



INTERVIEW WITH ORLANDO CHIRINO

Fixing the bathroom in a school isn't socialism

Orlando Chirino, is a national coordinator of the largest Venezuelan trade union federation in Venezuela the UNT. The following interview was conducted by Wladek Flakin in Ciudad Guyana at the end of March



ORLANDO CHIRINO has become a very contentious figure in the workers' movement in Venezuela both for refusing to join the government's new party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), and for calling for a blank vote in the constitutional reform referendum initiated by Hugo Chávez last year. Largely because of these positions, he was recently fired from his job at the state oil company PDVSA, and there has been an international solidarity campaign against his dismissal.

I spoke to Orlando Chirino on 24 March in Ciudad Guayana, in the midst of the workers' struggle at the steel works SIDOR. We don't agree with all his positions or his entire political trajectory, but we believe he has made an important and courageous stand in resisting the pressure by the Chávez government to place the workers' movement under state control. We would like to make his views known to an international audience, in order to clear up some misconceptions which have been spread by Chávez supporters within Venezuela and internationally.

Comrade Chirino is currently a member of the "International Workers' Unity" (UIT) a Trotskyist international current centred in Latin America based on the political heritage of Nahuel Moreno. As is the case with most Venezuelan trade union leaders, Chirino speaks extremely quickly and for long stretches. We have done our best to provide an accurate and readable English translation of the interview, but to judge Chirino's political positions fully it is best to read statements of his in Spanish.

Wlodek Flakin, REVOLUTION,

Independent youth organisation, Berlin, May 2008

Comrade Chirino, as a leader of the workers' movement in Venezuela, how do you analyze the situation after the referendum for a constitutional reform on 2 December of last year?

In the first place, the result of the referendum was a defeat for the government, for its new party the PSUV and for its trade union bureaucracy. This marked the end of one period and the beginning of another, in which President Chávez, not only in his speeches but also in his concrete policies, has shifted further and further to the right, making greater concessions to the bourgeoisie at the national and international level.

Can you give some examples of this shift?

If you think about his policies in regards to the summit of Rio [with Colombian president Alvaro Uribe and Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa], it's evident that this was a capitulation to Uribe and US imperialism. Also the decision to lift or make more flexible the price controls on most basic foodstuffs was a capitulation to the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. Chávez even made a decree which suspended, for six months, the regulations stipulating that import companies, in order to maintain their licences, have to respect certain labour standards such as allowing collective contracts, discussing with workers' representatives, paying workers who are victims of labour accidents etc. The regulations said if a company didn't comply with this, their license was to be removed so they couldn't import. But these have been suspended

for six months. This is the clearest expression of the shift to the right.

So the government's latest policies mean taking back workers' rights that had been won in the past?

Exactly. At the moment, the government is negotiating with multinational corporations – for example with auto

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manufacturers – and these negotiations are taking place without any participation by the workers' movement and the trade unions.

That's why I said the shift to the right is also visible at an international level. The most serious example is that the government (which we've called anti-trade union in the past) has put the Labour Ministry at the service of the PSUV and the trade union bureaucracy, in order to attack and try to defeat the trade union movement. By that I mean they attack the class-based trade union movement which fights for autonomy and independence. More concretely I'm referring to the C-CURA¹ and also myself. As you know, I've been fired from my position at PDVSA for political reasons.

What do these attacks mean concretely?

Look at the struggle that's underway at SIDOR. First the government tried to impose an arbitration council on the workers. As this was openly rejected by the workers and their trade union, the government tried to set up a parallel union. Now, the third attempt by the government to serve the Argentinian multinational Ternium-SIDOR in this conflict is that the government and the owners are trying to impose a referendum on the workers. But this kind of democratic consultation is a question exclusively for the workers and their trade union, not the National Electoral Council [CEN] and the owners.

The workers and their trade union will carry out a consultation when they believe there is any possibility of reaching an agreement with the company. These are three pieces of evidence which show that the government wants to destroy the workers' struggle. They know if the SIDOR workers win, that will force a qualitative change in the government's policies, because it will mean a defeat of the unilateralism with which they try to control the workers' movement.

How have they tried to do this?

Last year on May Day, the government, with the reserves of the Venezuelan state, organised the May Day rally, decided on the speakers, published the manifesto, etc, going over the heads of the UNT completely. The year before, it had been the UNT that organised the May Day

rally. But under this Labour Minister the government is trying, in general terms, to destroy the autonomy and independence of the trade union movement.

And Chávez has spoken out against trade union autonomy, hasn't he?

That was on 24 March of last year at the meeting to launch the PSUV. In the speech (which was crucial for us of C-CURA in our decision not to join the PSUV) he said that trade union autonomy was just "poison from the Fourth Republic". This was right at the beginning of the formation of the PSUV when the first proposals for the new party were being made.

Losing the 2 December referendum was a defeat because more than three million people who had voted for Chávez in the last elections stayed at home; a part of the Venezuelan workers voted "No", a part voted blank, but the largest part abstained. It's a clear rejection of the government's policies. What are all these policies aiming at? In SIDOR, today is an important day – the top leadership of the PSUV is here, as well as a commission selected by the President of the Republic, for a secret meeting to try to negotiate a solution between Ternium-SIDOR and the workers (and to weaken tomorrow's national meeting of trade union leaders for solidarity with SIDOR), to try to impose a referendum and avoid an indefinite strike.

Is it normal in Venezuela for the National Electoral Commission (CEN) to organize referendums within workplaces?

No, no, no. This kind of referendum is a normally question for the trade union. The CEN is committing a serious abuse of power. All bourgeois democratic governments in Venezuela tried to control the trade union movement, but they did it via their trade union bureaucracy, via their leaders in the workers' organisations. Today it's the state, going over the heads of the trade unions, that is trying to control the workers directly. The bureaucrats of the Bolivarian Socialist Workers' Force (FSBT) don't have any representative in the leadership of SIDOR's trade union, SUTISS.

It's evident that in this period, the concrete facts about collective contracts – not only in SIDOR but in all sec-

management level, who are mostly technical personnel, and the company uses them as a contingent. That's 1,800 votes the government and the bosses are counting on, as well as many new workers just entering the plant who might also vote for the company's proposal. But these people, who would vote in the CEN referendum, have nothing to do with the contract at SIDOR.

Is this case alone enough to talk about the government's "anti-worker policies"?

To give another example, since 2004 they have refused to discuss with public sector workers about their collective contract at a national level. The contract ran out in 2004. If you combine this contract from 2004 with an inflation of 22.5% last year, with a projection heading towards 30% for this year and the food shortages, much of which has been provoked by sectors of the right, it's a salary that has been pushed down massively. At a time when they won't discuss the collective contract and there's high inflation, it's obvious that there's a lot of pressure to struggle, and lots of people are struggling, for example blocking streets.

I'll give you an example – yesterday the employees of the Labour Ministry occupied a ministry office in Caracas. What were their demands? It's been 17 years since their collective contract was last discussed – that's eight years under the Fourth Republic and nine years under the Fifth Republic!

Weren't you occupying the Labour Ministry last year?

That's a different story, but I'm happy to tell it: 17 trade union leaders who had been delegated by almost 100 trade unions of the base went to present a proposal for a collective contract to the Labour Minister. But he refused to accept it, even though article 51 of the constitution specifies that every functionary is obliged to receive complaints and proposals. The 17 of us occupied the office and they brought armed thugs [pistoleros] to drive us out. The next day the minister went on TV to say that the workers themselves had driven us out of his office. And we had no right to present a response – the state TV gave us no possibility. We're still waiting for him to call us up to discuss the contract.

How does the workers' movement reflect this?

At the UNT congress of 25-27 August 2006 – and this is recorded, since we distributed the records around the world – of the 1,750 delegates at least 1,100 supported the positions of C-CURA. After that congress the government and its trade union bureaucracy, the FSBT, sabotaged the UNT. They left the congress and they never came back. Since then there hasn't been a meeting of the UNT executive – not one meeting since May 2006.

So two years without a trade union centre?

Almost two years. I said I'm a national coordinator of the UNT, but I can't speak for the coordination since it doesn't meet or make decisions. After that, the nomination of the current Labour Minister José Ramón Rivero, who is one of the leaders of the FSBT, was intended to develop its anti-worker and anti-trade union policies.

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tors of the working class – show the government refusing to negotiate with workers. They want to impose the referendum not because they think they're going to win, but as a means to dismantle the trade union movement altogether.

The organised workers in SIDOR oppose the company's proposals, but there are also 1,800 workers from the

Rivero, who was a member of our party at one time³³, and his trade union tendency have consistently opposed elections within the UNT.

The UNT was born on April 5, 2003, so it will be five years old soon. The original coordination was named for a transitional period of one year and then there were to be elections by the base – universal, secret, direct elections. But the government and its trade union bureaucracy couldn't permit elections because yesterday, today and I suspect also tomorrow, the C-CURA would win them easily. So what do they do? They split the UNT, build up parallel trade unions and they're talking about setting up a pro-government trade union centre.

At the congress, a big question was that of autonomy. In the first congress, in the discussions about the declaration of principles, they wanted to remove the part about autonomy because they said under a socialist government it wasn't necessary for trade unions to be independent.

That's what Trotsky said around 1920/21, but it's difficult to compare the Soviet workers' state with the Venezuelan state.

Clearly. And even in the 1920s, under a workers' state, Trotsky was mistaken!

You received a lot of attention because you called for a blank vote in the referendum for a constitutional reform. A number of activists from the workers' movement, some even calling themselves Trotskyists, accused you of helping the opposition, calling for counter-revolution etc. Why did you call for a blank vote?

First off, we need to go back to 3 December 2006, when the president won the election with 63.7% of the votes. It was a fact that the workers, peasants and popular masses of this country gave their support to Chávez, and we supported him as well. As a workers' leader I was also in favor of defeating the right, which we did. It was a smashing victory. It was the first time after the attempted coup that the right, behind their candidate Rosales, acknowledged Chávez's victory. The hope of the millions of us who voted for Chávez was that he would begin with the dismantling of the bourgeois state, which is capitalist, which is the most powerful obstacle against the advance towards equality, socialism, justice, full social security, an end to exploitation, etc.

We had a clear position that this was the right time to organise a constituent assembly – sovereign, popular and independent, you understand. Chávez won, and 15 days later he said he was going to make a new party, the PSUV, and present a constitutional reform to the country. Now what did we question about the reform? The method for working out and presenting the reform was anti-democratic and openly caudillo-like.⁴ Chávez picked a commission which worked from 15 December, when he named it, until the first days of August. Only he knew what they were doing and which articles they were planning to reform. So that lasted . . . January, February, March, April, May, June, July . . . more than seven months.

The commission proposed to reform 33 articles of the constitution. Chávez threatened that if even one single comma were removed, he would withdraw the whole

project (the constitution gives him the power to make proposals but also to withdraw them if they're changed). So there were only three months to review these proposals, from August to 2 December, before the referendum took place.

But what were the contents of the reform you objected to?

Of the proposals that jumped out at me, at our international current and at our team here, one example involved

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the question of property: the constitutional reform didn't just defend private property, it added amongst the new concepts of property, the concept of "mixed property". In our opinion, this is a step back from the current constitution, because in the current constitution the country's natural resources – in the sea, beneath the earth, all of that – are the property of the state. But the constitutional reform would have opened the door for multinational corporations, via mixed property, to own up to 40% of these resources.

In fact, before the proposed reform there was an event that we criticised enormously, which was the problem of the concessions in the Orinoco delta. The multinational corporations there had worked on a contractual basis. But all the multinational corporations (with the exception of Exxon Mobil) now form part of joint ventures with PDVSA. This means they went from being contractors to owning 40% of the project.

But wasn't it the case that they used to control 60% of the projects in the Orinoco delta and now can only control 40%?

Well no, they used to get 60% of the profits but in terms of property, they didn't have anything. The rules had to be changed because in reality they weren't paying the state anything – certainly their contributions were raised significantly. But our fundamental criticism was about these joint ventures. The constitutional reform spoke about socialism in order to give 40% of our natural resources to multinational corporations!

Were there other proposed reforms you opposed?

And the social vision had a strong Bonapartist⁵ element. In regards to what was called "the geometry of power" – indefinite re-election was introduced only for the president; there was to be only limited re-election of governors, mayors, etc. New municipalities and communities could be created by the president and he would have the power to name vice-presidents to rule over the new territories.

In practice this means if we won the governorship of the state of Carabobo (let's assume I became the governor of Carabobo because that's where I live) and implemented socialist policies from below, the president could name a vice-president and take over all the resources in that state. The president might say, "Well, I wouldn't do that to Orlando Chirino in Carabobo, only to Miguel Rosales in the state of Zulia" but the power would still be there

There was also a horrible thing about the workers in public administration. Article 141 of the current constitu-

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tion says they are at the service of the citizens. The reform would have changed that to say they are at the service of public power. So if you're a governor and I work for your administration, I'm at your service and not at the service of the citizens directly. If I form a union, you have a powerful weapon to fight against that. Finally, we looked at the question of councils: communal councils, workers' council, farmers' councils, students' councils, etc.

On the international left many people see these councils as organs of self-government for the masses or even soviet-type bodies which will replace the bourgeois state in Venezuela.

From that point of view, we would defend the councils – we aren't against them. On the contrary, if the workers, farmers, women, students etc. decide to use these councils to develop their democracy, to intensify their struggles, to broaden their organisations – if they use them as organs of management, consultation, debate, representation – then it's important to work with them.

But what the constitutional reform proposed was a type of council like in Cuba, i.e. councils controlled by "the Party" and its people who are sent to the factories, councils that are unequivocally opposed to the trade unions (and are thus in favor of the bosses). We defended and we still defend the trade unions as the most important instruments of workers' struggle.

I can give 15 or 20 more examples, but that's just three things from the 33 articles proposed by the president. Afterwards, in the debate in the National Assembly, 36 more articles were added, and they were even worse.

Do these councils have the resources to act independently of the state?

When we talk about dividing the budget in this country, 25% goes to the governors and mayors, and 5% was to be destined to the communal councils (that was the original proposal, they later raised it to 10%) – the other 70% is controlled by Chávez. That's how the budget was distributed.

The constitutional reform contained a strong element of increasing the president's power, without any doubt, and strikes against the autonomy of the trade union movement. Establishing the workers' councils in the constitution – who was that directed against? Against the trade union movement. Because the government was looking for a form it could use to get the trade unions to submit to its control, but it wasn't able to.

That should explain my position, from the point of view of the trade union movement in Venezuela. What else do you want to know. We presented this position to the working class vanguard, not only here but internationally. We maintained that it was important to discuss the content of the reform, whether it would establish socialism or not. I know my position provoked strong reactions – there are sectors that love me and others that hate me because I pointed out there was not one single social improvement contained in the reform, not one step towards socialism

The reform was presented as a vote on socialism.

You can't tell me it's socialism just because a hospital works. In the developed capitalist countries hospitals work too. Therefore, from an ideological perspective, from the point of view of consistent Marxists, of Trotskyists, we had to oppose the reform. I thought we had to vote "No", but openly I submitted to the decision of my organisation [the "International Workers' Unity" or UIT]. An International Executive Committee came to Venezuela to discuss the question and we ended up deciding to call for a blank vote.

My position was that we were capable of explaining to the working class and the vanguard that the reform didn't have anything to do with socialism – that a blank vote wasn't a rejection of socialism, and this position didn't have anything to do with the right.

So how do you respond to accusations that by opposing Chávez in the referendum you were supporting the counter-revolution?

You won't find an honest worker or workers' leader who has any doubts about my supposed sympathies for imperialism. In the epoch when I was linked to the guerrilla [of the MIR], Chávez was just entering the military academy.

The root of the problem is what kind of government is this? What is its programme? This is an anti-worker government. When there are meetings in Miraflores palace [the government headquarters] with the president and the representatives of businessmen and workers, we ask: who are these representatives, how are they selected? With the government there's no doubt – it was elected by popular vote. But who are these businessmen? And above all: isn't the government itself picking who will represent the working class? We oppose this kind of "tripartism", and all forms of "social dialogue" designed to co-opt the workers' representatives and strangle any kind of mobilisation based on class independence.

It's a fact that the president has unilaterally determined the minimum wage in Venezuela. Since the fall of the dictatorship in 1958 until now, there were always workers'

struggles to raise the minimum wage, to force the president and the legislative branch to make laws. Well, these struggles have been eradicated. There are no more discussions with the workers. The minimum wage is now whatever Chávez says it is. There are no discussions for collective contracts – or when there are, like right now in the oil sector, the minister hand picks the negotiating committee which is supposed to represent the workers. This is combined with attacks against our tendency.

Don't the workers benefit from the minimum wage?

The organic law of labour obliges the president to revise the minimum wage, to sit down with the different sectors and work it out. He has revised it, but he doesn't consult anyone. He sent us a letter last year to inform us of his decision, but we didn't respond.

What do we think? Our current wants to discuss and debate, but he imposes measures like that. If you receive the minimum wage, you get an increase, but people who are slightly above the minimum don't get anything. There have hardly been any raises beyond the minimum wage for the last five years, which means 71% of the public sector workers in this country are now earning the minimum wage. Of the economically active population, more than half live off the minimum wage.

And how much is that wage currently?

614 Strong Bolívares, which is US\$280 at the official exchange rate.

And that in a very expensive country.

Yes, super-mega-expensive [“supercarísimo”].)

There have been rumours that you are planning to leave the UNT and join the CTV⁶. What is the background to this?

We consider one of the best conquests of this revolutionary process was its trade union central, the UNT. Why? Because it was the fruit of a tremendous victory, the fruit of a defeat of imperialism in the lock-out/sabotage of late 2002, early 2003. If they had won the CTV would have been strengthened. But they lost, and the UNT was born. The UNT was the opposite of the CTV, which was born of political parties, especially the PCV [Peruvian Communist Party] and the AD [Acción Democrática]. In 1958 with their deals, they helped established the bourgeois democratic regime. These deals included an agreement to lower the salaries of workers in public administration and block strikes, which is the best example of their class collaboration.

What did I say in this situation? When the debate in the UNT began, the most bureaucratic and corrupt sectors – who today are in the PSUV, who today are deputies or ministers – said that workers who aren't with Chávez can't be part of the UNT, that trade unions who are against the process can't be in the UNT. In the UNT executive committee, which included other comrades, I was the only one to oppose this position of exclusion.

I believe the trade unions are the organs of all workers regardless of their politics or ideology. From there, the big difference emerges, because if the trade union is truly

democratic, if it truly wants autonomy, then we need to win all the workers who are still confused for the fight against capitalism. If we can't convince them, they have the right to present their opinions at every point in the class struggle, as we will present ours. The trade unions aren't political parties, they're organisations of all workers. Now the party we want to build up, that's different. Someone who believes in capitalism won't join us.

In one year we turned the UNT into a reference point in this country. I used to visit Miraflores as if it was my house. The old Labour Minister elaborated many policies based on debates he had with me. In the moment of the confrontation, i.e. of the coup and the sabotage and all that, I was building up the Bolivarian trade union movement, because a part of my organisation [the PST, Socialist Workers Party] didn't understand the dynamics of the movement and was super-sectarian in regards to Chávez. I left that organisation and I wasn't active for two years. I dedicated myself to building up the reference point. I discussed with Chávez. I was one of the first trade union leaders Chávez listened to, along with others of course. We told him about the history of the workers' movement.

But what happens? The UNT is born and for the first year it functions, but then it breaks down. Many trade union leaders coming from COPEI and AD sign up and set up a bureaucracy close to the government

What is the status of the CTV now?

The CTV still exists, of course as a minority trade union central, much weakened. But I want to explain this little rumour from aporrea.org.net [a Venezuelan left website] and other sources. I don't have any illusions in the leadership of the CTV. At the point when it supported the 2002/3 strike-sabotage, this leadership ceased to be a workers' organisation and became a political party executing pro-imperialist policies.

But the CTV still exists – why? It organises more than a few workers in the education, health care and technology sectors. We say that the Venezuelan trade union movement is in a deep crisis: a crisis of identity, of unity, of autonomy, of everything. It's necessary to refund the trade union movement, to give it a programme that's revolutionary, socialist, based on class independence and

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self-determination, with a clear position on the foreign debt (because this country under the Chávez government pays the debt better than under previous ones).

This is the debate we want. If you're from the CTV and want to participate in this debate, we accept you. You have 20 minutes to explain your position. Those of the FSTB continue their policy of excluding the CTV. Now that we're

the majority trade union, we can win debates like this.

I never asked to have meetings with the CTV leadership, never. But the other currents of the UNT have been incapable of winning the trade unions of health care and education workers from the CTV. We work on this, and I go to these debates because I want to win the base. That's the clear policy. Our position is that there should be elec-

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tions in the UNT because, as I said, it's a great conquest of the workers.

So you do favor a common central with unions currently organised in the CTV?

If we win the UNT elections, our policy would be to call a big congress of workers, with base delegates of all workers to unify the trade union movement in a single central, with a leadership legitimised by the workers themselves, elected directly via a universal and secret ballot. That would be the first time in Venezuela that we'd have a single central like that. Through discussions by the workers as a class, we could spread consciousness about what kind of government this is and what kind of country we want.

At bottom, bureaucratic sectors of the UNT want to wash their faces: they say the whole CTV is putschist etc. to distract from the fact that their own policies are the same or worse. They're not connected to the ruling class via AD, rather now it's through the PSUV.

When I came here two weeks ago, they attacked me, saying I was trying to destabilise the country by organising a strike at SIDOR and things like that. I believe that the workers of SIDOR have a right to strike and that all revolutionaries should support them, organising a national solidarity committee to build up an indefinite strike and stop anyone from entering the factory.

To repeat, I am very far from having any illusions about building up a new trade union leadership in this country together with the CTV leaders, who were putschists and seized control of the workers' movement during the confrontation. In the trade unions, they don't even hold elections. Our policies are completely different from theirs.

Moving on to the question of Chávez's new party, in your opinion, what is the character of the PSUV and how do you view the possibilities for revolutionaries working inside it?

After 24 March, 2007, when the president attacked trade union autonomy and the organisers of the PSUV attempted to carry out that policy, from that moment I said openly and firmly that I'm opposed, that I'm totally against the PSUV. Even back then, before it was founded – now it has

a programme and statutes – I said that it wasn't a revolutionary party. From the point of view of internal democracy it wasn't even clear how it was going to function; its structures had absolutely nothing to do with a Leninist party. It was profoundly anti-democratic. The process of foundation drowned any possibility of independent and revolutionary sectors participating.

That was your estimate a year ago. How do you balance the experience of the PSUV after the founding congress?

The delegates were completely knocked over by the top leaders of the government. Even though the delegates voted, the election of the national leadership was totally un-democratic. Why? The congress gave a list of 300 names to Chávez, and Chávez filtered these very well and picked 69 who could be elected. This way, even if the ones he most favoured weren't elected, there would still be people close to him.

For example, it was a progressive development that Diosdado Cabello, a leader of the right wing of the Chavistas, was not amongst the 15 principal members of the leadership, even though he was a principal cadre of Chávez (he ended up as one of the 15 alternate members of the leadership).

The general, Müller Rojas, didn't have such a good showing either, did he?

Müller Rojas was up for election, but even before the election he had already been named the first Vice-President of the party. Chávez has the power to name the Vice-Presidents – he didn't just choose the 69 candidates for the leadership, from which the congress could choose 30, he has also been given the power to name as many Vice-Presidents as he considers necessary. He divided the country in four regions and named a Vice-President for each one.

Another progressive development was that none of the military candidates ended up among the 15 principal leaders of the national leadership. But the principal leaders, who are civilians, are profoundly dependent on Chávez. One extreme example is the PSUV leader Aristóbulo Istúriz – the day after election he went on television for an interview and he said: *"The people say I do what Chávez tells me to do. He is the maximum leader. What do you want me to do, what Mickey Mouse tells me to do?"*

That's the main problem. But another problem is to create illusions that there's some possibility of changing the nature of this party – it's not a revolutionary party, it's a centrist party. Even the comrades of Marea Socialista⁷, people like Gonzalo Gómez who won a place as a delegate, don't have a chance to intervene in the debates.

Marea Socialista was present at the PSUV founding congress?

Marea had one single delegate, Gonzalo Gómez. That was out of a total of 1,677 delegates. As I said, the congress elected the national leadership in an anti-democratic way, and the upcoming election of regional leaderships will use the same method – the battalions elect 60 candidates which they send to the national leadership, and the national leadership picks the 15 principal and 15 alternate

members of the regional leaderships. That's the methodology. There is no debate, no possibility to present documents. Right now there's a battle going on about selecting the candidates for the elections at the end of the year, and Chávez has said that anyone who presents themselves as candidates too early will be expelled.

There is no possibility there to set up a revolutionary current, a tendency, a fraction to participate in these debates. Further, a party that is openly connected to the government can't be an instrument of the working class. We are in the phase of raising the banner for the construction of a revolutionary workers' party in Venezuela, which we will build up in the class struggle

For example, we are participating in the struggle of SIDOR, we are arguing for a workers' party. There are workers' leaders here in this state who in the past were Chavistas. Today they talk to you and say that what is happening here, day by day, makes it clear that the workers need our own party.

What are the next steps for setting up a workers' party?

Next month we have a meeting to strengthen C-CURA and we have decided to legalise our party in four states. That way, by next year we can have a national party. The four states are Aragua, Carabobo, Cojedes and Anzoátegui.

What exactly happened to C-CURA? Is the tendency divided, are there two C-CURAs or two tendencies in the same C-CURA?

To start at the beginning, C-CURA is a tendency we found ourselves forced to constitute on 18 February, 2006. The C-CURA was formed by people who were members of the PRS⁶ but also comrades of different organisations, it was a political and trade union organisation with different tendencies, including members of the MVR [Movement for the Fifth Republic] and the Tupamaros. But the fundamental cadre were broadly Trotskyist.

By 18 May, we had managed to win a majority at the UNT congress. That was a great triumph for C-CURA and it became the unquestionable majority tendency in the country, with lots of political respect. This led the government to develop a policy of destroying C-CURA.

When does the crisis in C-CURA begin? When the president introduces his project of reform, because sectors of C-CURA without a long tradition of political militancy, who were more Chavistas than Trotskyist, aligned behind Stálin Perez Borges and the Argentinean MST and the position of supporting the Chávez constitutional reform proposals. The people who came together in this way didn't have a clear programmatic identity. Their principal identification was the constitutional reform – whoever was against the reform was against Chávez, that's how they saw it.

There was no decision of C-CURA to join the PSUV. There was a meeting at which we agreed there were two political tactics. We told the minority, "if you want to go to the PSUV, then go, we believe it's necessary to build up a workers' party, and we'll work on that". If we agree on political questions then we can support a battle in the PSUV. But that's not what happened. The comrades

openly assimilated with a policy of open capitulation to Chavism.

We recognised that we had to let these people have their own experience. But this relationship broke down, and the comrades started a policy of spreading rumors in aporrea etc, saying C-CURA had decided to join the PSUV, that I wanted to join the CTV etc. These comrades did their part in the referendum campaign, expecting the "yes" vote to win easily, but the result was the exact opposite. After that, many leaders who had left us returned to C-CURA. There was a national meeting to make a balance sheet of the results and to discuss the policies for defending a great conquest of the workers which the government wants to destroy.

Well, certain leaders called on us to organise a national meeting. They came to my house with a letter, and I asked Stálin Perez Borges to sign up to a meeting. We owe it to the members to explain to them our positions about the constitutional reform and to examine them in light of the results. The results were that the right and imperialism was strengthened. The truth is that they refused to participate in this meeting – they just published a declaration about a "so-called meeting". After that, they voted to organise their current separately from C-CURA, and since then they haven't returned. You've seen they no longer use the name C-CURA. They don't use it anymore. They used to be "Marea Clasista y Socialista", now they're just the "Marea Socialista" current. Now we have many differences and I honestly believe they've given up the struggle for a revolutionary party in this country

To me it seems impossible that a trade union leader join a party with bosses and state ministers.

Of course. I said "I'm not going to join a party with exploiters, military officers and fascists." There are businessmen who violate the rights of the workers and there are corrupt state bureaucrats in the PSUV. Also there is no possibility for working at a grassroots level because there's no democracy.

The question of how to relate to Chavism – that's where the crisis in C-CURA came from. We never had a policy of entryism in Chavism. In certain moments we gave critical support to the president, for example in the last presi-

We are in the phase of raising the banner for the construction a revolutionary workers' party in Venezuela, which we will build up in the class struggle

dential elections. This was part of a tactic to maintain a dialogue with Chavista workers. But we always fought for workers' political independence.

There were two big mobilisations, on 15 July 2006 and 8 February 2007, right in front of the Miraflores palace. These mobilisations were against joint ventures. There were up to 10,000 workers protesting and their demands included

an emergency increase in salaries and workers' control – which meant an objective opposition to Chavism. But unfortunately, some comrades couldn't resist the pressure of Chavism and gave up independent class politics.

At this moment in Venezuela, when the overwhelming majority of the working class still has strong illusions

It is ridiculous to think of this government as revolutionary. Workers' control of industry doesn't exist, and even cogestión is under-developed

in the Chávez government, do you think the call for a workers' party will have a serious resonance?

Yes, and the problem is as follows. We are not talking about the presidential elections. Today's Chavismo isn't even half of yesterday's Chavismo. He still has 45% support, but it used to be over 70%. The most important thing I'm going to tell you is this – there is a strong resistance from below, and there are strong sympathies for leaders who fight. I'm not saying that Chávez isn't a popular figure – he enjoys the support of 45% while all other political figures are around 8%, 10%, 12% . . . But the problem today is that the polls are predicting Chavismo will lose something like eight governorships

So it's important that workers who are becoming disillusioned have a left alternative, so they don't have to switch to the right?

Exactly. It's important to build our party. The people who are disillusioned with Chávez aren't running to the opposition. This has opened a big political space which, in our opinion, can be filled with a great sympathy for revolutionary positions. For example, I'm from the state of Carabobo, and Chavismo is in a terrible crisis – the governor is constantly losing support. That's why we believe it's very important to create our party and offer an alternative for the workers.

What would you say about the class character of the Venezuelan government? Internationally there have been many debates, some Marxists calling it a bourgeois government – as I would – other a workers' and peasants' government, a “hybrid” government or one of indefinite class character.

Obviously it's a bourgeois government, totally capitalist. We characterise the government as a form of bonapartism *sui generis* [of a special kind], in which the government has to mobilise the masses, but in order to defend the class interests of the bourgeoisie. It is ridiculous to think of this government as revolutionary. Workers' control of industry doesn't exist, and even *cogestión* [co-management] is under-developed. You can see the capitalist nature of the government here in the SIDOR conflict, where the national guard – directly under the control of the President

– repressed the workers and destroyed 53 of their private cars. Of course it's a bourgeois government.

So how do you respond to the talk about the “Venezuelan revolution”?

From a classic point of view, there's no revolution. There have been important conquests by the people, won via their mobilisations – missions like “Barrio Adentro”, literacy campaigns, etc. But these conquests don't necessarily lead to abolishing capitalism. Just fixing the bathrooms in a school doesn't mean we're living in socialism. If you don't advance, expropriating industry, then corruption and bureaucracy will grow and the capitalist system will be strengthened.

So is there a possibility of changing things by struggle from below? The problem is that the communal councils are managed by the state bureaucracy and the PSUV. They are organs of control, not self-organisation. If you work for a state institution, for example, and raise some problems in your communal council, you can face repression from your employer and the council's funds can be cut. That's how these communal councils work. But if you're referring to projects of workers' councils, I can repeat what I said before – if these projects emerge from the workers and peasants themselves, if it's an autonomous instrument they created, obviously we should participate – a revolutionary party should try to win such councils for its perspective.

What kinds of developments do you expect in the coming year? Will there be increasing conflicts between the Chávez government and its social base?

If the strike of SIDOR wins, there will be a political crisis in the country. It's not that I expect conflicts – we are in the midst of conflicts right now. It's everywhere – in the streets, in the hospitals that don't work. Just yesterday there was a strike in an office of the Labour Ministry. The workers shut it down spontaneously. Workers in the oil sector are watching what happens at SIDOR, because if you remember the government imposed a collective contract on them with very few improvements, a very bad contract. They got a raise of 30 Strong Bolívars for the next two years, but they had been demanding 45. The electricity plants are involved in a huge strike right now. The government had to make some retreats because the trade unions made lots of protests – well they're Chavistas but they are also class-based. They fight. The workers in the aluminum sector are also beginning a struggle.

So you see this as a new stage in the class struggle which is beginning?

Trade union leaders who are close to the government keep losing support. Just look at the hatred for the Labour Minister.

So the struggle for a revolutionary workers' party is a question of the coming months?

I agree, but remember, we want to build the party by being the best fighters for the workers in this country. But we can't limit ourselves to the trade union struggle. Two years ago, when Chavismo was much stronger, it was

much more difficult to explain to the workers the need for a political instrument, not just for trade union struggles, but also for political struggles. But the experiences of SIDOR, the conditions of slavery and the repression by the government are elevating the workers' political consciousness.

Why are we doing this now? One reason is that the state elections are approaching, and in the course of the

electoral struggle there are people who want to become active. You can be the best fighter amongst the workers, but it's important to present them with a political party they can support.

Thanks for all this information.

You're welcome. I hope I could clear up, in English, those rumours regarding me and the CTV.

ENDNOTES

1. C-CURA, "Class Unity Revolutionary and Autonomous Current", was a far left current within the UNT which at one time formed a majority of the UNT leadership.

2. The Bolivarian Socialist Workers Force (FSBT) is a tendency within the UNT. It played a major role in fragmenting the UNT at its second congress in May 2006, opposing leadership elections in the UNT leadership as a "distraction" from campaigning to re-elect Chavez. José Ramón Rivero, a leader of the FSBT, became Labour Minister using his position to further his trade union faction's position and becoming increasingly unpopular as he tried to undermine the workers on strike at SIDOR. In the middle of April he and the FSBT announced at a press conference that they were forming a new trade union federation and that workers should leave the UNT. Within days Chavez sacked Rivero and replaced him with Roberto Manuel Hernández, a former member of the Venezuelan Communist Party.

3. Chirino is referring to the PST (Socialist Workers Party) the Venezuelan section of the LIT-CI, a Morenoite grouping that was dissolved in 1999.

4. Caudillo is the Latin American term for a cult-like leader – often but not always military.

5. Bonapartist - where a strong leader rules the country appearing to be independent of the interests of the main social classes whilst, in fact, ruling on behalf of the bourgeoisie.

6. The Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV) was the old bureaucratic and corrupt trade union movement, which was in the pocket of the old governmental parties swept away by the electoral landslide that brought Chavez to power. The CTV actively supported first the April 2002 coup against Chavez and then the lockout launched by the bosses at the end of 2002 to try and oust him from power. While the CTV still exists amongst sectors of workers it has never recovered its former influence.

7. Marea Socialista ("Socialist Tide") is a tendency inside the PSUV which is also part of C-CURA. Led by, amongst others, Stalin Pérez Borges, it disagreed with the majority of C-CURA which was against joining the Chavez party.

8. The Party of Revolution and Socialism (PRS) was a still-born attempt to form a revolutionary organisation. It was initiated in the second half of 2005 by many of the leaders and members of C-CURA, including Chirino and Stalin Pérez Borges, but it never cohered as a properly founded organisation.