

Comment on Venezuela and Bolivia

[The comments below were presented to the International Committee of the Fourth International in February 2006. The text is reconstructed from notes.]

First I need another disclaimer. These remarks definitively do not reflect the collective views of comrades I have been collaborating with around Brazil. Judging from informal conversations, most of them would have a decidedly different viewpoint.

I want to make a few remarks about our overall framework for understanding events in Venezuela, which I think are equally applicable to Bolivia. I agree with D. when he says that there is a dynamic of permanent revolution unfolding in Venezuela. But I will approach the question from a different angle.

In our earlier discussion on the world situation one comrade expressed the thought that a process of socialist revolution was taking place in Venezuela, but Chavez does not know how to bring it to a successful consummation, or words to that effect. The implication seemed to be that we would know how if we were in power in Venezuela. I want to raise a serious question concerning that assumption. If members of the Fourth International were in power today in Venezuela we would have to discover how to move forward, in collaboration with the mass movement. Chavez is in a similar position.

There is another possible implication of such a statement: That Chavez's lack of understanding about how to move forward represents a subjective obstacle to the revolutionary process. In that case the task is to construct an alternative leadership and win the masses away from its present misleader.

I think such an approach is mistaken. Even "sectarian" would not be too strong a term. Clearly the present process would not have gotten as far as it has without Chavez's leadership. I cannot see any reason why we should assume he cannot carry it further, whatever the limitations of his present perspectives. Indeed, in our earlier discussions I have already spoken about one key point here which should make us optimistic, even if we remain cautious: Chavez's demonstrated willingness to rely on a mobilized mass movement when confronted with the counterrevolution. He obviously has no illusions in the old armed forces as any kind of guarantee for "democracy." Clearly, then, he has already demonstrated his ability to learn some important lessons from the revolutionary process as it unfolds.

I often like to say to comrades that the key to effective revolutionary leadership is not what you already know in advance. It is what you are capable of learning through your experience. True, we need a basic threshold of theoretical understanding. So we cannot disparage education of that kind. But life has proven that revolutionaries never really know what they will need to know in advance of a revolutionary process. It is even a bit of a handicap if you think that you do, because it tends to make you too rigid, unable to learn from events. The best illustration of this dialectic, it seems to me, is Russia in 1917.

In February and March of 1917 the Bolsheviks did not know how to move the process of the Russian Revolution forward. They had to discover how to do this as the revolution unfolded, in collaboration with the mass movement (in particular with the workers and soldiers, already organized into Soviets).

So clearly, it is reasonable to raise some doubts about Chavez's individual role—past, present, and future. No one is definitively proven until the task is completed. But until we are *compelled* by events to conclude otherwise, it seems to me that Chavez should get the benefit of the doubt.

This is my main point. Any perspective we might develop about Venezuela should not stand *counterposed* to Chavez and his leadership, unless and until we are truly compelled by the process to conclude that his leadership is in default. Yes, revolutionary Marxism has an important programmatic contribution to make here. But it's a contribution we make in the context of, and as an ally of, the process presently underway, not in opposition or counterposition to it. Likewise in Bolivia it seems to me.

I would suggest that we conceive of the overall process as one where we (the historically educated revolutionary Marxists), the masses, and the present leaderships (Chavez and Morales) are all going through a learning experience together. We are all striving to learn, together, from that collective experience, and thereby end up with the understanding we need to combine the national liberation struggle and socialist revolution in Venezuela and Bolivia. The best outcome, what we should be working toward, is that each of these three elements move forward together to reach a common collective understanding of what to do next.

I sense, however, that there is a tendency in our discussions to see ourselves, the revolutionary Marxists, as somehow in a counterposed camp from Chavez and Morales, expecting a betrayal, or at the very least a benevolent incompetence that will lead to defeat. Comrades talk as if our goal is to work for the moment when the masses will break with Chavez, that this is a key and necessary turning point in the Venezuelan revolutionary process. That seems wrong to me.

True, it *may* prove to be the way things unfold. But if that turns out to be true it will be a setback for the revolution in Venezuela, not an advance. If we see it as some kind of necessary stage in order for the process to advance we cannot help but develop a sectarian orientation

The same considerations arise in terms of Bolivia. The picture that has been developed in the reports to this meeting, and in the international press, is of a Morales who is ready to capitulate. If he hasn't capitulated yet it is only because he is being dragged along by the mass movement. But that simply does not fit the picture I actually see. I note in particular Morales's connections with his indigenous origins, his *militant* position in support of legalizing coca production, and his commitment to a literacy campaign and constituent assembly as two of the first acts of his presidency. These are not things that mark a

politician who is just waiting for his chance to betray, or who is on a slippery slope to betrayal unless he is kept in check. Something is wrong with that picture.

Despite all of the limitations of Morales's political perspective in the past (and those limitations need to be acknowledged) as president he is going to be pulled in two directions simultaneously: toward his promises to the masses for genuine change, on the one hand, and toward his (up to the present moment) limited (primarily electoral) vision of social change on the other. He has actually been extremely consistent in each of these orientations. There is now going to be a decisive showdown, and one of the two will have to overcome the other. Is Morales capable of going through a radical evolution based on his genuine support for policies that point in the direction of social liberation? We certainly should not base our policy on the assumption that he is not. Far better for us, and for the Bolivian masses, if he is.

As in the case of Venezuela and Chavez, so long as there is any reasonable doubt we should be giving the benefit of that doubt to Morales and working for a positive evolution of his presidency—while still remaining conscious that this is not assured, that an alternative course might need to be charted at some point. It seems particularly important to me to give Morales the benefit of the doubt at this stage in our public articles and declarations. So we should reconsider the tone of recent coverage in the international press, it seems to me.