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Venezuela

24 Political Theses for debate (Part II)

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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At the end of June, the group of Venezuelan revolutionaries who now make up the organisation LUCHAS, began publishing a series of twenty-four theses on the current situation in Venezuela, its causes and its consequences. At the time these first three theses were published, which we published [here](#), they were still members of the organisation Marea Socialista, though increasingly critical of what they saw as MS's decision to adopt a position of explicit opposition to the Bolivarian government. They presented themselves as Marea Socialista-Original Line. That was still the situation when a second group of four theses were published which we reprint below. Shortly after that, at the end of July, on what would have been Chavez' 62nd birthday, they announced their decision to break with MS and set up the new organisation. Liga Unitaria Chavista y Socialista (LUCHAS) (IV)

4: Polarization deepens as the space for "party politics" shrinks

The Greeks understood that politics was the essence of the construction of the social world. They developed the concept of "idiocy" to describe those who showed contempt for politics. But the Athenians understood politics as the privilege of domination. With the emergence of capitalism, bourgeois democracy developed political discourse as the art of lying to dominate. In opposition to this, progressive forces developed and defended the concept of politics as the art of making the impossible possible: revolution.

In his introduction to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Gramsci seeks to find the keys to organize revolutionaries to achieve the cultural hegemony that every socialist revolution needs. The Machiavellian policy of coming to power and staying there by all possible means – behind the backs of working people – reached its extreme in the decadent expressions and behaviour of bourgeois politicians in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century.

Popular revolts spread across the Americas in opposition to neoliberalism. The Caracazo [1] was a turning point for the emergence of another kind of politics, distinct from that of the conventional politicians and political parties. The cry of the Argentina's rebellious people, "throw them all out", was the zenith of this mass movement. However, it failed to take power or win hegemony over the discourse of this other kind of politics: that of the working people.

Chavez, perhaps unintentionally, managed to find the keys to a discourse and a concrete social practice capable of organizing this rebellion against the world of the old politics, that of lying to dominate and stay in power, opening a path for hope in another possible world for the exploited, not just in Venezuela but in the whole continent.

Chavez trusted in the creative powers of the people, in their energy and their collective intelligence. He demonstrated this when in 2004 he chose not to go for a verification of all the disputed signatures delivered to demand a recall referendum. Instead he decided to go straight for a vote, trusting that the people's collective intelligence would produce a result in favour of those who defended them, as an expression of their rebellious spirit. He had done the same before, in 2002, when he trusted his fate to the people during the fascist coup.

This enabled a huge section of the population, who were on the growing margins of this anti-politics, to turn their attention and hopes towards this other kind of government. Dialectically speaking, this also led to the reunification of conservative forces and resulted in a polarization between two models: the capitalist versus the socialist.

Between 1992 and 2013 Venezuela and the continent experienced a new possibility of change from the left, of this

other way of doing politics. It involved a different way of understanding left-wing activism, one which went beyond the limits of tiny party organisations. Mariátegui and Maneiro [\[2\]](#), among others, had talked about the importance of understanding left discourse through the specificities of “our America”, and what happened in this period was a good example of this.

Chavez sudden illness and the whole process of his treatment through until his death, produced an emergency mechanism for his succession, and paralysed the opening towards another possible kind of politics. Since that time, the leadership of the PSUV, the biggest party in the Great Patriotic Pole, has been more concerned with staying in power than with making progress towards a socialist revolution. Political discourse and political practice in general have fallen back into the old ways both of governing and of opposing governments.

Polarization continues to characterize the world of politics, but this phenomenon is increasingly confined to a small group of citizens. Significant sectors of both Chavez supporters and the opposition, perplexed by this conflict with no clear objective that has continued since 2013, try to move away from the extremes and develop a new political centre ground. However, the bulk of the population is gradually returning to what they see as the safer ground of anti-politics, as a means of protecting themselves against what they fear will be a massive deception by the politicians.

Large segments of the population feel they are being used as pawns by interests beyond their reality and their desire for social justice. However, this reality stands in contrast to the broad consensus on the huge role played by Chavez and therefore to the possibility of a revolution within Chavismo. In other words, the potential for revolutionary Chavismo has not disappeared; on the contrary, the contradictions are very strong.

In recent months, we have seen an attempt to repeat of the polarized confrontation of 2001-2004 between Chavismo and the opposition. But neither the government nor the opposition understand that the space for partisan, political debate is ever smaller while the social space for “non-politics” is ever larger. The most widespread political activity today is “anti politics”, or even worse, mere individual survival.

The discourse against polarization sounds hollow, with little practical meaning, for the masses, who identify its proponents – often unjustly – as just another bunch of power seekers.

We are increasingly returning to the anti politics of the late eighties. The professional politicians seem incapable of speaking to people's real social experience. This can be seen in a growing disconnect over the last two years between the “common sense” of ordinary citizens and the various narratives of the politicians (whether Chavistas, opposition or those trying to break with both).

Politicians of all stripes seem to speak from a different planet to that inhabited by workers, housewives, the ordinary people who live from their labour. People begin to see what the new political class says as pure science fiction, disconnected from the real world.

In the queues to get scarce food supplies, people ask, “Don't politicians eat? Because we never see them queuing. They only fight each other for power and do not care about the people”. These are becoming the kinds of comment you hear most frequently in queues across the country.

The collapse of the opposition after its triumph on 6 December 2015 is remarkable. It's a stunning example of how to throw away an electoral victory in just a few weeks, only comparable with the government's own loss of political credibility. The current government is squandering in spectacular fashion the political capital bequeathed by Chavez, as it returns to politics as just a way of staying in power.

While most of the population suffers the ravages of inflation at a level unprecedented in Venezuela's history, of shortages that hurt the poor and the working class, and of violence and crime that illustrate the worst of capitalist irrationality, the politicians only speak about whether or not there will be a recall referendum, of who might be the successor and how that might happen. It's a vanity fair that the people want nothing more to do with.

Day by day there grows a feeling of widespread rejection of the "political". This contempt does not distinguish between different ideologies and could lead to any outcome, including a proto-fascist or openly authoritarian one. The greatest risk today is the emergence of an authoritarian government out of the chaos promoted by both sides, with the approval of the Obama administration. For the Pentagon it seems the ideal result would be the creation of an authoritarian government with mass support, capable of liquidating the political, social and economic gains of the last seventeen years and eliminating any danger of socialism in Venezuela. That does not mean that other kinds of transition could not emerge from such chaos, if the Maduro government fails to stabilise its rule.

5: There is no third pole: a third pole could possibly emerge from Chavismo if there is a turn and break by the masses

Some colleagues and comrades began, in the months preceding the 6 December parliamentary elections, to talk about the emergence of a supposed third pole, as a result of the breakdown of polarization. The boldest suggested that up to 17% of the national electorate might be willing to break with this polarization in those 2015 elections. This was a superficial reading. It did not read correctly the correlation of forces or the dispute between political models and cultures that was developing at the time.

Unfortunately, the Chavistas in power did not allow the legalization of other electoral options. These would not have changed the final election results, but they would have made it possible to see more clearly how wrong was this analysis of the emergence or existence of a third electoral and organizational pole.

Our position is not defeatist but is based on real facts. In recent years we have not witnessed a single big march or insurgent political event that shows that the political pendulum has swung to the left or to a third position or space for the masses. On the contrary, the calls for marches and rallies by so-called critical Chavism – except for those of the CRBZ [3] which is still very tied to the political leadership of the Chavista government – have failed to bring out more than a thousand participants.

The few organisations of so-called critical Chavismo have not even managed to reach the levels of influence and activity that characterised in the 1970s movements like the Socialist League, the CLPs or Ruptura, which certainly never saw themselves as a third pole at that time.

Moreover, the patent inability of the radical left – for which we share responsibility – over the past two decades to build regularly functioning national organizations, with offices and a regular political press, with the exception of Marea Socialista, did not allow for the emergence of a third pole based on the efforts of any particular political apparatus.

So we insist, to talk about the existence of a third pole in 2015 and the first half of 2016 is a political mistake. We are aware of the shortcomings of the top leaders of the process: they are steering without a flight plan or any idea of where they are heading. Their arrogance and belief that they are the heirs of Chavez by divine grace, leads them to see as enemies those of us to who criticize. They almost never take account of the questions we raise, and when they do they disguise the fact. This is true, but it is not decisive.

However, since objective events are also dialectical, the decline of the bureaucracy that runs the government and the

party and its demonstrable inability to lead the changes needed to preserve the Bolivarian process and relaunch it towards a socialist revolution, are factors that in the short or medium term could facilitate the emergence of a third pole. But this can only arise from contradictions within the mass movement at a given moment, and will require a broad revolutionary alliance, not just the action of a self-declared vanguard.

We act to contribute to the development of such contradictions within the mass movement and to build the greatest possible unity among critical Chavismo and left organizations as a whole, in order to promote a mass revolutionary alternative. But this obviously requires us, as our political orientation also suggests, to work within the so-called Bolivarian process. We need to be part of the space around the Great Patriotic Pole (GPP) and all the various expressions of critical Chavismo.

The historical weight of the PCV (Venezuelan Communist Party), deserves respect, as do other organizations of that generation like the PPT, which continues the popular and working class traditions of Alfredo Maneiro. In spite of many differences, the same goes for organisations like the Tupamaros, UPV, Redes and others. They cannot be ignored. Much less should we dismiss their members who, like the rest of the left, have made big sacrifices and still have the same dreams as us of building a socialist country.

If these political organizations are doing little now to strengthen efforts to compel government leaders to resume the path of Chavez and the radical deepening of the Bolivarian revolution (which is part of our goal), that should not lead us to condemn or, worse, to insult them. We should not dismiss them but call on them to continue developing together at least unity of action and possibly other bigger objectives.

We should even recognise that the PSUV (in spite of its present role), like the MVR and the MBR 200 before it, carries the organizational vision adopted by Chavez at different historical moments to come to power and to stay there. It is the bearer of a legacy that includes many victories. That does not give it carte blanche nor make it eternal or irreplaceable. But how can this (as Chavez' own work) be dismissed just like that? It is because it has these origins that it remains the biggest party today.

Having said all this, let there be no doubt. If a turn to mass radicalization occurs, we will certainly be at its side, without laying any claims to being a self-declared vanguard. Linking up with the masses is today much more about sharing the small, everyday experiences and struggles of the poor and the working classes, in their protests against the falling purchasing power of their wages, against shortages, inflation and in defense of democratic freedoms, human rights, the environment, as well as gender, labour and social rights. It is about helping organize and educate in the unions, in the communes, in cultural and student centres that can enable the emergence of a leading role for the class and for citizens in a situation of revolutionary radicalization. A third revolutionary pole may emerge, most probably from the grassroots of Chavismo or that growing space of resistance to the classic politics of holding on to power, which we discussed earlier.

6: The opposition between the interior of the country and the capital of the Republic threatens the idea of a national state

One factor that adds to the current turbulence is the bias towards Caracas in the interventions of the politicians, both of the opposition and the government side. Language is not universal, it has local and regional aspects and most of the political class seems unaware of this. At present, most leaders of the opposition and the government, when they think they are addressing the nation, speak to Caracas, from Caracas, in the codes of Caracas.

The country as a whole is not integrated into the politicians' narrative. At best the regions get a mention when some conflict breaks out there, and they are always interpreted from the logic of the city that serves as the seat of power

and of the national party leaderships.

This is aggravated by the fact that Caracas has appeared to be favoured on issues such as electricity and water rationing, policing, training for possible natural disasters, cultural events, and the monitoring of shops and businesses against hoarding and speculation. The social missions are much more active in the capital and wages are higher there. People in the provinces begin to see Caracas as a place of elites.

This growing phenomenon of opposition between the country's hinterland and Caracas had not occurred since the federal war of the 19th century. We all thought that this phenomenon had been erased by Gomes (the dictator in the first half of the 20th century) and the series of provincial leaders who consolidated Venezuela's bourgeois nation state, modern political parties and bourgeois democracy.

When you listen to top government and opposition leaders today, you find that most of their examples, references and even anecdotes are related to the great capital, leaving the regions bereft of political representation.

This provides fertile ground for the policies of Balkanization that transnational capital is promoting in our part of the world. We need to address this fact, which goes unnoticed by many. We need answers. This phenomenon demands a reconstruction of revolutionary political discourse, so that we are able to interpret the meaning of national unity, which is needed for revolutionary change. Fragmentation only favors the big capital.

7: The working class and its struggle for a living wage, and the lack of a national union leadership up to this task

The anti-capitalist left, at the same time it defends national sovereignty from any foreign invasion, should work with special emphasis in the current situation on the struggle between capital and labour. In that sense the first thing to do is work for higher levels of organization and struggle by the workers themselves, to allow them to defend their gains and achieve greater class consciousness. In this process of increasing their political awareness, while defending themselves against the greed of their employers and the exploitative logic of capitalism, the working class must prioritize its struggles. Today, fights to win decent wages, together with the right to employment, are of the first order, because in the midst of this crisis of capitalist overproduction, these are the benefits that are most under attack.

More than ever, they want the working class to pay for this crisis. Unusually, since the beginning of the Chavez government, the problem of unemployment does not have the same importance in Venezuela as in other countries. But wages do, especially with the dramatic loss of purchasing power that we are now suffering with this outrageous inflation in our country.

This is now a problem that needs to be solved as a matter of social emergency. Inflation over the past two years, just for food prices, has been running at 25% every month, with that rising to 30% in the last two months. Studies show that the increase in the prices of consumer goods in the last twelve months are of historic proportions. The basket of basic goods has gone up by 1,350%.

Trying to follow this upward trend of inflation already leads us into the labyrinth of hyperinflation. Workers today need two or more jobs to try to survive. Some take part in the perverse pyramid of reselling products at inflated prices just to be able to cover family expenses. Others become part-time taxi drivers, construction workers, electricians, mechanics and security guards. This deterioration also badly affects professionals and technicians, who are still part of the middle class, especially those who are retired on pensions. These, often along with their partners, can regularly be seen in supermarket queues trying to purchase products at regulated prices.

As wage earners in this country, we are being left with no protection for our old age because we have to cash in our annual pension fund contributions to supplement our wages. In other words, people no longer have the accumulated years of service they need for their pension and other benefits, because they are spending the money mainly on food and medicine.

Even the few modest goods that some workers and university graduates managed to obtain in the past, now have to be sold and the money becomes part of their family's regular expenditure. None of this is a dramatization to try to convince people that wages are not enough. It is the stark reality that many fail to see, just as they fail to understand the "invisible" or "mole-like" behaviour of the working class as a whole.

The working class spends most of its time during this crisis, individually, looking for ways to support their family. Collectively, organized labor, individually or in groups, spends part of its time lobbying their local trade union organizations not to give up any of their economic, social or labour rights, in the midst of a crisis characterised by hundreds of workplaces that are paralysed or semi paralysed. For their part, these workplaces put pressure on the Ministry of Labour to allow them to make redundancies or temporary layoffs of staff in order not to pay their workers' wages or only to pay them a part of what they are due, or they request permission not to fulfill some clauses of their collective agreements.

That is the tragedy of the organized working class, while the situation of subcontracted workers is much worse. Their wages are three to four times lower than those of permanent workers and they are not covered by collective agreements.

All of them, of course, continue to spend time on the various forms of alienation that capitalism has developed so well throughout its history. Many sectors of permanent workers or contract labour, in various workplaces, fall victim to small groups, political leaders and professional advisers who only want to profit from their control of trade unions to make easy money or to advance their political careers.

It is also true that the docile or submissive behaviour of some union members only facilitates the actions of these opportunist and divisive sectors, who seek to benefit from any problems.

While all this and worse is going on, the Bolivarian Socialist Workers Central (CSBT) which became the biggest union confederation thanks to its use of the power of state institutions, is now, 5 years after its creation, failing to struggle for wages alongside its affiliated and unaffiliated unions. Instead, it is much more concerned with imposing its hegemony in the various states and sectors of the economy, almost always in a thoroughly sectarian and manipulative manner, placing in leadership positions only those whose support is unconditional.

"Wages?", "Fighting for Wages?" For many of those who control the CSBT, this is a pure economic deviation, it is not socialist. When workers in state enterprises – as is now the case with the electricity workers – struggle in their contract negotiations to win better wages and to defend their existing conquests, the leaders of the CSBT, first tries to control them so that they do not go on fighting, and then ignores them and even condemns their positions. And if they do declare their support, they do it in the most timid manner possible and without any plan of struggle to help the workers achieve their demands.

This behaviour by the CSBT towards the Venezuelan working class is as that of the president of the oil workers' federation, the FUTPV, who is also the president of the CSBT. If you speak to oil workers they will easily confirm the situation they are experiencing.

In spite of the above, we are in favour of building the CSBT, of strengthening it, to turning it into an instrument of

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struggle for the Venezuelan working class. We are not in favour of destroying it, or building an alternative, nor of turning to one of the other union confederations that already exist or survive.

The CSBT needs to be strengthened so that its federations and unions are strengthened. This is necessary so that, in the midst of this situation where workers are distracted and busy trying to survive, where their organised strength is weak, their social conditions are deteriorating and their struggles are dispersed, they can regroup and strengthen themselves as soon as possible.

There is no way of substituting for the workers themselves. We are in favour of all workers being organised in a single confederation, with a single union or federation in each sector and a single federation in each region, because unity is strength.

That is our strategic objective. To that end, we need a new way of running the unions, so that all workers are involved in the activity of their organizations. That is how the class struggle and democratic sectors will grow in size and strength.

We want our class organizations to be a part of the solutions to the problems that workers and all the other oppressed social sectors are experiencing. And this, today, in the midst of the economic and social crisis we are experiencing, has only one name: wages.

Wages that are enough to support a family. The struggle for wages cannot be left only in the hands of individual unions. The entire working class puts pressure on these unions and even blames them, because these are what they have to hand to direct their demands, and because they lack awareness of the situation as a whole. But the erosion of wages cannot be resolved merely by discussing collective agreements. Individual unions should not be blamed for this problem. The CSBT as a whole has to take charge of this problem. The challenge is: either act in favour of working people, or put yourselves on the side of capital and the bureaucracy.

[1] The Caracazo was a spontaneous uprising against a package of structural adjustment measures, including fuel price increases, introduced early in 1989, at the start of the second government of President Carlos Andres Perez, of the supposedly social-democratic Accion Democratica party (AD). Over 300 were killed when the army put down the revolt. AD is now one of the main components of the right-wing opposition coalition, the MUD, which won a majority in Venezuela's National Assembly in December 2015.

[2] Jose Carlos Mariategui was a Peruvian marxist in the 1920s and 30s, often described as the founder of Latin American marxism. His writings on the land question and on indigenous issues remain among the best ever written, and illustrate his attempt to use and adapt marxism to the specific reality of Latin America. Alfredo Maneiro was a Venezuelan revolutionary, who began his struggle in the Communist Youth against the dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez in the 1950s. In the 1960s he took part in the CP's armed struggle against the government of Romulo Betancourt. Critical of the CP's evolution, he was one of the leaders of a split in 1971 that gave birth to the MAS and his own Causa Radical or Causa R, which became the leading force of the Venezuelan left in the 70s and 80s and was an early proponent and practitioner of participatory democracy. After further splits, that tradition is now represented by the PPT (Patria para Todos)

[3] The Bolivar and Zamora Revolutionary Current is a political coordination of several social movements, with its origins and main strength in one of the peasant movements, the FNCZ (Zamora National Peasant Front).