

Impressions of Workers' Control in Venezuela

[On Sunday, May 22, 2011, Spanish-language radio program Cayapa, based in Windsor, Canada, broadcast a program discussing the social and political changes underway in Venezuela, in the context of a recent solidarity brigade to the country by activists from the English-speaking world, and the country's growing workers' control movement. The brigade comprised activists, journalists and students, which between them represented Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scotland and the United States. The brigade visited various examples of Venezuela's growing infrastructure of social services as well as examples of popular participation and community organisation which form part of Venezuela's "Bolivarian Revolution". The program, hosted by freelance journalist Alex Utrera, took interviews. In the following interview he narrates his impression over workers' control movement in Venezuela. Excerpts :]

Q. Can you tell us what is workers' control?

A. Well, that is the great debate going on in Venezuela at the moment, on that question exactly. However generally, the idea is that workers should have control over the decisions in a company or workplace, and so the company, the production and all of the decisions, are under the control of the workers ... and this is a democratic idea, that all the workers have an equal role in the process of taking decisions about [the running of] a factory or workplace: that, basically, is worker control.

Q. You visited various factories [in the Guayana region of Venezuela], how was your experience of these factories?

A. We [the AVSN brigade] had two distinct experiences. The first was of the nationalised basic industries that form part of the regional production plan called "Plan Socialist Guayana", particularly Sidor and Ferrominero, the steel production and iron ore extraction companies. In these companies, as part of Plan Socialist Guayana, they are developing a strategy to implement workers' control... this process is at the stage called *sensibilizacion*, which is to say, a stage of debate and education with the participation of the workers on how to implement workers' control. Thus, this is an important stage because it is with the participation of the workers, in a debate about what form workers' control should take, however it is not at the stage of the actual implementation of workers' control... So this experience was of a debate about how to implement workers' control in factories with over 1000 workers [Sidor has over 10,000 workers, for example].

The other example we experienced was a visit to a factory called "Grafitos del Orinico" [which produces products important for the production of steel in Sidor, and was taken over by its workers after an eight-month occupation and struggle against the former owners], which is a factory with 54 workers. The system in this factory is one where every worker has a vote and an equal role, and [the decision-making body] of the factory is the assembly of all the workers: all the decisions about the running of the factory, including finance (and what to pay themselves), are made in the assembly... Thus this is a revolutionary and democratic idea, because it is a new model of organisation, of how to manage a factory ... and so for us, this example was very, very interesting.

Q. Can you tell us what is the difference between a factory which has workers' control and one that doesn't?

A. Basically, for me the difference is one between exploitation and oppression, and freedom and emancipation ... in the factories with workers' control. The workers have control over their lives, they can take decisions about their life in the workplace, decisions about their life, their work, and they can develop themselves as human beings... [This is because] the aim of workers' control is not to make profits for the owner, but the human development of the workers and to help the community, thus the wealth created by the workers above what is needed for a dignified life goes to the community, for schools and children's services in the area, and to help the community generally. Thus it is a different conception of how to imagine and organise production: is the aim of production to create profits for the boss, or for the wellbeing of the workers and the social development of the community and society?

Therefore, this is the difference: one is a democratic model, opposed to a [heirarchical] capitalist model of oppression and exploitation, which aims not to make money for the boss but to the human and education development of the workers, and to help the community as well. Those are the most important differences in my opinion.

This is the most revolutionary idea, because it is the union of socialism and democracy ... but to realise this in the entire Venezuela economy is, in my opinion, going to require a revolution within a revolution, because in order to conquer the spaces of popular power necessary for this process, you need to fight, of course, against the bosses and capitalism, but also against those sections of the revolution that are the most reformist, the bureaucracy... However there is a possibility, a possible future for humanity: workers' control offers a future [path] for humanity: but it is an idea which must be struggled for, and is going to require a struggle to be realised. Thus it is possible, but it is a struggle, a struggle for humanity.

Q. Finally, what is the impact of the implementation of this first phase of education and debate toward workers' control in Venezuela? Is it creating an impact on the average worker? What are the possibilities?

A. In Plan Socialist Guayana in the sensibilizacion stage, the possibility [of full workers' control] definitely exists, but something very important for this is the future of the proposition for a new organic law of Trabajo [an organic law is the highest form of law in Venezuela, and is rooted in and given the same weight as the constitution]. In this law, which is being debated and promoted by various sections of the labour movement, workers' councils, the PCV (Communist Party of Venezuela) and sections of the PSUV, is a proposition for a new legal status for workers' councils... Another clause in the law is for paid time during the workday for the political and educational activities of workers. Thus this law contains powerful proposals for workers struggling for workers' control in all of the factories and workplaces of Venezuela, and so it is very important... Chavez stated during the giant May Day march in Caracas that he thought this law should be passed in the country's National Assembly.

Aside from this, workers can still struggle to implement workers' control and bring sovereignty to the workers, giving real democracy to the workplace... If workers have

success with this, then yes, it is possible that there can be workers' control in the factories [and workplaces] of Venezuela.

Thus it is important to investigate and understand the process of changes underway in Venezuela in this moment, particularly the movement toward workers' control, because the examples of workers' control, for example in Merida with the nationalised milk company Enlaces, with Grafitos del Orinoco, with Invepal [worker-run paper factory in Maracay] and others, are important in my opinion because they offer another model to organise the workplace, along democratic lines, and thus understanding this process is important for all of humanity. Therefore in my opinion it is a good idea for all people to understand this process, what is happening at the moment, and learn the lessons from the struggles in our countries as well. □□□

[Source: Marx Laboratory, June 6, 2011]