

Chavez stabs Colombian resistance in the back

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It has been a terrible year for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - the FARC. In February there were, for the first time, huge popular mobilisations against the FARC's policy of taking hostages. Then on 1 March, Colombian troops violated the territory of neighbouring Ecuador to kill 12 FARC fighters - among them number two leader Raul Reyes.

One week later Ivan Rios, another member of its seven-strong secretariat, was killed by his own bodyguard to claim a \$1 million government bounty. Then charismatic FARC commander Nelly Avila Moreno, known as Karina, surrendered after making a deal with the government. Finally on 26 March FARC's historic leader, 77-year old Manuel Marulanda, died of a heart attack.

The 250,000 strong Colombian military claims to have considerably reduced the areas in which FARC can operate and that many guerrillas are deserting and joining "re-integration" programmes. Even friendly commentators, like Marxist writer James Petras, concede that FARC is down to 10,000 fighters from a peak of about 20,000. It seems that its two separate fronts, the area at the base of the Andes and the south-eastern jungles, are out of regular communication with one another.

The FARC emerged as a reaction to the ruthless exploitation by of imperialism and the Colombian oligarchy of the peasantry. In 1948 populist presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan was assassinated by right-wingers alarmed by his appeals to the working class and poor peasants. Colombia entered a long period of heightened polarisation, especially in the countryside, as increasingly impoverished, hungry and landless peasants many the descendants of ex-slaves were confronted with monopolisation of land by a super-rich tiny elite. Around 300,000 were killed by the army as the peasantry then mainly placing its hopes in the Liberal Party - was brutally defeated. But guerrilla bands continued to resist.

The FARC was founded in 1964 as the armed wing of the Communist Party of Colombia, from the remnants of the armed opposition to the oligarchy, state apparatus and Conservative Party which had emerged during the 1940s and 1950s. It was rooted in peasant organisations that enabled it, with little or no outside help, to sustain its 44-year long struggle. Nevertheless from its inception the FARC was isolated from the urban working class and operated a strategy of rural guerrilla war aimed at eventually encircling the cities.

The FARC followed the official Stalinist strategy of the 'stages theory' an essentially Menshevik strategy of promoting first a democratic stage of independent capitalist development of Colombia through an alliance between the working class and the 'patriotic' liberal capitalists. Socialism was to be a stage to be pursued in the distant future once the bourgeois democratic stage had been completed. This strategy meant that the FARC's aim was to force the Colombian capitalist class to negotiate with it, to break the country from the grip of US imperialism and carry out progressive land and democratic reforms. Despite the heroism of its struggle against a brutal military machine and two failed peace processes in the 1980s and early 2000s both of which collapsed due to the intransigence of the Colombian right and its US backers - the FARC has

drifted into heavy reliance on unpopular kidnappings for ransom and reliance on a take from the huge narcotics trade.

In the last few years the FARC seemed to find new support from left wing leaders elected in Venezuela (Hugo Chavez), Ecuador (Rafael Correa), Nicaragua (Daniel Ortega) and Bolivia (Evo Morales). Though these leaders did not explicitly support the FARC, they condemned the Colombian regime's human rights violations and called for peace negotiations.

Tensions build

At one point Venezuela even seemed to come close to war with Colombia. Outraged by the violation of Ecuadorian territory when Colombian forces crossed the border and killed the FARC leaders, and incensed by Colombian government accusations that computers found in Ecuador showed that Chavez was funding them to the tune of \$300m, the Venezuelan president expelled the Colombian ambassador and mobilised troops on Venezuela's border with Colombia. Furthermore he demanded international recognition of the FARC as "a belligerent force" and made a series of blistering denunciations of Colombian president Alvaro Uribe.

So when Chavez, on his live television show *Alo Presidente*, suddenly called on the FARC to unilaterally release all their hostages and cease their armed struggle, it was a shock to everyone and a heavy blow to the FARC, many of whose fighters listen to Chavez' broadcasts. He said:

"At this point in Latin America, an armed guerrilla movement is out of place. Guerrilla wars are history. Enough of all this war. The time has come to sit down and talk peace".

Chavez added that the FARC's struggle has become "a justification for the American presence in Colombia, and thus a threat to Venezuela."

He went on: "I think the time has come for the FARC to free everyone they have in the mountains. It would be a great humanitarian gesture in exchange for nothing."

He claimed that Venezuela and a number of other countries would be ready to help their reintegration into democratic life in Colombia, after peace accords are signed. The BBC commented with justification that "the effect on FARC morale was likely to be devastating." No wonder Colombia and the USA rushed to praise the Venezuelan president for the first time in many years.

Chavez's cringing climb-down comes at a time when Uribe has been waging a fierce war of words with Nicaragua's president, Daniel Ortega, and with President Rafael Correa of Ecuador - accusing them both of supporting the FARC. He has his united front with them at just the time when news is circulating that the US intends to open a major military base in Colombia, replacing the one in Ecuador that Correa has refused to extend the lease on.

Revolutionaries should unequivocally condemn Hugo Chavez's call on the FARC to surrender.

The FARC's programme

Of course the FARC's guerrilla strategy, their mass hostage taking, and their embroilment with the drugs cartels, is deeply flawed. It is fundamentally the wrong way to overthrow the murderous Colombian elite and its US backers. But our criticism of the FARC has nothing in common with Chavez's wretched appeal. Criticism from the viewpoint of an alternative revolutionary strategy, based on the leadership of the heroic Colombian working class in alliance with the peasantry, is something altogether different.

Such a strategy must break from the Stalinist stages approach and base itself on the theory of permanent revolution: the simple recognition that in countries like Colombia today, the national capitalist class is too weak and too tied to US imperialism to pursue a 'bourgeois democratic revolution' to a conclusion. To win true independence from imperialist subordination, to establish lasting democratic freedoms, to effect a revolution in agriculture that can free the peasants from underdevelopment all these things depend on the ability of the working class to come to the head of the revolution. In doing so they will be able to overthrow the capitalists and take power and property into their own hands in a socialist revolution.

Such a strategy cannot renounce all guerrilla resistance on the part of the peasants and indigenous peoples, faced with the Colombian landlords' notorious death squads and the US-backed army. It cannot renounce armed self-defence for the working class and the trade unions, given the murderous record of the regime.

But Chavez's call is not for a better revolutionary strategy but for a reformist capitulation. Quite apart from the fact that socialism, whether of the nineteenth, twentieth or twenty-first century variety, can never, anywhere, come via peaceful and democratic means - in Colombia of all places - to invite disarmed forces to participate in elections would be simply suicidal and would leave the party, trade union and peasant union militants to the mercy of the death squads of the mine owners and landlords.

In the last 15 years more than 4,000 trade unionists and peasant activists have fallen victim to right-wing death squads, to which Uribe is undoubtedly connected. As an example of the legality and human rights that workers experience in Colombia we have only to look at the most recent case. On March 6 2008 over 200,000 people participated in the "March Against State Terror". Yet between March 4 2008 and March 11 2008, hundreds of organizers and human rights activists were threatened. The organiser of the march and four other human rights spokespeople were killed, along with four trade union leaders for the Confederation of Colombian Workers.

Ridiculous and reactionary too is Chavez's idea that their surrender would ease US pressure on Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua. Quite the opposite. Colombia is the principal agent of US policy in Latin America and has received billions of US Dollars over the past decade, under the infamous Plan Colombia. In reality this project has resulted in the destruction of the livelihoods of countless Colombian peasants in the Amazon Basin. Upwards of three million peasants have been displaced from their lands as planes dump defoliants and destroy crops en masse, as well as poisoning peoples' supplies of food and water.

James Petras's condemnation of Chavez rings true:

"To say that the FARC's armed struggle is a pretext for imperialism is pure stupidity (- -) Chavez doesn't explain how the FARC can hand over their prisoners when it has 500 guerrillas rotting, tortured, malnourished, sick in the dungeons of Uribe's prisons. I believe that my question is why President Chavez wants to sacrifice the lives of the guerrilla prisoners to take up the flags of Uribe, Sarkozy, et cetera; a total unilateral surrender."

FARC today is declining in membership and suffering repeated military defeats, and its popularity is as low amongst the Colombian masses as it has ever been. Its ideology and tactics are a block to the formation of a mass workers and peasants party and isolate the peasantry in areas it controls from the working class, and the organisation is a tool of a bureaucratic leadership which manipulates the mass base for a strategy which does not even set the goal of socialism before the Colombian masses.

Nevertheless a defeat for FARC against the state remains a defeat for the peasantry by its class enemy.

We must not forget FARC's roots as a force of self-defence for popular movements from savage right-wing repression, and as a reaction to the brutal living conditions of Colombia's peasantry which persists today despite billions of dollars of US aid, corruptly pocketed by the elite. Our aim must be to say to its disoriented fighters and its supporters in the cities: find a better way. They will find none better than Leon Trotsky's strategy of permanent revolution.

Unlike Hugo Chavez, we have to be clear that there can be no "peace" without justice, and that the Colombian terrorist state and the imperialists who loot the country will never let the masses of the continent live in peace and security. It must be overthrown and smashed in a socialist revolution that spreads across the entire continent, creating a United Socialist States of Latin America.

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