

## VENEZUELA: World Social Forum — Chavez calls for ‘socialism or death’

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez proclaimed “socialism or death” in finishing his rousing speech to a rally of around 10,000 people at the Polihedro Stadium on January 27. The rally was a feature of the Latin American section of the Sixth World Social Forum held in Caracas on January 24-29.

The forum attracted an audience of up to 100,000 people from all over Latin America and the world, to a feast of more than 2000 public meetings and seminars on themes of anti-imperialist globalisation and the struggle for a better world.

Chavez said that unlike Karl Marx, when he first issued the call for socialism in the 19th century, “we do not have much time left”. The 21st century has now come, “when the dilemma must be finally resolved”.

“Time is short. If we do not change the world now, there may be no 22nd century for humanity. Capitalism has destroyed the ecological equilibrium of the earth. It is now or never!”, Chavez declared. “We should go toward setting up a worldwide anti-imperialist movement. We have already taken steps in this direction”, Chavez told the cheering crowd. He commented that at the previous WSF in Porto Alegre in 2005, “many talks were occurring without conclusions. We are not here to waste our time. We must urgently build a new socialist movement.”

Chavez blasted the US empire. “It is the most perverse empire in history: It talks about freedom while invading and destroying other nations ... The empire is very powerful, but not infallible. This century we will bury the US empire. The empire has to face the people of Venezuela and Latin America. It has failed in Iraq already.”

He urged the audience to “imagine a world in which the US administration declares peace to the world, withdraws its forces, and uses its resources to produce medicines and food for the poor people of the world”.

Chavez contrasted the US’s record to the achievements of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, with the help of Cuba, which taught 1.5 million people to read through Mission Robinson in just two years.

“Injustice and inequality are losing: it is now up to us to define the formula of unity for victory. We need unity of all our currents. While respecting the right to autonomy of the movements, including the green movement and the various political and national movements, all of us should get together in a victorious offensive against imperialism.”

Many prominent figures in the international progressive movement were featured on a podium, including Aleida Guevara (Che's daughter) and Cindy Sheehan (US anti-war leader whose son was killed in Iraq). Huge applause greeted Chavez's speech, and the rally included a rousing rendition of the workers' anthem, "The Internationale".

Chavez's stress on the need for urgent international political action against global capitalism and oppression was a major theme of the forum. The whole conference was filled with the overwhelming influence of the Venezuelan revolution. The "Bolivarian spirit" was pervasive from the very first day, when around 20,000 activists marched to launch the WSF. The lively and colourful march featured the banners, clothing and chants of the many national contingents, especially from Latin America.

One contingent was a group of around 15 Australians, marching with the banner of the Australia-Venezuela Solidarity Network and chanting: "Chavez, friend! Australians are with you!"

A panel with speakers from the National Union of Workers, the worker-managed Alcasa aluminum factory, organisers from participatory budgets in Brazil, and well-known radical intellectuals, discussed how co-management and participatory budgeting were weapons in the struggle against capitalism and in building a democratic socialism of the 21st century. It also featured debate on the strengths and weakness of these various experiments so far.

Another panel of radical Latin American economists discussed how the Latin American integration project known as the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) was the antithesis of the US-inspired Free Trade Area of the Americas. The panellists discussed how ALBA gave activists a strategic and concrete alternative to struggle for and that it must be a social integration of peoples at every level rather than only of governments and elites.

Another well-attended forum discussed the Marxism of Che Guevara and its relevance. The panel concluded that while Che's thought didn't contain all the elements of 21st century socialism, he articulated its essence by arguing that socialism must be centered on developing new human beings liberated from alienation, and that this can only be achieved through their active participation in building a society free from capitalism and all forms of bureaucracy and hierarchy.

Another forum discussed the massive achievements of Venezuela's social missions in improving the lives of the poor communities, and their role in transforming the communities into organised, conscious and creative social actors in constructing a new socialist Venezuela, thus giving them a revolutionary character in a capitalist society.

Meetings also discussed solidarity work in various countries and plans for coordination of international solidarity activities with the Venezuelan revolution in 2006.

The variety and breadth of topics covered the whole spectrum of debate in the world anti-capitalist globalisation movement. As the WSF draws toward a close, discussion is occurring on the future of the social forum movement and the urgent tasks facing us in the coming year.

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