

Report to UNISON on Solidarity Delegation to Venezuela August 2009

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UNISON members and staff at Metrocable



The delegation was organised by the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC, formerly VIC) and included delegates from UNISON, Unite, PCS, TSSA, NUS and a number of VSC members. The programme, from 15 – 22 August, included visits to *misiones* in the *barrios*, factories in the Barlovento region, a community television station and El Sistema; and meetings with ministers, officials and trade union representatives. We learnt a lot about the revolution in Venezuela and got some feel for life in Caracas. On this basis we want to make these main points:

1. Venezuela has a government which is implementing the kind of policies which UNISON supports. If we had this kind of government in Britain, we would be pleased. It deserves our support.
2. The Venezuelan government is socialist and describes the process going on in Venezuela as a revolution. As well as its numerous 'misiones' which are strikingly successful at reducing poverty, it is building grassroots democracy through community councils; and extending public control over key sections of industry and commerce.
3. Don't believe much of what you read about Venezuela. Most of the negative stories in the UK and US press originate in the Venezuelan private media owned by an elite which has far better links with multinational corporations and global media than with the poor in their own country; and who hate what Chavez is doing.
4. Democracy is alive, participative and vibrant in Venezuela. Again and again Chavez has won majority support for his government in elections and referenda. There are no unusual restrictions on political activity or the media.
5. The new constitution, which trade unionists helped draft, guarantees numerous rights which we would love to have but don't. For example it is illegal to privatise core public services.
6. Venezuela's achievements and its alliances with other progressive Latin American countries in the ALBA pact show an alternative route for the world economy. The WTO and IMF do not have to rule. No wonder the USA is worried.
7. Workers have played a key role in supporting Chavez and in overcoming economic sabotage during the lock-out in 2002 intended to bring down the Chavez government, with the support of some unions. Other unions associated with the old regime have actively opposed the Chavez government.
8. The current ILO affiliate is still CTV. It is questionable whether this organisation retains credibility with organised labour as a result of previous engagements, or as reflected in current membership and activity. Discussions informed by this visit and other research, will be articulated in a VSC publication. UNISON should reflect upon the emerging trade union alignments and federations.
9. UNISON has made links with unions in key sectors (health, local government). These links should be developed on a sector basis, whatever the status of current centres and federations. Many of these sector groups may be realigning with the CTS trade union centre. It should use these in building support for the Venezuelan revolution and to use the positive lessons which Venezuela and ALBA provide.

What We Saw And Heard

EL SISTEMA

We visited the new Centre for Social Action Through Music which is where the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra is trained. We heard about the unique practice and philosophy behind *El Sistema*, which provides children (from as young as three) musical instruments and trains them to play in classical orchestras.

The main activity has been in poor districts, there is no charge and a policy of not rejecting anyone. From small beginnings 33 years ago the institution is nationwide and has some 400,000 students, over 200 orchestras; over 1 million people have been through El Sistema.

“Truly inspiring”

The auditorium in the new El Sistema centre in Caracas

We heard that there a great social benefits:- 90% of El Sistema students get through High School and graduate; and they learn key lessons about cooperation and responsibility. Now there is increasing support for other music like jazz and traditional Venezuelan music.



CARICUAO BARRIO

We visited Caricuao, one of the many barrios or shanty towns which were built in an unplanned way, very crowded and without proper services. They cluster around the city, often on steep hills and up against more prosperous areas.

Mision Barrio Adentro – healthcare

This is one of the famous ‘misiones’ through which the Chavez government has delivered services to communities which never received them. This deals with healthcare – Mision Robinson delivers literacy.

Barrio Adentro features the construction of thousands of iconic octagonal two-storey medical clinics—*consultorios* or doctor’s offices. We also visited one in the centre of Caricuao. The clinic is downstairs and the doctor’s living quarters upstairs. The enthusiasm of the doctors, staff and patients was obvious.

The doctors are Cuban – when Venezuelan doctors refused to work in the barrios the government requested this help from Cuba; although some of the first doctors recruited from the communities have finished their training and started work. The nurses are mostly Venezuelan.

When they opened they were treating people who have never seen a doctor. A lot of untreated diseases were detected, like diabetes and hypertension, and a lot of lives saved. Treatment is free; medicines are made in Cuba.



Local health clinic in Caricuao, with two Cuban doctors and residents

Mercal Community shops

To ensure a reliable supply of healthy and affordable food the government has set up Mercal, which runs shops in the barrios. Basic foods are available at subsidized prices (50% subsidy). Other stuff is not subsidized but is sold at about 70% the prices found in commercial shops because of the benefits of bulk purchase by the state.

Sporting and cultural facilities



A new sports pitch where basketball training was being given by Cuban volunteers.



A Cuban music teacher with whom we sang Guantanamoera

Community Councils

The leading members of the community council told us about its work. Community councils are established to deal with the big problems within the communities. In Caricuao they had replaced adobe (mud) houses with brick ones; channeled water course and built bridges, paved roads and brought water in pipes to the houses. They organise social services like cooking for those who are not able to; they are planning a cultural space; and have two dance groups.

Community Councils work with the misiones and local administrations to ensure they get the necessary financial resources, and target these resources to where they are most needed. This includes dealing with the consequences of flooding and building of walls to try to avoid the devastating landslides to which the barrios, built on very steep slopes, are prone.

Community participation is evident at all levels. There were health committees for women, committees for sport and culture and so on.

Community TV station

This is one of many around Venezuela (there are 300 community radio stations) in a country where most commercial TV channels are anti-government and fairly trivial in content. They make programmes the community want – mostly programmes made within the community itself.

BARLOVENTO CHOCOLATE FACTORY

This factory was created with three objectives - productive, social and political - in an area with a majority Afro-American population, descended from freed slaves. It is part of measures to raise the economic and social status, which includes ensuring inclusion of the African heritage in the presentation of Venezuela's history and in popular images of the country.

The workers and the cacao growers who supply the factory meet every three weeks to make policy decisions. The project is also part of the efforts to achieve food sovereignty, to improve the soil and environmental sustainability, and to create downstream industries linked to primary resources. Until now cocoa grown here was bought by multinational companies and processed elsewhere.

WASTE RECYCLING FACILITY

This massive investment will take waste from a population of 1 million and sort it in order to allow recycling and re-use. It provides employment for the local communities and stop the drift to the cities.



MISION NEGRA HIPOLITA

This centre for the rehabilitation and recovery of people who are homeless and recovering from drug addiction provides a programme of activities and psychosocial support, together with vocational training. While located well away from the city, steps are taken to keep service users in touch with families and to provide routes back into the communities through voluntary work and services linked to the Mision. There are five centres like this for Caracas, three for men, two for women, created under the Chavez government – before that although there had been some support services on the streets there had been no rehabilitation services like this.

METROCABLE, Caracas



Apart from the Metro, it is difficult to get around Caracas, by public or private transport. Especially through the barrios which in some cases sit adjacent to developed, high-rise parts of central Caracas – bus services cannot penetrate their narrow, informal streets on steep hills, so getting to where the work is can take a long time. Metrocable is an innovative and exciting way of linking some of the barrios into the underground Metro – by cable car. This solution avoids clearing houses to make roads or tunnelling underground.

The development of the Metrocable stations has been done with the local Community Councils and they incorporate facilities for the community. As well as rooms for meetings and events, each has a particular emphasis, for example on bringing sports or cultural facilities in that area. Each Community Council has sub-groups like a Land Council and a Cultural Council. 50% of the Metrocable workers have to be from the local communities. Housing redevelopment has been part of the project as well

MEETING WITH TRADE UNION REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE CTS

Jacobo Torres told us about the long struggle to create a effective trade union centre. At the time of Chavez' election the main trade union centre, the CTV, was allied to his opponents and was run without democratic accountability to its members. As an alternative the UNT was created, in which five years was spent trying to build unity within diversity, but “in the end diversity killed consensus”.

The decision to create the Centro Trabajadores Socialista (CTS) was taken in 2007 and its first measures were to strengthen the grassroots in each economic sector. It is now organised around 17 sectors, including health, education, and public sectors, as well as oil and a range of manufacturing sectors.

Asked what they saw to be the key achievements of the Chavez governments, they listed:

- the National Constitution – the most advanced in the world, it protects the rights of workers
- the laws created to fit the constitution, for example the new Organic Law of Education, which had just been passed.
- The constitution outlaws privatisation of key public services and industries; banning of outsourcing by Presidential Decree
- renationalisation of electricity and telecommunications industries
- Use of resources of the PDVSA, nationalised oil company, to fund the Misiones
- Making biodiversity and the environment a constitutional matter. “The earth can only be saved if the capitalist model is replaced by a socialist model”.

DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM, MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION

The new ‘Organic Law of Education’ was passed, amid demonstrations both against it and for it, while we were there. It sets principles for new specific laws which will be brought forward to implement it. We were told that “it creates a change to a new socialist cultural logic – equality of opportunity and of conditions”.

The new law follows from the constitution, has been under discussion since 2001 and follows a hard political struggle. It includes three principles, which are also the reasons why the opposition is against it:

1. the concept of a teaching state which involves the government listening to the people and then formulating policy
2. free education from primary to university
3. unification of all education policies (public and private)

It protects non-religious education which is seen as a function of families not of schools. That's why the church opposes it (“the church has become like a political party”). It redefines the autonomy of the universities and changes the way they contribute to society. New students' councils will be established based on participatory democracy.

It is also has controversial implications because “the media have violated the idea of the teaching state – their goal is not educating, it is violence and profit”. The law establishes scope for critical analysis of the content of the media.

The meeting also heard about the government's achievements in extending access to universities, for example for women and black people, in part through the new Bolivarian University. The nation has achieved its UN Development Goals and has been declared illiteracy-free by UNESCO, thanks to Mision Robinson. Further progress is being made, for example through infrastructure investment; and a plan to put 350,000 specially designed laptops into primary schools.



ENVIRONMENT – presentation by Cesar Aponte, Environment Ministry

Cesar Aponte told us that Venezuela has a long tradition of positive environmental policy – the environment ministry was the first in Latin America, set up in 1976. An extensive legal framework was established – environmental crimes were recognised; Venezuela has the largest cover of protected areas in the world (68%); it is the 10th country for biodiversity and in the top 15 for forest cover and fresh water.

However there were social costs – people, including traditional indigenous cultures, were seen as a threat to nature; no alternative development route was offered; so this created poverty. At the same time the nation as a whole did not have a sustainable model – it used market-based solutions to environmental problems, the commodification of nature.

He said that in 1992 35% of people did not have a running water supply. In the first oil boom agriculture fell from 45% to 10% of GDP; the urban population rose from 14% to 35% (by 1978). In the second oil boom,

oil was nationalised and generated income which was 20 times the size of the post-war Marshall Plan in Europe; but created the rise of inequality and an elite 'middle class'.

In 1989 the implementation of the IMF's Structural Adjustment Plan resulted in resistance and uprising which was violently repressed – the Caracazo. The environmental consequences of IMF policies were:

- more foreign investment in extractive industries
- reduction of environmental regulation
- National Parks oriented to tourism
- gold mining allowed in reserves

For many in the environmental movement Chavez' election campaign was seen as a chance to promote the environmental priorities threatened by the IMF. The new constitution embodies environmental rights and the Bolivarian Environmental Policy, constructed since 2000 involves co-management of the environment by the state and grassroots organisations. This has inspired the constitution in Ecuador which recognises the rights of nature, inspired by indigenous peoples.

Mision Arbol, for planting trees – uses money from the state, but is implemented locally: 26,500 people have been involved in using 148 tons of seed, 200 nurseries and 36 million plants. In contrast the old government planted eucalyptus and pines which are not natural here and damage the environment – they needed to reverse this.

Community co-management of water created 3,500 Community Water Boards in the barrios and rural villages; supported by state services. The Millennium Development Goal was to reduce by 50% the people without clean water. This was done by 2003 and they are now approaching 95%.

Energy: 70% of energy consumption is supplied by hydro-electricity; 20% by natural gas and 10% from gasoline and diesel. The government is making massive investments in public transport. It plans the development of wind farms.

Fisheries: Venezuelan seas are free from industrial fishing!! this protects the marine environment and also supports small scale local fishing.

Climate Change and Fossil Fuels

We asked about the approach of the Venezuelan government to the Copenhagen talks, since their economy relies on selling of oil. They thought that the fate of their oil reserves would depend on global circumstances – “oil is a geo-strategic resource”. This means that the problem is demand for oil and they cannot be expected to limit supply independently. Venezuela has to use oil income now to produce a way of life which will not be dependent on oil production or consumption. This will involve creating the right technologies like carbon capture and storage.

At the moment petrol is cheaper than water in Venezuela. Cheap petrol is seen as a right or at least a contributor to living standards. Before serious steps can be taken to reducing people's reliance on petrol an alternative must be available. This is the direction they want to go in.

INSTITUTE FOR HIGH DIPLOMATIC STUDIES

We met with Hector Constant Rosales, Deputy Director, Institute for High Diplomatic Studies He told us first about Venezuela's relations with neighbouring Colombia.

The USA's new military bases in Colombia are seen as threatening and are causing concern for Venezuela. The need to be understood in context:

- Colombia is adjacent to and has potential influence in the oil-producing region of Maracaibo, where an autonomy push could be used to undermine Venezuelan unity. There is “a fight between two development models. The Opposition model is financed by the USA and will seek to create divisions”.
- There are 4 million Colombians in Venezuela, refugees and economic migrants.
- Colombian drug traffic brings Colombian drugs mafia.

Since Venezuela broke with the (USA's) Drug Enforcement Agency drug seizures and captures of drug bosses has increased. By contrast, the involvement of USA in Afghanistan; and with PLAN Colombia, has coincided with increases in drug production and trade.

UNASUR and ALBA

Venezuela sees South American unity as very important, both politically (as a defence against US imperialism) and economically. There are two alliances. UNASUR, the Union of South American Nations, is an intergovernmental union which aims at developing along the lines of the European Union. It is talking about removal of customs barriers and creating a Council of Defence. ALBA is an alliance which embodies a specific development model and includes some countries in both South and Central America. It is talking about a common currency.

21st Century Socialism uses the state against inequality - oil income should be used by the state for the purposes of supporting people's rights and achieving the greatest happiness of society. The task of the Institute is to create diplomats who will carry this message. They should be anti-imperialist, engaged in the fight against poverty. "The co-operation of the north is needed to allow the south to have sustainable development".

MEETING WITH ELIO COLMENARES, VICE-MINISTER OF LABOUR

Elio has been a trade unionist since 1979, in textiles, metalwork, oil and petrochemicals. He was first a minister in 2000. He started by explaining some historical background.

Nearing the end of 20th century, there was a period of benefits from oil for some workers, via certain parts of the trade union structure; the CTV leadership was effectively part of the government. These trade unions actively participated in the deregulation inspired by the IMF. Open markets destroyed industries in Venezuela and removed social security. For example employment in food industry fell from 32,000 to 10,000. Redundancy protection of two months per year of employment was reduced to 5 days per year. The shift of social security to an insurance-based service over 5 years was agreed with the CTV unions, government and employers.

The election of Hugo Chavez in 1998 was supported by those involved in trade union struggles. They had the objective of reinstating workers rights – and union democracy. The Constituent Assembly was created to prepare a new constitution. Of 230 members, 26 were trade unionists. The goals in the constitution include:

1. Reinstatement of a public, universal supportive social security system
2. Progressively improve the rights of workers, which cannot be renounced by the individual (e.g. under pressure)
3. Democracy within the unions – they were instructed to hold elections
4. Legitimacy – workers can only be represented collectively by elected representatives

Economic sabotage

During the lock-out/'strike' against the Chavez government in 2002, there was systematic economic sabotage, supported by the leadership of the CTV. This was overcome thanks to oil workers who defied the strike call; and popular mobilisations. With the support of the army they could take over industrial sites, operate machines. They were working 20 hours a day to get a supply of petrol and distribute food.

Progress over the decade 1998 – 2008

- 1) From 120,000 retiring with a pension to 1,500,000
- 2) Reduced working hours from 44 to 40/week (35 if on night shifts)
- 3) National Minimum Wage raised every year, to the highest in Latin America
- 4) TU membership density from 9% to 23%; obstacles to TU activity eliminated.
- 5) Stability Measures:
 - a) anyone earning up to 3x NMW can only be fired (sacking or redundancy) if the reason is agreed with the Ministry for Labour.
 - b) More strict criteria apply to TU and H&S reps and those with children aged less than one year
 - c) Large-scale redundancies can be reversed if they have a serious social impact
 - d) Enforced through inspection system and government contracts.
- 6) Have nationalised over 70 companies which the owners closed down in disputes with unions (govt is legally obliged to compensate).

Economic Impact of government policies

Elio made these points:

- Raising of the Minimum Wage every year has disproved economists' prediction that this would cause inflation, which has been stabilised until this year.
- Venezuela can fund a public health and education system thanks to use of oil income.
- In some areas Venezuela is not competitive with countries with an under-paid workforce. They have protected jobs by prohibiting imports in some areas. Also they nationalised important industries where profits were so low as to prevent survival.
- Venezuela used to be "like a shopping mall within the framework of globalisation" – it imported 80% of national consumption. Now that's at 52%. They are aiming at national sovereignty in food, medicine, housing and clothing.

He agreed that some of these measures were inconsistent with WTO rules; they sought to modify WTO rules on intellectual property rights to achieve their objectives. Complaints have been made against Venezuela at WTO.

They have an industrial policy of downstream development – creating industries which use primary products like oil (petrochemicals) and iron (steel and metal work). There has been a silent blockade from USA which has made it hard to get parts (for military) and medicines. To get around this they have relied on the solidarity of countries like Russia, China, Iran.

"This is not possible to do within the framework of globalisation. Instead we are seeking complementarity with our allies in ALBA".

Unemployment was falling under the Chavez government, since 2003; now it is stable. On the Venezuelan response to the economic crisis, Elio told us "We spent a long time looking at this. In the end it was easy. We took all the measures recommended by the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO – and did the opposite". This has helped protect Venezuela from the impact of the recession

So it's ALBA vs the WTO.



Meeting with Elio Colmenares, Vice-Minister of Labour

"I was exhilarated by Venezuela. I saw great changes being made, met inspiring people, heard wonderful music. People in Britain should know that democracy is alive, participative and vibrant in Venezuela. If we had this kind of government in Britain, I'd be delighted. It deserves our support. Venezuela's achievements and its allies in ALBA show us an alternative route for the world economy - the WTO and IMF don't have to rule".

Matthew Crighton, City of Edinburgh UNISON; for UNISON Scotland