

Hugo Chavez Frias (1954-2013): The king is dead, long live the revolution?

Peadar O'Grady



Hugo Chavez
1954 - 2013

The death earlier this year of Hugo Chavez at the age of 58 prompts immediate questions regarding his legacy and his successors. Chavez will be remembered fondly by many on the left for his dedicated opposition to imperialism, his championing of welfare reforms to successfully reduce poverty and improve public services in Venezuela particularly in health, education and housing as well as for his support for community organizations, cooperatives, land occupations and experiments in self-management in industry. Venezuela now has the lowest level of inequality in Latin America. In 2011 the inequality rating scale, the Gini coefficient, was 0.39 in Venezuela compared to 0.52 in Brazil¹. There will, however, also be deserved criticism for his deeply erroneous support for authoritarian leaders like Gaddafi, Assad and Ahmadinejad, for his failure to build a party of the left or to directly take on Venezuelan big business who still control

the majority of non-oil industry including banks, telecommunications and media.

In their obituaries of Chavez, the mainstream press continued their generally biased and at times vitriolic assessment of him with none of the restraint from speaking ill of the dead afforded to Thatcher or Reagan following their deaths, despite their murderous policies in Latin America. The economist headlined: 'Chavez' Rotten legacy' and described his period in office as an 'oil-fuelled autocracy'². Typical stereotypes of him were of a laughable, incompetent buffoon or a cynical, sinister authoritarian (a caudillo). On hearing of his death world leaders like Obama spoke of their support for democracy and human rights implying Chavez didn't, hypocritically skipping over the long history of US support for coups and dictatorships in Latin America, including George Bush's for the unsuccessful coup against Chavez himself in Venezuela in 2002 as well as, more recently, Obama's support for the successful coup against Chavez's ally President Zelaya in Honduras in 2009. When questioning the validity of the vote in the recent elections in Venezuela there was no mention of Chavez's perfect record of fair elections, highly praised by even former US president Jimmy Carter, not to speak of the fraudulent election of George Bush against Al Gore, when no recount was held even in Florida where vote irregularities were alleged.

Chavez's successor, Nicolas Maduro, now faces the task of winning the leadership of Chavez supporters, uniting the PSUV party (United Socialist Party of

¹Robert Plummer (2013), 'Hugo Chavez leaves Venezuela in economic muddle', *BBC News*

²Anon (2013), 'Venezuela after Chavez; Now for the reckoning', *Economist*

Venezuela) and facing down criticism of inflation, corruption and crime as well as opposition mobilization of protests and the renewed threat of a military coup.

Historic or hysteric?

Socialists are generally skeptical of explaining major social changes in any country or region in terms of what this or that office-holder or political leader did or did not do but leadership does still matter. So how does Chavez measure up under the cold gaze of history?

Chavez' initial success was a product of the rising anger with an IMF-imposed austerity programme and a political vacuum caused by the simultaneous collapse of the 40 year rule of a power deal between Fine Gael-Labour type parties and of Soviet-bloc communism with the resulting disorientation of the left internationally. Neoliberal 'reforms' attacking workers' rights and opening up Venezuela to foreign investment and exploitation had failed across Latin America leading the 1980s to be widely regarded as the 'lost decade'; lost to development and progress with economies flailing and living standards falling.

In Venezuela for 40 years from 1958 to 1998 there was a power-sharing arrangement between the two dominant parties: Accion Democratica (AD) a social democratic party (with a base in the corrupt union federation CTV) and Copei a christian democrat party. A list system and appointed mayors and governors kept out the left, mainly centred around the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) and its spin offs La Causa Radical and the Movement to Socialism (MAS). When the anger of the poor and the working class exploded onto the streets in mass demonstrations in 1989 (which became known as the Caracazo) in the capital Caracas, the military and po-

lice were sent in by the government and massacred up to 2,000 protestors.³

Horrified by the army's involvement and the scale of the repression, and with the left unable to respond, a group of progressive army officers began to organise a coup which was led by Chavez, then a young army colonel, in 1992. Despite this coup's failure it was well-enough supported for the authorities to concede Chavez's request to go on radio to call off his supporters when he famously said that would be all 'for now'. Released from prison two years later in 1994 he decided to contest the presidential elections and stunned everyone by winning with a clear 56% of the vote in 1998. Chavez's easy, confident and earnest style and his obvious regard for the poor Venezuelan masses won him respect and a political following. In the traditional racist categories of the Spanish colonists he was a mestizo a dark-skinned descendant of mixed African, Amerindian and European descent; that is, he looked like the poorest classes and not like the traditional rulers who would be criollo or lighter-skinned descendants of 'pure' Spanish stock.

Chavez set about reforming the constitution and setting up a new parliament or constituent assembly and re-presented himself for election which he won easily. Faced with a resistant civil service and state industry bureaucracy of opposition supporters Chavez set up different 'Missions' to channel money directly to social projects without having the delays which would occur if funding had to go through the corrupt and inefficient government departments. Oil is Venezuela's main industry, accounting for one third of GDP and half of government revenue. Chavez part-nationalized sectors of the oil company PDVSA so that the majority of Venezuela's oil was state owned and he

³Lee Sustar (2007), 'Where is Venezuela going?', *International Socialist Review*, July-August

raised the taxes and royalties.

Masses take to the stage

If, as Trotsky put it, the key feature of a revolution is ‘the direct interference of the masses in historic events’⁴ then the revolution in Venezuela began in 2002. After 4 years of Chavez government in 2002 the rich were concerned by the increasing confidence of the poor and the strength of their support for Chavez. Chavez’s hydrocarbons law in 2001 raised the royalty rate for foreign oil operators from 17% to 30% (as with Ireland’s corporation tax, special deals had meant effective royalty rates were as little as 1%). It was only after the coup that Chavez moved to fire the 40% of senior managers and technicians obstructing state control of PDVSA.⁵ Opposition politicians used a protest march on April 11th to launch a coup attempt. When a countermarch by Chavez supporters was fired on by unidentified snipers sections of the army supporting the coup used the violence as an excuse to intervene. Chavez was arrested and the lie was spread in opposition media that he had resigned. In fact he was imprisoned on an island off the Venezuelan coast.

The same slums that had exploded on to the streets in the Caracazo of 1989 sprang into action after a day of police repression on the streets and the banning of protests. From the early morning of April 13th they came in their thousands and tens of thousands until a million protestors surrounded the miraflores presidential palace to demand their president be freed and reinstated. Fearing an insurrection, the coup leaders, headed by Calderon leader of

the employers’ organization ‘Fedecameras’, who had assumed the presidency, fled and Chavez resumed the presidency. The excellent documentary film: ‘The revolution will not be televised’ directed by Irish filmmakers Donncha O’Briain and Kim Bartley is required viewing and brilliantly displays the role of the masses in turning the tide in the conflict, despite more conservative accounts seeing the switching back-and-forth of support by the army as the decisive factor.⁶

The rich and the PDVSA managers and other employers retaliated 6 months later with a lock-out in the oil industry which was defeated when oil workers restarted production and broke the lock-out. As Mike Gonzalez describes it:

Once again the defeat of the lock-out was the direct result of mass mobilisation across the country. Local communities joined trade unionists in mass pickets to defend oil, gas and electricity installations; the social movements organized supplies, transport and distribution of goods across the country, and political debates raged in universities and schools. And once again a major ruling-class assault was defeated by mass action.⁷

Despite real economic damage and the only period of negative growth in the Chavez years, a surge of activism and support for the revolution followed these two victories and gave an impetus to community organizing and economic reforms culminating in the rise of ‘Community coun-

⁴ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p17

⁵Iain Bruce, 2008, *The Real Venezuela*, p20

⁶Donncha O’Briain and Kim Bartley, 2003, *The Revolution will not be televised* (documentary film)

⁷Mike Gonzalez, 2009, ‘Chavez ten years on’, *International Socialism Journal*, January 2009

⁸Iain Bruce, 2008, *The Real Venezuela*, p42-3

cils', land occupations and experiments in worker's self-management.⁸

A rising price of oil, ironically due in part to the US war in the middle east, boosted government revenue and allowed the launching of the 'missions' in 2003.⁹ Oil deals with Cuba meant an 'oil-for-doctors' arrangement that saw 20,000 Cuban doctors and other health workers coming to Venezuela to start up primary care clinics that eventually served the 18 million poorest of the 26 million population, the majority of whom had never had any health services before. Hunger and illiteracy were eradicated in Venezuela in a matter of years and the numbers going to university were multiplied five fold.

Venezuela's agriculture had collapsed in the 60s and 70s as a result of the oil boom but, despite having some of the best agricultural land in the region, very little food was grown in Venezuela with more than 70% imported.¹⁰ 80% of the land was owned by 5% of the population and only 12% of the population lived in rural areas. Land occupations increasingly won success in expropriating private land, though most grants were for public land.

Socialism in one factory

While Chavez was preoccupied with the recall election of 2004 which he won with a comfortable 63% of the vote, there were signs of radicalization in local organization in communities and workplaces. The state oil company as we have seen was channeling funds directly to the missions for health, education and housing etc but also towards small cooperatives producing food and clothes which were encouraged to become autonomous. While PDVSA was

central to this progress, the top layers of managers having been cleared out in 2004, the management style was still rather orthodox and top down. It was in the state owned aluminium factory, Alcasa, that one of the most large-scale experiments of 'co-management' were carried out. The newly appointed president of Alcasa in 2004, Carlos Lanz, explained that unlike the Soviet model with central planning or the western social democratic model with workers' share owning and, largely symbolic, worker directors:

We see co-management as tied to workers' control of the factory as a proposal for transition towards socialism, towards another system of production.¹¹

Elected spokespeople, works committees deciding on priorities and methods of work as well as mass assemblies, meant control of production rather than just minor ownership or distribution was really being implemented initially. However, a combination of market forces, the success of oppositionists in union and factory elections as well as a real ambiguity among pro-Chavez forces (sometimes due to a desire to control contracts and kickbacks) demoralized the most radical workers involved in co-management and smaller factory occupations. Nationalisations of industry like steel, television or electricity supply and especially PDVSA were carried out with massive compensation to private owners and not further involved in the 'co-management' experiment which, isolated in a handful of factories, failed to progress. Just as Chavez announced his plan for 'socialism in the 21st century' in 2005 he

⁹Iain Bruce, 2008, *The Real Venezuela*, p3

¹⁰Iain Bruce, 2008, *The Real Venezuela*, p47

¹¹Iain Bruce, 2008, *The Real Venezuela*, p106

¹²Iain Bruce, 2008, *The Real Venezuela*, p123

was silent about supporting workers' control of the factories emphasising community councils instead.¹²

The creation of a new party to bring together all the pro-Chavista factions did nothing to advance popular power. Though a stunning 6 million joined, the party is ideologically vague and lacks democratic processes or accountability. A focus on defending Chavez and electoral battles frequently detracted from real debates on wealth distribution and democracy from below.

In the aftermath of his death the Venezuelan revolution can boast real success in reducing poverty and improving public services as well as mass mobilizations to defeat the conservative forces of the right but now the challenge is for the revolution to gain momentum again. True revolutions entail real changes in class relations that is in who really controls the resources of wealth and power. Venezuelan workers, the poor and the indigenous have seen both their own power in victory but also demoralizing defeats. With this experience and some revolutionary currents such as in the UNT trade union federation there is a real prospect for a left formation to break away from the PSUV. However there is also a concern about a resurgence of electoral support for the right on issues

of inflation and corruption. The challenge to Chavez's successor, Nicols Maduro, may come from the right-wing oppositionists or indeed from within the ranks of the PSUV from Diosdado Cabello, the rich former army officer and distrusted ex-governor of Miranda state.

Chavez rightly deserves a place in history as a champion of the poor and a charismatic leader but his limitations are the political limitations of 'left nationalism'; that is he represents the left-wing limit of what parties like Sinn Fein could ever achieve. Real progress in Venezuela as in Ireland will never come from above, from the state. It will have to be won from below, from the organized struggle both in communities and in workplaces for control of services and production and the building of a revolutionary party that can take on the task of confronting the profiteers of capital at home and building solidarity with like-minded currents abroad. I think the fairest analysis of Chavez is that breaking through his own political limitations, in the interests of the mass of workers, indigenous and the poor internationally, is what he was, with tremendous energy and dedication, trying to do.

Hasta la victoria siempre. La lucha continua.

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