his country's sovereignty, no different from the absurd charges that his government is engaged in drug smuggling and terrorism.

Defense of Palestine

The rise of popular movements in Venezuela has been accompanied by increasing efforts to aid Palestine.

In 2005, the first Arab-South American Summit was held in Brazil – the U.S. was refused permission to send an observer. The resulting “Declaration of Brazilia” criticized Israeli and U.S. aggression against Palestinians.

When Israel invaded and bombed Lebanon in July 2006, as punishment for support from within Lebanon for the Palestinians, Venezuela’s government was one of the few to speak out strongly in opposition. Chávez denounced Israel’s war on the Lebanese and Palestinians as a “second holocaust.”

Venezuela responded with sanctions, recalled its ambassador from Israel and stopped issuing visas to Israelis. Cuba, which has had no relations with Israel since 1973, also threw itself into the campaign – continuing the pro-Palestinian policy it has followed for 50 years.

A delegation from Venezuela’s parliament met in Damascus in August with leaders of ten Palestinian resistance currents to “express our support and identification ... with the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples.” Venezuela’s government sent 20,000 tons of emergency aid to Lebanon and launched a national fund for Lebanese reconstruction.

Venezuela also pressed the Palestinian case at the second Arab-South American Summit in Caracas in July 2006, pointing to the complicity of the U.S. and the UN Security Council in Israel’s wars.

In September 2006, Venezuela, which has a large population of Arab descent, joined the Arab League as an observer.

Egypt’s *Al-Ahram Weekly* commented that Chávez had emerged as “the most popular leader in the Arab world.” This judgment was recently confirmed by Zogby International, a U.S.-based business research firm. Four thousand people in six Arab countries (not including Palestine) were asked in April and May 2009 which world leader they admired most. Chávez (36%) was mentioned twice as often as the next-ranking figures (Jacques Chirac and Bashar el-Assad). Barack Obama did not make the list.

The Hamas-led wing of the Palestinian Authority on January 12, 2009, hailed the Chávez presidency as a “paradigm to be emulated.” Chávez has “boldly said what the world’s masses feel.”

Solidarity broadens

The murderous Israeli assault on Gaza in December 2008 touched off a new test of strength between pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian forces in Latin America.

The stage was set three months previously when Nicaraguan diplomat Father Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann was unanimously elected president of the UN General Assembly. As foreign

minister under the Sandinista government of the 1980s, d'Escoto had led opposition to Israel's intervention in the U.S.-organized "contra war" and organized effective solidarity with Palestine.

It was the Latin American and Caribbean nations' turn to nominate the Assembly president, and it was they who selected d'Escoto. Unifying them for this purpose was a victory for the ALBA countries, as well as an example of the adroit and principled revolutionary diplomacy at which the Cuban government has long excelled. D'Escoto's election delivered a message to Israel regarding sentiment in the region.

Among d'Escoto's first actions, in November, was to call for world support to the boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign against Israel, likening its treatment of the Palestinians to racist apartheid in South Africa.

In December 2008, when Israel began bombing Gaza, d'Escoto accused the United Nations, together with the U.S., the European Union, and Russia, of "direct complicity" in the 19-month siege of Gaza and the Israeli assault. He dismissed suggestions that Hamas rockets had triggered the violence, blaming it on the great powers' decades-long refusal to implement resolutions of the Security Council for "lasting peace in the Middle East."

The ten Latin American presentations to the Security Council debate ranged from Mexico, which called for a ceasefire and the opening of the Gaza border, to Venezuela, which called for Israel to face a new "Nuremberg trial" for genocide. Condemnations of Israel were heard from Paraguay, on behalf of Mercosur (a Latin American trade alliance with ten full and associate members), and Cuba, speaking for the Non-Aligned Movement, which unites 118 nations in the Global South.

The efforts of Latin American and other nations and world public opinion to halt the slaughter were blocked in the Security Council by a U.S. veto.

In January, both Venezuela and Bolivia broke diplomatic relations with Israel in protest over the "human catastrophe" it had unleashed in Gaza and its defiance of United Nations resolutions.

Three months later, Venezuela established diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority. At the signing ceremony in Caracas, Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki said his government's embassy in that city, among ten such missions planned in Latin America, would be the epicentre of Palestine solidarity in the region.

Israel no longer has a free hand to brutalize Latin American peoples in alliance with local dictators. Instead, peoples and governments of the region are intervening with increasing vigour for justice for Palestine.

In an important sector of the world, the tide has turned against Israeli apartheid.

This article is based on a report given by the author to a membership meeting of the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid, in Toronto, May 28, 2009.

Socialist Voice #333, June 29, 2009

Iranian Workers in Action for Democratic Rights

Introduction by Robert Johnson and John Riddell

The mass protests in Iran, sparked by charges of fraud in the June 12 presidential elections, express deeply felt demands for expanded democratic rights. The establishment press has been silent on the aspirations of rank-and-file protesters. Socialist Voice is therefore pleased to be able to publish several statements by components of Iran's vigorous trade union movement, which has been a major target of repression by Iran's security forces. We have provided the titles and some introductory comments.

The U.S. government and its allies hypocritically claim to be "pro-democracy," a lie exposed by their enthusiastic support of repressive dictatorships in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, and their alliance with the apartheid regime in Israel. For 30 years they have raged against Iran, jealous of the sovereignty established by its great revolution in 1979. Now they hope that the protest movement can provide an opening for them to undermine Iranian sovereignty and return the country to their sphere of influence. They hope to break Iran's alignment with the Palestinian freedom struggle and with the progressive nations of Latin America's Bolivarian Alliance (ALBA).

By repressing mass protests, the Iranian government is weakening the country's defenses against such imperialist attacks. Continued social progress in Iran depends on the expansion of democratic rights, and the strengthening the working class and other popular forces that are the main pillar of national sovereignty.

Progressive activists in Canada should not take sides between the competing factions in Iran's capitalist class, nor should we try to instruct the Iranian people on how the present crisis might be resolved. These questions can only be settled by the Iranian people themselves.

We should, however, support the right of the Iranian people to communicate freely, to demonstrate, and to form trade unions and other popular associations independent of government supervision or control. We should support calls for freeing political prisoners and for an end to the repression.

At the same time, we should strongly oppose attempts by imperialism to take advantage of this crisis, and call for an end to sanctions and other forms of foreign oppression of the Iranian people.

The position adopted by the Vancouver antiwar coalition Stopwar.ca provides a good example of this approach. Its resolution also appears below.

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TEHRAN BUS DRIVERS' UNION

“General prosperity depends on general cooperation, and we must not let others make decisions for us. We must take the initiative ourselves.”

[In 2005-2006, the strike movement of Tehran's bus drivers won respect among working people in Iran and worldwide. The movement was repressed and hundreds of drivers were arrested, but the union continues to function.]

[Mansour Osanloo, the president of the bus drivers' union, has been in jail since July 2007, serving a five-year sentence for “threatening national security” and “propaganda against the state.” He has suffered gross mistreatment at the hands of his jailers. He is being denied appropriate medical treatment and his health is failing. Other leaders and activists of the bus drivers' union have suffered arbitrary arrests, beatings, and loss of their jobs.]

[The union issued the following statement during the campaign for Iran's tenth presidential election, before the outbreak of the national crisis.]

The Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company Workers' Trade Union is purely a trade and workers' organisation. This trade union was formed in 2005 based on the consciousness of the workers and the broad support and involvement of workers, and despite its ups and downs and many problems, has continued its activity as before until today.

The Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company Workers' Trade Union does not support any candidate in the tenth presidential election and does not view supporting any candidate as within the scope of the activities of independent workers' organisations. With the absence of freedom [of activity] for parties, naturally our organisation is also deprived of a social association that would protect it. While the Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company Workers' Trade Union views political intervention and activity as the absolute right of every single person in society, it believes that if the presidential candidates present workers' manifestoes and give practical guarantees about their electoral slogans, workers throughout Iran can either participate or not participate in the election.

But the Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company Workers' Trade Union, as a workers' association, sees it as its duty to ask all candidates [some questions], so that in case there is a logical answer, workers can make a decision about these [replies]. But unfortunately, until now the presidential candidates have not expressed any views about workers, the unemployed, and their demands in the press, at conferences, in press conferences or during provincial trips.

Today, for workers and their families, encouragement about participation in the election is one of the most meaningless of existing debates, because during the past three decades the workers have experienced all the presidents from the time of the [Iran-Iraq] war and the [post-war] reconstruction and reform, and also the affection-cultivating president.

We want all our workmates and people of our class, if there is a discussion about the election in their place of work or study, home or neighbourhood, to not forget to ask themselves and others what is the programme of the presidential pretenders for workers?

1. What is the clear position of the candidates of the tenth presidential election on the formation of independent workers' organisations without the interference of the government and employers?
2. How do you justify the suppression of independent workers' organisations like the Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company Workers' Trade Union?
3. Considering the accumulated demands of workers and that the poverty line announced for this year is 850,000 tomans [\$874], but on the other hand the monthly wage has been set at 263,000 tomans [\$270], will you accept the demand of workers' organisations that the minimum wage should be one million tomans [\$1,021]? This was what the signatures of factory workers throughout the country have proclaimed.
4. To announce their opinion on international conventions on labour rights, children's rights, women's and human rights, and to say how they will adhere to them?
5. To say what their opinion and programme is on job security, job creation, housing, and unemployment insurance for people over 18 years old, medical insurance for everyone, and scrapping temporary contracts that are the cause of hardship and poverty for working class families?

During these past years, the workers have been told to make sacrifices and to accept their hardship and their lack of rights. While the workers can neither go to work with security or hope, nor to their homes for rest, thousands of plain-clothes and security force [officers] – forces that perform no productive work and are used everywhere and for any deed that is necessary, with any level of violence and use of force – are kept to deprive and detain workers from a free life. Yet [the candidates] refuse to [devote] one day to talking about the workers' demands and needs.

These are not issues specific to the time of the election. These problems depend on the co-operation of all toilers who see this dam in front of them.

We must strive to go past this dam and reach a society where the solving of social problems is not handed over to the president and parliament only.

General prosperity depends on general cooperation, and we must not let others make decisions for us. We must take the initiative ourselves.

–Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company Workers' Trade Union May 2009

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TEHRAN BUS DRIVERS' UNION

We “fully support this movement of [the] Iranian people to build a free and independent civil society and condemn any violence and oppression.”

[In this later statement, the union states its position on the post-election crisis.]

In recent days, we continue witnessing the magnificent demonstration of millions of people from all ages, genders, and national and religious minorities in Iran. They request that their basic human rights – particularly the right to freedom and to choose independently and without deception – be recognized. These rights are not only constitutional in most of the countries, but also have been protected against all odds.

Amid such turmoil, one witnesses threats, arrests, murders and brutal suppression that one fears only to escalate on all its aspects, resulting in more innocent bloodshed, more protests, and certainly no retreats. Iranian society is facing a deep political-economical crisis. Million-strong silent protests, ironically loud with unspoken words, have turned into iconic stature and are expanding from all sides. These protests demand reaction from each and every responsible individual and institution.

As previously expressed in a statement published on-line in May of this year, since the Vahed Syndicate does not view any of the candidates support the activities of the workers' organizations in Iran, it would not endorse any presidential candidate in the election. Vahed members nevertheless have the right to participate or not to participate in the elections and vote for their individually selected candidate.

Moreover, the fact remains that demands of almost an absolute majority of the Iranians go far beyond the demands of a particular group. In the past, we have emphasized that [so long as] the freedom of choice and right to organize are not recognized, talk of any social or particular right would be more of a mockery than a reality.

The Syndicate [Union] of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company fully supports this movement of [the] Iranian people to build a free and independent civil society and condemns any violence and oppression.

In line with the recognition of the labour rights, the Syndicate requests that June 26, which has been called by the International Trade Unions Organization "Day of Action" for justice for Iranian workers, include the human rights of all Iranians who have been deprived of their rights.

With hope for freedom and equality

–The Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Vahed Bus Company June 18, 2009

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AUTOWORKERS AT IRAN KHODRO

Organize 30-minute protest strike; "it is our duty to join this people's movement"

[Khodro, Iran's leading car company and the largest vehicle producer of automobiles in the Middle East, has a strong recent history of labor militancy, strikes, and repression. It employs more than 100,000 workers and produces more than half a million vehicles a year.]

[A few weeks before Iran's June elections, a strike by the Khodro workers quickly won its two demands: for payment of unpaid wages and for Khodro itself to sign up employees previously supplied by third-party contractors.

[In a recent letter to the International Labour Organization, Khodro workers have also made their long-term demands clear, asking that ILO work to help ensure that Iran:

- *Observes workers rights.*
- *Does not prevent the formation of free workers' organisations.*
- *Does not arrest and jail workers for the offence of going on strikes and forming workers' organisations.*
- *Respects the conventions of the International Labour Organisation.*

[The following is the Khodro workers' response to the crisis.]

Autoworkers, fellow labourers: What we witness today, is an insult to the intelligence of the people, and disregard for their votes, the trampling of the principles of the Constitution by the government. It is our duty to join this people's movement.

We the workers of Iran Khodro, Thursday 28/3/88 [June 18], in each working shift will stop working for half an hour to protest the suppression of students, workers, women, and the Constitution and declare our solidarity with the movement of the people of Iran. The morning and afternoon shifts from 10 to 10:30. The night shift from 3 to 3:30.

–Labourers of Iran Khodro

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TEACHERS' ORGANIZATION OF IRAN

“Honour the will and the vote of the people”

[We have been unable to find an English translation of the statement by the teachers' union. Below is a summary and partial translation of the statement as it appeared on the LaborNerd website June 19.]

Sazman-e Moallem-e Iran (Teachers' Organization of Iran) is writing a statement protesting the arrest three days ago of its leader, Ali-Reza Hashemi. It expresses the view that the wave of arrests by the government will only serve to unite the people. It says, “The only way out of this situation is to accept the request of the candidates and to honour the will and the vote of the people.” It expresses extreme objection to the arrest of Hashemi and other activists and says that freeing those who have been arrested will serve to decrease the amount of conflict in the country. It also says, “The Teachers' Organization of Iran, further, supports the goals of Messrs. Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi and calls on the election authorities to annul this election and undertake a free election.”

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STOPWAR COALITION (Vancouver, Canada)

Statement on the Iran crisis

[The Vancouver antiwar coalition StopWar adopted the following statement at its June 24 monthly membership meeting.]

StopWar, the broad-based anti-war coalition which has been active in the Vancouver area since 2002, sends warm greetings and solidarity to all those who are rallying for democracy and justice in Iran and abroad this week. We share your commitment to a peaceful and just resolution of the disputes brought to the surface by the recent presidential election in Iran, and your desire for Iranians themselves to determine the future of their country.

We condemn the regime's killing of protesters and we join with others in demanding the right to organize, strike and protest, and to free speech and assembly for all Iranians. We demand the release of all arrested workers, students, and political prisoners.

We condemn any attempt by pro-war forces in the United States, Canada, and other countries to take advantage of this situation to push for 'regime change' imposed by outside powers. The drumbeat of threats against Iran should remind all peace-loving people of the build-up for war against Iraq seven years ago, which brought a terrible tragedy to that country without advancing the rights of the Iraqi people.

StopWar expresses our full confidence that the people of Iran will achieve their goals without the interference of governments such as that of Canada, which has only hindered genuine progress towards democracy, social justice and gender equality with the ongoing military mission in Afghanistan.

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Note: An exchange of comments about this article is posted separately in the article "Debate: How Should Anti-Imperialists Respond to Iran's Political Crisis?" in Socialist Voice, July 28, 2009