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An Anarchist At the World Social Forum

Walker Lane

2006

Barrel-assing around hair-pin turns at 6am in a crowded bus on a road with no barriers between us and a two thousand foot drop was not the manner in which I anticipated arriving in Venezuela for the Sixth World Social Forum (WSF).

This anus-clenching adventure was made necessary by the fact that a key viaduct on the highway from the airport into Caracas was recently determined to be on the verge of collapse. All traffic was forced to take an old mountain road, so what was normally a 40 minute ride had turned into a gridlocked six-hour nightmare journey.

In order to alleviate the traffic jams, the government decreed specific hours for different types of vehicles, and bus time began at 5am. When we arrived, after a sleepless night on a flight from Newark, rather than being met by steely-eyed, suspicious immigration officials, the most obvious indication that we weren't in Kansas was a huge banner reading, "*Bienvenidos a Venezuela y el Foro Mundial Social: Otro Mundial es Posible*" (Welcome to Venezuela and the World Social Forum: Another World is Possible).

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This was an official government sign welcoming us and similar ones were displayed all over the city for the Jan. 24–29 events.

These now yearly forums came in response to the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland, where the international imperial chieftains gather annually to discuss how to keep the world exactly as it is, or, if it is to change at all, how they can still squeeze the most swag out of the world's poor. The first WSF anti-forum forums were held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, but this year, interest had grown to such an extent it necessitated a “polycentric” event with co-forums held in Mali and Pakistan as well as Venezuela. As it was, almost 100,000 activists showed up in Caracas to discuss and compare strategies for social justice and how to pull the fangs of the U.S. empire.

Representatives of social movements and non-governmental organizations are invited, whereas, those from political parties, governments, and armed groups are supposedly asked to not attend. The latter meant that the Zapatistas and Colombian guerrillas did not come, but the Chavez government had a major presence and weighed in with a \$500,000 contribution to cover event expenses including airfare for 100 welfare rights organizers from the U.S. Also, representatives of the Cuban government took part in forums and had an official exhibit tent, and at least one political party, the Partido Comunista do Brasil, was there in full force complete with musical groups and its members bedecked in t-shirts sporting hammers and sickles.

Caracas is interesting and exciting, but also dirty, crowded (5–7 million people we were told, which is quite a spread for an estimate), polluted (gas is 14 cents a gallon, so anyone who can drive, does), noisy, and somewhat dangerous. Other than that, it was fine, with all of the rhythms of life and culture one expects from a bustling Latin city. The modern, efficient subway system is always crowded but costs only 17 cents and was free to WSF delegates as well as retired citizens.

The city is criss-crossed with pedestrian malls which are swamped with endless kiosks selling every sundry item imaginable. Crowds are often so thick one can hardly walk and music blares from stalls at concert level decibels. It seems unimaginable that people could consume the vast number of items for sale.

A friend, who attended the 2004 Forum in Mumbai, India, described her experience as “life transforming,” so I arrived with great expectations. Unfortunately, much of my enthusiasm was dashed, in part because of the immense scope of the Forum itself. There were two 128-page tabloids published listing 2,000 workshops that were located in venues spread across the sprawling city. Events were often cancelled, frequently with no advance notice, and although most probably took place, it seemed that the ones we most wanted to attend didn’t happen. I spoke to the head of a WSF organizing group who said this was the worst planned of all five forums.

Most sessions were conducted in Spanish although the major talks featured simultaneous translation. Most were on expected subjects such as human rights, youth, women, workers, and the environment, ones that would concern those opposed to globalization and neo-liberalism. However, there weren’t many sessions that sounded engaging or innovative enough for me to warrant struggling through them with my rudimentary Spanish or spending an hour wearing headphones for their translation. A number of the formal sessions took place in the Caracas Hilton which is as elegant as in any U.S. city. However, this facility, besides the ubiquitous WSF signs, sported posters of Bush taped on almost every meeting room wall declaring, “*Bush: Asesino*” (Bush: Assassin). No one took them down.

I, with seemingly thousands of others, spent most days in the outside plazas adjacent to the hotel taking part in informal discussions and watching an unscheduled variety of music and theatrical performances. The Hilton plaza area continually swarmed with ostensible opponents of capitalism, and the

usual venue of the rich was transformed into a merchandise bazaar for South America's traditional left. Want a Che scarf or a Trotsky t-shirt or a Chavez poster? It was all there.

On January 24, there was a mass march of about 100,000 participants and Caracaquenos to the opening WSF ceremonies. All along our route we were flanked by ominous looking, battle-ready, Venezuelan army troops wearing Kevlar body armor and carrying automatic weapons. They were dispatched there to guard us against any provocation from the city's still formidable anti-Chavez right wing, unlike American cities where troops are mobilized *against* demonstrators.

After a seemingly endless march through the city, the opening ceremony, projected to the throng on a giant video screen, featured music and speakers, including American anti-war activist, Cindy Sheehan. When we passed a McDonald's during the march, thousands of people chanted, "*Arepas, Arepas; No Hamburguesas!*" referring to a preference for the local sandwich over the American shitburger.

All across Caracas, much like U.S. cities do for art fairs and the like, banners were hung welcoming people to the WSF, although most billboards urge buying commodities or watching *King Kong* or *Desperate Housewives*. As in all other Latin American countries, except Cuba, abortion is illegal in Venezuela, and Chavez is unlikely to stir up a hornets nest by doing anything about it. There were, however, many posters and banners demanding, "*Para Legalizacion el Aborto*" — For the Legalization of Abortion.

Perhaps my greatest disappointment of the trip was not being able to locate the anarchist-organized *Foro Mundial Alternativo* — the Alternative Social Forum (ASF). It was the announcement of that event as a counterweight to the essentially leftist and reformist orientation of the main gathering that made the whole idea of traveling there appealing. I've read reports of it since returning, so some people found it, but our constant inquiries about its whereabouts were unsuccessful.

ten pretty domesticated over the eons to the culture of work and consumption. We would become fully human following our exit from the daily activity of wage work and commodity exchange through our connection to others. Maybe that's the best we can hope for. The major problem with this is that it still leaves humanity at the mercy of the state, *hoping* that it will function in the manner of Sweden and not as it usually has throughout the thousands of years of its brutal history.

On the surface, the vertical integration of classes under the aegis of a fair and just state sounds appealing given with what we are currently confronted, but it is also the philosophy of classic fascism.

It seems too much of a gamble to not continue struggling to bring about the world we *want* rather than accepting what we are told is "possible." As well, this dream of 21st Century Socialism is predicated on an expansion of the chemical/industrial/nuclear work economy.

The planet cannot sustain even current levels of extraction, production, consumption, and waste — even when they are cloaked in the intoxicating rhetoric of anti-imperialism and socialism. Only a radical retreat from authoritarian and technological solutions can restore balance and stave off catastrophe.

On their extensive web site (nodo50.org/ellibertario; English version at bottom), the anarchist *El Libertario* group states that it wanted "to open and maintain spaces for debate and the construction of the dynamics of transformation," but doubted that the WSF is a "pluralistic, open, self-managed" event.

The ASF described itself as independent for its refusal to accept funding from the Venezuelan government, banks, tourist ministries, and even the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation and Christian aid organizations that contribute to the WSF. But it's more than just funding and WSF's uncritical stance toward Chavismo. *El Libertario's* Rafael Uzcatequi, in several withering attacks on the Bolivarian Revolution of Hugo Chavez, available on the above web site, calls the WSF a "shroud for Venezuela's social movement."

He writes that rather than encouraging autonomy and anti-capitalist policies, the government's "imposition of organizational models directed by a single hand," the much vaunted Bolivarian Circles and other organizations within the poor barrios, become "immobilized to raise their own demands."

Uzcatequi says what are billed as revolutionary social movements have experienced a "progressive incorporation in the cumulative politico-electoral logic" of the Chavez government and are "mortgaging their own autonomy." He ticks off the many facts that have led to the "paralysis of the Venezuelan social movements," such as a lack of mobilizations against energy concessions to multilateral companies, whereas, thousands turn out at rallies to hear Chavez give 4-hour speeches filled with anti-capitalist and anti-globalization rhetoric. The ASF gave voice to criticism of Chavez and advocated for social movements independent of the government.

The material available from *El Libertario* is extensive and argues powerfully that Chavismo is only capitalism with a human face. This means expanding the economy to allow previously excluded sectors of the population to reap some of its benefits by redistributing Venezuela's record high oil wealth

more fairly. But this process also allows the co-optation of the independent movements which become the government's electoral machine and social base for its battle against the old ruling classes to whom Chavez is Castro and Hitler combined.

Uzcátequi views this process, thusly, "There are those in the *Circulos Bolivarianos* with the best of intentions, with priceless grassroots activity, and others, to my knowledge in a greater number than the previous, to whom the word 'revolution' is synonymous of a 'sure wage.'" This is much like Cuba, which I visited last year, where the strongest supporters of the Castro government are those who get paid by it. And, one can understand this.

While those of us, including the comrades of *El Libertario*, want an authentic revolution that eliminates capitalism and the state, most of Venezuela's poor are extraordinarily grateful for what the ersatz one has brought them. Venezuela, like the other countries of Latin America, have experienced intense looting, first by the Spanish colonialists and then by Western, primarily U.S., imperialist interests.

It doesn't bear repeating to this readership the bloody and exploitative history of the Western destruction and domination of the people, land, and animals of this hemisphere. On the sorry day Columbus was discovered by Arawak Indians, he wrote in his diary, "They would make fine servants." And, so it has been for over 500 years — servitude for the people of Latin America, first to bail out the collapsing economies of Europe, and later to enrich the corporations of North America and the local governing elites.

The colonialists and imperialists established a domestic class of rulers of European origin who were cut in on the racket of wealth extraction and have governed the native people of the region while swiftly and murderously extinguishing any resistance. When the local rulers couldn't do the job, the imperial power would intervene directly to insure the maintenance of the racket. The U.S. Marines invaded and occupied Latin coun-

what is done to world's poor, and wants reform. But, what is being created is not "Another" world, but rather the same one made fairer. Again, it's hard to oppose this given the levels of poverty, but the question becomes, can capitalist development of the industrial infrastructure and wealth producing enterprises be accomplished utilizing existing resources without sinking the planet ecologically? Is a fairer deal a sustainable model for the billions of poor?

There's enough wealth in Venezuela currently to accomplish everything Chavez wants, but much of it is parked disproportionately in the hands of the traditional ruling class. So, he could take the route of 20th century socialists and expropriate the wealth of the rulers and distribute that. However, authentic class war would create a perhaps untenable political crisis. Instead, he turns to generating new wealth through standard capitalist means.

What emerges is a model that ends intensive imperialist looting and uses new wealth creation to alleviate the worst suffering of the poor through food coops, medical clinics, small business cooperatives, etc. Still, it's industrial capitalism which Marxist modernizers such as Chavez view as the road to be taken to lift the region out of poverty.

Chavismo essentially raises the question: is this the only type of revolution possible in the modern era? We advocate a world based on decentralization, yet every region of the planet is now intricately interconnected and the planet has a massive population of over six billion. Perhaps within "21st Century Socialism," the state would cease playing its historic role as a racket protecting the wealth and privilege of society's rulers, and instead become the arbiter of social justice. The spheres of wage work, private property, and profit, which revolutionaries have struggled to abolish for almost 200 years, would remain, but be used to promote the common good.

Under this concept, human community would be reassembled *outside* of the economic arena. As a species, we've got-

gently build a new socialist movement.” But what exactly is a “new socialist movement” these days and what does a “world-wide anti-imperialist movement” have as goals? If it is simply to improve the lot of the world’s poorest and to stop allowing the Western economies to penetrate local ones for the purposes of imperial looting, this can only be seen as a positive reform.

However, Venezuela remains solidly enmeshed in the world market system and industrial capitalism. In fact, under Chavez, that process is accelerating, and not just with oil sales. Pablo Hernandez Parra, an oil expert quoted by Rafael Uzcatequi, says, “[N]ational and international capital headed by oil companies, have donned the red beret and sash [of Chavez] and advancing with triumphant strides impose their privatization program under the guise of socialism for the 21st century.”

While including the poor in wealth distribution, Chavez, as Venezuelan presidents before him have, makes deals with the worst of the oil giants but negotiates much better terms for his country from them. Also, plans for massive mineral and coal extraction are in the works that will displace some of Venezuela’s indigenous people from their ancestral lands, and, along with the construction of two costal superports and planned continent-wide oil and gas pipelines, do intense damage to the environment, contradicting Chavez’ concern for ecology quoted above.

Probably the most dramatic display of autonomous opposition in Caracas during the WSF came when two thousand representatives of Bari, Yuka, Anuu, and Wayuu people and their supporters demonstrated in the Capitolio district demanding an end to mineral and coal extraction in the Zulia state by a host of multinationals. When I mentioned this to Mark Weisbrot, the Chavez adviser, he blithely said there was always some sacrifice associated with industrial development. Yeah, like whole continents and entire peoples.

There’s no reason to think that Chavez has anything other than the best of intentions. He appears to genuinely despise

tries over 100 times since 1900 to protect American interests including overthrowing elected governments.

Recently, however, the old fashioned invade, kill the rebels, and install a local fascist, such as occurred in Chile on September 11, 1973, has become unworkable. Indigenous social movements have grown to such a degree that they have been able to install leftist presidents in Brazil, Venezuela, and most recently, Bolivia. These leaders speak the language of socialism and anti-globalization, refusing the economic models of exploitation pressed upon them in the past by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

When Chavez took office, the official poverty rate was 54 percent. Now, if one takes into account the massive government spending in the poor districts, it’s less than 30 percent. Millions now receive previously unavailable health care; education spending has increased greatly and food subsidies through a chain of state-subsidised supermarkets, Mercal, have combined to alleviate the most grinding poverty. Still, on a bus ride through suburban barrios, a Westerner is shocked at housing conditions. Chavez says that problem will soon be addressed.

But is this socialism as Chavez and his international supporters trumpet? Maybe in the Scandinavian sense of social democracy, but not within any precise definition of the word as it’s been historically defined. Economist Mark Weisbrot, an American adviser to Chavez, told me as we spoke in his room at the Hilton overlooking the hotel swimming pool, that the government’s policies are “gradualist reform.” Still, the reforms are such a departure from the nation’s past that no one looks askance when they are referred to as “21st century socialism.”

Chavez is so popular that his poll numbers come in at a dizzying 77 percent, and like Che in Cuba, the Venezuelan’s likeness is plastered everywhere. His popularity ends at the doors of Caracas’ daily papers and commercial television stations that are so virulently over-the-top anti-Chavez that they make Fox News actually look Fair and Balanced. There is no censorship

inhibiting these mainstream, corporate media which let loose a daily barrage of invective, mostly lies, against the government — a situation unlike anywhere else in the world. The papers and the TV stations were the spark plug for the 2002 coup against Chavez that overthrew the country's constitutional institutions and declared it a democracy. When Chavez was quickly re-installed, not one person was arrested nor any paper or station closed.

(For a chilling portrait of this fascist coup, see the Irish BBC documentary, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, [although it is!] at chavezthefilm.com.)

One day, when we traveled up to the Altamira district for a demonstration against Canadian and Brazilian occupation of Haiti, we stopped to eat some *arepas* and *cachapas* at a middle-class restaurant. After our meal, we were approached by a professor who claimed he was like a Jew under Hitler and had been blacklisted for signing an anti-Chavez recall petition. We had no way to verify his story, but then he went into a predictable rant: Venezuela used to be a wonderful place where everyone was happy until Chavez came along; now children were starving in hospitals. In reality, it seems little has been done to the traditional ruling class other than to diminish their absolute privilege. For instance, the one thousand spots in freshman medical schools, which were previously reserved solely for the children of the rich, are now open to students from the barrios as well. Hence, the wealthy feel like the Jews of Germany? They need to read a little history.

Socialism or not, there definitely is a new day in Venezuela and the other poor countries of Latin America. Some of the change is material such as improved living conditions, but it's also in the stirring of the poor populations to make their demands heard. Much of the transformation is in the way people conceive of themselves and the governments they are depending upon to change their lives. They exhibit a self-confidence

that the poor have entered the stage of history en masse and things will never be the same.

At one WSF session, coca-leaf chewing Bolivians told the audience that if newly-elected Evo Morales doesn't do the bidding of the people, he will be removed just as were the two previous presidents. Venezuelans carry copies of the Bolivarian Constitution in their pockets almost like a Bible or talisman.

What are we to make of all of this? In terms of reform, it would be hard for anyone to oppose what the Chavez Bolivarian Revolution has brought to millions of Venezuelans. Also, it's heartening to hear Chavez denounce Bush as Mr. Danger (a Venezuelan literary illusion) and make utterances like, "The imperialist, mass-murdering, fascist attitude of the president of the United States doesn't have limits. I think Hitler could be a nursery-baby next to George W. Bush."

When Chavez isn't trash talking *El Asesino*, he speaks in terms that the Western capitalist rulers hoped had disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union. He has resurrected a dialogue in which capitalism is an issue, not a given. In a speech Chavez gave during the WSF at a Caracas arena, he denounced the U.S. as "the most perverse empire in history... This century we will bury the U.S. empire." We watched it on the government TV channel at our hotel which repeated the 2.5 hour harangue several times. I suspect most Caracaquenos were either viewing the U.S. sit-coms playing on the other channels, or, most likely, the Venezuelan baseball championships.

Before Chavez spoke, the 50,000 in attendance sang the "Internationale." Everyone seemed to know the words of the radical working class anthem except for Cindy Sheehan, who sat on the dais, and, surprisingly, Chavez.

He told the crowd, "Time is short. If we do not change the world now, there may be no 22nd century for humanity. Capitalism has destroyed the ecological equilibrium of the earth." He quoted Marx, Jesus, and Noam Chomsky and called for "creating a worldwide anti-imperialist movement... We must ur-