

Chavez invites Obama to Peace Dialogue

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Mérida — During a meeting with U.S. labor union leaders in New York on Wednesday, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez invited the unionists to participate in the fair trade integration bloc known as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), and he invited U.S. President Barack Obama to hold a “peace dialogue.”

“Groups of unions, groups of workers from the United States, could incorporate themselves into the ALBA, because the ALBA has a council of social movements in addition to its council of presidents,” said Chavez in response to a participant who asked how U.S. and Latin American social movements could work together more.

The first such opportunity for U.S. labor leaders to participate could be in the ALBA meeting scheduled to take place on October 16-17th in Cochabamba, Bolivia, said the president.

“The ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance, is much more than an alliance of governments,” the president explained. “We must fill it with people, from below, from the roots... because you are the ones who construct these alternatives.”

The ALBA was created in 2004 by Venezuela and Cuba to provide an organization for cooperation-based trade between countries as an alternative to the U.S.-dominated free trade agreements, and to promote regional integration on the basis of solidarity. The bloc now has nine members in South and Central America and the Caribbean.

Chavez, who was wearing a red and white striped tie and blue suit, told the U.S. unionists that Venezuela is not an enemy of the U.S., as the media portray it to be. “One thing is the empire and another is the people of the U.S.,” he said. “We are enemies of imperialism, of hunger, of misery, of exploitation,” said the leader of Venezuela’s drive toward “21st Century Socialism.”

Turning his comments to the U.S. government, Chavez said he hopes to have a positive relationship with the Obama administration, but that President Obama will have to assure that the actions his administration takes are in line with his call for “a new era of engagement” during a speech before the 64th U.N. General Assembly in New York this week.

“Sometimes one gets the sensation that there are two Obamas. One, who gave the speech, is good. The other makes decisions that are contradictory to his speech,” said Chavez.

As an example, Chavez cited a recently signed deal to expand the presence of the U.S. military on seven Colombian bases. “If you promote peace, then why the seven military bases in Colombia?” he asked.

“Obama, Obama, wake up! Open your eyes!” Chavez exclaimed. “Don’t send any more soldiers or war planes to Colombia, that is throwing gasoline on the fire, and that affects us all in South America... Let’s talk about peace, let’s set up a peace dialogue,” he suggested.

“The world has begun to change, and the United States is part of the world, it cannot remain behind,” Chavez said, emphasizing that he is optimistic that the 21st Century will bring substantial improvements and that “the process of building unity cannot be detained.”

“In the first ten years of the 21st Century, we have been able to advance on what could not be achieved in the two hundred previous years,” he said, mentioning as examples the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bank of the South, and the Latin American television news station Telesur, in addition to the ALBA.

“The next ten years will be decisive,” he said. “I feel optimistic, and I ask all of you to feel optimistic, but to struggle hard.”

This struggle includes that of Puerto Rico to become an independent republic, said the Venezuelan leader, after recognizing that September 23rd is the anniversary of the day when Puerto Rican leaders declared the island independent from Spain in 1868. “Who said history has ended? History has re-begun,” Chavez said. “Someday, Puerto Rico should be a republic.” His comments were followed by strong applause.

Wednesday’s event took place in the office of Venezuela’s ambassadorship to the United Nations. The participants included labor leaders from the national and multi-national electricity, food, commercial, automobile, public, and university sectors, as well as organizers of African-American and Puerto Rican worker unions. Chavez also came to New York to address the 64th United Nations General Assembly meeting on Thursday.

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