

The political dynamics in Latin America - Sebastien Ville

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Iain Bruce, After Venezuela's elections: defeat for the right, challenges for the left

At the beginning of October, much of the world's media descended on Caracas hoping to report on the end of an authoritarian regime. "Too close to call" was the refrain on almost every network. Market analysts at places like Barclay's Capital urged investors to pile into Venezuelan debt on the assumption of an opposition victory. Months earlier Robert Zoellick, then still head of the World Bank, revelled in the certainty that Chavez' days were numbered. Better still, Chavez' defeat would put a stop to Venezuela's subsidies to Cuba and Nicaragua and spell the end for those 'regimes' too, bringing "an opportunity to make the Western Hemisphere the first democratic hemisphere". When those pictures came out a week before the poll, of tens of thousands at the final opposition rally, it seemed they might be right. Many of us had forgotten that the Venezuelan opposition turned out dozens of equally massive rallies and marches back in 2002 to 2004. Even among left activists there were more and more of us mumbling about whether there was really much to save in the Bolivarian revolution.

In the event, of course, Chavez won with 55.08 per cent to 44.30 per cent, on a turnout of 80.5 per cent. It's worth repeating those numbers. After nearly 14 years in office, in the face of enormous media hostility outside and inside the country, a sitting president won by a margin of 11 percent; in a country where voting is voluntary (unlike many other Latin American), an unprecedented four fifths of eligible voters cast their ballot, including a huge contingent of first-time voters, meaning both young people and some of the most marginalised sectors who traditionally never registered. And no one even hinted that this was anything but the cleanest of ballots. Compare these figures with the U.S. election just past and the difference is striking. One footnote figure is also striking: the only 'far left' candidate, Orlando Chirino of the PSL, a coalition of small, trotskyst currents, got 4 thousand votes nationwide, or 0.02%.

So how did it happen and what does it mean?

First the Venezuelan opposition did put up a more united and credible alternative than it has in the past. It toned down its more rabid, sometimes overtly racist rhetoric, and adopted a smoother, centrist, social liberal posture: 'back to the free market, but let's keep some of the social policies'. This helped it win over a number of disenchanted Chavez supporters, although the increase in the size of the electorate makes it difficult to tell just how big such a "defection" was. It has of course always been true, to paraphrase Fidel Castro, that there cannot be 6 million oligarchs in Venezuela. Nonetheless, the opposition base remains firmly anchored in the rather white, middle and upper middle class neighbourhoods of eastern Caracas and their equivalents in cities like Maracaibo, Merida and Valencia. Around them orbit larger, more marginalised petty-bourgeois sectors and the least organised or politicised parts of the working class and urban poor. This hasn't fundamentally changed in ten years and in this sense the opposition's new face has so far failed.

This means that tensions within the opposition could well resurface around the state elections in December and the municipal ones next April. On one side are the more aggressive

coup-mongering sections of the opposition, who want to get rid of Chavez by any means, and who probably would have cried fraud this time if the margin of his victory had been smaller. Alongside them are the larger electoral blocks, now led by Primero Justicia, but including remnants of the traditional parties like Accion Democratica and Copei, who have a vested interest in increasing their share of local, regional and parliamentary posts, and who therefore, for the time being, have adopted a more 'democratic' stance.

The failure and division on the Venezuelan right, and the spectacular self-delusion of the global establishment over the likely outcome of this presidential election, are symptomatic of a larger disarray on the right in Latin America, and in imperialism's policies towards the region.

From the 1990s through to the beginning of this millennium, Washington had a coherent project for Latin America: free trade plus controlled, formal democracy, and a 'war on drugs' to deal with any exceptional insurgency. At the beginning of his first term, George W. Bush made his maiden trip abroad to Mexico, to emphasise that his attention would be focussed southwards. After September 11, that went out the window. The grand project of a Free Trade Area of the Americas was finally defeated at Mar del Plata in 2005. Since then successive U.S. administrations have seemed bereft of any alternative.

At the beginning of his tenure, Barack Obama briefly flirted with the soft left of Lula in Brazil and Michelle Bachelet in Chile, but his attention soon strayed. In this last election, Latin America all but disappeared off the horizon. Mitt Romney occasionally boasted he would sign lots of new free trade agreements with Latin America – as if he hadn't been watching anything over the last decade. Obama made occasional references to the supposed 'war on drugs' in Mexico. But both candidates avoided the issue if they could.

The 2009 coup in Honduras looked like it might herald a new offensive from the United States and the right across the region. It was followed by the revelation of Washington's plans for new military bases in Colombia and the election of right-wing presidents in Chile, Panama, Costa Rica. But the offensive faltered. There were divisions among the competing, middle-level cliques that now ran Washington's Latin American policy. Most of the region's increasingly autonomous bourgeois governments reacted with hostility. The Obama administration was left looking more diplomatically isolated than ever.

At the same time, Washington's right-wing allies in the region have faced mounting social resistance. The huge movement led by students in Chile is the most important, but the recent revolt in Colon, Panama, forcing President Ricardo Martinelli to withdraw plans to privatise land in the continent's largest free-trade zone, is emblematic of a wider mood. Even in Mexico and Colombia, right-wing hegemony has been dented, with the thrashing of the PAN in the former and President Santos' shift to the centre in the latter. The peace talks now underway in Cuba with Colombia's FARC guerrillas may signal a defeat for one kind of Latin American left. But they could open the lid on some of the region's most potent social struggles.

In this context, last June's parliamentary coup in Paraguay looks more like a wounded beast lashing out than the continuation of a concerted strategy.

The reason for this relative failure of the right is clear. Latin America is still the part of the world where the challenge to neoliberal hegemony – that is imperialism – has gone furthest. This remains true even after the extraordinary mobilizations in

the Arab world and Europe since 2011. Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution has been the key component here: first, because it showed, in practice, that a break with neoliberal priorities was possible; second, because for the first time since the collapse of the soviet block it opened up a discussion about socialism as the framework for any alternative, under the heading "socialism of the 21st century". In this context, there is no doubt that Chavez' victory is a victory for all of us on the left, and an important one.

None of this should be cause for complacency. If the right has failed to mount a coherent counter-attack, the Bolivarian left has also run into serious problems.

Latin America's challenge to neoliberalism has broadly three pillars. First came the waves of social struggles, by students, indigenous communities, peasant organisations, environmental campaigns and movements of the urban poor – but relatively few industrial or trade union struggles. These express a wider loss of credibility among tens of millions of people of the free-market prescriptions of what used to be called the Washington consensus. Within this, and under the influence particularly of the indigenous movements and the organisations of Via Campesina, the last few years have seen a growing ecologist and even eco-socialist awareness.

The second pillar comprises the governments of the Bolivarian Alliance, ALBA, that emerged directly or indirectly out of these struggles, principally Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, plus Cuba.

The third pillar also reflects, in a distorted way, the popular rejection of neoliberal hegemony. But it subordinates this to the interests of a newly assertive local bourgeoisie that simply wants greater benefits and autonomy within the existing globalized economy. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Peru all fit in here.

The relations between these three components are shifting. The outcomes are hard to predict. But it is far from certain they will be positive.

At the continental level, we have seen repeated confrontations between social movements and the Bolivian government of Evo Morales, and a swerve to the right by the Correa administration in Ecuador. This means there is now a deepening rift between Latin America's most important social movement, the indigenous one (which has plenty of internal differences of its own) and the ALBA axis of progressive governments.

Inside Venezuela, in addition to uncertainties over Chavez' health, many left observers have noted growing disenchantment among the revolution's supporters as conservative, bureaucratic or just plain opportunist and corrupt elements strengthen their grip within the Bolivarian government. Still the outcome is uncertain. Revolutionaries in the Marea Socialista current describe how the election was won. First there was a far larger and more combative popular mobilization than expected at the final Chavez rally, changing the tone of a lacklustre campaign. Then on the day, as Bolivarian officials began to panic at worrying early signs from voting stations, the final hours saw a massive surge in turnout from the poor barrios of Caracas and other cities. Marea likened it to the masses descending from the shanty towns to defeat the coup against Chavez in 2002.

Another potentially positive sign came at Chavez' first cabinet meeting after the election, on 20 October. Chavez made a withering critique of the revolution's problems that echoed arguments made by revolutionaries inside and outside Venezuela. Quoting Marxist texts, he argued that the basis of economic production has to change, if the revolution's gains are not to be swallowed up in a sea of capitalism. That, he said, means

radically democratising economic activity, because socialism is democracy. By the same token, the urgent task of building popular power through communes could not be entrusted to a ministry. It had to be done by communities themselves. And Venezuela's public media had to be overhauled to support these priorities of radicalising democracy.

The trouble is, Chavez has said similar things before in the last six years. But it hasn't happened yet.

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Michael Löwy, Brazil. The PT: From Lula to Dilma

Brazil is an immense country in terms of population (180 million in habitants), area (half of Latin America) and natural resources. And yet it is a country where the majority of the population live in the direst poverty. In fact, in a recent United Nations international ranking, Brazil emerged as on the most unequal countries on the planet, a country where the gap between the privileged minority and the impoverished majority is one of the greatest. According to some observers, Brazil is a kind of "SwissIndia", where the rich live as in Switzerland while the poor live as in India.

[...]

The long march of the PT

How did the PT emerge? From 1978, the year of big workers strikes in the suburbs of Sao Paulo, several "authentic" trade union leaders began to agitate for the idea of an autonomous workers' party, probably starting from a reflection on the experience of the strike itself, of its confrontation with the military police apparatus of the state, and for some a first balance sheet of the social struggles in the recent history of the country (since 1964). In October 1979 the first National Meeting of the PT took place in São Bernardo do Campo, a proletarian bastion of the metalworkers union, led by Luis Inacio da Silva, "Lula"; this was concretely the moment of foundation of the new party, and the election of its first provisional leadership took place. A brief political statement was approved at this conference, clearly affirming the goal of the party: "The PT fights so that economic and political power is directly exercised by the workers. It is the only way of ending exploitation and oppression". At the same time, the document called on "all democratic forces to constitute a broad mass front against the dictatorial regime". The PT thus proposed to fight for the formation of a single union federation, stressing that "its construction necessitates the overthrow of the current trade union structure subjected to the states".

In April-May 1980 the big strike of 250,000 metal workers broke out in São Bernardo; following the police and military intervention — arrest of main leaders, military intervention in the

union — the movement was stopped; but it revealed, by its exceptional length (42 days) and its capacity of mass organisation (daily meetings of tens of thousands of workers), the surprising force of the new unionism. In May-June of this year a new National Conference of the PT met, with delegates from 22 states in Brazil, representing approximately 30,000 members of the party. A Manifesto and a Programme were approved, defining the PT as “the real political expression of all those exploited by the capitalist system” and as a mass, broad, open, democratic party. However, the PT was still far from having an elaborated “doctrine”: many programmatic questions and definitions were deliberately left open to allow a broader debate and a progressive “ripening” of the activists as a whole. The PT candidate, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, lost the presidential elections of 1988, 1994 and 1998, beaten by the candidates of the neoliberal bourgeoisie (Collor de Mello and then F.H. Cardoso). Despite these defeats, the PT won several important municipalities in the country, and even some state governments. And it implemented, in the localities it managed, forms of rank and file democracy, like the famous “participatory budget”. However there was a certain institutionalisation of the party and starting from the mid 1990s, an increasingly strong tendency, in the majority current of the PT leadership, to pragmatism and political and programmatic “deradicalisation”. The socialist programme of 1990 was put on the back burner, and increasingly the party leadership rallied to social democracy, despite the opposition of the left currents in the Party — notably “Socialist Democracy” the tendency of the PT affiliated to the Fourth International, led by Raul Pont, the mayor of Porto Alegre. The electoral defeats convinced Lula to change his strategy. In 2002 he imposed on a reticent PT a broad policy of alliances with bourgeois force, taking as his candidate for vice-president an industrialist, José Alencar, leader of the right wing Liberal Party. He was elected at the second round, with more than 61% of the vote, against José Serra, the candidate of the PSDB supported by Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

A social liberal government

The victory of Lula in the elections of 2002 provoked an immense hope of change among the poor and the oppressed in Brazil. However, five years later the balance sheet was globally negative; rather than a big change there was continuity with the previous economic policies. Certainly, not everything in Lula’s period of office was negative: by the programme “Zero Hunger” and other social programmes, billions of dollars were distributed to the poorest, in various forms of aid (food aid, scholarships and so on). But in terms of neoliberal macroeconomic policies, he did not emerge from the framework established by his predecessors. The symbol of this continuity was the president of the all powerful Central Bank, which determines the country’s interest rates and monetary policy; Henrique Meirelles, a senator from Cardoso’s PSDB party and former director of the Boston Bank. Trusted by international financial capital, he enjoyed the unflinching support of the president, who imposed a “provisional measure” giving him the status of Minister and thus immunity certain judicial investigations for financial irregularities.

This neoliberal orthodoxy was reflected in practice by subordination to the demands of the IMF, the establishment of a huge tax surplus allowing payment of the external and internal debt, high interest rates to attract investment, neoliberal pensions reform, massive subsidies of export oriented agro-business rather than family agriculture, the opening of the country to Monsanto GMOs. Without speaking of various corruption scandals

involving members of the government and the leaders or deputies of the PT. We can define the policy of Lula and his government as social liberal. Social liberalism is not identical to neoliberalism as such: it maintains certain social concerns, attempts to improve a little the fate of the poorest and it prefers dialogue with the social movements — or to co-opt them — rather than to repress them. But on the essential bases of economic policy, there is no substantial difference. And on certain questions — pensions for example — it was capable of imposing neoliberal policies that the right had not succeeded in pushing through because of PT opposition! One example illustrates the logic of social liberalism: 10 % of the budget for agricultural aid was distributed to millions of families involved in small peasant production — responsible for most of the country’s food cultivation — while 90 % went to a handful of big proprietors in capitalist agro-business, producing for export.

In 2003, three deputies and the senator Heloísa Helena were expelled from the PT for voting against the neoliberal pensions reform. They then formed a new Party, the P-SOL, Party of Socialism and Liberty, which identified with the PT’s original socialist and democratic programme. It received support from groups of Trotskyist origin, Christian socialist activists (like Plínio de Arruda Sampaio, one of the best known Christian intellectuals in the country, author of an agrarian reform programme supported by the movement of the landless), and a number of well known trades unionists and left intellectuals, like Carlos Nelson Coutinho, Leandro Konder, Chico de Oliveira and Ricardo Antunes. The PSOL activists mostly originated from left PT currents, but most of the supporters of these tendencies — notably the great majority of the “Socialist Democracy” current — remained in the PT and in government. They were up to a point critical of Lula’s neoliberal policies, but remained prisoners of governmental solidarity. To say that the Lula government is social-liberal means also that it did not remedy the “social fracture”, the gigantic gap which separates the oligarchy from the masses in Brazil. The president and most of the ministers, whether from the PT or the other parties of the majority coalition, shared the conviction that there is no alternative economic policy to the neoliberal status quo, the “Washington Consensus”.

Certainly at the beginning some ministers or higher civil servants had followed a more autonomous orientation based on national development, the internal market, the defence of Brazilian industry; however the main representative of this “developmentist” tendency, Carlos Lessa, director the important National Bank for Social and Economic Development (BNDES), was forced to resign.

Criticism by Frei Betto

Among those who left the government was the liberation theologian Frei Betto, who was one of the leaders of the Zero Hunger programme. He has drawn a lucid balance sheet of his experience and the government itself in his book “A mosca azul. Reflexão sobre o poder” (Editora Rocco, Rio de Janeiro 2006). A Dominican priest who was imprisoned for five years (1969-1974) under the military dictatorship for having aided revolutionary militants to hide, and a personal friend of Lula since the late 1970s, Frei Betto was a faithful “fellow traveller” of the PT, ironically stating that he did not join it because he did not want the parties to reproduce the vices of the churches. During its early years, he says the PT had an ideological coherence and ethical principles, as well as a strategic objective: the workers to power, the construction of socialism. Imperceptibly, through the 1990s,

these original colours lost their shine and the PT became distanced both from the social movements and its initial objectives, privileging instead the positions of institutional power. Betto attributes this change in grand part to the fall of the Berlin wall, which obscured the utopian horizon of the PT and its socialist perspective. This is the only argument in the book which strikes me as debatable: in fact most PT cadres, in various ways, did not have the countries of so called “actually existing socialism” as their central ideological reference point. And in 1990, one year after the fall of the wall the PT Congress approved a document reaffirming in a more categorical form the anti-capitalist and socialist commitment of the Party. In any case, Frei Betto was greatly enthused by Lula’s victory in the 2002 elections, and agreed to be one of the leaders of the “Zero Hunger” programme. Two years later he resigned, believing that the government had essentially become the hostage of the dominant élites and financial markets. Betto notes that while in the trade unions Lula had shown he could insert himself in an impure structure without being co-opted, he had not succeeded in doing so in government. Shortly after Betto’s departure from government the scandal of hidden payments of the PT broke out : “a small leading nucleus of the PT had succeeded in a few years in doing what the right had not been able to do over several decades, even in the darkest years of the dictatorship: demoralising the left”. But for Betto, worse still than the corruption was seeing the fear faced with the diktats of the financial market vanquish hope.

What happened? The thirst for power and the adaptation to the religion of the market led to the loss of strategic perspective and the collapse of the historic horizon. Power ceased to be an instrument of social change and became — as predicted by Robert Michels in his classic study on mass parties — an end in itself. As Betto observes “Politics becomes hateful when it loses the utopian horizon”.

Lula mark 2 and Dilma Roussef

What happened in the 2006 presidential elections? Popular disappointment prevented Lula from being elected in the first round. In the second round he steered his discourse to the left, denouncing his opponent’s privatisation plans. . He was comfortably re-elected at the second round, with around 61 % of the vote against 39 % for the candidate of the right wing coalition (PSDB-PFL), Geraldo Alckmin. Rather than popular enthusiasm, Lula’s success resulted from the fear aroused by Alckmin, a representative of the hard neoliberal right, close to Opus Dei) known for his pro US positions, his repressive policy of criminalisation of social movements and his support for a policy of privatisation of public enterprises . The candidate for the PSOL, Heloísa Helena (linked to the Fourth International) supported by a left coalition including the Brazilian Communist Party and the Trotskyist PSTU, received just under 7 % of the vote (more than six million votes) at the 2006 elections and the party elected three deputies to the federal parliament. A limited but not insignificant result. The PSOL refused to take a position in the second round, but some of its leaders called for a vote for Lula to block Alckmin. A critical vote for Lula was also the position of the MST, despite its deep disappointment with this government, which has not kept its promise to carry out real agrarian reform.

Lula’s second term was no different from the first. A single solution was proposed to Brazil’s social problems: the growth of GDP. Thus a Growth Pact was approved, with the objective of

reviving production through state aid. Among the left and centre left governments of Latin America, Lula was closest to the most moderate, like Tabaré Vazquez in Uruguay and Michèle Bachelet in Chile, rather than the anti-imperialist pole represented by Hugo Chavez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia) or Rafael Correa (Ecuador) — even if he refused, unlike the Chilean president, to sign a Free Trade Agreement with the USA. There was however a certain rapprochement with the Bush government around the project of replacing oil by “biofuels”: ethanol, produced from cane alcohol. It was a dangerous project, replacing the cultivation of food products by that of sugar cane, with disastrous consequences for the food supply of the popular layers. During this new government — where ministers from right or centre parties occupied a still more determinant place than before — there was a still greater distancing from the social movements. Not only the radical left (PSOL, PSTU) and the MST, but also the trade union left and other social movements protested against the government’s policies.

One of the great limits of ten years of the Lula government has been the absence of a real agrarian reform, a central question for the future of Brazilian society. According to the MST, the Lula government which had committed itself to distributing land to 450,000 peasant families has only done so for 150,000. Millions of landless rural workers await a real reform which attacks the insolent privileges of the rural capitalist oligarchy, in increasingly precarious social conditions. Forbidden by the Constitution from seeking a third term, Lula chose as his dauphin Dilma Roussef, who became in 2011 the PT presidential candidate. Active in the armed resistance to the dictatorship — she organised some bank expropriations — she was arrested, tortured and imprisoned for three years. After her release, she became an effective and pragmatic “left technocrat”, first joining the Democratic Labour Party of Leonel Brizola, and then joining the PT in 2000. Elected in the second round against Alckmin, she then succeeded Lula. The PSOL presented as candidate Plinio de Arruda Sampaio, who waged a good campaign but only gained 1% of the vote. The policy of the Dilma government— shaken by several corruption scandals concerning various ministers, notably from the centre right PMDB, who have had to resign — has hardly been different from that of its predecessor. The social programmes are maintained and even strengthened, but the general orientation remains that of the Washington Consensus”. Some control over capital flows has been established and the situation of the economy has stabilised. The demands of the landless for debt forgiveness have been totally rejected. The most disappointing aspect is probably the ecological balance sheet: a law on forests which favours impunity for the destroyers of Amazonia; and the decision to build the hydro-electric dam at Belo Monte, leading to the expulsion of the inhabitants and the destruction of a vast wooded area. The movements in defence of human rights have obtained a concession, in the form of the Truth Commission, which has presented a report on the crimes of the dictatorship, but without punishment of those responsible, covered by the military auto-amnesty of 1979.

As in previous years, only the mobilisation “from below” of the workers, landless and homeless, youth and women, environmentalists and indigenous peoples, can change the relationship of social and political forces.

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Edgard Sanchez, The OPT, a proletarian alternative to the crisis of political parties

On 27 and 28 August the Workers and People's Political Organization (OPT) held its founding conference. It was the culmination of months of preparation, since October 2010 when Martin Esparza, General Secretary of the SME (Mexican Electrical Workers' Union) publicly announced at a rally of 50,000 people in the Azteca Stadium, the proposal to create what at that time was called a 'national political grouping' (OPN). With the OPT's founding congress a new phase has begun, of consolidation, recruitment and organization, at the same time as the SME's own resistance struggle continues, alongside the broader call to organize Mexico's "indignados" against the neoliberal and repressive policies of the present regime.

The OPT Congress was held in the SME's headquarters and was attended by 956 registered delegates on Saturday 27th, 300 of them elected by the electrical workers, rising to more than 1,100 registered delegates on the Sunday at the OPT's launch rally in Mexico City's Zocalo square.

Given that the call for the OPT came from the SME, which only organizes in the central part of the country where its electricity company, *Compania Luz y Fuerza del Centro* (Central Light and Energy Company), operates, it was remarkable that delegates came from 22 different states, some of them very far from Mexico City. Apart from the Federal District (of Mexico City), there were delegates from Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Puebla, Aguascalientes, Michoacán, Sonora, Chihuahua, Zacatecas, Morelos, Jalisco, Sinaloa, San Luis Potosi, Estado de Mexico, Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Durango, Baja California, Querétaro, Tlaxcala and Nayarit.

Towards working class political independence

Many have emphasized the novelty of the OPT, given the crisis of Mexico's party system and the decline of those who liked to present themselves as the sole representatives of the left. Its importance goes beyond just that of a new political organization or a socialist regroupment of the sort some of us were arguing for years ago, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The real importance of the OPT is that it comes out of a call from the most combative section of the Mexican working class, the electrical workers of the SME, who are struggling against energy privatization and the dismantling of the Central Light and Energy Company. Firstly because the proposal means moving beyond a

purely trade union, labour struggle onto the terrain of political struggle. As the SME leaders frequently say in their speeches, the aim is to fight for power, to fight for the country, and that's why they're proposing to create a political organization. Secondly, it means building a political organization of the workers, based on the trade union strength of the SME, but which also includes other forces from the workers, trade union and popular movement. "Come on, Come on, here we are building the workers' movement", is the electrical workers' favourite slogan at OPT meetings.

This initiative to create a political organization of working people could fill a historic gap in Mexico: the lack of political independence for the working class, given it has never had a party of its own to represent it, but has historically been tied to through the obligatory, mass, corporative affiliation of the trade unions to the PRI, to a bourgeois party that defends the capitalist system. From the beginning we said that the importance of the SME initiative was that it opened the way to the creation of what in the international workers' movement has been known as a "workers' party". [1] Of course there have always been organizations of the socialist left that who defend the interests of the working class, including the PRT and others, but the OPT goes beyond a regroupment of the left and points towards the creation of a broad workers party, a party of the working class that offers workers in other unions tied to the PRI an alternative of their own.

It is true that the OPT has not come about at a time of growing working class struggles and victories, nor does it organize the majority of the class. The SME, which continues its resistance, now has some 16 thousand members among the 40 thousand electricity workers sacked in October 2009; nonetheless it remains a significant force, an example and a pole of attraction for workers in other unions, as the teachers and miners have already shown. Although it has not been able to reverse fully the blow represented by those mass lay-offs, it is not a movement that has been defeated. The key thing is that the SME's struggle is the reference point and backbone for all the resistance struggles that continue to unfold against the current regime's neoliberal policies and militarization. Although the OPT doesn't come out of an upsurge in struggle, the fact that is born under the leadership of the SME, at the head of resistance struggles and at a time of sharpening class conflict, also has an effect on its political character.

The Brazilian PT, created on the initiative of trade unions like the metal workers, was born in the midst of a number of victorious battles, yet when it reached government its orientation was social liberal, for the administration of neoliberal capitalism. Obviously there are many more political factors that mean the circumstances in which such an organization emerges are not decisive one way or another for its subsequent evolution. But in any case, the process of radicalisation and of confrontation with the most reactionary, privatizing and pro-capitalist policies of Calderon, means there is little scope for the OPT to harbour illusions in the conciliatory policies that dominate the institutional left (for example with the PRD and its alliances with the PAN or the search for coalition governments with the right).

The debates leading up to the OPT

Once the proposal for the OPN was announced, during the months leading up to the Congress a major discussion was undertaken on its content, scope, character, programme and organizational structure. This was possible because the proposal

was received favourably by many brothers and sisters beyond the SME, militants in other struggles, other unions and other social and political organizations. The project has been embraced by activists from various currents of thought on the Mexican left, reflecting both its success and its potential.

As political activists of the current represented by the PRT, we also welcomed and took part in the discussions to define the content and character of the OPN under construction. In fact, the PRT's XII National Congress held in August last year addressed the issue in its resolution entitled "The Road to building a revolutionary party." When Martin Esparza announced the proposal in October 2010 at the Azteca stadium, we also issued declaration welcoming the initiative and presenting our views. When in December the first written texts were presented for the new organization, at that time still seen as the creation of National Political Grouping, comrade Guillermo Almeyra wrote some critical observations shared by us. (The above texts are available on the site of the PRT.)

Organized around four working groups, (Principles, Programme, Statutes and Plan of Action), the Congress saw its discussions enriched with many proposals and observations, but three main themes, I think, stand out:

1. The character of the OPN and whether it relates to a perspective of national liberation or defines itself as an anticapitalist or socialist project. 2. The OPN's approach to elections within the current political system and its political perspectives for the 2012 elections.

3. The right to tendency within the OPN's democratic organization.

In the first texts presented for the founding of the OPN, which were no longer written by comrades of the SME, it was proposed that the OPN's strategic perspective should be guided by the struggle for national liberation, recalling some old debates on the left. There were in the past those who argued this perspective as a first stage of struggle historically separated from the socialist perspective, saying that as the first task was to achieve the national liberation of nations oppressed by imperialism and win demands that were anti-imperialist and democratic but not yet socialist, there needed to be an alliance with – and programmatic subordination to – a supposed national bourgeoisie that was ready to fight imperialism. In reality, the way in which capitalism has developed means the bourgeoisie in Mexico has grown in alliance with and subordinate to foreign capital and imperialist interests, with no significant sector of the national bourgeoisie willing to oppose and fight against those interests. Therefore it would be a mistake to self-limit the struggle of working people to the bourgeoisie and its programme, and hence the importance and absolute necessity of an independent policy to build the OPN as the working people's own organization.

In Mexico, the consolidation of the oligarchy in power with the development of neo-liberalism in recent decades clearly shows the interrelationship between the interests of imperialism and the oligarchy against which we fighting today.

After months of intense discussion and clarification, the comrades who initially proposed this national liberation strategy say that they are not arguing for two historically separate phases of struggle; they say they do not want to limit the struggle to a merely anti-neoliberal perspective, because they believe that neoliberalism is simply the form assumed by capitalism today, nor are they proposing a subordinate alliance with any sector of the bourgeoisie. If this is the case and it can be made clear in the documents voted by the Congress, then it would seem that thanks

to the discussion the differences have reduced and people's positions have drawn closer.

In that case it would still be useful to make clear that although capitalism currently takes the form, model and prescriptions of neoliberalism, opposition to neoliberalism is not necessarily the same thing as anticapitalism. In fact there obviously are political currents who see themselves as antineoliberal without being anticapitalist, and who believe, mistakenly, that it is possible to "humanize" capitalism. The new oligarchy that has emerged under the mantle of neoliberalism, using mafia methods of plunder and violence, has in fact displaced from power other sectors of the bourgeoisie, and this provides the objective basis for those who, suffering the consequences of neoliberalism, long for the previous phase of capitalism, with its so-called welfare state and statist policies, but also with its corporatism and anti-democratic, populist demagogy. On occasions no doubt, in the fight against some aspects of neoliberalism, we will coincide with certain current or sectors of the bourgeoisie displaced by the oligarchy, but that does not mean we should limit our perspective to the struggle against neoliberalism, as they do, but rather maintain our anti-capitalist approach, precisely because we know that the current reality of capitalism is neoliberal.

There seems to be a confusion in this debate within the OPN between the tasks of the struggle against the oligarchy and the system, on the one hand, and on the other the character of the new party organization that we are building.

It is true that the oligarchy's submissive governments give some relevance to anti-imperialism and the defence of national sovereignty (the fight against NAFTA, against privatizations that favour imperialist companies, against Plan Merida and Felipe Calderón's "war on drugs" or the presence of foreign agents and police officers, and the defence of the country's oil, are some examples of this). This means that on occasions there will be an overlap with the struggles of other social sectors, because of course neoliberalism benefits a very narrow minority and hurts some business and bourgeois sectors too. But the possibility of fronts or common struggles against neoliberalism, do not eliminate the need for independent workers' organization. This is why we say that the OPN is the organization, the party, of the workers. In the course of the struggle we may form fronts with other social sectors. But these sectors are not in the Workers' Party, nor can the latter limit its own programme as if it were a multi-class party. It is not a party of national liberation which implies a multi-class programme, albeit anti-imperialist, but a workers' party with an anti-capitalist perspective, even though in the immediate struggle it may coincide with other sectors that are just anti-neoliberal. This is why we make a distinction between anti-imperialist tasks, which we may share with others, and the character of the workers' party. This is the "novelty" of the SME's proposal: it's the workers' own organization. It is not about repeating the experience of other supposedly left-wing parties whose programme is merely neoliberal or partly anti-imperialist, or has a certain vision of national liberation that comes from the revolutionary nationalism of the old PRI and Cardenas. We repeat: what is new in the SME's proposal is a party political organization of the workers themselves, that comes out of the SME's struggle against the neoliberal policies of the oligarchy in power, which favour a capitalist minority, i.e., out of an anti-capitalist struggle.

Some comrades in the discussion in recent months have criticized, correctly, the fact that the programmatic proposals included so many nods and winks to business sectors, as if we

wanted to represent their program and interests. It is obvious that no medium business sectors or displaced sections of the bourgeoisie will have the least interest in joining the OPN. So this obsession with including in the programme of a workers' party these nods to business leaders, or saying that, yes it is a left party, but without including any anti-capitalist definition in its programme, is a misplaced self-limitation that will not only fail to appeal to the bourgeoisie, it will give the impression that we are waiting for them, saving them a place just in case, and submitting to the shadow of this absent bourgeoisie, by making concessions in party's programmatic definition. According to this logic, it would indeed be more attractive to define the party as standing of national liberation, rather than as an anti-capitalist party of workers struggling for socialism (although it should undertake imperialist tasks).

People often say we don't want another PRD, but if we define the OPN as an anti-neoliberal or national liberation party, we will maintain the same strategic outlook. We have to stand by the original sense of the SME comrades' proposal. And this does not mean not making fronts with others whose anti-neoliberal positions we share, even though they are not anti-capitalist. For example, in the past in the fight against the privatization of the electricity industry, the SME gained the support of people like Manuel Bartlett. That was right and helped fight the SME. That does not mean that in the new OPN characters like Bartlett will be comrades in the same party. Similarly, we may coincide with Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in the struggle to defend the Mexican oil industry, or indeed in other areas of struggle against the oligarchy, which he calls "The Mafia", but that does not mean that there are any illusions that he will join this new political organization of the workers which is the OPN. We do not need to make programmatic concessions that no one is asking of us, as if we were keeping the chair warm for social sectors that are not representative of the working class and who anyway will not join this party. Multiclass, anti-neoliberal parties, we have seen many times before, and their failure has become apparent. The SME's proposal is different. We should support it.

[...]

Many challenges in the immediate future

With the launch successfully completed, the OPT now has big political challenges ahead. The founding has been very inclusive politically. Now it has to consolidate this among its social base and extend it to activists in new social movements that are in struggle. Recruitment and organization of the rank and file is being driven by the OPT's central coordination and leadership. It could not have been otherwise. Many initiatives are being taken to organise OPT members, not only geographically by areas of struggle, but through trade union initiatives aiming to promote a united workers' confederation, as well as initiatives for the student movement, the peasantry and among women. More broadly, there are unitary attempts to move towards a broad, anti-neoliberal front of struggle and opposition, that can also link up with Mexico's 'indignados'.

In a context where the whole party system in Mexico is in crisis, the OPT emerges as a hugely promising proletarian alternative, but with many challenges and difficulties to overcome, which are linked to what happens to the class-struggle workers' movement and in particular to the SME itself.

Since the Extraordinary Congress of the PRT in July 2009, we have pointed out that a phase of the political crisis had begun that

would lead to a rearrangement of all political forces, "to an imminent readjustment, rearrangement and recomposition of the party, political and electoral landscape, as in 1976 or in 1988". [6] One year later, at the 12th Ordinary Congress, we added that "in this rearrangement, new political parties or formations may emerge while other disappear – almost or in fact – as in previous crises and rearrangements". The creation of the OPT in August is a confirmation of this crisis that will see parties appear and disappear. For his part, López Obrador has called for MORENA to be turned into a civic association, probably as another step towards the creation of a new political party, as indicated by the calling of the MORENA Congress for November 2012, in other words after the elections. The PRD's collapse, the end of its cycle, continues with this new step by López Obrador. But what may seem interesting as an opposition front or alternative social block, which is what MORENA is today, tomorrow as a party will be just another cross-class, anti-neoliberal party. It is in this context that the arrival of the OPT stands out because of its class identity, as a broad workers' party, which now needs to clarify its position to be part of a broad social block in opposition to the oligarchy, at a critical time that could see the neoliberal mafia removed from office.

But undoubtedly one challenge that will have to be faced by the OPT very soon, possibly earlier than the time scale envisaged by the founding Congress, is the position to adopt in relation to the presidential elections, in a situation characterized by the violence of the Calderón government's policy of militarization and its so-called war on drug trafficking. It will probably be necessary to wait for the current phase of the SME comrades' struggle to be rehired to reach a conclusion, after all their years of resistance, before any clear decisions can be taken. However I do not think abstract calls for a "united candidate" are an adequate substitute. "United" between who? It is not possible to put an equals sign between the various political options and pre-candidates on offer today and just wait to see who "has the best chances". The OPT's position should not be based on electoral marketing but on political criteria, in terms of what each option represents and what its political possibilities are. For example, Marcelo Ebrard and López Obrador are not the same thing. Nor is it the same thing, in a time of crisis and confrontation, when there is a real perspective of removing from office the neoliberal representatives of the oligarchy who are responsible for this crisis, whether they be the PAN or the PRI, on the one hand to decide what alliance can achieve this goal, or on the other to stand a non-registered, symbolic or propaganda candidate, even from our own ranks – something that could be useful in other circumstances but not now.

The experience of the founding Congress shows that the OPT will be able both to hold onto its character as a party of the workers, and to show the flexibility needed to develop a successful, anti-oligarchic front or block

Footnotes

[1] See for example the resolution of the PRT's 12th National Congress, "Caminos en la ruta hacia la reorganización de un partido revolucionario" published in the PRT Internal Bulletin, number 5, 2010, year 34, or at the PRT site or the document presented in the preparatory debate by Edgard Sánchez, Andrés Lund and Alfredo López "Las definiciones del Congreso de Fundación de la OPT". Some of the ideas contained in that are reproduced here.

[2] "Vamos a la disputa por la nación": Martín Esparza, press

release announcing the founding of the OPT, signed by Humberto Montes de Oca, External Relations Secretary of the SME, 28 August, 2011.

[3] Op cit.

[4] The National Executive Commission of the OPT, for example, is made up of the following comrades: Pedro Ramírez, Luis Miranda (PPSM), Fernando Tapia, Marcos Tello (MLN), Juventino Melgar (MUS), Magdiel Sánchez(MLN), Gerardo Domínguez, Luis Vázquez (OST), Alfredo López (PRT), Edgard Sánchez (PRT), Manuel Munguía, David Escobar, Rodolfo Somera, Camilo Valenzuela (REDIR-PRD), Humberto Martínez Brizuela (OST), Isabell Cauzard (MLN), Pedro Castillo (Rumbo Proletario), Juan Campos (PPSM), Cuauhtémoc Amezcuca (PPSM), Jorge Cázares (Sección XVIII del SNTE), Antonio Rodríguez (SME), José Gómez Beristain (SME), Héctor Becerra (SME), José Antonio Almazán (SME), Humberto Montes de Oca (SME) y Martín Esparza Flores (SME).

[5] Guillermo Almeyra, in “Sobre cartas, ética y política” in La Jornada, 11 September 2011, says “It is above all vital to support the attempt by the SME, other unions and left groups, to give birth to an OPT, that is, to a party of the workers and their organisations, with an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist programme, which would be an advance in achieving independence from the pro-capitalist parties and the state”.

[6] “Una nueva oportunidad en la construcción de un partido revolucionario” Resolution of the Extraordinary Congress of the PRT in July 2009, published in Desde los 4 Puntos No. 58, December 2009.

Saturday 12 November 2011, International Viewpoint

Pedro Campos, What Cuba's reforms may bring

People have been encouraged to speak freely about the economic guidelines of the Sixth Party Congress set for April, so with all due respect I am expressing my point of view.

I didn't want to be among the first to comment, nor did I want to speak out before the discussion began; I wanted to analyze the content of the guidelines, while learning the outcome of the December session of the National Assembly. I also didn't want in any way to influence the opinions of other comrades at the beginning of the debate.

Two months ago the discussion began. In meetings, through the print media and in personal commentaries, a broad section of the international left, as well as many Cuban revolutionaries, communists and ordinary citizens expressed disagreement with aspects of the form and content of the call and the guidelines.

After the debates of the last few years and during the time spent on its preparation, it was expected that the leadership of the party would call for a comprehensive congress with an expansive and truly democratic agenda, without sectarian scaling down, but allowing for a deep and constructive examination of what was previously realized. It was supposed that the line that leads to socialism would be traced, as well as new cadre chosen who could face the task of restructuring Cuban society. People were also waiting on a publicized and far-reaching discussion about what type of socialism we want. This was not in the call made by the leadership, though it was their historic responsibility.

The convening of the Sixth Congress of the PCC, the formulation of an economic plan, the strengthening of municipal autonomy and the opening of other extra-governmental productive relations, especially the expansion of self-employment and the extension of cooperatives to all spheres of the economy, are demands with wide popular backing that many people have been requesting for years. Somehow these are finding partial expression in the call for the Sixth Congress as well as in the guidelines and subsequently in speeches by senior government officials.

Ignoring fundamental problems within the party

I have no doubt that this call and the guidelines seek to address the serious situation posed by the government's financial situation, but by making this the central objective they are ignoring the discussion around fundamental problems in the operation of the party itself, the relationship between revolutionary theory — upon which action is based — and its practice, and that which is related to our concrete situation.

Generally, these can be considered insufficient to guide our society toward true socialism since:

1 – After eight years of waiting, and after having been postponed to better prepare for this congress, the call and the guidelines do not include an integral critical analysis of what has occurred over these past 13 years since the previous congress or the results of the policies pursued to avoid incongruities and omissions and allow for the appropriate corrections.

2 – The selected methodology and the content hamper the broad and needed democratic discussion about the direction and paths to socialism, and thereby repeat the basic errors of the past.

3 – They do not call for the needed replacement of officials or the promotion of cadre with a new mentality capable of guaranteeing the necessary changes.

4 – The call and the guidelines are not accompanied by the election of delegates who would have to defend the positions of their respective constituencies.

5 – They do not assess the outcome of foreign policy or national security policy.

6 – They do not deal with the current international political, economic and social situation in all its complexity, nor our country's system and its position in the contemporary world.

7 – They don't include an analysis of the party's own activity or the internal life of that organization, which needs to breathe new life into its methods.

8 – Some points within the guidelines violate the letter and spirit of the socialist constitution when approving wage-labor for private capitalists and the sale of properties to foreigners for 99 years

9 – They only call for discussion on some specific, limited, prefabricated economic guidelines.

The absence of real debate

Although the official line speaks of a “democratic process” and calls for “consultations,” any real democratic debate has been lost because:

1 – They have presented the discussion on some guidelines whose key points had been already approved by the Council of Ministers, put into legislation and are now being executed as part of a five-year plan that ignores the people and the party.

2 – Horizontal exchange between and among rank-and-file and grassroots forces is absent.

3 – Sectarian control exercised by the leadership over the

national press hampers the spreading of other contributions and ideas different from theirs.

4 – The “participation” given to workers and grassroots party members is one of consulting and expanding them with a methodology that promotes support prior to discussion and that guarantees the approval of the guidelines almost unanimously (though this is officially criticized). What should be done is only record opinions, because all positions should be respected as valid and debatable to the point of voting on them in the congress’ plenary session.

5 – They demonstrate that the traditional intolerance of differences remains, despite official discourse that promotes them.

6 – The historical prevalence of verticalista (top-down) methods of order and command in the party continue to be applied as their methodology, accentuated since the Special Period (economic crisis that began in the early ‘90s).

7 – The culture of non-debate continues to dominate the process that has generated bureaucratic centralism. Many instructors and intermediate cadre have “assumed” the approval of the guidelines — instead of their discussion — as being the role of the party.

On the other hand, the promoters of the guidelines continue to consider socialism to be a system of distribution of the means of consumption in the neo-social-democratic style and not as a new form of the organization of production, without their allowing an opportunity for questioning.

Moreover, in a dogmatic, sectarian and uncompromising manner, they assure that there is no other alternative except the one expressed by them, ignoring their own failures, the disasters of imitated “real” socialism and the positive socialist practices of other experiences. They disregard the entire theoretical activity of socialism of the past and what has been realized by many Cuban and international communists and revolutionaries since the fall of the former socialist camp; these latter uphold the idea from Marxist philosophy that points to changes in production relations as the solution to the contradictions generated by the wage-labor system of exploitation, whether this is applied by private owners or by the government.

Instead of looking for the cohesion of revolutionary forces, a congress with all these exclusionary limitations distances them amid a crisis in the credibility of socialism, which we are experiencing. With so much confusion and people of all strata wanting to live the “American way of life,” without successes that demonstrate the future viability of statist projects, does not permit the necessary in-depth treatment by the party or all of society of the current situation and perspectives for Cuba. Nor does it make the appropriate democratic decisions, and therefore it does not guarantee the objectives that would be expected from such an event in the current circumstances.

No guarantee of the advance of socialism

In this way, the essence of the political economy already approved and being executed, expressed in the guidelines and that seeks to be endorsed by the Sixth Congress, although it implies important changes regarding the traditional paternalistic conduct of the government, does not guarantee the advance of socialism because:

1 – It does not entail a correction that moves from statism to socialization, nor from centralization to democratization that puts control of political, social and economic life in the hands of the workers and the people.

2 – It remains well established that the important strategic decisions will be left with the bureaucratic apparatus of the state/party/government, and that the concrete operatives will be imposed bureaucratically by the traditional administrators.

3 – The fundamental levers of power will remain in the hands of groups strongly influenced by the concepts of archaic bureaucratic centralism blended with ingredients typical of contemporary neo-liberalism.

4 – It doesn’t make clear what are the different functions of the party, the state, the government and the economy.

The principal macroeconomic goal that the government is to balance its budget — something very much the fashion in capitalist economies seeking to guarantee the high costs of governments and their bureaucracies — which will be accomplished by the layoff of a million and half public-sector workers, the reduction of social programs and subsidies, the increase in retail prices of the market monopolized by the government, the freezing of nominal wages and a decrease in real wages, the maintenance of the serious problem of the double currency, and the employment of “available” workers in extra-governmental forms of production with the aim of collecting enough taxes from these individuals to cover their costs.

I don’t doubt that these policies could somewhat alleviate the problem of government finances, redirect some workers into state sectors lacking manpower and improve the standard of living of some now-favored strata; but it will negatively impact the low-income majority, particularly the poorest and least protected.

But more than anything, it will be difficult to achieve a significant increase in production and productivity because the guidelines do not contain concrete positive incentives for those who work for the government or for those who are the most responsible for making the large factories and companies productive. Incentives to production remain as negative values that take advantage of the natural pressure of people’s needs, just like under capitalism (work as a necessity, not as a source of enjoyment) and they rely on traditional — but inefficient — calls for discipline and sacrifice.

In addition, to achieve a substantial increase in tax revenue to satisfy the aspirations of the government at the cost of new extra-state forms of work would demand the granting of widespread opportunities for the development of private capitalism, self-employment and cooperativism. This would be possible with a tax policy different from the current one, a stimulating one, and if they eliminated the monopolies and centralizing mechanisms that hamper the development of economic activity outside the government, which a good part of the established bureaucracy doesn’t appear willing to change. In fact the situation appears to be just the opposite; they seem intent on reinforcing this despite the official line about decentralization and decreasing government intervention in social and economic life.

This is demonstrated in actions to improve centralized economic controls by the bureaucracy, to dictate all economic activity from above; to reinforce the police and other agencies of inspection, repression and coercion that are responsible for maintaining government control; to levy taxes on all extra-economic governmental activities no matter how small, to maintain and even increase the high taxes on self-employed workers, to hamper self-employment in many professional activities (for e.g. architects, doctors, dentists, nurses and others), to continue blaming the workers for the poor performance of the economy, not to expand any of the needed mechanisms of democratic and civil participation, and keeping

out of the congress the important discussion on specific forms in which workers and citizens should participate in the country's economic life.

[...]

Who decides the distribution of profit, the few or the many?

In modern economies, the most efficient production and service companies work more or less on the basis of dividing their profits/surpluses in three main parts: a third for extended reproduction of the entity itself, another third for the enjoyment of the owners (whether private or collective, while the form in which this part of the surplus is distributed — equal or not — is what identifies a company as sharing its profits on a capitalist or socialist basis), and the third part is paid out as a tax to cover social expenses and the government, the municipality, etc. Only this last third should be available to the government for its planning and it now involves relatively large sums. In Fidel's "History Will Absolve Me" he stated that 30 percent of the profits from companies would be distributed among the workers.

The practices of attempts at socialism have demonstrated that planning would have to be democratic, in accordance with participative budgets approved at each level and in each production or service entity and not through the centralization of all surpluses distributed and the whole investment process, a phenomenon that feeds corruption and bureaucracy and is approached without arriving at its essence or finding solutions.

The market — as has already been said, written and repeated — has existed in all social systems. It is not exclusive to capitalism but is a fundamental tool for economic development that will exist while the capitalist system prevails internationally. Naturally, with the relative prevalence of socialist production relations, it will tend toward the exchange of equivalent values as a channel of social justice until it proceeds to progressively disappear along with the state, classes, the social division of labor, the law of supply and demand, money and other categories of the mercantile economy.

Socialists of different ideological tendencies agree in pointing out that by only putting the means of production under the direct control of workers, with previously contracted production, will it be possible to advance toward the new socialist society. When the workers themselves in each production or service center are the ones who decide on the company's management, its economic administration and the destiny of the surpluses, we will be before real changes in production relations. Anything else is more of the same thing with a different name.

As has been evidenced, if simple state ownership is not socialized, if it doesn't include those concrete changes in the relations that people contract in the production process and, on the contrary, if it maintains the wage-labor relations and the centralization of the important, natural, inevitable decisions and it demonstrably regenerates the cycle of workers' exploitation (only by the state instead of private owners), it will reproduce exploiting and exploited classes in the form of bureaucrats and producers. Finally, as happened with all forms of "state socialism" in the 20th century, it will end up regenerating the capitalist system. This lesson has not been learned by the current leadership.

With what they intend, they would transition from being a bureaucratized, poor, paternalistic and generous state to another one that is also bureaucratized but additionally a greedy financier that will continue to be poor but with pretenses of opulence.

I am not in the least advocating the immediate disappearance of the state apparatus as some try to accuse those who defend the Marxist path to the withering away of the state. The state is temporarily necessary to guarantee the general aspects of the country's development and its defense. However, socialist construction, socialization, is not possible by concentrating all economic and political power in a few hands or with important decisions being made by a small sectarian group of people without true discussion with full democratic guarantees, rights to free speech, publication and association and where everyone has the same opportunities for participation and the popularization of their ideas.

Cuba again at the crossroads

Each country will advance toward socialism in accordance with its characteristics, its level of development, the degree of socialization and democratization reached, and without having to hope for others to begin that road; but the victory of socialism as the predominant social system with a stable character in any one country will depend on the same situation prevailing in several countries and that these achieve economic and political overlap from their own bases. The projection of ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) in that direction, comprehensively, beyond government ties and based on new socialist relations of production is more than necessary, it is vital.

In Cuba, we are heading then to the critical point of the dissolution of monopoly capitalism under the guise of "state socialism," therefore:

1 – Either we are clearly advancing toward a change in production relations from wage-labor to the prevalence of cooperative-type freely associative and self-managerial relations — this does not involve excluding others — and we are democratizing the political life that makes this possible, or...

2 – We are regenerating classical private capitalism for the survival of the centralist-bureaucratic-wage labor system that, seeking to exist forever, will soon be absorbed and transmuted by capitalism and self-generated privatization.

Without the widest democratic participation of the workers and the general population in all decisions that concern them, socialism is not possible. What the government/state/party is doing and seeking to endorse through the Sixth Congress does not assure the advance toward socialism.

The path shown by the call to the Sixth Congress and its economic guidelines seem to favor the reinforcement of wage-labor relations of production more than freely associated socialist relations of the cooperative/self-management type. What does not go forward dialectically goes backwards.

The gradual progress of capitalist restoration in the jaws of the most voracious and atrocious empire in history, the traditional enemy of the Cuban nation that has firmly maintained the principal laws of the blockade up until today, is an assault that is threatening to return us to dependence under the empire. As comrade Celia Hart once said, "Cuba is socialist or it's not."

15 March 2011, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>

Claudio Katz, Strategies of the Left in Latin America

The call to build socialism of the twenty-first century has reopened the strategic discussion on the Latin American left. Once again characterizations of socialism and courses of action are being analyzed to advance the socialist objective.

This reflection includes six large themes: material conditions, relations of social forces, social subjects, popular consciousness, institutional frameworks and the organization of the oppressed.

Maturity of the Productive Forces

The first debate takes up once again a classic controversy. Have the forces of production in Latin America matured sufficiently to begin an anticapitalist transformation? Are the existing resources, technologies and qualifications sufficient to open a socialist process? The countries of the region are less prepared but more urgently in need of facing up to this change than are the developed nations. They endure nutritional, educational and sanitary disasters more intense than those in the advanced economies, but have weaker material premises with which to solve these problems. This contradiction is a consequence of the peripheral character of Latin America [within the global economy – ed.] and its resulting agrarian backwardness, fragmented industrialization and financial dependence.

On the Left there are two traditional responses in the face of this situation: to promote a stage of progressive capitalism or to initiate a socialist transition adapted to the regional insufficiencies. In a recent text we have expressed various arguments in favour of the second option. [2] But another equally relevant debate centres on the opportunities of each course. After a traumatic period of productive depression and banking collapses, Latin America is going through a phase of growth, increasing exports, and recomposition of business profits. One could object that in these conditions, no collapse justifying anticapitalist transformation is foreseeable.

However, the socialist option is not a conjunctural program to overcome recessionary cycles and in this respect strictly differentiates itself from Keynesianism. [3] It aims to overcome the exploitation and inequality that characterize capitalism. It seeks to do away with poverty and unemployment, to eradicate environmental disasters, to put an end to nightmarish wars, and to stop financial cataclysms. This polarization is taking place in the current Latin American conjuncture. The increase in profits and consumption of the comfortable sectors contrasts with terrifying indices of misery. These calamities – that become more visible in the peaks of economic disaster – justify the battle for socialism. The situations of collapse do not constitute the only apt moment to eradicate the system. The anticapitalist turn is an open option for an entire period and can begin in whichever conjuncture of the cycle. The experience of the twentieth century confirms this fact. No socialist revolution coincided with the zenith of an economic crisis. The majority of cases erupted as a consequence of war, colonial occupation or dictatorial oppression. In contexts of this kind the Bolsheviks took power (in Russia), Mao imposed himself on China, Tito won Yugoslavia, the Vietnamese threw out the United States and the Cuban revolution triumphed. Most of these victories were completed during the full postwar boom; that is to say during a stage of record capitalist growth. No automatism links, therefore, the debut of socialism with

economic collapse. The penuries that capitalism generates are sufficient to support its reversal, in whatever phase of the periodic fluctuations of this system.

One objection to starting socialist processes highlights the impediments created by globalization. It is argued that the current internationalization of capital makes an anticapitalist challenge in Latin America impractical.

But where exactly is the obstacle? Globalization does not constitute a barrier for a project of universal scope, such as socialism. The overflowing of borders extends the imbalances of capitalism and creates better objective bases for a socialist transformation. The presentation of globalization as a stage that makes alternative models impossible is a tributary of the neoliberal vision which proclaimed the inexistence of alternatives to the rightist model. But if one discards socialism for this reason it is also necessary to reject whatever Keynesian or regulated capitalist alternative. It is inconsistent to argue that the totalitarianism of globalization has buried the anticapitalist project, but tolerates interventionist forms of accumulation. If it has shut out all options for socialism there are also no openings for neo-developmentalism. However, in reality globalization does not constitute the end of history and all alternatives remain open. It is merely that a new period of accumulation began, sustained by the recomposition of profits at the expense of the oppressed and by transfers of major international imbalances to the weakest economies. These regressive media give new life to the necessity of socialism as the only popular response to the new stage. It is the only exit which can remedy the instabilities created by the expansion of global capital in a framework of nation states, and in the face of tensions generated by the overflowing of financial speculation, imperialist polarization and the divorce between markets and technological advance.

What is the Correlation of Forces?

The pre-eminence of relations of forces favourable to the oppressed is a condition for socialist change. The popular majority cannot prevail over its antagonists of the dominant classes if it faces a very negative balance of power. But how do we assess these parameters? The correlation of forces is determined in Latin America by the positions gained, threatened or lost by three sectors: the local capitalist classes, the oppressed masses and American imperialism. During the 1990s a massive global offensive of capital over labour was consummated on a global scale. The initial Thatcherite forcefulness of this broadside has decreased, but it left behind an adverse general climate for workers on an international scale. What happened in Latin America?

The capitalists of the region actively participated in this attack, but ended up suffering various collateral consequences from the process. With commercial opening they lost their competitive positions and with the de-nationalization of the productive apparatus they gave up their defences against their external competitors. Later, the financial crisis thrashed the establishment and took away their direct political presence. As a consequence the right has been left in a minority and centre-left governments replaced many conservatives in the management of the state (especially in the Southern Cone). [4] The capitalist elite are no longer able to fix the agenda of the entire region with impunity. They have been affected by a crisis of neoliberalism that could result in the structural decline of this project. The regional relation of forces has also been modified by massive popular uprisings, which in South America precipitated the fall of

various heads of state. The rebellions in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina and Venezuela have had direct repercussions on the dominant classes as a whole. They challenged business aggression and in many countries imposed a certain accommodation with the masses. The combative impulse is very unequal. In certain nations popular protagonism is visible (Bolivia, Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador), while in others an ebb in the tide prevails as a consequence of deception (Brazil, Uruguay). A new development is the awakening of worker and student struggles in countries that lead in neoliberal ranking (Chile), and in nations overwhelmed by social abuses and haemorrhages of migration (Mexico). The correlation of forces is extremely varied in Latin America, but a general trend of popular initiatives is reaffirming itself throughout the entire region.

At the beginning of the 1990s American imperialism launched a politics of recolonization in its backyard through free trade and the installation of military bases. This panorama has also changed. The original version of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) failed because of conflicts between globalized and dependent corporations in internal markets, clashes between exporters and industrialists and extensive popular rejection of the project. The counteroffensive of bilateral trade agreements that the US Department of State has launched does not compensate this setback. The international isolation of Bush (electoral collapse of the Republicans, failure in Iraq, loss of allies in Europe) has closed the space for unilateralism and spurred the resurgence of geopolitical blocs adverse to the United States (such as the Non-Aligned countries). This American retreat is sharply reflected by the absence of military responses to the challenge of Venezuela.

The correlation of forces has registered, therefore, various significant changes in Latin America. The dominant classes no longer count on the neoliberal strategic compass, the popular movement has recuperated its street presence, and American imperialism has lost capacity of intervention.

Diversity of Subjects

The actors of a socialist transformation are the victims of capitalist domination, but the specific subjects of this process in Latin America are very diverse. In some regions indigenous communities have occupied a leading role in the resistance (Ecuador, Bolivia, Mexico) and in other areas peasants have led the resistance (Brazil, Peru, Paraguay). In certain countries the protagonists have been formal urban workers (Argentina, Uruguay) or precarious informal urban workers (Venezuela, the Caribbean, Central America). The new role of indigenous communities and the weaker role of factory unions stand out. The multiplicity of sectors reflects the differentiated social structure and political particularities of each country.

However, this diversity also confirms the variety of participants of a socialist transformation. As the development of capitalism expands the exploitation of salaried work and collateral forms of oppression, the potential actors of a socialist process are all the exploited and oppressed. This role does not fall exclusively on the salaried workers who directly create business profits, but to all the victims of capitalist inequality. What is essential is the convergence of these sectors in a common battle, which unfolds around ever-changing focal points of rebellion. Victory depends on this action against an enemy who dominates by dividing the popular camp. In this struggle certain segments of salaried workers tend to play a more central role because of the place they occupy in the vital branches of the

economy (mining, factories, banks). Capitalists profit from the privations of all the dispossessed, but their profits depend on the direct labour force of the exploited and from profit which is made specifically from certain activities. This centrality is verified in the current conjuncture of economic revival, which tends to recreate the significance of salaried workers. In Argentina unions are reclaiming their pre-eminence in the streets, in comparison with the role played by the unemployed and the middle class during the crisis of 2001. In Chile the strikes of the miners are playing a leading part, in Mexico certain unions are establishing a role, and in Venezuela the centrality of the petroleum workers since their battle against the coup attempt (in 2002) persists.

[..]

The Constitutional Framework

The Latin American left faces a relatively new strategic problem: the stabilization of constitutional regimes. For the first time in the history of the region the dominant classes manage their governments through non-dictatorial institutions, in almost all the countries and after a significant period. Neither economic collapses or political crises or popular insurrections altered this form of government.

The return of the military is for the most part a discarded hand for the hemisphere's elites. In the most critical situations presidents are replaced by other leaders with some type of civic-military interregnum. What is discarded for now is the reinstallation of dictatorships to fight fragmentation from above or rebellion from below.

The current regimes are not real democracies but rather plutocracies in the service of capitalists. The institutions of this system have served to perpetuate social abuses which many dictatorships would not even have dared to suggest. These aggressions diminished the legitimacy of the system, but did not lead to a popular rejection of the constitutional regime equivalent to that suffered by the old tyrannies. This change in the rule of capitalist domination has contradictory effects on the action of the Latin American left. On the one hand it amplified the possibilities of political action in a context of public freedoms. On the other hand the stabilization of parliaments, parties and functionaries offered capitalists more political security and growing confidence in their business affairs. A system which reduces and at the same time consolidates the power of the oppressors represents a great challenge for the left, especially when this regime is for the most part perceived as the natural mechanism for the functioning of any modern society.

This last belief is encouraged by the right – which has grasped the usefulness of conducting their political activity within the constitutional context – and by the centre-left – which preserves the status quo under progressive masks. Both stoke false electoral polarizations in order to present the simple alternation of figures in power as meaningful change. The current example of this complementariness is the “modern and civilized left” that arrived in government with Lula (Brazil), Tabaré (Uruguay) or Bachelet (Chile), in order to perpetuate the supremacy of the capitalists. However, other situations are more problematic because institutional continuity was broken with fraud (Calderón in Mexico) or presidential resignations (Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina). In certain denouements these convulsions concluded with the reconstruction of the bourgeois order (Kirchner in Argentina), but in other countries the crisis resulted in the unexpected entrance to government of nationalist or reformist presidents, who are rejected by the establishment. This is the case

of Chávez (Venezuela), Morales (Bolivia) and probably Correa (Ecuador). These results have been the consequence of the non-institutional character the crises and insurrections in these nations initially assumed.

In these processes the electoral terrain has shaped up to be an area of struggle against reaction and a point of support for coming to terms with radical transformations. This conclusion is vital for the left. For example, since 1998 all of the elections deepened the legitimacy of the Bolivarian process in Venezuela and transferred to the ballot box the defeat dealt to the right in the streets. The electoral sphere and the victories of mobilization complemented one another. The constitutional setting significantly altered the framework of action of the left, which for decades had been accustomed to confronting a dictatorial enemy. The battle within these systems is not easy because institutionalism functions with permanent pretences of reproducing the existing order. Therefore it is necessary to combine direct action with electoral participation. For this path, times of arising popular power – which every revolutionary process requires – and the maturation of socialist consciousness – which to a certain degree is processed through the constitutional arena – complement one another.

Movements and Parties

Popular consciousness translates into organization. The grouping together of the oppressed is indispensable to creating instruments of an anticapitalist transformation, since without their own organisms the exploited cannot initiate an alternative project for society. Movements and parties constitute two modalities of contemporary popular organization. Both options perform an essential role for the development of socialist convictions. They reinforce confidence in self-organization and develop bases of collective functioning of popular power for the future. Movements sustain immediate social struggle and parties fuel more developed political activity. Both instances are necessary to facilitate direct action and electoral participation. However, this complementariness is frequently questioned. There are exclusive advocates of movements and of parties.

But these objections only invalidate the actions of certain parties and not the general function of these structures, which are irreplaceable for acting on the political level. No emancipatory project can progress exclusively on social terrain, or dispense with the specific platforms, the links between demands and strategies of power, which party organizations provide. These groupings contribute to overcoming the limitations of a spontaneous rebellion. The party facilitates the maturation of an anticapitalist consciousness, which does not emerge abruptly from protest action and which requires differentiating struggle for improvements under capitalism and the battle for socialist objectives. The disqualification of parties is as inadequate as the vice of superiority that some organizations on the left still exhibit. They maintain the old vanguardist conception, act with iron verticalism and reward themselves with permanent self-proclamation. This cult of the organization leads to sectarian practices and a quest for hegemony in all social movements. This form of political action feeds itself from the small-group caudillista tradition, or the tradition of strong-man, top-down leadership. In some countries this behaviour also expresses persistent bad habits from an organizational culture built during decades of clandestine action and antidictatorial resistance. In the current framework of public freedoms and party competition the confused character of this conduct is patently obvious. Those

who maintain these practices can thrive, but they will never lead a socialist transformation.

Reform and Revolution

Material conditions, correlation of forces, social subjects, popular consciousness and popular organization shape the hexagon of themes that surround the strategy of the left. The postulated programs connecting action, conviction and proposals in a socialist sense depend on these six foundations. However, rarely are these components coincidental. Sometimes the maturity of material conditions does not converge with the correlation of forces, with the protagonism of social subjects or with the aptitude of the political context. Less common still is the connection of these elements with the level of organization, consciousness and popular leadership required for an anticapitalist project. The strategy of the left is a search for paths to overcome these discordances and the analytical distinction of six great questions aiming to facilitate this analysis. The biggest problem is situated in the links that connect these pillars. The routes to follow are extremely varied because the universalism of the socialist program is not synonymous with uniformity. The experience of the twentieth century has illustrated how the bases of this process combine together in differentiated forms in each country. It has also been confirmed that the temporary nature of a socialist debut differs significantly between accelerated insurrectional conclusions (Russia) and prolonged confrontations of dual power (China, Vietnam). [6] There are two grand responses – traditionally counterposed – to the dilemmas created by this disconnect between components of socialist change: reform and revolution. The first path promotes combining the disarticulated elements through a progression of social improvements that reinforce the positions of the workers and consolidate their political weight, institutional presence and organizational force. But these reforms – which are feasible under capitalism – do not accumulate and are not irreversible. Sooner or later their consolidation (or deepening) clashes with the rule of profit and suffers employers' abuse which provokes major conflicts. In these circumstances the consequent popular response demands advancing toward socialist change. Reforms are only valid as a link in the struggle for socialism. The absence of this perspective leads to the abandonment not only of an anticapitalist future, but of the improvements themselves. It's incorrect to attempt first the "resolution of immediate problems" in order to "discuss socialism later." If capitalism could structurally solve those problems socialism would be unnecessary.

The second idea of socialist change promotes revolution and rejection of reforms. It calls for overcoming the disconnection between objective and subjective conditions through action which articulates the peaks of the crisis of capitalism with the disposition of struggle of the masses and socialist convictions. However, this connection is not so easy, even when there occur conjunctures close to the Leninist model of a revolutionary situation ("those from above can no longer continue dominating and those from below play a leading role in a historical eruption"). In South America we have observed in the last several years various circumstances of this type without any socialist result. Crisis of hegemony or authority of the dominant classes (loss of consensus and leadership capacity in Gramscian terms) converging with the revolt of the subaltern classes is not enough. [7] Socialist maturity requires a prior process of learning which is not improvised in the expeditious path toward power. That

preparation includes social achievements and democratic conquests that are obtained through reforms. This last term is not a bad word, nor is it situated in the antipodes of revolution. It is a useful instrument to gradually develop the revolutionary leap forward, building bridges which move the oppressed closer to the socialist goal.

A combination of reform and revolution can enable the link between immediate conquests and radical ruptures with capitalism. The first type of achievement is indispensable for creating popular power and the second for defeating an enemy that will not renounce its privileges. To connect reform with revolution is the way to adapt the correlation of forces and popular action with the possibilities of anticapitalist transformation in each country. But it is necessary to replace the old counterposing of both roads with their confluence.

Optimism and Reason

To discuss strategies presupposes searching for a guide for inspired action in past experiences, but always remaining open to new circumstances and experiences. This inquiry includes unprecedented hypotheses and no simple calculus of models to repeat. The strategy of the left includes a liberated dimension that cannot be found in other political formations. It raises humanist objectives associated with a communist horizon which no bourgeois current can offer. But the credibility of these goals depends on the behaviour of its organizers and this conduct presupposes an attitude of spontaneous resistance to inequality and intuitive rejection of injustice. The function of strategy is to transform indignation in the face of misery and solidarity with the oppressed into rational projects. And this development demands intellectual bravery to face up to the thorniest and most unpleasant problems. If there is no disposition to tackle the difficulties, the roads to socialism will invariably remain blocked. The current Latin American conjuncture invites renewing strategic controversies on the left with frank, open and respectful debates. It is the moment to adopt the achievements and weigh the limitations with an enthusiastic and critical attitude. Both positions contribute to forging reasoned optimism which the battle for socialism demands.

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NOTES

[2] Claudio Katz, "Socialismo o Neo-desarrollismo," (Socialism or Neo-Developmentalism), available in Spanish at: www.lahaine.org, 1-12-06, or www.rebellion.org, 1-12-06.

[3] Keynesianism refers to the reformist economic theory of John Maynard Keynes. It was most influential between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s.

[4] The Southern Cone refers to Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.

[5] Sandinismo refers to the ideology and practice of the Sandinista revolutionary government of Nicaragua, in power between 1979 and 1990. The Central American insurgencies referred to here were the unsuccessful revolutionary guerrilla wars waged in Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s.

[6] Dual power refers to an unstable and unsustainable period of a revolutionary situation in which popular institutions of the

exploited and oppressed emerge alongside and in opposition to the existing institutions of the state.

[7] Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist who developed the most influential Marxist theory of hegemony.

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