

Tensions increase between Venezuela and Colombia

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Earlier in November the border between Colombia and Venezuela was the scene of bloody clashes between Venezuelan and Colombian armed forces. Two Venezuelan soldiers were killed, apparently by paramilitary hitmen who had entered from Colombia. Eight Colombians were killed, innocent civilians according to the government of President Alvaro Uribe, a paramilitary squad according to Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Hugo Chávez responded by calling on the people of his country to 'prepare themselves for war', but later excused his remarks as simply a quotation of the maxim: 'if you want peace, prepare for war'.

Although the two countries are major trading partners the relationship between the regimes has been deteriorating, since the Colombian army killed FARC leader, Raul Reyes, in Ecuadorian territory in 2008. This threatened to spiral into a military confrontation between Ecuador, supported by Venezuela, and Colombia.

Alvaro Uribe is the United States' most loyal servant in Latin America, and has now caused huge disquiet in Latin America by signing an agreement for seven new US military bases in that country. This is part of Obama's 're-orientation' to Americas' back yard after the Bush years, when it was deprioritized and US foreign policy shifted its attention to the Middle East and Central Asia. But it is no surprise that most South American states - including less radical ones like Lula's Brazil, see these bases as a potential base for a new period of US meddling in their countries affairs.

During the eight years of Bush's Presidency, governments in the region felt free to up their anti-US rhetoric, the most radical being Chávez in Venezuela along with Morales in Bolivia, and more mildly Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. All of these have joined the ALBA bloc. (Alba - Dawn in Spanish- is an acronym for the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America). It was initiated by Venezuela and Cuba as an alternative to the US dominated Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). It now includes, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and three Caribbean states.

Obama tries to bring US domination back to its former strength

Obama came to power knowing that Latin America, the traditional 'backyard' of its northern 'neighbour' - or more accurately, master - needed to be brought back into line. In order to do this he combines 'dialogue', a discourse that harks back to Roosevelt's 1930s 'good neighbour' policy, with more outright coercion.

The combination of Obama's rhetorical condemnation of the coup in Honduras with behind the scenes US embassy logistical support for it, combining in diplomatic efforts to reach a 'compromise' whereby all the

aspirations of the Honduran masses (particularly for a Constituent Assembly) would be thwarted indicates what the 'good neighbour' policy amounts to. The corrupt and autocratic Honduran elite - landowners, business executives and military chiefs are the instruments of US rule in the Central American semi-colony. Obama intends to keep it that way.

Together with the issue of the bases in Colombia, this issue shows to the working masses of Latin America how hypocritical and cynical is Obama's claim to be a 'change' from the Bush era. One of the pillars of both the US and the European imperialists' approach to Latin America has been their close relationship with Brazil. However, this hasn't been free of contradictions: for example, regarding the military bases in Colombia. Lula has asked for guarantees that they will only be used 'for Colombia's internal security'.

Lula recently signed an arms deal with France and represents the aspiration of that country's ruling class to increase its clout as a regional power. It plainly feels insulted that it wasn't even consulted on the Colombian bases and worried that the Pentagon may be planning some sort of 'regime change' in Venezuela that could misfire and radicalise the whole continent.

However, Lula has no answer to the US making 'facts on the ground.' To sign a mutual defence pact with Venezuela, for example, would mean jumping into the camp of the populist radicals and open him to internal destabilisation by the US and its Brazilian ruling class agents.

This inability of the Latin American ruling classes - even the so-called radicals - to effectively defend the most basic democratic rights against their US masters, was shown in Honduras. The Organization of American States (OAS) negotiations in Costa Rica served only to shore up and legitimise the murderous coup and help Manuel Zelaya and his allies to channel the discontent of the masses into the negotiation room where they have been repeatedly frustrated. This has also been Chávez and the Alba bloc's approach, as they too accepted 'negotiations', themselves entertaining illusions that Obama's intervention could mean a restoration of democracy for the Honduran people.

As a result Chávez and his allies, did not mobilise a region-wide action against the coup in Honduras. In fact only if Chávez, Morales and Co had called for the masses to protest on the streets, across the continent, targeting not only Honduran embassies but the US ones might Obama have felt obliged to insist on Zelaya's return to power.. But in fact the Alba states response was feeble in the extreme.

This all confirms Trotsky's analysis that the ruling classes of semi-colonial countries cannot, despite the fact that some leaders like Chavez may genuinely believe they are 'anti-imperialist', resolve the most basic democratic tasks like independence from imperialism. This because their class position forces them to constantly demobilise the only social force capable of defeating imperialism - a revolutionary movement of the proletariat in alliance with the peasantry and the urban poor.

An example of this in Venezuela is the increasingly openly anti-democratic, or to use the precise Marxist term 'bonapartist', right turn by the Chávez regime,. Over the last year or so the Chávez government has been trying to discipline the working class, impeding its right to organise independently of the state and the regime. We have already seen how he has carried out repressions, either directly or through state governors, of workers at factories like SIDOR and Sanitarios Maracay, both of which saw brutal armed repression by the state forces and many injuries and arrests, and the latter of which saw two workers killed.

A government which has now proposed repressive laws, equating the just struggles of the working class with the actions of the right-wing coup-mongers: for example heavy prison sentences for activities which disrupt 'political equilibrium'. Another law penalises strikes which sabotages the working of a state

company, with a prison sentence of up to 10 years ? backed up by a threat to use the intelligence services on any ?agitators?. A regime where 2,200 worker, peasant and student activists are estimated to be facing court proceedings, a government couldn't stop a spate of killings by private hit men of 6 trade union activists earlier this year, is in no way a workers government. It is scandalous that some groups claiming to be Trotskyist regard Chávez as the builder of ?21st century socialism.?

US bases and imperialism out of Latin America

Despite all this, socialists don't fall for the hypocrisy of the Uribe regime in Colombia which accuses Venezuela's government of trying to shore up ?national unity? at a time of crisis by identifying an external enemy ? one phrase which has been bandied about is that this is Chávez's ?Malvinas moment?. We cannot equate Chávez's left bourgeois populism with Uribe's government, the most reactionary and pro-imperialist in the region.

The truth is that Colombia is acting as an agent of US imperialism, which uses the Uribe puppet regime to help it police the region and encourage fear and loathing between the working people of Venezuela and Colombia, who are united by a common language and history, similar living conditions and daily struggle against racism and imperialist domination, and of course exploitation as workers or permanent attacks on them as peasants.

Uribe's regime received massive aid increases during the Bush years under the ?Plan Colombia? and ?Plan Patriota? projects and, like Israel, used the same logic of the ?pre-emptive strike? to justify its aggression towards its neighbours, as we saw when it tried to set a precedent to legitimise the use of Colombian troops within the borders of neighbouring countries in the Raul Reyes case. It also has domestically a long history of assassinations and massacres. The ?dirty war? carried out by the army and paramilitaries has directly killed thousands of peasants, trade union leaders, workers and political activists, and is not far off the tactics of state terrorism practiced by the region's sinister military dictatorships of the 1970's. The regime is also responsible for the expulsion of thousands of peasants from their land, the surrender of Colombia's natural resources to the multinationals and signing of economic, political and military pacts with imperialism that have tightened yet further the stranglehold which the USA has on the country. What's more, Uribe is linked to sectors of the drugs cartel and the so-called ?para-police? of Colombia. Fourteen of his supporters in the legislature (and 6 from other parties) are in jail for their links to the paramilitaries, and a number of high ranking officials have had to leave their command.

During 2008 over 50 politicians were involved in legal scandals and photos of Uribe himself with paramilitaries on his 2002 election bus were revealed, and he was accused of giving support to the formation of paramilitary groups while governor of Antioquia in the mid-90's. The Colombian state has been armed to the teeth by the US: it has over 400,000 full-time members of the army, air force and marines, while Venezuela has less than 50,000.

In Colombia, even before the installation of the 7 bases, US marines and private mercenaries already operate openly, and there are 3 bases in place (at Tres Esquinas, Florencia and Villavicencio). It is no coincidence that the most repressive country in the region is the one which receives the most US aid.

Clearly the working class and progressive forces worldwide must come to the aid of Venezuela if it is attacked or provoked by Colombia. But we should not entertain any illusions in Chávez, who for all his bold anti-imperialist words, has during over ten years in government, refused to nationalise most US business interests in his country.

Permanent Revolution

The Latin American masses have historically showed their heroism in fighting imperialism and its agents at home, the oligarchies. What is needed for them to triumph is for the class organisations of the proletariat to come to the head of these struggles. We only need to look at the recent history of Venezuela to see this ? a multinational like SIDOR was nationalised after 14 months of struggle by its workers who had to overcome state repression, although Chávez ended up paying millions in compensation to the Techint bosses.

It was the oil workers who were decisive in defeating the 2002 attempted coup against Chávez, first by going on strike against the military regime and later by running the state oil company PDVSA themselves in the face of a bosses lockout. The pressing task of the working class is to organise the broadest movement possible across the whole region against the installation of the US bases in Colombia. The working class must be ready to unconditionally defend Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba and other Latin American states if the US and the reactionary state allies or internal élites try to launch military coups, cross border provocations, or new economic blockades.

All those in Latin America who want to see the region liberated from imperialism, need to fight for the working class to realise its full potential and take up the leadership of the mass movement with a programme for the revolutionary transformation of society.

For this it will need to create revolutionary parties of the vanguard of the ongoing struggles, united in a revolutionary working class Fifth International, independent of populist presidents and the capitalist state.

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