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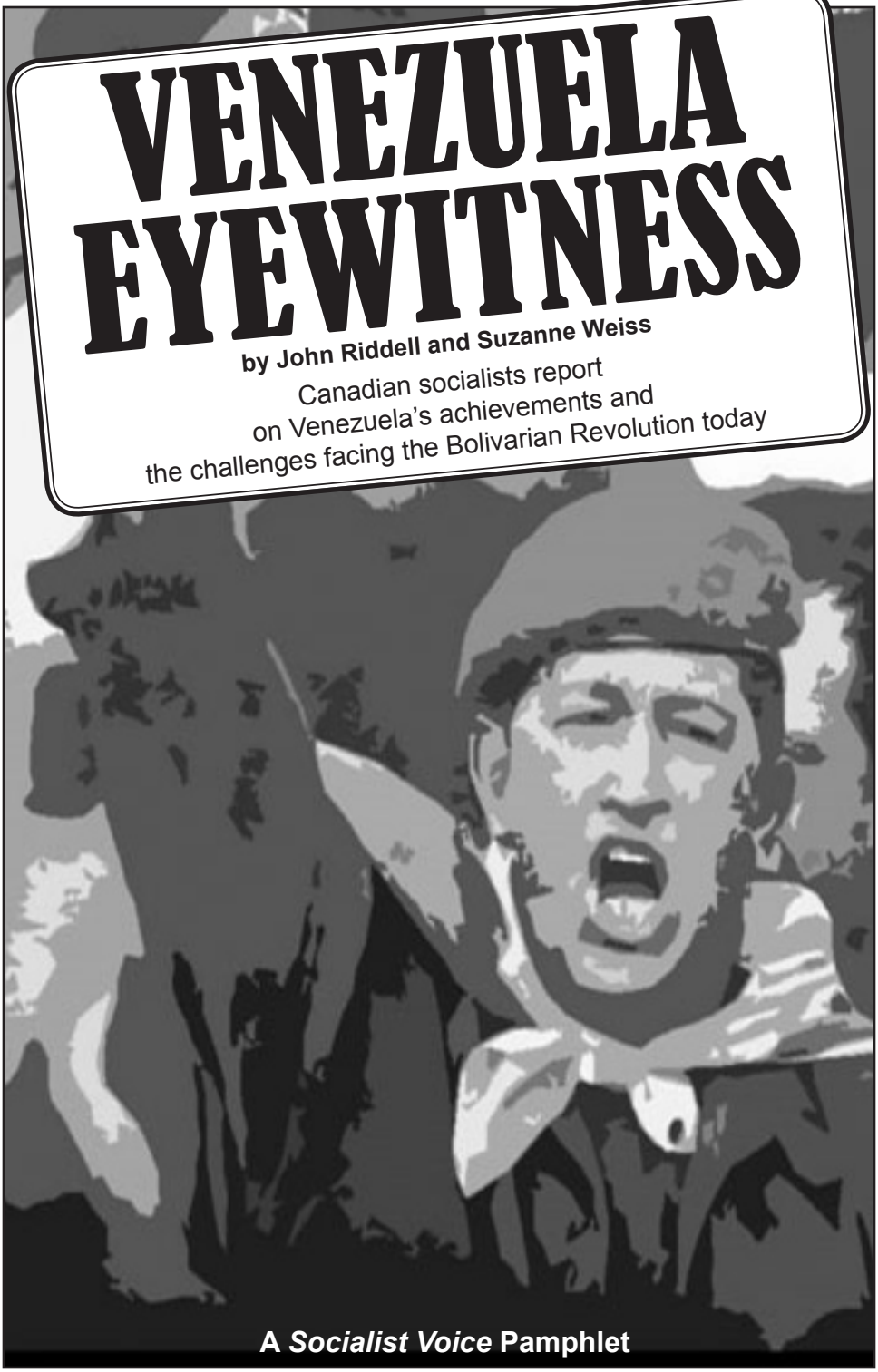
VENEZUELA EYEWITNESS

by John Riddell and Suzanne Weiss

Canadian socialists report
on Venezuela's achievements and
the challenges facing the Bolivarian Revolution today



A *Socialist Voice* Pamphlet

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After the Referendum: Chávez Pledges to Continue the Struggle

(Socialist Voice, December 7, 2007)

By John Riddell and Suzanne Weiss

Responding to what he termed a "photo finish" defeat in Venezuela's December 2 constitutional referendum, President Hugo Chávez pledged to continue the struggle for the measures that were presented to voters.

Announcing the results on national TV, he accepted "the decision made by the people" and thanked all voters, both those who voted "yes" and those in the "no" camp. But he called for his movement to stay on course. "I do not withdraw a single comma from the proposal," he added. "The proposal is still on the table."

Chávez also recalled the words he used after the failure of the Bolivarian movement's initial bid for power: "As I said on February 4, 1992, we could not do it – for now.'" On that occasion, the Venezuelan masses seized on the words "for now" (por ahora) as a commitment to fight on until victory was won.

Chávez closed by saying that a major proposal in the constitutional reform project, the expansion of social security to include workers in the informal economy and housewives, does not require a constitutional amendment and would be carried out as soon as possible.

The right-wing victory in the vote was paper-thin: 51% to 49%. The "no" camp increased its vote only marginally (about 2%) from the opposition's score in last year's presidential elections. The big change was the abstention of more than a third (38%) of those who voted for Chávez last year. Unconvinced of the reform proposals but unwilling to associate themselves with the opposition, they chose this time to stay at home.

Profile of the Reform

Chavez announced plans to reform Venezuela's 1999 constitution shortly after his reelection in December 2006, as a way to open the road for the country's advance to socialism. On August 15, 2007, he proposed amendments to 33 articles of the constitution. This triggered an extensive public debate in all parts of the country.

Following this discussion, on November 2, the National Assembly adopted a package that included not just Chavez's amendments, but others affecting another 36 articles. The referendum followed automatically 30 days later.

The reform's main provisions can be grouped under six headings:

Popular power: Creation of a new level of government consisting

of communal and other councils that would receive at least 5% of the national budget and would take decisions not through elected representatives but through assemblies of all members.

Non-capitalist economic development: Provisions for new forms of collective, social, and public property alongside private ownership; subjection of the central bank to government direction; stronger measures for land reform and against capitalist speculation.

Deepening social inclusion: A variety of measures to counter discrimination, democratize higher education, and move towards a 36-hour work week.

New territorial divisions: New presidential powers to channel resources to designated regions with special needs.

A stronger presidency. Removal of the two-term limit on a president's time in office; provision for suspension of freedom of information during a state of emergency (a response to the capitalist media's role in organizing the unsuccessful 2002 military coup); and other measures.

Socialism as the goal. The amendments proclaimed a socialist society as Venezuela's goal, without specifying what that would mean in practice.

The view from the streets

When we arrived in Caracas, 12 days before the vote, the streets in downtown and working-class areas were lined with banners, posters, and graffiti calling for a "yes" vote ("Sí con Chávez"). The "no" campaign conceded the streets, relying instead on its vise-grip on the media—the strongest instrument of political control.

We saw little evidence of public discussion. Efforts were being made to circulate the text of the reforms, which filled several dozen pages of legalistic prose. But at first, we saw these distributions only close by the National Assembly. Not until the last few days did we see "red points"—with tables, banners, and music—carrying out the distributions across the city. In the last week, a "dual-column" version was also distributed. We spent time pouring over it, trying to grasp the changes, but it was slow going.

Only in the final few days before the vote did we see flyers that attempted to summarize the changes. Just back from a lengthy trip abroad, Chávez spoke stirringly during the final week in defense of the reform.

Nonetheless, on the whole, we did not see any concerted effort to explain why the changes were necessary.

A loaded debate

Most of criticisms we heard from "no" supporters were based on obvious

distortions of the reform, including claims that the changes would abolish private property, end free bargaining for employment contracts, make Chávez president for life, abolish elections, and end free speech.

Other charges were even more fanciful: the government was said to be arming criminal gangs and promoting incursions of Colombian paramilitaries, planning to take children from their parents, and preparing to convert Venezuela into a "totalitarian" state like Cuba or North Korea.

Such accusations were usually delivered in a scattergun style that made reasoned response difficult.

The whole debate was loaded against the Chávez supporters — to vote "yes," you had to support a wide range of proposals which were individually and collectively difficult to understand. But to vote "no" or abstain, you only needed to object to a single proposal, or just feel uneasy or uncertain. The capitalist media made certain that everyone heard plenty of reasons for unease and uncertainty.

The 'yes' campaign

During our two-week stay, we talked to many hundreds of "yes" supporters. In the two mass demonstrations we attended, we carried a banner reading, in Spanish, "Canadians in support of the Bolivarian revolution." Marchers crowded round to greet us, talk to us, and express their internationalist convictions.

Given the complexity of the issues, it was striking how well and thoroughly these "yes" supporters understood the reform. Whenever we asked, "Which change is the most important?" we got specific and thoughtful responses, often quoting the constitutional paragraph number, and often taking up complex topics remote from the speaker's immediate experience.

Partisans of the "yes" often overestimated our knowledge of the changes. On a voting lineup in the "23 de Enero" district of western Caracas, a "yes" supporter, asked which change was the most important, replied, "Well, I'd say article 115, but also articles…" and he reeled off a series of article numbers, far too quickly for us to jot down.

We took part in a pro-reform student demonstration of more than 60,000 – the largest such action so far – and a campaign windup that mobilized some 750,000 in downtown Caracas. Both actions were far larger than anything the "no" forces managed. At both events the mood was confident, joyous, and militant.

And as Chávez points out, the vote of 4.3 million for reforms that endorsed a course toward socialism is a historic achievement.

The impact of our discussions with "yes" supporters was overwhelming and is hard to convey to those who have not witnessed revolution. Here

we have a revolutionary vanguard of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions—experienced in struggle, wise, passionate, and determined—that has several times rallied a decisive majority to beat down attacks of the imperialist foe.

Defections from the Bolivarian camp

Yet again and again, "yes" activists told us that support for the reform in their milieus was noticeably less than support for Chávez in the presidential elections last year. This uncertainty in the progressive camp was reinforced by a series of much publicized defections, including the Podemos party (which scored 8% in last year's vote) and former defense minister and army chief Raúl Baduel. Many Bolivarian activists told us that the reform faced possible defeat.

In this context, it seemed to us that the revolutionary forces urgently needed to organize an intensive dialogue with those in Bolivarian rank-and-file who were uncertain about the reform. We expected to see efforts to canvass working-class areas similar to what took place earlier this year, when five million signed up to support the project of a new unified socialist party (the PSUV). But we saw no such initiative.

A PSUV meeting we attended in the Catia district of Caracas, a week before the vote, concerned itself with the organizing of scrutineers at polling places – a crucial and complex task – rather than with organizing discussions with voters in its region and getting out the "yes" vote. For the newly formed party branch we visited, just getting the scrutineers in place and provided with logistical backup was a major challenge. The party shows great promise, but did not play a strong visible role in the campaign. (See "The Battle for the United Socialist Party of Venezuela," by Kiraz Janicke. *www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2939*)

Hammer of counterrevolution

The opposition campaign proceeded along two parallel tracks. On one hand, "no" spokespersons – with Baduel and Podemos in the lead – cloaked themselves in the mantle of the 1999 constitution, an early Bolivarian achievement, claiming they merely wanted to defend the movement's original goals (although in fact, the opposition at that time had bitterly opposed that progressive document).

At the same time, the opposition readied its "Plan B." Opposition groups engaged in repeated violent provocations against "yes" supporters, including wanton killings of Chávez supporters. Elements of the right-wing student movement that is strong in the country's traditional upper-class universities were prominent in the disorders. There was talk of insurrection if "yes" forces won.

Opposition leaders did little to disavow and prevent such actions. During the campaign they did not pledge to accept a "yes" victory. All this reinforced fears about voting.

In the aftermath of the vote, some opposition leaders made conciliatory gestures, clearly seeking to build a bridge to more conservative forces within the government. Yet the entire course of the opposition since Chávez's election in 1999 has aimed not just at halting the Bolivarian process but at forcibly destroying the revolution root and branch and fully restoring U.S. domination and oligarchic rule. In view of Venezuela's oil wealth and world political influence, the opposition's masters in Washington can settle for nothing less.

If the opposition can preserve its control of Venezuela's most powerful social institutions, starting with the private economy and the media, it has good reason to hope that over time they can divide, grind down, and crush the revolution.

This fact was a central motivation for the constitutional reform proposals. The Bolivarian movement's socialist course is not a change from its original goals, which included national sovereignty, a break from neo-liberalism, endogenous development, popular democracy, equality, and the well-being of the working masses. Rather, as Chávez has stated, these goals can be achieved only through a fundamental re-organization of society along socialist lines.

However, many supporters of the Bolivarian cause preferred to stand pat on the social achievements of their movement, rather than risking an uncertain advance toward socialism. The dynamics of elections under capitalism, which isolate working people from each other while maximizing the impact of hostile media, reinforce such conservative impulses.

Yet the revolutionary process has as yet been able only to slightly alleviate the grinding poverty of the Venezuelan masses. Society has only begun to recover from the devastation of neo-liberalism. A still-dominant capitalist class conspires to heighten instability, while seizing on it to discredit the government.

The revolution cannot stand pat. It must advance – or ultimately lose all.

That choice will be made not in parliament but in the arena of mass social struggles, where the multi-millioned Bolivarian vanguard, if successfully deployed, has decisive political weight.

The referendum's outcome is a serious setback. But the resolute response of President Chávez, plus the vigor and determination of the Bolivarian ranks, provide good reason to believe that the revolution will resume its forward march.

People's Power in Venezuela

(Socialist Voice, January 8, 2008)

By John Riddell

"If we want to talk of socialism," says Argenis Loreto, "we must first resolve the people's most urgent needs: water in their homes, accessible health care, easy access to housing."

In the Venezuelan municipality of Libertador (state of Carabobo), of which Argenis is mayor, "we have 90% poverty. Ending that is our first task. I am convinced that the existing state cannot do this." It's essential that "the majority of the people become part of the decision-making process."

But when Argenis was elected in 2000, the second year of the Bolivarian government headed by president Hugo Chávez, he found that "the people did not possess the tools needed for their participation."

That insight led Chávez and the Bolivarian government to initiate the formation of neighbourhood councils across the country—councils that they view as the embryo of a new people's state.

Suzanne Weiss and I spent two days in Libertador, one of the first municipalities where such councils were formed, talking to Argenis and dozens of others. This report is based on what we saw; it also draws on Marta Harnecker's outstanding study of the Libertador experience, *Gobiernos Comunitarios: Transformando el Estado desde abajo*. [Community governments: transforming the state from below] Monte Avila Editores, 2007.

A devastated community

With 200,000 residents, Libertador sprawls across a mainly rural territory the size of Toronto (20 km. x 30 km.). Most of its employed population works in nearby Valencia, the country's heartland of privately owned industry. Jouncing over its ruined roads in the back of a pickup, we saw a district that had been devastated not by natural catastrophe but by a social calamity — decades of systematic neglect.

"Before we had many problems," recalls Félix Hernández, member of a community government. "The roads were super-awful. The electricity worked one or two days and then shut off. Health service was chaotic. Water service was complete chaos."

Appealing to city hall was a waste of time. "It was horrendous," says another council member, Virginia Diaz. "We'd go with petitions and explain. They'd visit and approve the project." But nothing would happen. "When we went back to the office, they'd never heard of us, didn't know anything…. As useful as tits on a bull."

The result was public apathy, says municipal social activist Fidel Hernández—like Argenis, a published poet. "The people had let itself be convinced that it could not govern. There was a deliberate policy for this … that's why we had 1½ million who were illiterate."

Tools for people's power

Of peasant origins, Argenis Loreto finished only six years of schooling before starting his working life in factories, industrial management, farming, and again in factories. He joined a revolutionary group at age 17, took part in the Bolivarian movement's unsuccessful coup in 1992 and became mayor after two decades of underground activity.

Convinced that only the poor and disenfranchised could reconstruct his municipality—and his nation—he sought to bridge the gulf between them and the instruments of government. Argenis and his colleagues set out to do this by extending governmental structures to the community level and by delegating power to community governments. Such a shift was authorized by a decentralization clause (Article 184) in the Bolivarian constitution adopted in 1999.

Progress was slow at first. The right-wing coup and bosses' strike of 2002-2003 delayed restructuring. The Libertador plan ran into strong opposition from some Bolivarian national legislators, who accused Argenis of "creating illegal associations."

Finally, in 2006, the community structure was in place: 35 "social territories," which united residents that shared similar problems, a common project, and a sense of belonging to a common environment. The territories ranged in size from 1,000 to 15,000 residents. Each one elected a government through assemblies of its residents, usually choosing between competing slates of candidates. All community government work is voluntary—no salaries are paid—but relevant expenses are reimbursed.

In one of the social territories, skeptical residents declined to name a council. In another, a centre of Libertador's small middle class, the opposition slate was elected. "Many right-wing oppositionists join in community council activity," says Argenis. "They feel they cannot stand aside from the social programs and local projects that the councils carry out…. The opposition's role in local government has helped ease political tensions here."

The people's power structure has two tiers. Each social territory or commune includes smaller and more homogenous communities, each of which has its own communal council. The size of component communities is determined by social geography: urban councils typically unite 200-400 families; rural councils, 20-50 families. The smallest social territory by population (Mont Vernont), is composed of dispersed mountain

hamlets: it therefore includes the largest number of communities. In Libertador, there are 204 such communal councils.

Participatory budget

Each communal council and social territory holds assemblies to choose and prioritize its ten most needed projects for the coming year. The municipal planning council then evaluates the top three proposals from each territory—more than three, if finances permit. A value of 1 to 9 is assigned to each of a number of criteria: number of residents, number who will benefit, cost, how long the request has been pending, the number of previous projects in this community, etc.

This ranking creates a proposed project list that is presented to an assembly in each territory, which can change its priorities and request reconsideration—if for example a favoured project turned out to be impossibly expensive.

Once the project list is decided, the required funds are allocated to the community bodies, which handle administration, buy materials, and engage workers or contractors, giving preference to cooperatives. Community networking and know-how helps keep costs down, and any savings stay in the community for other purposes. Argenis estimates that $1 million a year is saved simply by eliminating private profits.

"For example, a flood control project was approved with a budget of 184 million bolivars [about $90,000]," says Fidel Hernández. "But in fact the community councils did it for 47 million and had lots left over for fixing roads. In another case, the local council got a price of 80 million to bring electricity to a district. But in fact they managed to do three districts for that price. Last year the community councils spent 84% of the municipal budget [for projects]."

Accomplishments

Popular control has steered funding toward small, plain, and inexpensive projects densely spread through local neighborhoods. Urgent human needs have taken priority over infrastructure requirements like road upgrades.

Argenis highlights the 74 primary-care health centres built by neighborhood councils, which at first sometimes even manufactured the bricks. "We had only nine centres before," he says. In addition, Libertador boasts four Integral Diagnostic Centres—small hospitals—"the pride of our community," according to Felix Hernández.. Another community government member, Aixa Silvera, calls the Cuban doctors working in these centres "the most spectacular thing we have in the communities."

Indeed, Libertador led the way in Venezuela by arranging for Cuban

doctors to work in the communities, before this became a national program.

Argenis says that community governments are building 48 primary schools this year—mostly one-room structures serving a neighborhood. There are also now three university campuses in Libertador—part of a national program to "municipalize higher education."

"As for sports, there are now only two or three communities that do not have a minimal installation" which means a playing field.

The citizens of Libertador are also trying to establish cultural centres in each social territory, usually an "open-air amphitheatre." Eight cultural centres are now under construction. In some cases resident assemblies gave building a cultural centre priority over fixing the road or installing street lighting. "You can't have a revolution without beauty," Fidel Hernández says.

The obvious progress is confirmed by two surveys that were taken at the beginning of the community government program and again in May 2007. The first survey showed that the most urgently felt needs were for health care and educational facilities. In the second, no one cited health care as a concern, and almost no one mentioned education. Moreover, "we now have hardly any kids on the streets," says Argenis, "and the problem of homelessness is almost solved."

The Housing Bottleneck

According to official estimates, Venezuela has a shortage of 2.7 million homes, while another 1.3 million dwellings are inadequate home-made shacks. In 2006, 200,000 homes were built—a positive achievement, but far less than what is needed.

Argenis believes that community councils, which feel this urgent need acutely, are best suited to build houses. Sometimes they "build 10, 12, even 15 houses with the money provided for seven," he says.

"But we desperately need raw materials. Our economy was destroyed, and now we don't have the capacity to make the cement blocks, the paint, the ceramic toilets. We're working with Iran, China, and Brazil to meet these needs."

And Venezuela is building six factories to produce plastic building materials—"we have oil, after all," says Argenis. This project, called Petrocasa, will supply materials for 15,000 new houses a year. One of these factories, is close by, in the state of Carabobo.

National expansion

In 2006 Hugo Chávez endorsed the establishment of communal councils as a priority across Venezuela. In January 2007, he declared them

institutions of "people's power," an embryo of a new people's state. An enabling law was passed in April, and there are now more than 10,000 councils across the country.

While vindicating the innovative program in Libertador, this expansion also caused the municipality many headaches. The national government intended the councils to be free of the deadening hand of the traditional state bureaucracy. Among other things, word went out that mayors should not get involved with these people's organizations. This directive might be appropriate in the nearby industrial city of Valencia, ruled by the opposition, but in Libertador it was totally at odds with reality.

Unfortunately, the Carabobo state government, led by critics of Argenis's initiatives, seized on this opening to create problems for Libertador's government. Utilizing its own statewide network of paid social activists, it promoted the notion that communal councils don't need to work with Libertador's larger social territories or with the city government.

"That caused a terrible process of fragmentation and division between the two levels of popular power," says Argenis.

Much effort has gone into knitting the two levels of people's government back together, Argenis says. "When they work together they're unbeatable."

People's power was an element of the constitution reform narrowly defeated in the December 2, 2007, referendum. The communal councils are still authorized under Article 184 of the constitution and the April 2006 legislation, and there is no legal barrier to expanding the structures beyond this framework. However, the referendum setback may encourage the councils' critics.

Bureaucratic obstruction

The community government bodies in Libertador aren't perfect. Among the occasional abuses noted by Argenis:

- Only one community is represented in a social territory council.
- One slate takes all the leadership positions.
- Elected officers take decisions on their own without convening the residents' assembly.
- The assembly functions poorly because of lack of interest.

These can be viewed as growing pains. As community government officer Omaira Carvallo comments, "When people see what is accomplished, it will break through their apathy."

More troubling is the conduct of other branches of government, such as the problems with Carabobo State. Among the many stories of this sort that Argenis tells, the pig manure episode is enough to illustrate

what people's power is up against.

The city government makes special efforts to help Libertador's many farmers, a number of whom raise pigs. Some time ago the Ministry of the Environment banned hog-raising in the municipality because of concerns for water quality, but did not enforce the regulation. Libertador tried to help farmers solve the water problem on their own, by providing septic tanks for environmentally safe treatment of pig manure. The manure's polluting gas discharge was captured and burned for cooking. "This is a miracle," says Argenis. "It cuts out the smell and uses the gas!"

But the ministry intervened and nixed the project, which they said broke their rule against raising pigs. The bureaucratic method could not be better demonstrated: only the formal regulation counted; the real-life problem of manure pollution was of no interest.

What explanations do the ministry provide? "None whatsoever," says Argenis. "Just as we always say: this bureaucracy is eating us alive… We can't change things with this type of state."

Even among inherited municipal officials, "the apathy is barbaric. We have to establish a new conception of a staffer," Argenis says. "I'd like to dissolve the municipal administration … and create a confederation of community governments."

Reflections

At first glance, Venezuela's people's power can seem to be just a formal structure—municipal government on a street level. This is misleading. The councils have appeared and made gains only as part of an immense popular movement on a national level: the Bolivarian revolution.

This revolution was born in the mass mobilizations against the U.S.-backed oligarchy's attempts to overthrow the country's elected government—by a military coup in 2002, by an economic shutdown in 2003, and by an anti-Chavez referendum in 2004. All were defeated by the initiatives of masses of working people.

In Libertador, Argenis recalls, the embryonic community governments acted as defense committees, struggling to ensure that food, cooking gas, and gasoline reached the people. "That was just so wonderful," he says. "Quickly we had a network of more than 200 Bolivarian shops," distributing necessities and helping defend the revolution. Such national struggles were the true birth of people's power.

Venezuela's success at forging constructive ties with other non-imperialist states has also played a role, not just through Cuba's contribution to health services, but above all in building alliances to help fend off, for now, a U.S.-led assault.

The sometimes destructive role of national and state authorities is also

a reminder that the power of working people will not flourish at the street level unless it is consolidated nationally.

Yet the community councils in Libertador call to us, *Sí se puede!* – Yes we can do it! Enlisting the majority, the working people, in government is indeed possible. Venezuela's people's power—while still embryonic—is a living, viable reality.

Venezuela Responds to World Food Crisis

(Socialist Voice, March 18, 2008)

By John Riddell and Suzanne Weiss

The following are major portions of a presentation to members of the National Farmers Union in Grey County, Ontario, March 10, 2007.

The people of Venezuela are today campaigning to rebuild a devastated family farm economy. They have more problems than solutions, but still are making significant progress.

Venezuela is an oil-rich country. But that doesn't mean that Venezuelans are rich: in poor countries, oil brings misfortune. The so-called free market ensured that oil exports were balanced by a flood of cheap imports that stunted Venezuelan manufacturing and devastated its agriculture.

So despite the oil, Venezuela remained poor – its income per person is about one-fifth of Canada's. And a rich minority gets most of it; 65% live in desperate poverty. Over half, unable to get jobs, scrape by in what is called the "informal economy."

For 'holistic rural development'

When Hugo Chávez was elected as Venezuela's president in 1998, only a fraction of Venezuela's once flourishing farming sector was left. There were fewer than 300,000 farm families, and many of them were doing little farming. Much of its richest farmland was no longer utilized. Much was being held idle in huge estates. Agriculture made up only 6% of national production – extremely low for a country so rich in farming potential and so poor in industrial development. Three-quarters of Venezuela's food was imported.

Soon after the election, the Venezuelan people adopted a new constitution that addressed this problem in terms not just of raising farm production but of rebuilding rural communities. It declares:

> "The state will promote conditions for holistic rural development guaranteeing the farming population an adequate level of well be-

ing, as well as their incorporation into national development."

The government stated in 2004 that farming is "the basic foundation for the preservation of a culture" and of "a way of life." ("ALBA and Food Security," Bancoex, February 5)

It is government policy to promote family farming as the best way to achieve this cultural goal and as the most efficient form of agriculture.

In Venezuela, 5% of landowners hold three-quarters of the land. The constitution deplores this situation, declaring that "the predominance of large estates is contrary to the national interest." President Chávez explains this with a biblical quotation from the prophet Isaiah: "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, tell there be no room, and ye be made to dwell alone in the midst of the land."

As Venezuela sees it, reliance on food imports endangers the security of its food supply.

Venezuelan farmers cannot compete with highly subsidized U.S. exports, and with the big lead that U.S. agriculture has developed in technology and infrastructure. But attempts to protect Third World producers are denounced as attacks on "free trade."

Meanwhile, the predatory tactics of a handful of corporate giants are making farmers "more and more dependent on the purchase of expensive inputs of transnational companies."

Land reform

The heart of Venezuela's agricultural program is a land reform that aims to distribute idle land to small farmers or farming cooperatives, using both state-owned land and expropriated portions of private estates with compensation.

The reform is moderate, leaving untouched large estates that are in production. Yet it has led to a wave of violence in the countryside. Assassins in the pay of large landowners have killed almost 200 farm activists. The reform has also met with obstruction from government bureaucrats, judges, and police.

Farmers, who face lawless, chaotic conditions in the countryside, receive weak legal and police support. Infrastructure is lacking – for example, the rural road system is very poor, so it is hard to market products. State officials appointed under the old regime are often unhelpful.

Nonetheless, by 2004, 125,000 families had received inalienable title to four million acres – often land they were already cultivating – and there's been much progress since.

Many of the new farms are independent family enterprises; others are cooperatives, and there's a full-time training program for those who are joining or forming new co-ops. Producer co-ops are mostly small and

often family-based. There are also co-ops that process or transport food.

Close to $1 billion a year has been invested in agricultural development. Low-interest loans have been provided to small farmers. And food production has increased in each of the last three years – 12% in all.

Meanwhile, the government has moved to counter hunger among the poor. It slapped price controls on basic foods. A new network of 14,000 state-run groceries stores, called Mercal, provides cut-rate food in poor districts, and another network of 6,000 community-run kitchens, using donated space and labour, provides free meals each day to a million of Venezuela's neediest.

A visit with Venezuelan farmers

While we were in Venezuela in November and December, we met residents of the town of Libertador, in the state of Caribobo, who had taken up farming on idle land.

We met Maria Morillo, president of a communal government formed by about 200 farm families living in a hill district called Mont Vernont. She told a dramatic story. In the early days of the Bolivarian government, she and her neighbours had occupied an idle farm, refused to accept the landlord's eviction order, fought off an armed attack by his thugs (two farmers were wounded), and finally won title under the land reform law.

Mont Vernont farmers set up communal councils in each of the area's 14 hamlets, which in Venezuela have authority to decide on and administrate local improvements. They worked to bring in health, electricity, schooling, and other services.

Mont Vernont is famous in Liberator for the success of its first electrification project. The farmers got funds to wire up one of their hamlets. By working some angles and contributing some free labour, they managed to stretch the money to cover electrification of not one but three hamlets. Such community control means cheap government.

As president, Maria visits the 14 communities to check on progress. She goes on foot and can reach three hamlets in a day. In these isolated rural communities, everything cries out for action.

We reached another mountain farming community, Las Vegas del Torrito, by the worst road we've ever seen. At one point it dived into a gully and splashed across a stream, obviously passable only in dry weather and only by a truck or four-wheel-drive. Garbage was burning in piles by the side of the road.

There are 23 farm families in Las Vegas. The communal council decided to put human needs before issues such as roads and garbage. Their first project was a community building—a classroom, meeting room, and consulting area for a visiting Cuban doctor. A school is under construc-

tion. They have council assemblies every two weeks with attendance of between 40 and 100.

Bureaucratic obstruction

We also found in Libertador several examples of the obstruction farmers face from a conservative state bureaucracy.

There are small hog raising operations in the municipality, which generate manure that threatens local water supplies. The local government developed a solution: septic tanks that would eliminate pollution and odor while generating gas that can be burned for cooking. But the project was quashed by the ministry of the environment, on the grounds of zoning regulations. There had been other incidents of this sort, like a ministry ban against construction of ponds where small farmers could raise trout.

What explanations do the ministry provide? "None whatsoever," says Libertador mayor Argenis Loreto. "Just as we always say: this bureaucracy is eating us alive… We can't change things with this type of state…. I'd like to dissolve the municipal administration and create a confederation of community governments."

Battling shortages

During our visit, many basic food items were in short supply, especially in the Mercal stores. The shortages were causing discontent.

Partly, this reflects the success of efforts to improve living standards of working people. Venezuela's poor now have more money in hand (more than double, by one estimate), and they are buying food at subsidized prices. They are eating better. Demand for milk has risen 50% in eight years. By another measure, demand for food rose by more than a third in three years.

Corruption is also a factor. Some subsidized food was being diverted from the Mercals and sold privately.

Market forces make matters worse. Scare tactics by the right-wing media have encouraged panic buying. Importers brought in too little food. Distributors resisted price controls by hoarding. Large amounts of food – often subsidized food – were being smuggled out of the country.

Public exasperation was increased by the fact that these problems were all foreseeable.

In recent months, the government has responded decisively. Price controls and import restrictions have been eased. Funds have been allocated to reinvigorate and expand the Mercal chain. Mercal stores have been placed under community control. Most importantly, a large state-owned food distributor has been established to import food on a massive scale for the Mercal network.

World food crisis

President Chávez believes that the food shortages in Venezuela are also symptoms of a looming crisis of supply on a world scale. He recently quoted an article from Canada's *National Post* (January 7, 2008), reporting a speech by a Bank of Montreal investment expert. "A new crisis is emerging, a global food catastrophe," the expert said. Raw food prices are up 22% in a year. Corn prices are up 44%. The U.S. produces more than half the world's corn, and its exports are expected to shut off in three years.

Two dozen companies control world food supplies, says the bank's expert.

Chávez identifies three causes of world food shortage, all of them hard to reverse.

1. An increase in world demand, particularly for meat and dairy.
2. A decline in yields, caused by global warming.
3. "George Bush's crazy plan to use food to make gasoline."

Massive investment

The answer? In Chávez's words, "With the grace of God, we will make Venezuela a powerhouse of food production." Venezuela aims to increase cattle herds 50% in four years; to increase food production 2½ times over. The pace of government investment in agriculture has been stepped up greatly.

Many new socially owned food processing plants are being opened under community control. For example, on January 10, 2008, Chávez opened a milk processing centre, one of the largest in Latin America, in the state of Zulia. The centre's history is typical of many of these projects. It began 47 years ago and was government-owned until 1995. Then it was then sold to an Italian firm, Parmalat, which ran it into the ground. The plant lay idle until the government repurchased it last year.

Zulia is an important cattle-raising area, and the plant will help local dairy farmers market their product. But it takes more than a single plant to create a healthy environment for farming. Alongside the milk plant, Chávez announced an array of measures for Zulia's farmers:

- A centre for genetic support of livestock herds.
- A meatpacking plant.
- A branch of the government's Agrarian Bank, providing low-interest loans to farmers.
- The rebuilding of 226 kilometers of rural roads.
- Creating of a rural planning district, which will implement an integrated plan for supply of electricity, water, schools, health, security, and other services.

Such socially owned processing plants can fit together into a farm

marketing system that cuts out the profiteering private food monopolies. Small farmers get preference in sales to the socially owned processing plants, whose product can be passed on to the state distributor, and then to the Mercal community grocery, and finally to the consumer.

Venezuela's agricultural efforts are also expressed internationally through its alliance with other countries that seek a path independent of U.S. control – an alliance called ALBA (Spanish for "dawn"). One result of this cooperation that we saw is a large vegetable garden in downtown Caracas – a demonstration site that was established with help from Cuba.

A massive challenge

Farmers in Venezuela, as in Canada, are aging. The young generation is mostly in the cities and has mostly lost touch with its farming roots. Venezuela needs to persuade tens of thousands of young people to return to the land. How will this be possible?

It will take more than economic support. For farming to flourish, it needs a rich rural culture. But this is Venezuela, where farmers cannot easily get a truck or tractor, let alone satellite TV and Internet. How can such needs be met in a poor country, with urgent problems on every side crying out for solution?

What's more, the country is locked in conflict and threatened with attack from abroad, and the very survival of the social experiment led by Chávez is in question. Farmers cannot always count on the sympathy of government bureaucrats or police. And Zulia, where Chávez opened the milk processing plant, is often hit by right-wing violence initiated by paramilitary gangs that cross the border from neighboring Colombia.

So it won't be surprising if Venezuela finds it difficult to achieve the high goals it has set for the expansion of food production. But its people deserve credit for setting the right tasks and tackling them with energy.

Support for small-scale farmers and rebuilding of family farming is an urgent priority worldwide. In this struggle, farmers in Canada share a common interest with the popular movement led by Hugo Chávez and with Venezuelan farmers.

Venezuela We Are With You Coalition
Coalición Venezuela Estamos Contigo

A Toronto-based coalition of organizations and individuals
with various points of view and approaches,
united in support of the Bolivarian Revolution.

http://venezuelawearewithyou.blogspot.com/

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