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Venezuela

24 Political Theses for debate (Part I)

- 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 reprint below, 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 [here](#). 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)

This document can be seen as a partial balance sheet of the Bolivarian process and the administration of the Chavista governments, particularly during the last three years of President Nicolas Maduro. This is an important discussion, coming almost four years after Chavez, on October 20, 2012, at the Council of Ministers, made a kind of balance sheet of some of the results which he was not satisfied with. On that occasion, he called on his ministers, the PSUV and its supporters, to make a "change of course" (*golpe de timón*), a "turn" or to begin a "new cycle of transition", emphasizing the need for criticism and self-criticism and for an increase in efficiency.

None of that has happened. Criticisms have been rejected and inefficiency has increased, although we should recognize that Maduro's government still retains some of the social gains implemented during the Chavez government. It is worth remembering that Chavez began his speech at the Council of Ministers with a quote from István Mészáros: "The framework for measuring socialist achievements is: to what extent do the measures and policies adopted actively contribute to the establishment and well-rooted consolidation of profoundly democratic forms of social control and generalized self-management". (Chavez, *Golpe de Timón*, free brochure distributed by the Bolivarian government, p 10).

The debate we want to have, is marked by recent events (repression and deaths in Sucre state, the raid on the office of Marea Socialista and the repeated hacking of the Apoorrea.org website), which raise the possibility of a repressive turn by the government of Maduro. We see these actions as mistaken responses, on the one hand to protests and/or attempted looting provoked by the food shortages crisis, whether these are spontaneous or organized by right, and on the other hand, as intolerance to criticism or wanting to curtail opposition to the blatant surrender of concessions through the new Arco Minero mining proposal in the Orinoco basin.

Chavez used the quote from Mészáros, which we referred to above, as a Marxist way of taking stock of some of his policies which had not been developed as they should have been. We want to quote some of that speech, known as the "Change of Course" or *Golpe de Timón*, but forgotten by this government, which is just a summary of his intervention in that Council of Ministers on 20/10/2012, and published as a pamphlet. We do it some exasperation and concern, for in the midst of this generalized social crisis and the imperialist attack waged through multilateral bodies like the OAS, UN and others, we now also have to face a possible repressive turn by this government against the people and their vanguard organizations. Therefore, we consider it appropriate to dwell on what Chavez said in that *Golpe de Timón*, in order to clarify and leave in no doubt the democratic character that any government should have which lays claim to be the heir to Chavez' legacy, and which describes itself as socialist or engaged in a process of transition. Here are some excerpts from that speech:

"So we come to the issue of democracy and socialism, whose essence is absolutely democratic, while capitalism is in essence anti-democratic and exclusionary, the imposition of capital and the capitalist elites. Socialism on the contrary

liberates: socialism is democracy and democracy is socialism, in the political, the social and the economic." (Ibid. P. 10)

"... Remember the Soviet Union, which is gone with the wind: in the Soviet Union there was never democracy, and there was not socialism. The process lost its way and the leaders didn't realize it, or if they realized it, they could do nothing about it, and the empire struck"... (ibid. P 16)

"That is why socialism of the XXI century, which has risen here as if from the dead, is something new; It must be truly new, and one of the essentially new things in our model is its democratic nature, a new democratic hegemony, and that forces us not to impose but to convince, and that is why we have been talking about the media, about communication, about the need for arguments..." (Ibid, p 17)

To conclude this introduction, it is worth recalling that in this "Change of Course" intervention, Chavez spent a lot of time talking about self-criticism and correction, referring especially to the failure to implement the communes or the "communal state", and emphasizing that socialism cannot be decreed. He said: "The purpose of self-criticism is to make corrections, not to do it in a vacuum or keep on doing the same. It is to act now, gentlemen, ladies, ministers...". And because the communes had not developed, this was a lash of the whip from Chavez, together with, as a Christian might say, a prophecy; "Nicholas, I entrust this to you as I entrust to you my life: the communes, the social state of law and justice" ... "Do I make myself clear? Will I have to keep crying in the wilderness for things like this? Everyone here has a responsibility for this, everyone from me, the President of the Republic, down"...

1. Shortages, inflation and the loss of purchasing power detonating a generalized social crisis

Between 1999 and 2013, Venezuelan society saw a continuous rise in material living standards, with higher levels of consumption as a result of the democratization of much of the oil revenue. However, the downside of that good news was that this was based on the boom in oil prices and a huge increase in imports, not because it was possible to diversify the economy or develop domestic agriculture and industry. Nonetheless, this improvement in the material conditions of the people and workers went hand in hand with an attempt to instill the idea of transcending existing capitalism, and therefore the desire to see a Socialist Venezuela.

However, returning to the current grim reality, those in the government and the parties that support the Bolivarian process who criticize the growing discontent among the people against shortages, inflation and the loss of purchasing power of their wages, as a "lack of loyalty" or who say it amounts to people "thinking with their stomach", are trapped in a metaphysical view of militancy and consciousness which ignores the Marxist premise according to which material conditions determine social consciousness. Today we have a people who suffer hunger, poor health, lack of medicines, so of course they express anger and discontent and are on the verge of rebelling against a nomenclature that squanders the political capital and social and material achievements of the previous decade. In just three years the country has been plunged into squalid conditions.

However, we should recognize that the government has made some efforts to alleviate the crisis of food and medicine shortages, while the foreign governments in some of the countries that traditionally supply the imports, along with businessmen and traders inside the country, try to provoke a climate of discontent and also get richer themselves, by hoarding, speculating and increasing prices. This is what the government calls the "economic war". However, neither the government nor the various institutions set up to monitor and control the situation have been very effective in preventing this. On the contrary, many of them have themselves become mafias of corruption and complicity, taking part and deepening the speculation and the crisis, taking bribes in exchange for not enforcing the law. This is on top of the misguided economic policies, the improvisation and the total lack of planning.

Before understanding why we are going through this, first we have to see look at how we are currently surviving. Here are some figures that show how far people's wages go. In April this year the Basket of Basic Goods (CBF) was calculated at Bs 256,146.79 per month. From March to April, it increased by 25.6% (Bs. 52,202.84). And it has continued to increase. In May, the minimum wage stood at 15,000 bolivars a month, plus Bs. 18,564.00 in food stamps, which not all workers receive. So we are far, far below what would be needed to cover our basic needs. This is an indisputable truth: nearly 19 minimum wages are needed to cover the basket of basic necessities.

We can add to this the inflation, said to be the highest in the world, the endless queues because of shortages caused by hoarding, speculative reselling and low agro-industrial production, along with the abuse by police and military personnel, the drama of the sick who can not find their medicines, corruption that goes unpunished, the electricity crisis and organized crime. All of this is creating a situation of unprecedented social, political and economic chaos in Venezuela; a situation of hopelessness and a state of anxiety that overwhelms us every day, imagining and expecting that at some point a popular uprising or something else will break over those in power.

In a country whose economy is based on rent, it is entirely predictable that a significant drop in oil prices will affect the living standards and material conditions of the population. Therefore, a situation like this should have been foreseen and the necessary savings made. But what is most questionable is not only that this was not done, but that no one will talk about it, explain the truth to people transparently and admit responsibility; instead we are served up with a stream of radical verbiage that nobody believes, when what is most revolutionary is the truth.

It is urgent to speak to the country clearly and activate participatory democracy so that the people, through instruments of direct democracy like the referendum, can decide on the economic policies to be followed, such as non-payment or a moratorium on the foreign debt, plans for investment and for the relaunching of the productive apparatus and the nationalized enterprises, plans for agricultural production on land expropriated and redistributed by the revolution, devoting every possible effort to the countryside to help peasant farmers to produce; promoting wage policies that offset high inflation by means of a sliding scale of wages which encourages workers to help relaunch the economy. It is urgent to activate the leading role of workers and the people, or else the Bolivarian revolution will be erased either by popular rebellion, or by the capitulation of the current Bolivarian political class to big capital to ensure its own survival, or in the worst case it will be defeated politically and militarily by a combination of foreign imperial forces and local, anti-national forces.

2. Why we arrived at this situation from the perspective of the Chavista left

It is a mistake not to understand that any revolution or decision to lead a country on a sovereign and independent path, and much more so if this declares it is aiming at a socialist revolution, will be immediately besieged by big international capital. The latter would see its global survival at risk if a socialist revolution were to develop in any country in the XXI century. The so-called economic war has been present ever since Chavez first arrived at the Miraflores presidential palace, and yet he never submitted to big capital.

So what were the mistakes that led to this situation, which can serve as a lesson for socialists now and in the future? We will list some of the economic, political and administrative problems, still unresolved, which may have contributed to the current situation:

a. Exchange control without periodic adjustments according to the dynamics of the global economy. Exchange controls per se are not a bad thing, but rather keeping them anchored to an unreal price generated by the abundance of dollars when the price of a barrel of oil was high. We should have anticipated that this would fall to avoid remaining

hostage to the boom. Socialist planning demanded that.

b. Fixed price controls, without permanent adjustments, when the vast majority of food products, pharmaceuticals, services, etc., are imported. This created a price differential between products on the domestic market compared with those in neighboring countries, which encouraged the emergence of the phenomenon of “bachaqueo” (reselling products at much higher prices) both domestically and internationally, leading to increased shortages.

c. An unreal calculation of wages for the working class and working people based on a fixed dollar exchange rate. With this artificial rate a massive wage gap was created between the earnings of Venezuelans and those of their counterparts anywhere else in the world. Today, a professional with a university degree earns about 100 dollars a month, ie. \$ 3 a day, as a result of the readjustment of the exchange rate from 6.30 to 480 Bs to the dollar.

d. A government made up of inefficient and ineffective officials, where anyone who can repeat a slogan and a cliché can become minister of finance, of health, of education or security, rotating from one job to another with no problem. This is a quixotic form of management which has resulted in total improvisation. One illustration of this is the fact that this process of change has no documents, books, or even speeches to explain the about turns of up to 180 degrees in public policy. The only justification is that there is a new person in charge of the ministry. Improvisation has nothing to do with socialism, on the contrary, socialism should be synonymous with permanent planning, centralization, monitoring, evaluation and correction.

e. Talking of popular power instead of exercising popular power. Every day there is more talk of people power, but decision making has been kidnapped by a clique of bosses who are often not up to the job.

f. The impossibility of citizens getting access to the statistical data on which decisions are based. This concealment is a central element in the system of complicity which limits the possibilities of social control and the exercise of popular power.

g. The one-party system and the persecution of reasoned criticism does not allow for corrections to come from within. It is a sign of the decline of the so-called real socialism of the twentieth century.

h. A form of popular power that is coopted, bureaucratized and clientelistic, which merely administers economic resources and often develops the familiar pattern of corruption, on a small-scale. The hundreds of Zamoro Funds (agricultural collectives), the thousands of cooperatives, as well as communal councils and others, have all been examples of this.

i. A submissive and co-opted left, which has been unable to develop proposals for autonomous organization or to build such alternative organizational models. Alongside this, there is a hyper-critical left which is incapable of involving itself in real processes of building popular power. It is urgent to return to Maneiro's organizational model of a party of social leaders.

j. Now we return from a balance of these economic facts to some points involving the vast amount of money that could not be collected and the huge quantity of dollars that disappeared into a bottomless pit. One of these was allowing, throughout the long boom of incoming dollars, those economic sectors with the highest profits to get away with paying very little in income tax. Thus was the state missed the chance of obtaining large sums of money, which could easily have doubled its tax income in each of those years. The banking sector is a case in point. It made bigger profits than any other, yet it is not taxed as it should be, and much less than it is in many other capitalist countries. Capital pays little tax and a policy of those who have most, pay most, was never applied.

k. In addition, the banking sector became part of the triangulation mechanism that enabled large amounts of dollars to leave the country "legally", in a flight of capital.

l. Maintaining in an unproductive state, thousands of nationalised companies and millions of hectares of land located on farms, ranches and communes in the hands of the state, at a massive cost to the latter. All because these were put in the hands of incompetent managers and administrators, many of them corrupt and anti-working class. While there were loud claims that some of these companies were under workers' control of production, what developed was a bureaucratic caste almost always linked to those at the top of the ministry to which they belonged. With a few exceptions, these managements were a disaster. This also occurred to a large extent in the supposedly communal farms. Some of those who directed the companies belonging to the CVG (basic industries in Guayana) are also partly responsible for the low or non-existent production of steel, iron and bauxite. I.e. the lack of sheet steel for roofing and other industrial uses, and of steel rods for the construction industry, is less a result of sabotage in the so-called "Economic War of the bourgeoisie" than of the incompetence of those who have led these companies.

The lack of urea and other fertilizers is the responsibility of management Pequiven, the state petrochemical company. We could say the same of sugar and coffee which are now scarce, even though the government has the monopoly of sugar mills and coffee roasters. It is a sad fact that of the nearly 20 corn flour processing plants belonging to the State, almost nobody in the country knows the name of their brands and much less has ever eaten an arepa made with flour from these companies. A similar balance sheet can be made of the land and ranches expropriated by the government, which have subsequently become extremely unproductive.

m. Since exchange controls were introduced, the government, via CADIVI and CENCOEX, later through SICAD I and II and the Central Bank, handed over without hesitation and with no checks the dollars requested by different industrial and commercial enterprises to purchase abroad raw materials and consumer goods, including luxury items. These entrepreneurs took advantage of the flood of dollars that poured through these institutions from the introduction of exchange controls until oil prices began to fall. They were able to obtain foreign currency without presenting any cost structures and without anyone subsequently monitoring their production, checking where the dollars went or whether they were selling at the prices set by the government, unless these were essential foodstuffs. Later it was discovered, or rather some people denounced, that hundreds of fake "shell" companies had been used – it is still not known exactly how many of these companies there were or who their owners were – which had received substantial amounts of dollars to import raw materials, goods, equipment, foodstuffs and domestic appliances which never reached Venezuela. Towards the end of this drama, many containers were discovered in the country's ports, full of waste and junk to simulate cargoes of goods imported for production and services and to benefit the population.

n. The government, then and now, has shown little interest in developing its plans with the substantial involvement of employees. The trade unions are not listened to, so the opinions and proposals of the workers are not taken into account by the government. If such a connection had really existed, between government institutions or state enterprises and the working class and its trade unions, problems like those explained in points l and m, might possibly have been corrected. And most of the companies that are now paralyzed or semi-paralyzed for lack of dollars, like the auto industry, aluminum, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, food processing and other sectors, might now be working or have much higher levels of production, if attention had been paid to the initiatives and suggestions of their workers.

3. Chavismo is the synthesis of revolutionary discourse in Venezuela

The people have not yet revolted because of the connection they feel with the ideas and practice of Chavez. They

are well aware of the change in reality, but in spite of this huge crisis they still hold on to the hope that the government of Nicolas Maduro and the PSUV can preserve their fundamental social gains and at the same time return to Chavez' way of solving such situations. That means not just mobilizing the people but listening to them, especially in the productive areas of the economy, the working class, and acting accordingly. This is the way to go.

However, a part of the left does not at all believe that this government will return to that road, and they say so very loudly, above all that part of the left that never trusted Chavez or never believed in the Bolivarian revolutionary process anyway. What this significant part of the radical left fails to understand is that no matter what becomes of this government, it is most likely that socialist thought in Venezuela and in much of the continent will be associated for the rest of the XXI century with the figure of Hugo Chavez, as an example of how it is possible, starting from the common people, to build on their national particularities, and to rescue both their values and the idea and practice of socialism.

Chavez emerged with a nationalist and anti-imperialist discourse at a time when:

(A) the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe had collapsed;

(B) Capitalist restoration in China was underway and there was an opening up to capital in Vietnam, the country with the "glorious achievement" of having inflicted a military defeat on the US military;

(C) After a few years in power, amid verbal confrontations with the U.S. government, Chavez announced during the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, that the aim was socialism, which for him would be of a new kind, compared with the dogmatic, anti-democratic and totalitarian aspect revealed by the countries of so-called real socialism;

(D) From the moment he took office, Chavez had expressed unconditional solidarity with Cuba, providing its government with financial support at home and political support in the international arena. This was a time when the country was still suffering from the hardships of the "special period", when the economic blockade was intensifying and the country was still under siege in international forums and agencies, all of which destabilized the Cuban revolution;

(E) Chavez had made a stand against the neoliberal policies that held sway among Latin American governments during the 80s, opposing the IMF and the FTAA, economic globalization and the idea of a new role for the state, which removed its functions of control and management in order to give capital complete freedom over the sovereignty, national constitutions and laws of each country;

(F) In government, Chavez took steps against the policies of flexible working conditions (passing laws against outsourcing and defending job security), to the benefit of labour and not capital;

(G) The Chavista movement emerged on the public stage at a time when movements like the Zapatistas, with Subcomandante Marcos at its head, in Chiapas, Mexico, were having a big impact and drawing sympathy among much of the international vanguard and mass movement, with their proposal to build a counter-hegemonic power to the governments of the day. At the same time, in Ecuador and Bolivia, there were big mobilizations and struggles led by popular sectors and Indigenous peoples against their situation of ignominy, with the loss of their territories and their rights;

(H) Chavez intervened on behalf of the Colombian guerrillas, in favour of a peace process between the guerrillas and the country's governments, argued tirelessly for the cause of the Palestinian people and of other Arab countries and

Iran in the face of Israeli aggression in the Middle East, and was a champion of OPEC. All this gave Chavez an advantage as a point of reference for the left at home and internationally. So much so, that by aligning with Chavez, a number of political projects in other countries began to win presidential elections. This in turn strengthened his speeches, proposals and actions in favour of integration for the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Ideologically, he played a key role. He restored people's pride in their own country, recovering the heroic aspects of the independence movement, of Bolivar's project for liberation on a continental scale, as well as that of his teacher, Simon Rodriguez, and the struggles of popular caudillos like Zamora against the oligarchy. These were national symbols that had been lost or blurred in the course of our history, thanks to cultural alienation and an imposed contempt for our own national values. Chavez had the merit of tackling this head on, where previous collective, nationalist projects had abandoned them in exchange for the comfort of parliamentary seats or a few university professorships, and the old, empty discourse, devoid of class content, typical of social democrats co-opted by bourgeois democracy.

Chavez' anti-colonial and anti-oligarchic sensibility overlapped and interacted with the anti-imperialist or anti-yankee sentiments felt a large part of the population since the first oil concessions were given to gringo and English companies. This was a consequence of the abuse and vindictive meanness handed out by the foremen and bosses of the Yankee and British multinationals to the oil workers and the awareness that the main benefits of the enormous oil extraction went to the US and England and a handful of families from the local, colonialist bourgeoisie living off this rent. These anti-imperialist feelings found expression in the famous oil workers' strike of 1936, which had a huge impact on awareness, almost as if it had been a nationwide, insurrectional strike.

All this means little to some, especially those of the ultra-critical vanguard, who rather disdain such considerations. But they should at least weigh whether the masses, who at some time or other have benefitted from Chavez' social policies, once they have lost these under right-wing governments, will not look back to the figure of Chavez, his ideas and his legacy, as encapsulating the revolutionary programme for Venezuela's future.

In a few years time, people may find they miss these social policies, the greater importance given to women or senior citizens, to the poor and ethnic minorities, the fairer distribution of oil income, even if these never went beyond the framework of capitalism. Therefore, those of us who defend both Chavismo and socialism need to take a critical stance towards the current policies that could be leading us to defeat. We need to renew our approach to building, to debating, to education and functioning. We need to face the political challenges of the current period and those to come, developing alongside working people a project that takes us beyond capitalism or any other bureaucratic experience. If we can do all this, then Chavismo could indeed be synthesis of revolutionary discourse for Venezuela in the future.