

Why is there popular protest in Venezuela?

El Libertario editorial collective

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I.

The collapse of the food crop is demonstrated by the increase in imports within the sector, from US\$1.6bn in 1999 to \$7.4bn in 2008. Last year, the government was forced to purchase abroad some 57.9% of the foodstuffs required for its subsidy programmes. The cost of imported food per head per annum has risen from \$75 in the 1990s to \$267 today.

However, there's more to it than us solely having become more dependent on abroad for our food. We also suffer from the constant inflation of food prices: 46.7% in 2008, and more than 36% in 2009. This escalation is nowhere near compensated for; neither by the nominal raises in the minimum wage, nor by the distribution of subsidised food via Mercal, which currently finds itself in a state of veritable agony due to underfunding and corruption.

Given the above therefore, the recent devaluation will affect our everyday diet in an immediate and harsh fashion. The government's strategy has been to rely on the state's ability as a purchaser, rather than to develop production – the norm as long as oil clientelism has reigned in Venezuela. Let's fight so that those of us at the bottom don't pay the cost of the errors, the short-sightedness and the corruption of those in charge!

II.

In spite of the fact that since this government came into power, more money has entered the country than at any other point in its history, the continued poverty and exclusion of broad sectors of Venezuelan society has led to a sharp rise in urban violence. In 1998, we saw an estimated 4,550 homicides; in 2008, there were 14,568. Seen from another angle, the population has grown by 19.1% in this time period, while the homicide rate has grown by 320.1%.

It's generally accepted that both the Bolibourgeoisie and the fat cats of the government and PSUV party can count on any number of bodyguards to protect them (paid for by the state), while the rest of us have to barricade ourselves in our homes in order to avoid becoming yet another victim of either the criminals or the police. With regard to the police, here are a few sinister figures: in 2008, there were 205 homicides which can be attributed to the state's repressive forces (2/3 of which via execution), while the flimsy excuse of "resisting authority" was given in the case of some 1,820 deaths.

III.

Those who have governed Venezuela for the last 11 years have – at times – been overcome, not just by their money but also by verbal diarrhoea, especially when speaking of their love for the people. However, they have been thoroughly self-centred when it comes to attending to the basic social problem of housing. From 1999–2008, a mere 300,939 houses were built in both the public and private sectors. This is an utterly insufficient amount, especially when one considers that even according to the state's figures, there's a housing deficit of some 3 million units, which – in this same period – would have required the construction of those 300,000 residences a *year*.

Where the bosses of the "pretty revolution" have been attentive, though, is with their own demands for posh housing, and the proof is in the pudding: they're there now, living in townhouses and penthouses, enjoying all the benefits of the luxury suburbs of Venezuela's cities. With such

an example set by their superiors, it is little wonder that there is such a high index of official complaints of corruption against the middle- and lower-ranking bureaucracies that are charged with resolving the population's need for their own, dignified roofs under which to live.

This state of affairs has brought about a rising volume of public outcry: between October 2007-September 2008, 457 demonstrations took place around the issue of housing, peaking at 588 protests between October 2008 and September 2009. This supposedly "popular, revolutionary government" has responded by criminalising these activities, even resorting to jail sentences and conditional releases (58 individuals have been imprisoned in this period, with 23 of those still obliged to present themselves in police stations at regular intervals), or even worse, armed repression (67 people have been injured and one killed at the hands of the state's forces).

IV.

The carousel of new chiefs repeatedly revolves in front of our eyes — with each new head promising mountains of resources and grandiose projects — yet our public health service continues on its very real decline. This is plain to see upon any half-decent analysis of the sector, despite the efforts of various public bodies to deny and obscure the information that they are obliged to provide, as well as their attempts to discredit those who deviate from merely regurgitating the line in official propaganda.

However, the truth is stubborn, and the same government that threatened — in the words of Minister Tarek El Aissami on 16th December, 2008 — to "put a boot in the face of those liars" who published a report documenting the grave crisis which has engulfed the famous *Misión Barrio Adentro* [*a social programme which placed public health clinics in deprived urban areas — trans.*], later had to recognise — via the President himself on 20th September, 2009 — that out of a total of 3,478 clinics, some 2,000 lacked medical staff. And this is without even mentioning any other serious problems, such as the claim that only 4% of the money invested in order to buy new equipment for the clinics can be accounted for with receipts.

Nevertheless, the government's solutions to this sorry situation are perhaps even more alarming. For example, the monopoly over public sector workers' health insurance is to be granted to a company which is run by none other than the unfortunate celebrity, Orlando Castro [*onetime Cuban castrista turned fraudulent banker and jail-dodger in crisis-ridden 1980s Venezuela — trans.*]. Faced with developments such as this, the choice is clear: either we struggle or they'll destroy us!

V.

If any one single thing exposes the farce behind 11 years of a self-proclaimed revolution, it is the myriad problems which affect the working class. The figures are massaged and deceptive temporary employment tricks are practised (such in the *Misiones*, the cooperatives and the "socialist businesses"), but the most reliable economists indicate that the actual unemployment rate at the end of 2009 was at 12% of the economically active population (the official statistic puts it at 8%). And out of those who are working, 44.9% are in the informal economy, with all the disadvantages that that entails.

Add on to that the fact that, since 2009, incomes have been less than a living wage, not even covering essentials such as the *Canasta Básica* [*“Basic Basket” – the state’s calculation of the cost of essential foodstuffs per household – trans.*]. This development, proven in our everyday lives, is now even acknowledged in official statistics. The pinch has been made even more painful by the macro-devaluation in January 2010, which resulted in the abandonment of the myth of us having the highest minimum wage in Latin America.

These issues – and many more – have caused an outpouring of discontent in the workers’ movement, previously unprecedented under this government. Between October 2008-September 2009, 983 acts of workers’ protested were reported, some 80% of which by state workers. The government have responded by slandering and criminalising the movement, using violence against 43 protests and causing more than 100 injuries and the death of one worker – in Anzoátegui state on 20th January, 2009 – in the process. And let’s not forget, of course, that 33 workers have been subject to judicial processes for their participation in these actions.

VI.

According to the data provided by the Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones [*prison watchdog – trans.*], there were 366 deaths and 635 injuries inside the nation’s prisons in 2009. In 11 years of *chavismo*, there have been 4,030 prison deaths and 12,036 injuries, the vast majority being caused by firearms. These figures underline the position of the jails of the Bolivarian Revolution amongst the bloodiest in the world.

These brutal homicides are facilitated to a large degree by the trafficking of arms – amongst other “merchandise” – inside jails by mafias run by soldiers from the National Guard, as well as officers from the renamed National Direction of Penitentiary Services in the Ministry of Popular Power for Interior Relations and Justice. This dirty industry has flourished thanks to the indifference, inability and/or complicity of the 17 different directors who have occupied the post since 1999.

An example of the ilk of these particular bureaucrats can be found in the current Director, who, following the La Planta prison massacre in Caracas in January 2010 – which left 10 inmates dead and 19 injured – cynically and shamelessly attributed the violence to the similarity between a jail and a family. In a prison, she claimed, just like in a family, there are problems between its members, which can cause clashes. To top it all off, she then went on to blame the arms being smuggled into the facility on the inmates’ relatives and visitors. In case you’re interested, this bureaucrat, with a postgraduate degree in Criminology, dyed hair, an escort and a Blackberry phone, is called Consuelo Cerrada...

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