

Venezuela: Mass organisation, unity increases as revolution deepens

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“This government is here to protect the people, not the bourgeoisie or the rich”, proclaimed Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez on February 28, as he ordered soldiers to take over two rice-processing plants owned by Venezuelan food and drink giant Empresas Polar.

The move was made in order to ensure that the company was producing products subjected to the government-imposed price controls that aim to protect the poor from the affects of global price rises and inflation.

Under Venezuelan law, companies that can produce basic goods regulated by price controls must guarantee that 70-95% of their products are of the regulated type.

“They’ve refused 100 times to process the typical rice that Venezuelans eat”, said Chavez. “If they don’t take me seriously, I’ll expropriate the plants and turn them into social property.”

Four days later, Chavez announced the expropriation of a rice-processing plant owned by US food giant Cargill after it was revealed the company was attempting to subvert the price controls.

Moving against capital

In the following period, “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 and is reviewing tens of thousands more hectares across the nation”, [Venezuelanalysis.com](#) reported on March 11.

This includes the March 5 expropriation of 1500 hectares of a tree farm owned by Ireland’s Smurfit Kappa. The government has pledged to move away from eucalyptus trees, which were drying up the land, and turn the land over to cooperatives for sustainable agriculture.

On March 14, Chavez decreed a new fishing law, banning industrial trawl-fishing within Venezuela’s territorial waters.

“Trawling fishing destroys the sea, destroys marine species and benefits a minority. This is destructive capitalism”, explained Chavez on his weekly TV show, *Alo Presidente* the following day.

[Venezuelanalysis.com](#) reported on March 17 that the government will invest US\$32 million to convert or decommission trawling boats, as well as to development fish-processing

plants.

“Thirty trawling ships will be expropriated, Chavez said, due to the refusal of their owners to cooperate with the plans to adapt the boats to uses compliant with the new fishing regulations.”

Small-scale fisherpeople will have access to the converted boats.

Anti-crisis measures

This latest wave of radical measures by the Chavez government should be seen in the context of the ongoing process of nationalisations since early 2006, the onset of the global economic and food crises and the February 15 referendum victory.

The government has re-nationalised privatised industries such as electricity, telecommunications and steel. Cement companies, milk producing factories and one of Venezuela’s major banks have either been, or are in negotiations to be, nationalised.

Unlike the state interventions currently being undertaken in the imperialist centres, the aim of these moves is not to bail out bankrupt capitalists, but to help shift production towards meeting people’s needs — in service provisions (phone lines, electricity, banking) and production of essential goods (concrete, steel for housing and factories, and food).

Last July, the government made strong signals that its next targets would be two strategic sectors previously barely touched — food and finance.

The day after announcing the planned government buyout of Banco de Venezuela (which, once completed, will give the government control over close to 20% of the banking sector), Chavez issued 26 decrees, a number of which increase government and community control over food storage and distribution — and allow the state to jail company owners for hoarding.

Moves aimed at increasing government control over food production come amid soaring world food prices and 30% inflation within Venezuela — which is still dependent on imports for 70% of its food supply.

The government also faces an ongoing campaign of food speculation and hoarding carried out by the capitalist food producers and distributors in order to destabilise the anti-capitalist government.

With oil prices plummeting by almost \$100 per barrel from a high of more than US\$140 last year, the government is tightening the screws. Oil accounts for 93% of the government’s export revenue and around half of its national budget.

The government has already announced the restructuring of its ministries, merging a number of them in order to cut down on bureaucracy.

The Chavez government is making it very clear that it will be the capitalists, not the people, who will pay for the mess that the capitalist system has created.

“I have entrusted myself with putting the foot down on the accelerator of the revolution, of

the social and economic transformation of Venezuela”, Chavez explained on March 8.

Mandate for socialism

These latest moves follow the government’s victory in the February 15 referendum.

Officially, the referendum concerned whether to amend the constitution and remove limits on the number of times elected officials could stand for re-election. At stake was the possibility of Chavez standing for re-election in 2012.

In the context of the intense class struggle, it became a referendum on the socialist project pushed by Chavez.

Addressing tens of thousands of supporters from the balcony of the presidential palace after the victory, Chavez noted that those that had voted “yes” had “voted for socialism, voted for the revolution”.

The referendum was proposed by Chavez as a “counter-offensive” against the opposition following the November 23 regional elections.

Candidates from Chavez’s United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) won the overwhelming majority of governorships and mayoralties.

However, opposition victories in key states on the Colombian border (where there is growing right-wing paramilitary activity) and the Greater Caracas mayoralty were viewed as important gains for the counter-revolution.

Opposition governors and mayors began to use their new positions to attack community organisations and the pro-poor social missions.

The rapid mobilisation to defeat these attacks by the poor and working people was converted into the formation of 100,000 “Yes committees” to campaign in the referendum, in poor communities, workplaces and universities across the country.

These committees were the backbone of the successful referendum campaign.

Organising for revolution

The latest measures will undoubtedly intensify the class conflict in Venezuela.

An example of this conflict has resulted from the government’s program of land reform, aimed at ending the domination over agriculture by a small minority of large landowners.

Previous attempts by the government to redistribute land have resulted in a violent counter-offensive by large landowners that has resulted in the murder of more than 200 peasants since the land reform law of 2001.

On March 9, land reform activist Mauricio Sanchez was murdered in Zulia, two weeks after campesino activist Nelson Lopez was shot dead in Yaracuy.

Increasingly, trade unionists have also been the target of violent repression when struggling for their rights. On January 29, two workers at Mitsubishi plant were killed by police during an industrial dispute — sparking protests and the arrest of a number of police.

Several peasant organisations are seeking to unite their forces in support of government measures and against repression. The PSUV leadership has also called for a restructuring of the party to better organise the masses for the coming battles.

Launched after Chavez's 2006 re-election to help accelerate the revolutionary process, the PSUV brought together a range of revolutionary forces as well as opportunist and corrupt layers.

On March 6, the national leadership of the PSUV made public a series of decisions aimed at deepening participation and democracy in the party.

This includes a recruitment drive to sign up new militants, a clean out of the current membership lists, the reactivation of the grassroots socialist battalions and the organisation of an extraordinary congress for August to deepen discussion over the party's program and principles.

Building on the success of the "yes" campaign, the PSUV will move to consolidate national mass fronts of workers, peasants, women and students — along with converting the "yes committees" into ongoing "socialist committees".

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