

Over a period of two months spanning January to March in 2006, I backpacked through Venezuela in a reckless manner on behalf of the Red & Anarchist Action Network (RAAN), in search of first-hand information regarding the country's current political and social situation and in particular the "Bolivarian Revolution" proclaimed by incumbent president Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías. My goal was to use the VI World Social Forum, held in the capital city of Caracas during the last week in January, as a launchpad to make the kinds of contacts necessary for this study to be a success. As an autonomous communist and affiliate of RAAN, my ultimate aim was to specifically seek out the contradictions that lay within the institutionalized Bolivarian movement and, therefore, to hopefully discover the sectors of Venezuelan society that were developing anti-capitalist critiques of Chávez's state-driven process.



# The Civil War in Venezuela Socialism to the Highest Bidder

*Prepared by Nachie,*

*for the Red & Anarchist Action Network (RAAN). June 17th, 2006*



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*The Red & Anarchist Action Network is a loose organization of autonomous individuals and collectives who subscribe to revolutionary anarchist and libertarian (that is, anti-state, anti-Leninist) communist ideals. The network was born out of a desire to bridge the artificial gaps between segments of what might be described as the "anti-political left" and dismantle the elitist "sceneism" that has governed portions of the revolutionary movement for far too long. It is our hope that a strong association based on shared revolutionary beliefs and a variety of tactics, driven by a serious practice of mutual aid, will be able to make a serious and lasting contribution both to our world and the people who are working to better it.*

compatible match) they can be useful in cases such as this one, where there is so much riding on the continued credibility of one man, and the legitimacy of the political structure itself is being questioned openly by vast sectors of the revolutionary class.

Support for the state, especially a "Bolivarian" one, is rooted in liberal doctrine, nationalism, and the Northern Left's search for a "painless pill" (reformism) that will supposedly allow oppressed peoples to liberate themselves or "be" liberated without the occurrence of any fundamental ruptures in the capitalist mode of production. To support Chávez - and only Chávez - is to deny the whole breadth and trajectory of the Venezuelan and international revolution, effectively condemning class struggle to a supporting role subjugated by - and in justification of - the State and its executive. In a text well over a century old that many in the movement would now do well to remember, Karl Marx encapsulated this issue rather succinctly:

*"But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes. The centralized state power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature - organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labor - originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle class society as a mighty weapon in its struggle against feudalism."* - The Civil War in France

Or to put it in simpler terms, there is no reason as to why the Venezuelan situation should call into question our core beliefs and strategies, especially in regards to non-participation in state politics and hierarchal organizations. If anything, now is the time to enhance our understanding of these anarchist/communist positions and, through exploring the material reality, reaffirm our commitment to both them and their practical implementation. This reflection has already been undertaken by every revolutionary movement of the last century, particularly those that were routinely sold out by Leninism, populism, and other forms of left-wing capitalism. We now have their shoulders and experiences to stand on, so the repetition of past mistakes is inexcusable - the decades of trial by fire which have led us to this point have also produced as good and uncompromising a slogan as we'll ever need:

**Que Se Vayan Todos!**



Over a period of two months spanning January to March in 2006, I backpacked through Venezuela in a reckless manner on behalf of the Red & Anarchist Action Network (RAAN), in search of first-hand information regarding the country's current political and social situation and in particular the "Bolivarian Revolution" proclaimed by incumbent president Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías. My goal was to use the VI World Social Forum, held in the capital city of Caracas during the last week in January, as a launchpad to make the kinds of contacts necessary for this study to be a success. As an autonomous communist and affiliate of RAAN, my ultimate aim was to specifically seek out the contradictions that lay within the institutionalized Bolivarian movement and, therefore, to hopefully discover the sectors of Venezuelan society that were developing anti-capitalist critiques of Chávez's state-driven process.

## 1. BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

For RAAN, this whole affair began exactly a year ago when I distributed a text entitled *Bolivanarchism: The Venezuela Question in Our Movement* to comrades in the network and the North American "anti-authoritarian" tendency in general. Written whilst I was on a short trip to Brazil over the point of which I had become particularly fascinated by the process in neighboring Venezuela, this exploratory essay laid the groundwork for everything that was to follow in terms of our tendency's discussions on the issue. At the time I was criticized for showering attention on a situation seemingly directed exclusively by the Venezuelan State; and it was suggested that the network's time and energy would be much better spent elsewhere. I am now certain that this - at least for me personally - is not the case, and that this focus on Venezuela will prove to have been useful to both our network and the wider movement.

A few things must be made absolutely clear: firstly, that without this follow-up, the original *Bolivanarchism* essay would be considered, under RAAN's "No-Bullshit Policy", to be more or less an exercise in useless ideological masturbation. Only this on-the-ground investigation and practical follow-through on the tasks set out in that text could possibly justify it within our network's action-oriented culture. Furthermore, I must clearly state that my time in the country has led me to seriously reconsider many of the positions I had toyed with in that essay - as will be shown below. And finally, one of the essay's main points has in particular shown itself to be quite outdated: that being my concern over the lack of attention and information on the situation. When Common Ground Relief goes down to ask Chávez for cheap heating oil to New Orleans and the mainstream Left starts riding Trotskyist coattails in an effort to associate itself with the Bolivarian Revolution, I don't think we have to worry too much about any such neglect; Chávez is in the limelight and poised to become the most important political figure in the world. Now all we need to focus on is the *quality* of that information concerning Venezuela.

As with all documents produced under the banner of RAAN, this essay strives to be not merely an exercise in theoretical development or information sharing, but a full report concerning the interventions our network has made in the Venezuelan process and what we might further propose as points to act upon in

the future. That said, this study exists simply to fulfill the goals set forth last June and I, personally, have no intention of returning to Venezuela in the near future, or organizing around the issue past the objectives lined out over the course of this text. Nevertheless my work has set the material foundation through which other RAAN affiliates may become involved in this process, in accordance with their personal desires.

Before beginning I would like to take the time to thank all those who let me interview them, gave me food, shelter, or in any way assisted in the creation of this report. In particular I would like to thank Alix Santana and the artisans of Valencia, all the anarchists in Caracas but especially Nelson Méndez, Humberto Decarli, and the CA3 Collective, Oswaldo Kanica of the Tupamaros, Red & Anarchist Skin Heads of Venezuela and last, but by no means least, Christian Guerrero of Earth First!

I'd like to also give a shout out to everybody who helped out with this project and the collective editing process and the RAAN crews who have been organizing stateside around this issue.

Giuliano Roma of the Argentine "La Anarquía" periodical deserves mention as well for being among the first to engage in a serious debate with us on this issue. Anne Carlson & Michael Staudenmaier both deserve props, as their 2004 piece "Of Chavistas and Anarquistas" provided a great deal of inspiration for the spirit, if not content, of my own travels.

It is crucial to state that, except where explicitly outlined in the text, no alliance is implied between RAAN and any of the groups that are mentioned over the course of this report. I was often given contradictory information and views on the same situation by different people and have done my best to reconcile these within the overall text. By far the most difficult part of this process was deciding how to represent all these viewpoints simultaneously while giving enough space for the speakers' backgrounds to be explained; I hope I have succeeded in this task. And lastly, any factual errors or mistranslations are entirely my own fault.

## **2. A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF VENEZUELA**

To a certain extent I will be assuming that the readers of this essay are already familiar with the broad framework and implications of the current regime in Venezuela, and in particular its recent spats with the US government. Nevertheless I have found that one cannot possibly hope to appreciate the complexity of the situation without at least some knowledge of the nation's political history and that of its "liberation heroes". Those looking for a more comprehensive analysis can probably find it in Michael McCaughan's *The Battle of Venezuela*, (7 Stories Press, 2005) where I have pulled the majority of these dates from. Anyway:

Venezuela's independence movement truly began in 1806 when "Generalissimo" Francisco De Miranda begins plotting against Spanish rule, but only six years into this he is betrayed by fellow conspirators while trying to set up an independent administration in Caracas. He was then shipped off to Spain to die in jail, in the process becoming the nation's first Independence

Many people have an unshakeable faith in Chávez, but my experience in the United States has shown that the majority of homegrown "Chavistas" are really just looking for information and ways to support the Venezuelan *people*, and are usually incredibly receptive to anti-capitalist critiques of the government, particularly as most of the information contained in this report has not been widely distributed until now. If we maintain our posture of insisting on the complexity of any debate regarding Venezuela - not to exclude the ideas of the Chávez but rather to make sure that our own and those of the Venezuelan masses can be heard as well - I think North American anarchists can do quite a bit of good on this issue.

As we seek to add depth to the debates already underway within our movement and society at large, it will of course be crucial to keep up with the unfolding situation on the ground as it develops - possibly into something completely unprecedented! The WSF was in fact nothing more than a grandiose election-year kickoff for Chávez, who is facing a poll in December. As explained above, the outcome of this election is not really in question, but its aftermath certainly is. For many Venezuelans, the election represents the final "stamp of approval" on the Bolivarian process, and as such must be immediately followed up by radical changes, potentially including - but certainly not limited or defined by - judicial and political reform as well as some type of action against the institutions of private property. It is well within reason to believe that thus far, Chávez simply has not had enough "breathing room" in which to implement truly revolutionary and irreversible initiatives as demanded by the Venezuelan people. However, few believe that this would be the case if he were to overwhelmingly win another seven-year mandate, and so look to December as a "point of no return" after which Chávez will either implement sweeping changes (how, no one is sure, since the bourgeois state remains intact) or risk becoming irrelevant as the masses decide to return to strategies of extra-parliamentary, anti-political action.

Between now and December, it will be our task to play up the contradictions within Bolivarianism to the greatest degree possible, setting up a situation where the December election can be seen by all as a great test for the revolution, and likely a very divisive one. Simply put, people are just really tired of election after election, which is what you might expect after seven years of supposed revolution. Many of the most important social movements in Venezuela - both Chavista and otherwise, including the Zulia campaign - have seen in the election year spectacle a brilliant opportunity for forcing Chávez to "walk the walk". For instance if in the midst of his populist campaign frenzy, Chávez can be persuaded into making some sort of definitive remark regarding the destruction of indigenous land caused by coal mining, such statements could then presumably be used against him when he fails to act on them at a later date. We're also going to be seeing a lot of people doing advocacy that specifically deals with the Bolivarian Constitution, and particularly the many ways in which reality fails to live up to its more "progressive" articles. While such strategies are ultimately defeatist since they seek to squeeze politicians and the state into our own conceptualizations of revolution, (a decidedly in-

told, are quite minor) it is worth noting that the Venezuela issue has shown itself as an extremely effective means through which to insist on the (necessarily) ultimately revolutionary character of any serious confrontation over coal production. During the course of my presentation on Venezuela at the training camp (which included a segment of *Nuestro Petróleo*) and the Q&A that followed, the RAAN analysis was actually used with great success not to divide the movement, but rather to push a lot of the "reformists" towards thinking in terms of a more *systemic* critique that goes beyond their immediate bioregion or local government - a fact for which I was later personally thanked by many of the participants. Only a communist analysis is capable of truly explaining Bolivarian Socialism within the global context and connecting issues of energy consumption worldwide back to the capitalist model of development. In the end it is for this reason, rather than as a result of anything Chávez has said, that the Venezuela issue will prove so useful as a sobering tool with which to disseminate the ideas of RAAN and promote a more militant approach from movements that might otherwise have ignored the situation or offered uncritical - and unprincipled - support directly to the bureaucracy.

News of the anti-coal movement in Zulia was met with great interest from MJS organizers, who expressed a good deal of enthusiasm towards connecting their mutual struggles. This will now tie into a larger drive to create an international network of support between coal abolition activists, which hopefully will also include Navajo populations resisting mountaintop removal and the accompanying destruction of their land and water supply in Black Mesa, Arizona. This should continue to be a hot issue around which to organize for some time, especially with companies such as the infamous Peabody Inc. active not only in Appalachia and Black Mesa, but Venezuela as well. One of the major steps yet to be taken in terms of cementing solidarity between these international groups - and in the process raising everyone's general sense of vitality - is to coordinate simultaneous protests and other actions between the US campaigns and those in Venezuela (hopefully, spanning several different cities). Planning for this has already begun around a couple potential dates later in the summer and if successful, these collaborations will be among the most significant results of our work.

## 25. FINAL THOUGHTS

*"We don't care who gets elected ... because whoever it is will be overthrown."* - Subcomandante Marcos (Mexico)

Although I have been stressing the tactical imperatives of connecting US anti-coal struggles with those in Venezuela, the general issues of Bolivarianism and the "Socialism of the 21st Century" have proven so interesting to such a wide variety of people that to organize with an awareness of it has become a great way to ensure that our message reaches a larger audience. Larger, for instance, than if we had been elaborating the same radical positions in relation to something more obscure such as the "Other Campaign" (*La Otra*) currently underway in Mexico (which nevertheless remains an incredible example, which provides a valuable contrast to what is happening in Venezuela).

Hero.

Miranda was a military man, fighting all over Europe and Florida before turning his attentions to the South, and seeking support from the new United States government in the process. There is little reason to believe that he was to be anything but a tyrant, though government-funded murals and banners across Caracas now display the old bastard as a hunky, square-chinned sexpot who stares squint-eyed into the future as his long platinum hair flows in the wind - something which is really hilarious once you get to see an actual portrait of what he really looked like. The Frente Francisco De Miranda, an apparently mass-non-electoral organization driven by "ultra-left" Chavistas, unites a more modest caricature alongside that of Ché and Bolívar as their symbol, and aside from a scattered statue or street name, provide the most widespread reminder of who this guy was.

So in 1812 we see Miranda leave the stage and his project is picked up by a young prospect known as Simón Bolívar. Now Bolívar, who is known officially as either "The Liberator" or "America's Genius", is really quite well known in history, and the crypto-nationalist cult of his image predates Chávez entirely; to compare him to George Washington in terms of his stature as a popular icon would be to *gravely* understate the situation. Just to give an idea of how deep feelings can run in regards to the man, a poor woman named Victoria once answered me, after I had asked if she thought Chávez was a sincere revolutionary, "After God, Bolívar. After Bolívar, Chávez. And after Chávez, us. The people". It was one of the most terrifying things I'd ever heard, and serves as a decent example of how profound the adoration and trust of Hugo Chávez really is amongst the people. But I'm getting ahead of myself..

Bolívar was a rich kid. Like most nationalist heroes of the time, brilliance was more or less an effect of his being exposed to the ideas of the Enlightenment. Though born in Caracas he was schooled in France, where in particular his tutor Simón Rodríguez (alias Ribas, now also considered a national hero) helped to expose him to Voltaire, Rousseau, and all that stuff. Add to his experiences a trip to the freshly-independent United States, and you'll find that he had all the fuel he needed to embark on his revolutionary plans for an independent South America.

Bolívar turns out to be a more than competent leader, as he and his lieutenant Antonio José de Sucre (you guessed it, also a national hero) use his inheritance to romp across the Northwestern continent, secure Colombia in 1819, and rock the Spanish armies in 35 battles including that of Carabobo on June 24, 1821 - gaining independence for all of modern Venezuela. Ever an ambitious fellow, Bolívar declares "Gran Colombia" to exist on the territories of modern-day Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela before the last two were even won from the Spanish Empire. This shining idyll of a South American superpower is more or less the historical and ideological basis for what the Chávez government refers to as its projects of "integración", and Bolívar's empire provides a handy reference as to what that might look like (plus Cuba, of course). I was surprised at how openly these ideas were paraded in the country; for example when I read

in the December, 2005 issue of *El Camino* (a publication of the Ministry of Culture) that Evo Morales' election had "reopened Bolívar's dream in the territories of Venezuela and the nation *that is today* Bolivia".

Anyway, Bolívar gets along fine until about the late 1820's when, after "liberating" all of Gran Colombia, Bolivia and Peru, his territory begins to fall apart while he is away fighting in the latter. Despite having continually rejected offers of an emperor's crown, Simón finds that his massive conquests cannot hold under a central government and in 1828 becomes a dictator in an attempt to save it all. In 1830 he miraculously escapes an assassination attempt in Bogotá, after which he says, "Fuck it" and resigns from politics. Sickly, impoverished and without any friends, he dies later that year after declaring, "There have been three great fools in history: Jesus, Don Quixote, and I."

So there you have *El Libertador*, who more or less embodies the imagery that Chávez has rode to power. Now some anarchists, at least in light of the Bolivarian Revolution, have since sought to put a "libertarian" spin on Bolívar, giving him the José Martí treatment as someone who was potentially a revolutionary, but either before his time or prevented by history from seeing his dream succeed. They can pull out a number of arguments to back this up; for instance his support for "indigenous rights" or the fact that the patriotic Venezuelan government of Miranda had abolished the slave trade early on - though not slavery itself, which would only disappear in name by 1854 (it continued in practice for quite some time after). Personally, as a North American resident I see little use in opportunistically "recuperating" such a historical figure. After all, it's just another white guy espousing bourgeois nationalism, and we got enough of those.

Bolívar's empire soon crumbled to pieces as it was divided between feuding *caudillos* ("little generals") who would define Venezuelan and regional politics for at least the rest of the 19th century. There is, of course, as much history of genuine class struggle in Venezuela as there is anywhere else in the world - notably Eziquiel Zamora's "sovereign army of the people" that in the 1840's terrorized the landowning classes (Chávez' great great grandfather was among their ranks) - but for our purposes it is sufficient to say that the nation remained more or less unchanged from this ragged state of affairs, without a truly effective central government or military, until 1908 when the corrupt dictatorship of Cipriano Castro Ruiz (who has been praised by Chávez as a nationalist figure at recent OPEC meetings) was overthrown by his more ruthless lieutenant, Juan Vincente Gómez.

General Gómez was the most successful of Venezuelan dictators, holding onto power until his death in 1935 partly through luck, and partly through skillful planning.

The luck was that Venezuelan oil production truly began in 1914, and during the discovery of massive reserves throughout the early 20's Gómez was able to capitalize - literally - by making himself sole shareholder in the national oil industry and then selling everything he could to the foreign energy companies: by the 1930's Shell and Standard Oil owned 85% of the nation's oil reserves.

therefore superceding the reformist issue of ecological "conservation", and tackling the economic model itself.

Now before going any further, I have found it necessary to clarify that RAAN does not view the anti-carbón campaign in Zulia as being the primary focus of revolutionary struggle in Venezuela as a whole. Those who are assuming that this is our position should go back and reread the above text, only a fraction of which actually deals with the coal issue. The reason it is being given such prominence here in our proposals is simply that in the American context, given the current anti-state/deep ecology movement with its very limited resources, the indigenous struggle against coal in Venezuela is without a doubt the most strategically-coherent point of intervention for us. It has been chosen for a variety of reasons, not only for its ability to galvanize the skeptical into taking a closer look at Chavismo or the coverage it received in *Nuestro Petróleo*, but chiefly because in this moment there is a serious and truly global battle being waged over coal consumption, and thus it is a very relevant issue that activists in the United States can plug directly into.

In late May of this year I spoke on a panel dealing with international resistance to coal mining and capitalist infrastructure projects at the Mountain Justice Summer (MJS) training camp in West Virginia. MJS is a multi-state campaign of various community and environmental action groups opposed to mountaintop removal coal mining in the Appalachian Mountains. It is important to note that MJS is a strictly non-violent campaign and is also opposed to property destruction, though it does engage in direct action against coal companies alongside various forms of litigation and other techniques. For this reason, it is worth making exceptionally clear that there exists no alliance, implied or otherwise, between MJS and RAAN, the latter of which has never defined itself as "non-violent" and has no intentions or structure with which to do so in the future (this of course does not preclude RAAN affiliates from identifying as "non-violent" or engaging in purely non-violent activities as they see fit). As long as these differences are always kept at the forefront for the sake of respecting MJS' strategic goals and the autonomy of those groups and individuals working within it, I believe it to be important for us to build contacts with participants in MJS for the sake of the Venezuela campaign, as those fighting King Coal in the US are both the ones with the greatest need for solidarity, and the most immediate potential to provide it. On a personal note, I believe MJS to be among the most crucial campaigns in the United States today, and their emphasis on training for direct community organizing (though much of it has struck RAANistas as just being *common sense*) towards the construction of a "mass base" is immensely important and seems to run parallel to the lessons that have been slowly absorbed by the revolutionary movement over the past several years.

As one can imagine, within MJS there is a certain humorous tension between what might be called the "reformist" and "radical" factions, all of which are nevertheless working together on the campaign. Although it is definitely not my intent to play up the ideological divisions within MJS, (which, truth be

caught an interesting break when a personal connection allowed them to sneak a massive anti-carbón poster onstage during one of the huge Manu Chao concerts held in Caracas several weeks after the FSM. Manu Chao is, of course, vocal in his support of Chávez. But he is also, like most intelligent people, against destructive mining practices and a supporter of indigenous movements. Making these types of connections, where a deeper analysis can be forcibly merged with mass interest on the issue, is the key to our success. We don't have to go out and "prove" that Chávez is a counterrevolutionary - as I explained earlier, focusing our efforts merely around his one persona is in fact a total waste of time. All we really have to do is get him and HOV to *talk* about it and respond to the critiques against IIRSA. Venezuela's economic model and energy policy must be analyzed openly, most of all by those who claim to move in solidarity with the struggle towards communism.

In the United States, the best place in which to utilize the "Manu Chao tactic" would be via the radio and television show *Democracy Now!*, which regularly does features on Chávez and South American movements in general, but seems unwilling, like so many other forums, to take their coverage beyond the standard "Chávez started a new social program; the US is about to invade" weekly updates. We demand a more nuanced look at the implications of Bolivarian Socialism, and the beauty of the thing is that only a truly thorough, anti-statist, anti-capitalist, *class* analysis is capable of providing it.

When presenting his ideas to Northern audiences, Chávez tends to use words such as "unsustainable consumerism" to appeal to environmental interests and explain why the US is after Venezuela's oil. In this manner his own comments have actually provided us with an easy way to demand an analysis of the reality of economic integration schemes and how they represent the expansion of capital. If we can get those concepts into the forefront of our understanding of Venezuela, we stand a good chance at being able to nurture a critical, horizontalist, and *complex* revolutionary movement as opposed to the vertical and unquestioningly-servile one being imposed through the oversimplifications, orthodox "Marxist" economic determinism, and leader-worship promoted by modern-day Bolsheviks.

We have already had a degree of success in pushing forward our analysis - one of the major victories of the FSA was that it led directly to the environmental group *Global Response* taking up Venezuelan coal as its primary issue. Nevertheless, GR's approach falls woefully short of what is needed by the movement on the ground due to the fact that have they failed to even *mention* IIRSA, thus casting the entire issue as a self-contained environmentalist anti-coal struggle with no real implications as regards the rhetoric of the "revolutionary" government, or capitalism as a worldwide system. A specifically anti-capitalist critique of Venezuela's energy industry and Bolivarian bureaucracy is exactly what the movement on the ground needs and is calling for, and meanwhile in the US it offers us an easy route by which to radicalize existing social/environmental movements who are sympathetic to the anti-coal cause by insisting that their critique also take the country's ongoing revolution into account,

The "skillful planning" was in finally being able to unite the country's armed forces under a centralized command - partly with oil bribes and partly with the help of a Chilean officer enlisted to restructure the military in line with the Prussian model. This is a particularly interesting fact given that Chavistas make such a point about the FAN (National Armed Forces) being "fundamentally" different from the quasi-fascist militaries in such countries as Argentina and... Chile.

After Gómez died, mobs in Caracas set fire to the houses of his relatives and supporters, and even threatened the oil installations in the West of the country with outright destruction - a clear indicator of his legacy. The Venezuelan "Communist" Party (PCV, obviously Leninist) gets founded in 1931, and eventually adopts the rooster as its symbol in reference to a popular novella, *El Gallo Canta Claro*. Decades later, its most important contribution would be to produce the daring guerrilla leader Douglas Bravo, who originally comes up with the idea of organizing an insurrection from within the officer class of the FAN.

As Gómez' successors struggled to maintain the same level of tight control, a new wave of nationalism in the country led to a movement proclaiming that Bolívar's dream was an unfinished project, particularly so long as oil revenues did not directly benefit the people. From 1936 to 37 we see a massive strike in the oil industry against "imperialism", probably the single most important event in the last century of Venezuela's labor history.

In 1941 the "leftist" Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD) party is founded on a platform of European-style Social Democracy, and in 1945 it seizes power with the military via the Unión Patriótico Militar (UPM). The Christian Democratic COPEI party is founded in 1947 to "counterbalance" the AD - both parties embrace and directly copy the Leninist model of efficient centralized organization in order to quickly counter the growing PCV at a national level. Pushing through a number of social reforms that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier, by 1948 they are removed from power in a military coup by General Marcos Pérez Jiménez - the same who had led the UPM in the first place.

Pérez Jiménez' rule was relatively short - only a decade - but became known as one of the most brutal dictatorships in the region. Torture, disappearances... if you can name it, it probably happened. During this period we see Venezuela's first real experiences with modern political diversion and proto-populism as Jiménez seeks to draw attention away from the fact that he is a shitty ruler by constructing a lot of big impressive buildings in Caracas. It doesn't work.

On New Year's Day 1958, the airforce begins a bombardment of the Miraflores presidential palace and soon the navy joins the mutiny. By January 21 a general strike is called, but only two days later with the cooperation of the military does Jiménez fall. This drawn out process is nowadays condensed into "El 23 de Enero", a popular myth that one massive uprising toppled the dictator on the 23rd.

The magic of 23 Enero is compounded by the fact that during the uprising,

poor Venezuelans seized several modern apartment blocks surrounding Miraflores, which had been built to house Jiménez' technocrats, and to this day they remain in the hands of the working class in the heart of the barrios that soon sprang up around them - the most famous of which is itself known as *El 23 de Enero*.

Nevertheless, the events of early '58 were the birth of Venezuela's 4th Republic. The "Junta Patriótica" - another, more stable civic-military alliance - took power under the auspices of the infamous Punto Fijo pact, a "perfect alliance" between the military, clergy, business, (FEDECAMARAS union) labor, (CTV bureaucracy) and the AD and COPEI, to alternate power indefinitely through a two-party electoral system. The PCV, as usual, did all it could to put a break on the revolutionary process in order to weasel its way into power somehow, but ended up being kicked out of the government it had helped to create in order to appease Washington after visiting President Richard Nixon was nearly lynched in the streets of Caracas by an anti-US mob (awesome!).

New president Romulo Betancourt presides over this process and succeeds in uniting the ultra-right FAN behind electoral democracy by buying officers with oil money and stroking fears of the communist menace. His other great achievements include a literal "shoot first, then ask questions" policy and a comprehensive exchange program with the School of the Americas - another thing to remember the next time a Chavista tells you that the FAN are unlike any other military on the continent. Business as usual is back in place as early as 1959, when a march of 50,000 unemployed workers is fired upon, killing three.

Around this time, the Cuban Revolution had the same affect on Venezuela as it had everywhere else on the continent: it inspired armed struggle. In 1962 the FALN (Armed Forces of National Liberation) was created from various smaller preexisting rebel groups, and began a comprehensive campaign of violence against the state that lasted well into the '70s and included a botched assassination attempt against Betancourt himself in 1963.

All in all, Venezuela's armed struggle didn't get too far, but its history is filled with dramatic attacks, escapes, and even mutinies. In 1965 guerrilla leader Douglas Bravo is expelled from the PCV after criticizing it for turning away from the armed struggle to focus on prisoner support and civic organization. This break would clear the way for him to start looking for other possibilities, and in 1980 he succeeded in recruiting a young officer named Hugo Chávez to his plan of insurrection from within the FAN.

The 1970s are a period of ultra-populism for Venezuela. In '73 instability in the Middle East shoots the price of oil from \$2 to \$12 a barrel and in '75 President Carlos Andrés Pérez nationalizes oil and iron ore, and then immediately goes on a spending spree. Venezuelans suddenly become used to a high standard of living and everything the country needs (and plenty of stuff it doesn't) is imported for consumption by the ruling classes. Terribly-implemented social programs nevertheless deliver free childcare and food to thousands, successfully neutralizing the social struggle with paternalism. As we shall see, Chávez'

out that the most important task at this stage is to fight against the oversimplification of the revolution into a "you're either with Chávez or against him"-type paradigm. Chávez is hardly the most important factor in the process, but its centralization around him is the key goal of those who wish to build hierarchal movements across the world. To North American radicals, Chávez appears as a type of "Fair Trade" coffee - a worker-friendly alternative that allows the privileged to sleep better without actually having to confront their own consumption patterns. It is in fact, then, a very perceptible manifestation of class and even white guilt when Northern radicals refuse at all costs to allow for any criticism of Chávez. Much of the apologism we see coming out of the North is based in white activists' inability to criticize the government out of fear for being labeled "imperialist" (often, by other white activists).

We therefore have to be extremely cautious when organizing around this issue, constantly pressing for a sober and detailed analysis of a complex situation to counter the oversimplifications of the Chavistas, who will waste no time in comparing us to the CIA. There is a need for such attentiveness precisely because in both the US and Venezuela, we are seeking to disseminate these ideas and organize around horizontal dual power from more or less within a movement led by Chavistas. For instance, it would make no sense for a movement with our limited resources to try and counter something like Hands Off Venezuela at the campaign level. Rather, I would propose that we work from within it wherever possible, putting the Trotskyists who head it up in awkward positions through debates on energy policy (which they usually refuse to take part in) while at the same time using its large organizational base as a pool from which to further dialogue with those who have already shown a degree of interest in the issue.

In order for us to have an impact, we must be clear in our analysis and not play into the hands of the reductionists. The anti-coal movement in Zulia serves as a perfect example, as the organizers of that campaign have been pushing for it to take on more of an anti-IIRSA, rather than simply an anti-carbón or "environmentalist", aspect. The question of IIRSA allows for a very direct connection to be made between a critique of Venezuelan energy policy and the commercial relationships of global capital and neoliberalism. It will be up to us in the near future to tailor our initiatives towards such broader questions. The relative obscurity of *Our Oil and Other Tales* makes it easy to coordinate screenings in concert with pre-organized Venezuelan solidarity activists, most of whom will not realize that it isn't just another pro-Chávez propaganda flick until after they've already been exposed to its message.

We also need to make sure that these issues are well recognized in our own movement, and in particular we must try to cut down on the number of anarchists who can only offer critical support of Chávez for lack of having access to any developed anti-state analysis. There is such a culture of excitement and hunger for information regarding the Bolivarian Revolution that it should in fact be quite simple - in the United States, at least - to see these ideas receive a wide circulation (if not acceptance). In Venezuela itself, the Zulia activists

direct contact with distributor Yeast Films, we have been able to make free copies of the DVD available to several RAAN cells throughout the United States, as well as various contacts throughout our extended network. RAANistas have organized a series of at least ten screenings throughout the country, including one in Philadelphia on the 14th of April that is believed to have been among the first showings in North America. Another on May 26th in Oakland attracted the attention of famed anarcho-institution AK Press, who we hope will now be able to take on and expand the majority of the film's distribution. Several copies have also been handed to key anti-coal activists in the US, as will be discussed below. Overall, we seem to have accomplished much on this front, making it perhaps the best example to date of a collective effort within the tendency.

It must be stressed that *Nuestro Petróleo y Otros Cuentos* is only a very small piece of the puzzle. The film itself takes no clear anti-capitalist stances and for the most part explores the issues raised only from a detached standpoint of social advocacy and reformist environmentalism. Moreover, there is no in-depth exploration of Bolivarian politics or the question of "socialism". Many critics will likely also point out that it spends almost no time dealing with orthodox class struggles. For this reason we have repeatedly explained that to merely show the film is not enough - it needs to be backed up with a moderated discussion on the current situation in Venezuela, and can then serve as a generative theme with which to debunk Bolivarian Socialism and seek out a broader anti-capitalist critique.

One of the next major steps being taken is the coordination of a US speaking tour for comrades of the CRA. Initiated by groups in Connecticut, this planned East-coast tour will likely be hosted by RAAN chapters in any of the relevant cities. However, at this stage there is still an immense amount of fundraising to be done for this project and it seems likely that it could get put off for another year. Regardless, this is an initiative we can move on when the time is right.

## 24. IN THE NORTH AMERICAN MOVEMENT

Despite our immediate successes in getting the word out about *Nuestro Petróleo* and the kind of ideas being expressed in *El Libertario*, we in the North still face an uphill battle in terms of ensuring that these analyses cannot be simply "swept under the rug" by the mainstream Left in its support of Chávez. Already we have encountered a fair deal of criticism from many sectors for daring to suggest that the situation might be more complex than the Chavistas portray, and in the process we have been called primitivists, racists, and even "anti-Marxist" for opposing Venezuela's development along the dictates of the capitalist market. Other critics, closer to the IMT line on Venezuela, have accused us of "complaining from the sidelines" in an effort to downplay our inconvenient analysis, obviously without any knowledge as to the actual work that we have already done on this issue.

What is condescending to the Venezuelan struggle is in fact not the "ultra left" analysis, but rather the Chavista model in which all participants and reality itself are treated as objects of the bureaucracy. Again and again we must point

plans bear more than a passing resemblance to this model. At the same time, the "Andrés Bello Plan" cleverly lets the government save money by allowing certain military officers to leave barracks and attend college to gain professional skills. Supposedly this put them in contact with "leftist professors", a key argument of those who insist on the "revolutionary" nature of the FAN.

In the earlier part of this decade two groups would split off from the PCV to become Venezuela's institutional leftist parties. The first, Movement Towards Socialism (MAS - no relation to the ruling party in Bolivia) was more interested in the "Euro-Communism" line and really didn't do anything exciting aside from disappoint people whenever it actually managed to get into office. The second was known as Venezuela 83 (even though it began in '71) for 8 years before becoming La Causa Radical (Radical Cause, Causa R). Causa R has had a much more interesting history than MAS, as it rose directly out of the steelworker's struggles against the union bureaucracy in Bolívar State before becoming a political party. In 1989 it won the governorship of that state and became the only party in congress to oppose IMF policies.

Another oil price spike caused by the Iran/Iraq war in 1979 keeps Pérez riding high, and the government is even able to maintain a policy of "buying" its neighbors through random gifts (again, a similarity to the present government). In 1983 Hugo Chávez, who had been looking for revolutionary alternatives throughout the late '70s, founds the MBR200 (Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200, for the bicentenary of Bolívar's birth) as a clandestine group within the FAN.

Things didn't get really interesting again until 1983, when world oil prices dropped and Venezuela got hit with inflation for the first time that almost anybody could remember. The only possible solution to the failure of paternalism? Neoliberal policies, of course! In 1989 Pérez runs on an anti-IMF ticket but immediately turns around once he is reelected. On February 25th gas prices are raised, wounding the national pride. Two days later, public transit prices go up and spark what would become the biggest explosion of class war in Venezuela's recent history.

In response to the higher fares, organized students occupy a bus terminal and in the process manage to get mass support. This is particularly important to remember since many Chavistas insist that the traditional student population (those not enrolled in the new "Bolivarian" University) are exclusively middle-class and incapable of playing an active role in the struggle. But during the events of February 1989, the students were the *only* organized social movement to be involved from the very beginning.

From the bus terminal, street barricades and marches spread until Caracas itself becomes a riot zone. Pérez was out of the city at the time, and ignored the protests until they had gotten completely out of hand. In Venezuela I had the chance to see some footage from those days, and I can tell you that for sheer comprehensiveness, the looting made anything from Argentina in 2002 look like a walk in the park. The government responded the only way a government could, which was to shoot as many people as possible.

It all depends on whom you ask, but anywhere between 300 and 1,000 people were killed in Caracas by the military. Of course, the "300" figure was suggested by the state itself. If you include Valencia and Maracay, to where the rebellion also spread, the count is probably something like 3,000 dead over 5 days of unrest; mass graves have been found from this period. In Caracas, where soldiers faced working-class snipers defending their neighborhoods, whole apartment buildings were repeatedly strafed with automatic machine gun fire. Many of the young officers directly responsible for this atrocity now hold posts in the Chavez government.

For Pérez' part, he put on the brave face and made plenty of televised speeches about "restoring order", "citizen's duty", and "getting through this hard period... together."

If Venezuela *is* going through a revolutionary process, this is where it all began. Ten years before Seattle, in the first major rebellion against IMF policies.

Of course the Chavista line is a little different. The "Caracazo", as the riots came to be known, were a tragedy of course, but the "revolution" didn't begin until February 4th 1992, when Hugo Chávez and his MBR200 burst onto the scene and tried for a coup. Tripping all over themselves with tactical incompetence and abandoned last minute by the Causa R which had promised to support the action (but then decided to hold out for the upcoming elections), Chávez's followers were quickly mopped up without any particular trouble after attacking Miraflores - though they did see some military success in oil-rich state of Zulia. Before being taken prisoner, Chávez negotiates one minute of TV airtime so as to ask his troops to surrender. What happened next was the genesis of mass Chavismo, as in the process of this appeal he tells the Venezuelan people that he is only laying down his weapons "for now". Lookin' all cute in his uniform and paratrooper's beret, a national icon was born.

Another coup attempt, primarily driven by the airforce, fails with no popular support on the 27th of November, but at this point populism, the Punto Fijo pact, and for all intents and purposes the two main political parties, were already dead. Pérez would be impeached just one year later as it surfaced that he illegally sent \$17 million to support the anti-Sandinista candidate in Nicaragua's 1990 elections.

This whole chain of events (but particularly the Caracazo) created a political vacuum, which then allowed the Venezuelan social movements to come into their own for the first time. Without a dictatorship or populist handouts to suppress them (or the stifling control of an AD/COPEI leadership), the indigenous, environmental, women's, student, and other movements found themselves in a period of widespread disillusion with the electoral process, and began to press for a sweeping change in the country's politics. In particular the student movement was able to finally assert its independence from the traditional political parties, peaking as an autonomous force between 1994-96.

After Pérez' impeachment, Rafael Caldera took office as a "reformist" with the support of MAS. It is now - and even then - widely known that the military burned ballots during his election so as to prevent the victory La Causa R, but

At the end of what was about a week's worth of informal discussions, a new and fully independent RAAN chapter without any given "organizational" format was launched in Valencia on the first of March. The group has since focused primarily on the promotion of Parkour in the city, with great success.

In Caracas, collaborations between RAAN and the CA3 collective produced a PK workshop on March 11th that was described in the CA3 flyer as the "Art of obstacle-coursing / Military techniques applied to the urban environment / Direct Action training / Organize with action and not just ideology / Training for emotional health and confidence in your body and mind". Again, the application of Parkour in our movement and RAAN's overall tactical objectives were met with a great deal of enthusiasm, which led to a second training session two days later.

We can now of course also say that relations have been established between RAAN and the CRA, and it is our mutual wish to carry out joint projects in the future. About 300 copies of *El Libertario* were donated to RAAN by the collective, and taken back to the United States. The issue in question (#46) had just come off the presses and was really put together quite well. Under the headline "Recuperating the Autonomy of Social Movements", this issue had a great feature on the FSA, updates from the anti-coal campaign in Maracaibo, an analysis of the Bolivian social movements, a hilarious graphic representing "Comandante Ché-vron", and a back page contrasting the differences between the new talking Hugo Chávez action figure and the one of Carlos Andrés Pérez from back in the days of old school populism. Pérez: Carries babies and kisses grannies; Chávez: Kisses babies and carries grannies. Pérez Figure: Hecho en Venezuela; Chávez Figure: Made in China.

These incredible Spanish-language newspapers have since been distributed at immigrant rallies, every speaking engagement on Venezuela we have organized, and several Infoshops throughout the United States.

I beseech those acting within the RAAN tendency to put any possible effort into strengthening our ties with the Venezuelan anarchists. The monetary exchange rate is so favorable in Venezuela that the monthly water bill for the CESL comes to something like fifty US cents. We will also be deepening our relationship with the CNA for the sake of channeling funds directly into more street- and prisoner-oriented activity. Discussion have already begun over potentially recasting a planned benefit concert for the EZLN as a Venezuela fundraiser, though the final decision is yet to be made by those organizing the event.

We can also cement more ties to the Venezuelan movement throughout our wider networks. Anyone who is able to receive mail at a University address can have about 30 copies of *El Libertario* sent up for free once a month as "educational materials". It is my hope that one or two distros in the US will be able to pick up on that and make this amazing publication more widely available.

The big project that RAAN as a network has been moving forward on is the distribution of *Nuestro Petróleo y Otros Cuentos* in North America. Through a

this text I would just like to focus on the practical moves already being made by our tendency to follow up on what has been accomplished.

After spending a week at the FSM promoting RAAN's ideas and distributing a very limited amount of network literature and zines from our Autonomous Publication Initiative, the majority of the network's ground-level organizing took place in Valencia. Thanks to the relationship we were able to build with the Association of Artisans, ample time was spent discussing RAANista perspectives with community members and activists, many of whom were being exposed to "anarchist" ideas for the first time. The majority of the work I did in the city was focused around Parkour workshops both for the benefit of Association members and local youth. Parkour, or the application of military obstacle-coursing techniques to urban environments as developed in France during the 1980's, has been one of the major contributions of the RAAN tendency to the revolutionary movement, and in my opinion represents the only feasible prospect for a widely-applicable and effective mental and physical training regimen in horizontal networks such as our own. In Valencia I was able to run nearly a full month of PK workshops, often tailoring them to the area's mountainous surroundings. The Parkour tactic was enthusiastically taken up by members of the Association and their allies, and since my departure a wonderful network for the continuation of this type of training has sprung up in the area. To the people of Venezuela, a broadly-accessible form of combat training is seen as a practical and imminent necessity for the defense of the revolution.

Towards the end of my stay in Valencia, Alix Santana and a handful of other comrades who had been involved in our dialogues expressed interest in forming a new RAAN-affiliated presence in Venezuela. This was a remarkable development for our group, and as an autonomous "ambassador" of the network with no mandate other than my own self-initiative, I took it very seriously and sought to approach this prospect with a good deal of discretion. A number of discussions regarding the nature of the RAAN project were held between myself and several of those interested; for my part I focused primarily on answering general questions about the network's ideology and methods, and the need for all regional RAAN initiatives to be capable of acting autonomously. We spent a lot of time focusing on the particular obstacles faced in creating the first network presence in Latin America, such as the fact that up until that point we had been almost entirely an English-speaking project. Another issue that was discussed at length was the tendency among North American radicals to tokenize their comrades in the South, and how could we develop strategies to ensure that any RAAN groups in Venezuela would not be cynically used as poster children by the American chapters. At the same time, we kept up an awareness of the concept of collective credibility throughout the network, and what the inevitable as well as positive effects of RAAN's first international project would be for preexisting affiliates. This series of discussions has actually provided the blueprint for a specific organizing technique focused around collective discussion and regional autonomy, which has since been used quite effectively to stimulate new dialogues on RAANismo throughout North America.

the left-wing party accepted the fraudulent results in order to enter the government. Caldera's only claim to fame is that he made good on a campaign pledge to free Hugo Chávez and his co-conspirators; the rest of his term is a continuation of IMF policies and the "Washington Consensus". For their part, Chávez and the MBR200 had urged Venezuelans to abstain from the '93 elections, confident that the political system was on the verge of collapse.

In 1995 we see the first of the major non-PCV Chavista parties emerge as Patria Para Todos (PPT) splits from Causa R in response to the former's allying itself with MAS and COPEI. Causa R is rewarded with government posts for supporting the 1998 presidential campaign of Irene Sáez, former Miss Universe and district mayor of Chacao (a small but wealthy sector of Caracas).

By 1996 the MBR200 had grown tired of waiting, abandoned armed struggle, and held a national conference to reformulate itself as a political party known as the Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR). Nowadays the MVR is more or less known as "Chávez's party" but some people are still running under the name of MBR200, as it is a certain stamp of credibility to have been with him from the beginning. This overall change in strategy did not materialize out of nothing - various members of the political and business class had been working to groom Chávez as an "alternative" candidate for years. His campaign was directly funded by private business and the eventual victory speech was broadcast from the offices of a securities multinational in Caracas.

The MVR as a political party came out of practically nothing, united a number of too-small-to-be-important socialist groups, did not have the organization necessary for electoral success, and has been described by ZNet as an "ideological monoculture" (a description that could also be much more widely applied). In practical terms, the MVR only got along by relying on the established PPT, PCV, and PODEMOS (which split from MAS) parties, which *did* have the internal structure to put up candidates and run national political campaigns. Thus Chavismo, far from being a neutral revolutionary phenomenon, is the force by which the traditional statist and social democratic Left has finally found a way to get itself into power; and its continued participation in the Chávez administration, is the only way that the MVR government can exist.

Hugo Chávez mounted his presidential campaign by leaning on the "Polo Patriótico" (an alliance of left groups), promises to rewrite the constitution, and the flowery imagery of Bolívar's dream, which hadn't been successfully harnessed since the height of populism in the 70's. Irene Sáez' campaign began strong, but she soon suffered from a few *faux pas* and withdrew before the election. As oil prices tumbled yet again, Hugo rocketed to victory.

On his first day in office, Chávez fulfilled his promises by signing a decree to create a constitutional assembly. And whilst the traditional oligarchy began courting the new government to see where the opportunities lay, he went ahead and implemented things such as Plan Bolívar 2000, which saw over 40,000 FAN troops leave the barracks to fix roads, schools, and distribute food throughout the country. On the one hand it was the only option for a president looking to bypass the state bureaucracy. On the other hand, it was the first indi-

cation of Chávez' methods for integrating his armed forces with the civilian population.

Simón Bolívar was known as a "caudillo with a human face", and Chávez latched onto this ideal with a great degree of success. It soon became clear how things were going to go as he stacked the MVR with fellow coup plotters and members of his immediate family (including his brother and longtime Leninist organizer, Adán). Up until this day, Chávez has continued in the democratic tradition by giving out all kinds of posts as rewards for loyalty.

The elections to the constitutional assembly in 1999 attracted a more diverse grouping than any previous process, and resulted in a 90% Chavista victory - with over half of the electorate abstaining. The assembly soon came to see itself as the *de facto* government, setting up 21 commissions for the debate of different issues and taking in article submissions from hundreds of citizens. Chávez' own contributions would come to form the outline of the final text.

The majority of Venezuelans who I spoke to expressed a positive view of the constitutional assembly and believed that, on the whole, it was an immensely democratic process - particularly given the alternatives. To be sure, the resulting Bolivarian Constitution has several interesting articles. For one, housewives were for the first time recognized as workers who create value, and thus should have access to welfare and social security. Paragraph 2 of Article 21 declares that the government should "adopt positive measures for groups which could be discriminated, marginalized, or vulnerable", which is vague, but has since been enthusiastically seized upon by the Gay Revolutionary Movement (an actual tendency). Prior to the new constitution, homosexuality was considered "gross indecency" and punishable by anywhere from 5-12 years in prison. Javier Granadillo, a queer media activist who I met during the World Social Forum, told me with tears in his eyes, "I *LOVE* my president because he has included gays for the first time".

This kind of heartfelt loyalty to the Bolivarian process is widespread and must be taken into account by anyone seeking to understand what Venezuela is going through. The new constitution went on to fix the workweek at a maximum of 44 hours, gave the military the right to vote, and reserved the rights of officer promotion for the president and top brass (it had previously been held by the National Assembly). All elected posts in the country were now subject to a recall referendum halfway through the term if 20% of the electorate desired it. 5% could petition for a referendum to reverse presidential decrees, .1% (10,000 people) can send a bill to congress, and 15% can force a referendum on constitutional reform.

Terrified at these implications and the possibility that abortion could be legalized (it was not, and continues to be illegal to this day, with no mass pressure on the issue that I could discern), the media and church began their attack on the constitution - and Chávez - around this time. The key to understanding the extreme-right spin of Venezuela's 9 private television channels and daily newspapers is knowing that Caracas has the highest percentage of Cuban exiles outside of Miami, and these people have taken their time getting well-entrenched

training of the Citizen's Reserve branch of the FAN. The arming and training of the people is a fundamental necessity of the revolution, and yet we find ourselves rightly suspicious of any formations that are born out of and subordinate to the existing state machine, Chávez included. It is possible that the ultimate role of the Citizen's Reserves may be to serve as repressive *Committees For the Defense of the Revolution*. During my stay in Valencia, one of the most common views expressed was that a Venezuelan civil war between the people and the bureaucrats is at this point inevitable. In addition, not only is such a confrontation seen as inevitable, but also entirely beneficial. In the words of Alix's son, "Only civil war can bring this to its conclusion. People are too much like sheep, they don't understand what's happening. A war would finally wake people up, force them to take sides very quickly and recognize who are their real enemies."

Whenever talking about these types of situations, one should also keep in mind that things are bound to change from week to week and even overnight; the whole point of any revolution are the dramatic changes and ruptures they entail. One interesting example is that while this text was being written, Chávez doubled taxes on foreign oil companies in the country. Companies working in the Orinoco Delta (including Chevron) were already being taxed heavily and suffered only a smaller increase. Interestingly however, Chevron-Texaco just posted a \$4 Billion 1st quarter profit, prompting accusations of price gouging in the wake of rising fuel prices in the US. Their response? Profit is generated by their oil and gas exploration and production divisions, not petrol retailing.

We should also take great care to remember when analyzing the Venezuelan situation and others like it that things are not always as they seem. For instance we can observe how the introduction of modern healthcare into Brazilian slums has served to underplay the affects of chronic malnutrition in favor of prescribed remedies that lock in reliance and mystification of the pharmaceutical industry. We also know that "unorthodox" capitalist economists have for years been suggesting the granting of individual land property rights to communities such as El 23 in a bid to make it easier for such people to enter the market by being able to mortgage their homes, which up to that point would have been largely-uncontested squats. In this way must we carefully pick apart the "victories" of the Bolivarian Revolution and give our support only to those groups and initiatives that do not seek to recreate or enlarge the capitalist economy.

### **23. RAAN INTERVENTIONS AND BROADER PROPOSALS**

Being our first international effort, this trip was a notable milestone for the Red & Anarchist Action Network and created many important opportunities for future projects in Venezuela. Both the Association of Artisans in Valencia and the Tupamaros in Caracas have offered to provide housing and assistance to any future RAAN groups studying the revolution. Although there are currently no plans for another such trip, that the foundations for this type of solidarity have been laid is an incredibly inspirational development. However we will leave such planning to those willing to undertake it, and for the remainder of

impressive in the run-up to the FSM, actually predate the government but have been turned into clients of the state with the promise of funding. This has happened to untold numbers of community projects and autonomous organizations, with those who refuse to collaborate inevitably being called *golpistas*. As Humberto Decarli explained to me, Chávez' interest in Cuba is not so much an ideological common ground as it is an admiration for the raw efficiency of the repressive mechanisms that have allowed Castro to remain in power for so long, and a key part of this is the absorption or dismantling of all institutions and movements outside of the state.

At this stage however, there remain dynamic relationships between all players - the people and the state, Chávez and the people, and Chávez with his own bureaucracy. Other than the MRT, one of the better examples of this is the *Frente Nacional Campesino Ezequiel Zamora* (FNCEZ). Because of the high urban population concentration and "impending" US invasion, Chávez has been able to successfully dodge the issue of land ownership and redistribution, which is truly an "either/or" matter that can quickly expose the reactionary nature of most leftist governments, as we saw with Lula. But while Brazil has the powerful Movement of Rural Workers Without Land (MST), Venezuela's small FNCEZ actually functions as a support for Chavismo while at the same time bringing a powerful critique from the inside. Their positions revolve around the (to me, contradictory) ideas that Chávez is the supreme leader of the revolution, and reformism is as dangerous as imperialism. Like the Tupamaros, they warn of a break between the comandante's rhetoric and the state's implementation, going so far as to "alert the president" that Colombian paramilitaries are entering the Apure and Táchira regions with the help of so-called Chavistas in the government. They oppose the officialist parties but are solidly behind the campaign for 10 Million votes. Most tellingly, they also regurgitate the calls to "defend strategic industries" and during an indigenous anti-coal march at the FSM, used physical blocking tactics to prevent the distribution of FSA literature and drown out the organizers' slogans with their own.

Clearly, we are dealing with an incredibly complex situation that cannot be reduced simply to either Chavismo or anti-Chavismo. In fact, at this point the "opposition" in the country has absolutely no political prospect other than total chaos and the destabilizing of the state so as to trigger foreign (United Nations) intervention. As a result, Venezuela is important simply *because* widespread violence has yet to break out. Chávez has to "take it slow" on many questions - including land redistribution - simply to hold on to power. The balance of class forces is not yet entirely favorable to the revolution on the street, and certainly not within the government. The most dedicated revolutionaries in the country, both those working within radical organizations and organizing alternative institutions simply for the sake of their family's survival, face a long and difficult task in raising the consciousness of the Venezuelan masses and constructing resources for the survival of the revolution. Most worryingly, they will have to accomplish this before the new bureaucracy has totally consolidated itself and completely institutionalized (or in other words, smothered) the revolutionary process. In particular we can take a closer look at the formation and

in the news industry. At this point It was useful to think of Chávez as a Venezuelan FDR, the modern bourgeois going up against the established bourgeois. The constitution also did not provide for any libel laws until the 2005 law of "Social Responsibility" (which was decried as censorship) and so for the first several years of Chávez' government the private media had a field day, attacking the president in any way possible and even declaring him to be developmentally challenged.

But not everything in the Bolivarian Constitution can be looked at as positive. Presidential terms were extended, foreign relations power was centralized in the executive, and business lawyer Allan Brewer-Carías was personally able to insert several articles guaranteeing a protection of private business and property. The constitution supposedly creates a citizen's branch of government, "republican power", but in practice Chávez has really done whatever he wants. Federalism is proclaimed while power is centralized, and page after page is loaded with repetitive announcements of human rights that mean nothing when grafted onto the pre-existing police state (which has undergone no reforms). Most worryingly, the constitution makes it completely unnecessary for the government to consult anyone before signing international energy or infrastructure contracts.

In December of 1999 the people voted for the new constitution largely on class lines, which - in a country where anywhere between 55-80% of the population is impoverished - means that it was approved. While Chávez promised, "I will turn Venezuela into a first world nation in 10 years" tens of thousands of the old bourgeoisie fled to countries that already were - notably Spain and the USA (Miami).

In order to cement this new constitutional order, new and massive elections for all governorships, state and national assemblies, president, and local mayors were held in July of 2000. It is at this point that we first begin to see the emergence of *Chavismo* as an electoral farce - in other words, various politicians of all stripes began to put on the signature red beret or t-shirt in order to get elected. Because Chávez lacked any mass political organization, he found himself needing to get support from wherever he could find it, and could afford to be ideologically promiscuous in the process.

As a result of everything Chávez has done, Venezuela became the first - and possibly, only - country in South America to have saved popular faith in political institutions and electoral participation. The biggest consequence of Chavismo is that it has relegitimized the state and its political class, at the total cost of all gains made in extra-parliamentary struggle over the course of the 90s. Venezuela has been on the verge of popular revolution (even if only a "national democratic" one) for at least half a century, and the crisis of the last decade created a situation where only a non-traditional politician using leftist rhetoric could possibly have salvaged the crumbling state.

In late 2001, Chávez approved the famous "41 Laws" he deems necessary to put the constitution into practice. This proves to be the final straw for the media, church, and national business class, who from this point forward begin to

seriously plot against the government. Ironically, it is in these 41 laws that we really begin to see openings for new types of foreign investment in the energy sector and other neo-liberal strategies.

What happened in Venezuela over the next few years is almost common knowledge, and I won't touch on it too much except to hit the main points:

In April of 2002 the heads of the military ally themselves with the business class and stage a massacre against peaceful Chavista crowds and opposition protestors outside of Miraflores palace. In the confusion caused by a concerted misinformation campaign by the mass media, Chávez is kidnapped from office and a new transitional regime immediately begins dismantling his government. Pro-Chávez crowds surround Miraflores screaming for his return and the loyal Palace Guards retake control of the complex. Through a single-minded concentration on these events, the international Left has built up for itself a myth that the April coup was miraculously reversed by a mass popular uprising with the sympathy of the rank and file in the FAN. This version of events is best represented in the officialist documentary *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, by far the single most accessible source of information on Venezuela for English-speaking North Americans and Europeans. The truth however, is that Chávez' return had more to do with internal negotiations within the higher levels of the FAN than anything else. As the new regime was put into place via a coup, the Organization of American States would not have recognized it and as a result Chávez remained the only option for the bourgeoisie.

The following year, the business class struck again by calling for a national "strike" in all strategic industries, most notably the state oil company PDVSA (this is commonly known as the "paro petrolero"). Venezuela's economy dived for months before the bourgeoisie itself called off the lockout in order to save their own livelihoods. The United States in particular had an interest in seeing oil production get back up to speed. Here again the Left has decided to paint the events with a red brush, hailing the heroism of PDVSA workers who defied the lockout to get the pumps working again. The most important effect of the lockout was that it allowed Chávez to fire 18,000 PDVSA employees for walking off the job, including most of its technical staff of geologists, geophysicists and reservoir engineers, and then refill those posts with political supporters (this is the point at which the "new" PDVSA became "the people's"). In this process all forms of budding worker's self-management were quickly rolled back under the assurance that PDVSA now "belonged to the people". Workers also managed to reoccupy a handful of other small factories, which are now being absorbed by the state and tokenized as symbols of "co-management" and glorious revolution.

The oil boom in 2002 saw Chávez rolling in cash, which through the "new" PDVSA, he proceeded to spend on a series of *Misiones*, or social programs intended to make the decrees of the constitution factual. In 2003 thousands of Cuban doctors and literacy workers entered Venezuela to help in building these programs, the most famous of which are Barrio Adentro (free health care) Robinson (literacy) Ribas (higher education) and Mercal (subsidized food). The

has encouraged an unprecedented rise in urban crime by those who expect to be able to get away with more. This has in turn been used by the government as a justification for the strengthening of the *pre-existing* repressive apparatus, which in April culminated in the chief of Caracas' police being replaced with a FAN brigadier general.

For all the talk of "tribunals against impunity" to investigate state repression, these bodies have been completely stacked with members of the National Guard and political armed forces. On January 30th in Barquisimeto, a committee of the victims and families of police abuse released a communiqué condemning the tribunals; "these people guarantee the social peace, generate justice, and therefore the state cannot dismantle its own gang, it will never judge, much less condemn, itself." The continuation of police abuse is one of the most underplayed aspects of the Bolivarian Government, especially considering the lack of responses to it. In March, 21 year old Iván Padilla Alliot was severely beaten by the DISP and told that he was going to be "disappeared" after he ran in front of a government convoy while crossing through Caracas' hectic traffic. Only when it was discovered that he was the son of the Vice Minister of Culture was he released. If such a "mistake" is possible, one can only guess as to what happens when the pigs grab someone who's father is not a politician.

While Chávez speaks almost endlessly about his plans to benignly integrate the armed forces into society, in practice it is Venezuelan society that is forced to take on the nature of the armed forces. Although Article 61 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, Articles 130 and 134 then declare it obligatory to "defend the patria". Among the largest changes we now see the country undergoing is the implementation of obligatory "pre-military" programs in all schools, which seek to indoctrinate the youth with a bizarre blend of nationalism and "socialism" (sound familiar?). These programs will of course be complemented by a wide variety of centrally planned - and approved - education initiatives, especially through the new Bolivarian University. This institution, which Chávez claims now hosts more students than all the independent ones put together, is rigorously controlled by the state so that all activism, cultural activities, and studies undertaken by the students fit into the prefabricated mold of Bolivarian Socialism (Alan Woods, for example, being a typical guest speaker). As a result one can expect to see significant deterioration in the quality and autonomy of student struggle, which had previously characterized the universities as traditional points of resistance throughout all of the past regimes. Meanwhile, like so many other vertically-implemented projects of the state, the Bolivarian University has been failing to live up to its promise: the professor's union has publicly said that student desertion is at over 40%, and attendance statistics have been manipulated by the government. The curriculum has also had to be completely redesigned three times in the past four years.

The Bolivarian Revolution and Chávez as a personality are increasingly intolerant of criticism, and even more so of projects that fall outside of their control. The much-lauded and incredibly tiny urban garden projects in Caracas, which were deliberately dressed up with things like premium fertilizer to look more

*should obviously never be hidden, nor should they be deemphasized.*

*3. Homogenizing events and activities, or trying to fit them within a particular political framework can lead to ignoring evidence, falsification, and useless conclusions. The reality of situations can be disheartening, but seeing revolution everywhere does not change the actual content of movements and events.*

*4. It is impossible to know about the particularities of every situation, but intellectual laziness is also a danger. Simply finding the information that supports the story one wants to tell is the hallmark of mass media. Therefore it is important to be honest about how much information one has and recognize the obstacles that a lack of information presents.*

*5. We can easily sharpen analyses through a variety of means. It would greatly benefit revolutionaries to learn other languages in order to have access to a wider array of information. Of even greater importance is the necessity of establishing international contacts with whom we can share information, analysis and critique. Comrades on the ground can help give us a more nuanced understanding of insurrectionary events, rather than us painting them with a broad brush due to a lack of information.*

Above all we must continue to encourage and provide space for ongoing independent anarchist analysis of the Venezuelan situation from both inside and outside of the country. Of course, the bourgeois media cannot be trusted as a source of information on these matters, but even greater must be our distrust of dogmatic Leninists to whom all revolutionary acts eventually boil down to the task of constructing a vanguard party intrinsically foreign to the process of proletarian self-valorization. What we risk is collapsing into the same mentality that seeks to explain the rise of Stalin as if he fell from the moon, completely independent of the Bolshevik structures that nurtured that despotism. Venezuela is a key issue for the anarchist analysis specifically because of the government's immense involvement. At this stage the state, what structures it replicates, who is controlling it, and how it does business are at the center not only of any anarchist critique, but the very process itself.

Chávez inherited a capitalist state just like any other, and "Bolivarian" Constitution or no Bolivarian Constitution, it has remained completely unchanged. He has inherited a bourgeois military machine and rather than even attempt to restructure it, has consolidated it from every angle. There has been absolutely no real judicial reform in the Fifth Republic, and as long as Chávez himself refuses to address this issue the rest of the government, for whom politics is merely a balancing act in which you do your best to appear in complete agreement with anything the president says, will continue to do nothing. In fact the Bolivarian Revolution has given the state a "softer, friendlier" image, which

real benefits of these programs cannot be denied, but neither can the fact that their implementation is designed to integrate civic society with the state oil industry and make the former even more dependent on the latter than it already was. There is indeed a case to be made that the current implementation of the Misiones is primarily an exercise in building infrastructure for the future, but the material fact is that social spending per capita has not increased past the levels seen during the 1970's oil bonanza.

The last and most recent concerted attempt to remove Chávez from power came in 2004 with a recall referendum - obviously ironic since such a move would have been impossible under anything other than the Bolivarian Constitution. The "No" (pro-Chávez) vote won this incredibly important election in a landslide that guaranteed the president's democratic credentials. And yet even the referendum itself is a bit tricky to decode, as of just under 15 million voters, only about 70% participated in the recall; some 5,600,000 for Chávez and 3,800,000 against, shattering the illusion of an undisputable Chavista majority, and exposing the continuing existence of voter apathy. It is also worth noting that the political forces behind the "Yes" vote had and continue to have absolutely no political platform or project other than a rabid anti-Chávez stance. It's also interesting to point out that after the victory, multinational stocks such as Chevron-Texaco and Crystalex (Canadian gold mining) shot up. Chávez provides a very stable and welcoming environment for foreign investment.

### **3. NO HAY CAMINO HACIA LA AUTOGESTIÓN, ¡LA AUTOGESTIÓN ES EL CAMINO!**

In fact, Chávez provides a very welcoming environment for just about anyone. The man is *damn* charismatic! It's like an anarchist sport just to see how long you can watch the president give a speech before saying, "hey maybe he's not so bad".

His relationship to the people is unlike anything I've ever seen. They love him. It sounds cliché, but they see themselves in him and have concentrated their hopes into his personage. His personality cult has been built slowly over thousands of hours of televised appearances and meetings with all sorts of different people - and it all began with that little minute in 1992. To give an example of how his "magic" sometimes plays out, it might be useful to relate what I saw of a televised conference in which Chávez presented a series of grants for different "endogenous" community projects to be implemented through the new Bolivarian High Schools. In an auditorium filled with cheering, uniformed school children, Chávez and several ministers listened as one by one, representatives of the nation's Bolivarian students reported on the development of their new educational institutions.

One young woman, poised to read off the achievements of her school, excused herself and instead used the opportunity to ask the president on national television what he planned to do about the confusion over school uniforms, which come in both blue and beige. The girl wanted to know when they could expect a single color for all school uniforms, and the crowd roared with approval at seeing Chávez caught off guard by this friendly interrogation.

The Venezuelans I had been watching the broadcast with began to laugh with disbelief, saying, "Wow - that little girl just fixed those stupid uniforms!" as on screen, Chávez played up his bewilderment and responded by calling out possible colors for new uniforms, after each of which the crowd of students would cry out for approval or rejection.

To be sure, these little incidents are not necessarily indicative of an actual "revolutionary democracy" and given Chávez' history of promising various things in the heat of the moment and never following up on them (such as ridding his country of Genetically Modified food companies such as Monsanto), often times do not mean anything at all. Some of the more cynical might even point out that such spectacles could be easily pre-planned in order to look spontaneous and paint a human face on the president. Regardless, the phenomenon they represent and feed is central to any understanding of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Hugo Chávez spends more time on television than probably any other politician, and practically all government ceremonies at which he speaks are seen as opportunities to rearticulate his vision of the revolution before a national audience. His weekly "Aló Presidente" program is only the tip of the iceberg in this nonstop propaganda blitz. The key to appreciating all this aritime is to contrast it with other politicians of past and present, both national and international. George W. Bush for instance, is infamous for spending as little time as possible in front of the cameras, and only speaking briefly whenever he is. Next to this example and the prior tradition of politics in Venezuela, Chávez' constant rhetoric and openness to the media creates the impression of a process that is constantly developing with the people's involvement - a societal discussion in which he can continually serve as the moderator.

There is a small but vocal group of radicals, including prominent members of anarchist groups, who have personally met Chávez in the past and confide that this "dialogue" is a sham, and his actual personality is quite authoritarian. Douglas Bravo himself is now one of the major voices in this strand of criticism, and insists that Chávez is nostalgic over his 1992 coup attempt, during which he claims that the future president was openly disdainful of the "unorganized masses" and saw the revolutionary project as the exclusive role of the armed forces, only to be rubber-stamped by the popular movements. In a way this is not difficult to believe, especially given the elevation of February 4th to a national holiday that totally eclipses Chávez' actual election in terms of relevance to "the process". On the other hand, the overwhelmingly vocal majority of the Venezuelan working class seems totally convinced of his sincerity, though not that of his immediate allies.

For the sake of this text as well as RAAN's future organizing around Venezuela, I must insist that the question of whether Chávez - as a single man - is sincere is incredibly irrelevant. For anarchists in particular, the detail of whether or not to support Chávez is a massive distraction that can only lead to divisiveness within the movement and accusations of "petty-bourgeois influence" from without. *Regardless* of whether or not Chávez is a legitimate revo-

vanguardist cadre organizations: with an emphasis on recruitment and the selling of official merchandise and literature. Nothing looks more pathetic than when your "action report" from an event is that you sold "33% more Trotsky books" than last year. *Woo Hoo*.

But do not underestimate their ability to use the attractive lure of the Bolivarian Revolution: HOV regularly draws hundreds of people to its events all over the world, and any independent anarchist projects related to the Venezuela issue will undoubtedly have to deal with them in some way.

## 22. CONCLUSIONS

*"He who serves the revolution ploughs the sea."* - Simón Bolívar

These words, spoken by Bolívar in his final days as he became increasingly cynical, in some way describe perfectly certain moments during my trip in which the Venezuelan revolution seemed hopelessly bureaucratic, superficial, and profoundly *capitalist*. What had been my intense idealism regarding Chávez - best expressed in the Bolivanarchism essay - was quick to fade away in the face of my physical experiences in the country. On the other hand, my extensive contact with those for whom the revolution is a daily project of self-valorization and the construction of alternative and non-hierarchical associations outside of both the State and capitalism left me with a lot of hope regarding not just the prospects for the advancement of true communism, but also the incredible opportunity that we as internationals have to preserve in this exact moment, as it develops, the truth about Venezuela before it can be erased by Leninist distortions. Above all we must delve deep into the complexity of the process, and in particular its internal contradictions not only so as not to be blinded by simplistic formulas that reduce the revolution to the actions of this or that politician, but as an overall strategy with which to strengthen critical thinking within our own ranks and increase comprehension of what a revolution is and how the various elements involved interact with each other.

In the wonderful short essay "Revolt and Misrepresentation", which appeared in the first issue of the insurrectionary journal *A Murder of Crows*, author Kellen Kass takes a look at anarchist analyses of recent global events and offers five important points to keep in mind when looking for the truth in any potentially revolutionary situation. These five points are in fact so dead-on in terms of evaluating the challenges we face in regards to Venezuela that I thought it would be useful to fully reproduce them here:

1. *For anarchists, analysis should never be undertaken in order to spread an ideology or try and prove the correctness of one's ideas so as to gain adherents. Many leftist rackets use uncritical cheerleading as means of recruiting members for their organizations or in order to sell more newspapers.*
2. *Insurrections are not pure events, and often they have contradictory tendencies within them. Therefore it is important to highlight those elements that we find encouraging, but not over-emphasize them. We gain nothing through misrepresentation and wishful thinking. Those aspects that we find deplorable*

victory"; Turkey: "there is no easy way to counter this other than boosting the efforts to build the revolutionary vanguard"; the Netherlands: "Therefore, become active, organize yourself on the basis of a Marxist programme and join the International Marxist Tendency!" etc. etc.

Their writing style on the Bolivarian Revolution is similarly boring, and often sounds like a broken record repeating the same trademark Alan Woods catch-phrases regarding the "correct position" for their militants to take on the Venezuelan process. Taken as a whole and studied carefully, the IMT (and its Venezuelan affiliate, the CMR) actually does seem to have a decent grasp of the current situation in the country, but their analysis is plagued with by worship of Chávez and the MVR and - like all authoritarians - they cannot conceive of a revolution without them. The major problems with HOV are twofold: The first is that they rely exclusively on the Bolivarian Government for their information and propaganda, with the benefit being that they are then instantly able to distribute full-color magazines, t-shirts, DVDs, and other literature in support of Chávez. In return, they are given funding and access to a number of Venezuelan social movements. Inside the country, this Trotskyist propaganda campaign is no worse than anything the government would be doing anyway. Internationally however, it creates a mass front organization for the spreading of Leninist ideology. The major consequence of towing the Bolivarian line is that you create an uncritical movement that is just as quick to call its critics "*golpistas*" as Chávez himself. Unsurprisingly, HOV simply will not touch issues such as IIRSA and Venezuela's opening itself up to unprecedented energy exploitation by the multinationals. In a process that bears comparison to the monopolization of the Communist International after the Bolshevik coup, they are seeking to herd international discourse on Venezuela behind the officialist version of events.

Ultimately, what results is an incredibly un-nuanced and electoralist ideology that does not take into account the true extent of the contradictions driving the process forward - contradictions that inevitably must lead either to the death of the revolution, or that of representative politics. This globalization of the simplistic Chavista mentality is necessary for the building of that "disciplined" movement which the IMT sees itself in leadership of; a politics and strategy that cannot hold up to any thorough analysis. Remember - these are the same fuckers who seriously want us to believe that Lenin and Trotsky were anything other than dictators! Their thinking is also profoundly opportunistic and designed only to get themselves into power, even if a few inconvenient ideological concessions have to be made first - in the recent past a longstanding page on the Frequently Asked Questions section of their "Youth For International Socialism" website, which identified Cuba as a Stalinist regime and greatly downplayed the historic significance of Che Guevara as a revolutionary leader, was deleted. This comes as they are now of course publishing Cuban editions of their books through Venezuelan contacts, and are only too happy when the Castro bureaucracy invites them to become part of its cheering section.

HOV is already being run in exactly the same way as its directors run their

lutionary "leader", the only tactical course for all *revolutionaries* remains as it ever was: to press for autonomous and horizontally-applied community and workers' organization and action against capitalism, focusing on a sustainability independent of all governments, "revolutionary" or not, and especially the limited political and even natural life of any single figure.

#### **4. NINGUNA REVOLUCIÓN SE FINANCIA POR MEDIO DE LAS TRANSNACIONALES**

*"The Comandante may shout whatever insults he likes against Bush, but that loud-mouthed anti-imperialism means nothing as long as he continues giving Chevron, Conoco-Phillips or Repsol the control of our reserves of oil and natural gas, continues giving Telefonica our communications, giving Grupo Santander and BBV our bank sector, giving Crystallex our gold mines and to Vale do Rio Doce or Peabody our coal reserves."* - Comision de Relaciones Anarquistas (CRA), Venezuela

Hugo Chávez is a pragmatist who on more than one occasion has said that he does "not believe we are living in an age of proletarian revolutions". So the question becomes, just where the hell is this "Socialismo Bolivariano" supposed to come from, then?

Criticizing the current Venezuelan regime, particularly from within the North American movement, is a tricky proposition. There are more than enough people out there wearing red berets and ready to denounce any "attack" against Chávez as tacit support for a US coup. This tendency is of course rather prevalent in Venezuela, and in fact is really quite analogous to the Bush doctrine of either being "with us or against us" - a comparison that needs to be made as much as possible. To those who say that criticizing Chávez hands weapons to the enemy, we must be firm in saying that to not do so is infinitely more dangerous. Those who speak at any time of a "revolutionary government" have, to recall Vaneigem, "a corpse in their mouth".

The Venezuela issue is so interesting, so very germane to the Red & Anarchist Action Network, because to understand it fully one needs a synthesis of both classical anarchist *and* Marxist critiques.

From the anarchist side, we have a rejection of all power structures and particularly the vertical implementation of aid or development. So no, of course it's not "bad" that Chávez is setting up free health care clinics, and of course it's not "bad" that people are learning how to read and write for the first time, but the extreme rigidity of these programs breeds a direct dependence on state structures that harkens back to the paternalism of the 1970's. Thus when the leftists exclaim that Chávez has gotten rid of school fees (allowing 600,000 more children to attend class) and RAAN (with its principles calling for the abolition of institutional schooling) is hopelessly "bourgeois" and cannot understand the importance of that in a "Third World" nation, we must explain that Chávez has *bought* his way through the revolution with frequent "gifts" (such as free school uniforms) and that not only was free schooling already available during the populist years, but it was abandoned due to the unsustainability of the oil-centric economic dependency that Chávez has not only refused to con-

front, but has in fact deepened exponentially.

We envision self-managed communities with the ability to independently educate themselves according to their local custom via a free access to information and resources. The vertical implementation of government programs seeks to "push through" a "revolution" that in many cases doesn't actually exist at the level of grassroots consciousness, or at least not in the format specified by the government decrees. This culture of "charity" and dependency is ultimately counter-revolutionary since it ossifies the state bureaucracy and makes it nearly impossible for the people to defend themselves or carry through the revolution in the absence of a "friendly" central government or armed forces - conditions that simply cannot be taken as given!

There are of course exceptions to this - for instance in the autonomous community of La Vega, (a historically combative settlement 40 minutes outside of Caracas, from where the police have been expelled) Mision Ribas and other social programs are directly run by the most active community organizers, without much interference by the state. The problem is, La Vega is not a representative community in Venezuela. Hugo Chávez continually calls, day and night, for the people to organize themselves. *Repeatedly* he states that the revolution can only go through if the people are organized enough to really make it happen. Such comments as these are always pointed to by those who would insist that Chávez is sincere in his project. I would respond that it really doesn't matter, and that "with" him or "against" him, the task remains to organize autonomous communities capable of breaking all dependence on Chávez or the guy who comes after him, even if having to utilize government handouts along the way. The problem is, this isn't what's happening.

Chávez will decree that by such and such a date, some odd number of localized "cooperatives" will be ready to extend whatever the new project for that month is into a like number of communities across Venezuela. When the deadline comes, less than a third of these cooperatives have actually gotten themselves together, and the project is just dropped from above onto the remaining communities. It is very important to note, these Misiones do not surpass the token level of care already provided for during previous oil bonanzas. Barrio Adentro, for instance, has three levels. The first are the preventative care clinics directly in the neighborhoods that we hear so much about, which aren't good for much more than a band-aid. The second level encompasses the specialized trauma centers, which only exist in select communities, anyway. And the third level is supposedly the public central hospitals of Venezuela, which remain completely inadequate and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, food consumption is up while actual nutrition is down, and "tropical" diseases like Malaria and Tuberculosis are shockingly on the rise. But none of this matters, because all Chávez needs to do is build another Barrio Adentro and the international Left will shower praise on him like he saved the world. With such tactics he actually spends less on the social programs than he would on any media campaign necessary to promote them, and draws attention away from the fact that all of this is still based on one thing - oil.

"the process" accessible to leftist tourism, and as a result collaborates with a number of different groups from Global Exchange to various Universities to book week-long tours of government ministries, Misiones, and candid meetings with trade union and community leaders. Of course, as a result these bought "experiences" are often fundamentally charged with the bureaucracy's one-sided and self-promoting propaganda.

Without a doubt, the biggest player on the international scene for organizing around Venezuela is the *Hands Off Venezuela* (HOV) campaign, a Trotskyist front group that has had success in using UNT contacts to secure supportive union resolutions in England, and has been putting groups together from Greece to the United States. It's actually hard to say who is riding who - is the Bolivarian Government using HOV as built-in activist base to organize speaking tours and teach-ins about the revolution, or is HOV using the Bolivarian Revolution as an energetic hot-button issue with which to more effectively spread state-capitalist ideology? In fact it seems that both sides are working together, as Chávez' vision for a "Socialism of the XXI Century" is remarkably close to the plans of certain international Trotskyist groups, which are being recruited by the government to direct the indoctrination of Venezuela's "revolutionary generation" along profoundly Leninist lines. We have to remember that Chávez has already been in power for over six years, meaning that many children have had a chance to come of age during the Fifth Republic, and the *comandante* is almost certainly counting on his Bolivarian Universities to provide a steady supply of Red Guards for the defense of the government.

"Hands Off" was launched in December of 2002 on the heels of an appeal to defend the "Bolivarian revolution" that was made by Alan Woods, editor of the horrifically misnamed "In Defense of Marxism" website and, along with veteran British Trot Ted Grant, ideological leader of various affiliated movements such as the Workers' International League (WIL) in the US and International "Marxist" Tendency (IMT) in England and abroad. The campaign has since served as a way for these authoritarian currents to buy legitimacy in the movement by playing up their close relationship with the Bolivarian Government: Woods has met with Chávez, who personally thanked HOV for their efforts. In May they both spoke at a large HOV (and Cuba!) rally in Vienna, which was probably only the first of many such mutually beneficial engagements.

The editorial style of "In Defense of Marxism" is depressingly formulaic, unimaginative, and repetitive. The leaders of the IMT write pages and pages about developing revolutions in all regions of the world while contentedly sitting on their thumbs in their own country, hoping that one day the Labour Party will be "reclaimed". In fact as with all Leninists, the idea of the (official) "Workers' Party" figures prominently into their ideology and no matter what they're talking about, the conclusion is invariably that there is a need for a Trotskyist vanguard party to lead the revolution. Nepal: "The only thing missing was an organization to lead them to victory. The next vital task facing the workers and youth of Nepal is to develop that organization that will lead the movement to

December. The propaganda of "10 Million for Chávez" and "Now we will be 10 million!" pervades public politics and, for the opportunists, even functions as a campaign platform unto itself. Where this slogan came from originally nobody seemed to know, but Kanica brushed it off as mere political propaganda: "They just say that to get people riled up and excited about the elections. I mean, look at the referendum - we were just under 6 million for Chávez then." I asked if this meant he thought the goal of ten million was impossible? "Right, there's no way we're going to get that, I think we could maybe do 8 million, if we really get out in the streets and organize people to vote."

The rush to get such a large pro-Chávez turnout in December isn't just about winning the election, as at this stage the opposition doesn't really present a credible political challenge and Chávez himself has suggested turning the poll into a mere referendum on his rule so as to prevent the United States from accusing him of "un-democratically" standing as the only candidate. The election is seen much like 2004 referendum: as a symbolic contest between Chávez and Bush. There is no technical need for the "10 Million", but voting for Chávez has come to symbolize a dedication to the revolutionary path and its advancement. The December election is therefore popularly seen as a final commitment to the break with capitalism, a symbol to the world that Venezuelans are behind the Bolivarian project and in many ways the vote will also represent the "point of no return" for Chávez. As Kanica explained, "It's not just about Chávez winning again: we need those 10 million to justify what we're going to do in the eyes of the world; to justify the deepening of the process, because if that doesn't happen then we haven't really done anything. On one side we have the Misiones, and on the other we're still being robbed by *los mismos de siempre* (the same people as always)."

## 21. HANDS OFF VENEZUELA?

*"The battle to re-elect the President is inseparable from the struggle to resolve the grave problems that the workers and the vast majority of the population continue to suffer, and from the need to build socialism under the direct democratic participation of the workers ... But, in our opinion, one of the main problems the UNT has suffered during the last two years has been that it has failed to carry through the policy of struggle agreed at its founding congress. It has ignored basic issues such as the struggle for factory occupation and workers' control of state industries ...the ultra-lefts want to split the UNT away from the Bolivarian movement because they consider President Chávez to be an obstacle in the way of the advance towards socialism. They put the interests of their own sectarian groups before those of the working class as a whole." - Statement from the Trotskyist CMR*

Before I explain my general conclusions about the Venezuelan situation and propose some tactical objectives for RAAN and the revolutionary movement in general, it would be useful to first discuss the current state of international intervention and solidarity initiatives with the Bolivarian Revolution.

Chávez has a good idea of the degree to which his government will need a global solidarity campaign to survive. The state is sparing no effort to make

This is where the Marxist analysis comes in. In the rush to support an emerging "revolutionary" situation in South America, many radicals have completely forgotten that capitalism is not just some form of government, but a *mode of production* that is not isolated in one nation, class, or done away with simply by having the workers run "their" own factories. Chávez very skillfully keeps the attention on policy differences with the US government so as to throw up a smokescreen with which to hide the fact that he is actually marching right in step with neo-liberal globalization's grand scheme for the region.

What possible use is it to go on and on about how unjust the war in Iraq is, for instance, when Halliburton remains the chief services contractor for PDVSA? How enormously distracting is it for Chávez to play verbal war games with Condoleezza Rice while welcoming Chevron - the murderous company she once directed - into the country with open arms, even calling them "great friends of the revolutionary process"?

On the one hand, Venezuela's oil nationalization left much of the industry's infrastructure undeveloped, and building relationships with the transnationals is the only way to overcome this without immediately bankrupting the country. Chávez certainly can't hope to go from relying solely on oil and importing up to 80% of Venezuela's food, to a completely "sovereign" and self-sufficient nation overnight... but on the other hand there is absolutely nothing to suggest that he is doing anything other than trying to deepen this dependency. Under the banner of socialism and with slogans of "development", Chávez has presided over the *biggest handover of national resources in Venezuela's history*.

And how else could they possibly hope to do it? In late 2003 Bolivia nearly went through a revolution just at the *suggestion* of privatization. Chávez, on the other hand, is such a "revolutionary" that he can sign over the rights to the massive offshore Deltana Platform - which will create a "dead zone" in the ocean and have access to more gas reserves than ALL of Bolivia combined - and nobody will even realize that it just happened!

For Chávez, anything that brings in money from the country's energy reserves (combined, the largest in the world) is positive. His single driving goal is to convert Venezuela into the number one energy producing country on earth - and for this to happen he relies not only on the transnationals, but the *continuity of the capitalist system that consumes that energy*. Despite scattered references to "the environment", he has absolutely no intention of developing or providing the alternative energy solutions necessary to reduce economic dependency on the oil market. In fact, the only type of energy Chávez seems to be interested in that doesn't come from gas, petrol, or coal... is nuclear.

But that's probably a long way off. After all, he recently declared that under his government the integration of South America will become reality, and that Venezuela can provide for the region's energy needs for the next 200 years - as if the ecosystem could possibly survive that much more sustained consumption! To match the global South's level of "development" with that of the North (because of course, that's what a prosperous socialist society should look like) is not only an ecological catastrophe, it's exactly what international capital de-

mands! Moreover, it's a path completely removed from the national reality, as Venezuela has already received 60% of its energy from hydroelectric sources for some time and hardly needs a massive expansion in its oil production except as a exporter for the global market.

Chávez won big brownie points with the anti-globalization movement by coming out strong against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, (FTAA, or ALCA in Spanish) and never stopped his tirade against it until it was clear that it would not be going through. He even had the brilliant idea of creating "ALBA", the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. The only problem is, ALBA didn't even really exist until Evo Morales signed on in late April, and unless Daniel Ortega becomes president of Nicaragua it is unclear if any other countries will be willing to sign up. In theory it's a wonderful ideal of mutual aid whereby countries trade the services they specialize in without any emphasis on profit, with examples being the literacy, oil-for-doctors, and spinoff programs with Cuba. Chávez pushes the issue whenever he can and throws out oil gifts across the Caribbean, defiant that ALBA (which spells out "dawn") will be the future. In fact, there seems to be no public framework to define ALBA aside from some of Chávez' own essays, which make sure to state that the project could never serve as "a barrier to the development of technology" in the participating countries. While ALBA shows a lot of potential and could one day even redefine international trade, (though not free it from the capitalist context) at this point it does not pass for more than a distraction when compared to Venezuela's much larger economic integration ventures under IIRSA.

## **5. EN VENEZUELA, LA ALCA SE LLAMA IIRSA**

Unlike the FTAA, which would not have affected the energy sector and therefore really wouldn't have mattered to Venezuela's mono-economy in the first place, IIRSA (Integración de la Infraestructura Regional Sur Americana) is *all* about Chávez' favorite subject. Financed by the Corporación Andina de Fomento (CAF, which in turn gets money from the International Monetary Fund), IIRSA is a longstanding development plan of the multinationals that is now being repainted as "nationalist". Of course, any similarities between IIRSA and what Chávez is calling a revolution are entirely coincidental.

IIRSA links up with other regional projects such as Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) to create the best possible environment for "Infrastructure Integration". In Venezuela the best example of this strategy can be found in the Western state of Zulia, which borders Colombia and contains some of the most important "energy reserves" in the country.

Zulia is where you hear about the FARC running columns around on Venezuelan soil. It's 100% true, by the way. The paramilitaries are, of course, also coming over with the drug trade, (and clashing with the FAN) and even Colombian government troops cut through to shave time off marching in their own territory. More interestingly, it's the center of the most important social struggle in Venezuela - as shall be discussed below.

For IIRSA, Zulia is most important because of the role it can play in helping both national and Colombian coal exports reach their final destinations. Al-

passed him a copy of *Nuestro Petróleo y Otros Cuentos*, which he had also never been exposed to. This small act may have been the single most important accomplishment of my trip.

Overall, what I found inspiring in the Tupamaros was the same thing that struck me with hope when talking to almost anyone in the country - a profound disillusionment with the slow political process and a solid commitment to revolutionary struggle, with or without Chávez. During our interviews, Kanica often took me out for walks through the city and to Plaza Bolívar, a public park that has become a focal point for officialist and Chavista dialogue, and each day hosts constant political debates between party activists and everyday people. In the plaza, we usually couldn't walk more than a few feet without somebody recognizing Oswaldo and telling me some funny story about him; at least in that part of town, the man is well respected. In the area we would usually bump into other Tupamaros, many of who were quite old, with faded prison tattoos on their forearms. Once, we encountered a group of people from another state who had traveled to Caracas to demand medical treatment for sick relatives. Kanica was very direct in telling them that unless they got organized in their own communities to demand the aid, they were unlikely to receive it. He explained to me that the MRT often had to deal with individuals who were "just looking for handouts" from the new welfare state, and rarely were these people conscious of the need to reshape society beyond their immediate demands.

Of all the people we met around Plaza Bolívar and the streets of Western Caracas, by far the most interesting was a fellow Tupamaro, probably in his thirties, who pulled me aside and explained, "What we need to do is line up all those politicians in the National Assembly and have them machine-gunned." Entirely in agreement - but still wanting to play devil's advocate - I asked, "What about [Gustavo] Cisneros?" By his reply I knew he hadn't been joking around, "You need to forget about Cisneros, that guy has already escaped; all those people are long gone, and they took the money with them. The ones you need to pay attention to, the people who are robbing us *right now* - are the same ones who are in this 'revolutionary' government."

To fully understand the dramatic nature of his viewpoint, one has to realize that in last year's elections, officialist parties took total control of the National Assembly, meaning that this particular Tupamaro was proposing the assassination of some of the country's most "revolutionary" and committed Chavistas. Although at the time an opposition boycott helped explain high abstention in those elections, there was in fact a large degree of apathy and non-participation from many in Chávez' mass base, partly in protest at what is seen as the slow pace of reform, but also due to the widespread mistrust of the politicians; most see Chávez as their only legitimate representative, making any election in which he is not a candidate totally irrelevant.

Because our talk had turned to the electoral situation, I decided to ask Kanica what he and the MRT thought of the widely publicized campaign to secure 10 million votes for Chávez in the important presidential elections this coming

But for that future to ever become a reality, the Tupamaros have to begin building a militant, revolutionary consciousness today; "The revolution has steps, the work we're doing now is only preparatory. It's a slow process to build consciousness, because we're still in a transition to socialism." The MRT sees a fundamental difference between the current representative democracy and the "participative" one they - and Chávez - believe is slowly being built. A lot of their work right now involves hosting film screening and public forums in the barrios where people can openly discuss their visions for the future and vent frustrations at a process that many say is taking too long, and has become just as rigidly entrenched in bureaucracy as any other government from the past. The Tupas, while perhaps not always using the same language, are avid supporters of the *revolucion en la revolucion*. "Chávez says 'march against imperialism' and the people march, but there is no day-to-day work being done to build a real anti-imperialist movement in this country," explained Kanica. To try and remedy this, the MRT has set up a national "Anti-Imperialist Front" bringing together many different groups. They also, while highlighting the unprecedented importance of the current government talking about and exposing the political disappearances that took place under past regimes, are working against ongoing state abuses that they recognize as systemic through another "Front Against Impunity".

"There are many opportunists in this revolution - a lot of *chameleons*" (he would use this word repeatedly) "The MVR, PPT, and PODEMOS are Social-Democratic, they're not Marxist. They want to participate in the system, to have a share of power, so they quietly sit by and don't criticize the process. If we want to deepen the revolution, if we want it to succeed, we have to denounce these bureaucrats. That is the role of the *Movimiento Revolucionario Tupamaro* within the political process - self criticism, and denunciation."

As militants with decades of experience, many of whom have not only fought as guerrillas against the state but also received military training from the FAN, the MRT is in a better position than most groups to judge the likelihood of a US or even UN invasion: "The ordinary Venezuelan has military training, knows how to use a rifle, what the different types of grenades are, and all that. Just look around you," - we were standing outdoors in Caracas - "can you imagine a foreign army trying to hold this city?" I admitted that I could not. Caracas and other South American metropolises like it would make Baghdad look like a walk in the park. "The thing is, they don't need to invade us, anyway. We're already occupied by the empire - through the transnationals."

Being Marxists, the MRT is well aware of economic relationships behind the politics. They believe PDVSA to still be undergoing an internal "class war", the result of which has not yet been decided. I used my time with the organization's president to inquire about the tripling of coal production in Zulia, which he admitted he had not been aware of. Bringing up the Tupas' identification with indigenous struggle, I told him of the campaign underway to save the Sierra del Perijá. Confronted with the Bolivarian Government's complicity in IIRSA, Oswaldo Kanica admitted, "This is an embarrassment to us all." I

ready in the works are a network of highways that will cut across Amazonian territory, a bridge over the enormous Lake Maracaibo, and the construction of a massive international port with which to handle those coal shipments. The entire development package has been put together with a mind towards easier access to "competitive" markets in Europe and North America, and is taking place against a backdrop of several shady coincidences. Chief among these is that prior to the signings of the relevant agreements with Colombia, Chávez had regularly criticized his counterpart, the "paramilitary with a necktie" Alvaro Uribe, for being a member of the oligarchy and a US puppet. After these integration deals went through, Chávez switched his vitriol to Mexican president Vicente Fox, who is now seen as the chief lapdog in the region. Unsurprisingly, relations between Venezuela and Colombia are now really rather smooth. Even more interesting, however, is that the port in question was to be named "Puerto América" (in the original plans which of course pre-date Chávez) but has now been rechristened "Puerto Bolívar", no doubt so as to make any voice against it sound unpatriotic by default...

Puerto Bolívar is set to totally displace fishing communities on the islands of San Bernardo, San Carlos, and Zapara, and the construction of Puente Padilla over Lake Maracaibo is being done without any respect to studies conducted by the government itself, which indicate that strong winds in the area (over 100 km/h) will lift coal dust from the transport trucks and, along with the opening of several new mines in Venezuelan territory, contaminate the entire region's water supply including the rivers Socuy, Maché, and Orinoco (which is the biggest reserve in the Western hemisphere) as well as Embalse Manuelote, the most important reservoir in Northeast Zulia. Directly affected will be the water supply to the city of Maracaibo, Zulia's state capital. Of course, the construction of this bridge and its connected projects was originally proposed by Carlos Andrés Pérez as part of wider neoliberal policies, and was even listed by Chávez as a justification for his 1992 coup.

It is hardly the first time that the current government has gone back on its word regarding planned infrastructure development. In a little-publicized struggle that has been all but forgotten in the face of Chavismo, the indigenous Pémon population spent the majority of 2000-2002 fighting against the construction of a series of inefficient and outdated energy towers cutting through their people's sacred lands. The project had originally been signed in 1997 by the Caldera government with then president of Brazil Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and Chávez had made it a campaign pledge to "review" the project, which under the future Bolivarian Constitution should never have been allowed. Of course once in office, Chávez declared the *tenido eléctrico* to be a "geopolitical necessity" that would not to be stopped by "foreign interests".

By foreign interests, Chávez specifically meant *ecologismo del Norte*, or "Northern ecology". In Venezuela the environmental movement that began in the 80's has long been stigmatized as a privileged interest group from the North, out of touch with reality - how, after all, could an "undeveloped" nation have problems with pollution? In fact, already in the 80's there were many

pressing environmental issues such as the contamination of Lake Maracaibo and release of mercury into the ecosystem by the mining industries. As we shall see, nowadays this idea of "ecologismo del Norte" is skillfully combined with "anti-imperialism" to harshly silence all movements that could be considered "green", which in Zulia means indigenous peoples opposed to the destruction of their ancestral homelands in the name of neo-liberal energy exploitation.

In the case of the Pémon, this situation led to their adoption of direct action tactics and the toppling of seven electrical towers in their territory - of course, this was denounced as "terrorism" (where have we heard that before?) by Chávez. Events came to a head on May 28th, 2002 when Pémon activist Miguel Lanz was murdered by Sgt. Jonathan Ortiz of the FAN. In July of that year, Pémon activists traveled to Caracas to denounce the killing and present a request for legal action to Chávez on his weekly call-in show, *Aló Presidente*. After having their demands passed back and forth between the various levels of bureaucracy lurking behind the program's "unscripted" image, Minister of Education, Culture, and Sport Aristóbulo Istrúiz denied them, saying, "*Chica*, you are crazy. This can't go on the air, what are you thinking? You think we're going to disparage our armed forces? What you are is crazy."

This is the reality of a "left-wing" government that was drawn directly out of, and remains dependent on, the armed forces: of an "anti-imperialist" government that rhetorically positions itself "against" Christopher Columbus, but in full cooperation with the Spanish banks that control the nation's finances - and of course, who do you think ultimately owns those banks?

Foreign influence over Venezuela's economy does not only extend through the energy sector, though that is clearly its most important manifestation. Electricity in Caracas, traditionally owned by a powerful local family, is now set to be internationalized by H Corp. The finance sector is totally owned by transnationals - Banco De Venezuela by Santander, Banco Provincial by Banco Biscbao, (which illegally gave funds to Chávez' 1998 campaign) Seguros Caracas by Liberty Mutual, and the list goes on. The security sector is almost totally controlled by a Spanish company, as is Movistar, one of the nation's largest cellular service providers. Two of other big ones, CanTV and MovilNet, are both owned by Verizon. In 2004, former US President (and "neutral" advocate for Capital-D Democracy in South America) Jimmy Carter arranged a meeting between Hugo Chávez and Gustavo Cisneros, a Venezuelan media mogul considered by Forbes to be among the world's richest men. Shortly after, the Cisneros Group bought Digitel, leaving the nation's telecom sector entirely in the hands of the multinationals.

## **6. VENEZUELA: AHORA ES DE TODAS LAS TRANSNACIONALES**

None of this is paid any serious attention of course, because the only important strategic industry (at least for now) is PDVSA, which thankfully "belongs to the people". Or does it?

Beginning this year, foreign multinationals will no longer have the ability to

such as the Tupas that it is important to remember the separate ideological context provided by Latin America and the legacy of Ché Guevara in particular. In addition, the identification with Túpac Amaru and the idea of indigenous resistance provides its own type of consciousness, as a result of which many of the traditional definitions of Leninism are useless - the Tupas are more interested in defending the historic validity of indigenous resistance than that of the 1917 Bolshevik coup. In addition, we have seen how Venezuelan class composition is entirely different from the stereotyped fantasy of an industrial proletariat generally seen as necessary to the functioning of an orthodox vanguard Party. Within the MRT there is every shade of "Marxism" from Trotsky to Mao and, undoubtedly, many young gangsters who only joined up simply because it would mean they could have a gun. The overarching Guevarist anti-imperialism gives them an ideological basis with which to unite, and when they do so, they do directly on the basis of practical community work, as has been the case throughout their entire history.

The Tupamaros' current political strategy is based around four "lines", which are designed as a "direct attack against misery": These are the workers' councils, student's councils, community organization in the barrio, and work with the *campesinos*. They are big supporters of the new "Communal Councils" - prototype organizations for a citizen's branch of government that have yet to be fully implemented or tested (I'm not holding my breath). While recognizing the very limited affect that a few Barrio Adentros can have on the country's totally inadequate healthcare system, they insist that the Misiones are nevertheless a *cambio profundo* because they are able to reach Venezuelans directly in their own neighborhoods for the first time. The new Bolivarian schools are also seen as an incredibly important step forward, especially taking into account the near-total shutdown of the schooling system in the last days of the Fourth Republic. For the Tupamaros, the Misiones and schools are not there to cure everything, but to build infrastructure for the future deepening of the process. The Bolivarian schools, they say, are through a variety of projects becoming integrated into the communities, which are using them as resources for jobs and public space. They are also excited about deals with China to launch a satellite in 3 years, which they say will finally allow the revolution to overcome the foreign mass media. ALBA is also seen as being of singular importance, and they definitely showed an awareness of the need to stop relying so much on food imports, and break with unsustainable models of development.

The Tupas are intimately aware of the differences between the current "state" of things, and a truly revolutionary post-capitalist society. In fact this awareness is at the crux of their existence, as they seek to find ways to organize effectively in the present while always pressing the need for radical change in the near future. Therefore, regardless of how we view their actual politics, they may be the single best point of reference in the Venezuelan revolution. "What we have now is Democracy and reformism, not proletarian dictatorship," explained Kanica, "we know for a fact that the Bolivarian Revolution has made millionaires of some people, and in the future they will have to pay for this."

his position, especially since I had been intending to ask him some difficult questions. Luckily, before long we had bonded over a common and deeply felt love for the revolution, and soon our interviews had become nothing more than informal discussions at any number of corner coffeeshops, where everyone always seemed to know him. Kanica was impressed at the Red & Anarchist Action Network's union between anti-state communists and anarchists, and was particularly interested in our use of Parkour as a broadly-accessible urban training regime for direct action squads. When I told him of our fundamental rejection of Leninism, he cracked a smile and leaned in to tell me a secret, almost as though we weren't the only ones in the office - "Yeah, I know what you mean. For example we have Maoists in this organization, and I have no idea where they think a peasant army is supposed to come from in Venezuela, but whatever."

Altogether I would rank the MRT as having the best interchange of concrete grassroots action and strategic, principled, and practical ideology. As communists we could of course properly object to their decision to participate in the electoral charade, but it is worth noting both that the current national political context has proved irresistible to various radical leftist groups, and that many voices within the organization are similarly opposed to parliamentarism. The social worker who initially enabled me to get into contact with them was adamant in saying that the MRT was actually profoundly disillusioned with the political process, and from another source I heard rumors that they were planning to destroy a massive Coca-Cola advertisement in Plaza Venezuela with explosives, which if true would put them firmly at the head of a vocal and growing movement to have the Bolivarian Revolution break out of the legal framework and advance towards the abolition of private property.

To be sure, their participation in the electoral process has always been a "one foot in, one foot out" sort of thing. In 2003, they even went as far as to call for the dissolution of the National Assembly, where they have yet to win any representation. They are critical of the country's electoral laws, which they say shut them out from a much larger piece of the political cake - they claim, and not without good reason, to be second only to the MVR in terms of grassroots support in the capital. Through their participation in the past two election cycles, they have only won 11 seats in local governments, helping to make sure that they remain a largely invisible part of the Bolivarian process. Their election posters call for a "Revolutionary alliance of the people with Chávez" - an obvious reference to what they correctly see as the inability of any revolution to be grafted onto the preexisting bourgeois state. And yet, their experiences tell them that now more than ever before, people's opinions about communist ideas are changing, and they are willing to take all available steps to get their message out. When I asked Kanica why the MRT had joined politics, his response was simple, "In the 80's, I had to run around with a bag over my head. Now, if I can take it off and actually talk to people, why not?"

He described the Tupamaros to me as a Marxist-Leninist [sic] organization before rethinking his terms a bit and adding on, "...Guevarist". It is with groups

make contractual agreements with PDVSA regarding their operations in certain areas of the industry. Instead, they will enter into "partnerships" where the state will always retain 51% of ownership. These partnerships are decided through a system of "bids" where different companies become "winners" in the contest to see who gets to help Venezuela move into the next century. On the surface, it seems like this might be a "fair" deal in which the nation gets to keep a majority share in its resources, even at the cost of the bidding contest's ludicrous spectacle. In reality however, while previously companies such as Chevron-Texaco would only be *contracted* for certain projects, (the building of a refinery, for instance) they will now be the literal owners of 49% of whatever projects are undertaken. When you consider that the contracts Chávez is pushing tend to last for up to 60 years, this amounts to nothing less than the *privitization of PDVSA!*

Like everything else, these processes are declared "socialist" and then through various manipulative techniques are sold off to a cheering international Left and a skeptical populace that had no say in their original design (as it took place behind closed doors, as always). Many fans of Chávez are of course quick to point out that new energy deals with China and India will cut Venezuela's reliance on the US as a market for oil, but this simply isn't true. When China puts money into Venezuelan energy it doesn't mean that they're buying oil for themselves, but that they're investing in national production that will still - according to the laws of the capitalist market - go to whoever is ready to pay cash on the barrelhead for it. *Sin embargo*, the United States.

The government of Hugo Chávez has basically had the affect of turning Venezuelan territory into a magical wonderland where the reality of international capitalism and the interests of the conglomerates who benefit from it are seemingly dissolved into a homogenous revolutionary development that is somehow "participatory" for the masses. This takes place regardless of what could be called any "long-term" strategy for revolution, as it is only the capitalist objectives that are being rammed through *right now*. Their logic being, it won't matter how socialist Venezuela is tomorrow if access to its energy reserves can be locked down in the meantime - no matter what the cost to the people or environment.

There is seemingly no end to the number of longstanding neo-liberal development schemes that can now be pushed through without protest in the name of solidarity, South American economic integration, or "exporting the revolution". Many of these projects were originally proposals of the Caldera government that are only now seeing the light of day, such as the opening up of the Imataca natural reserve to extensive logging and gold mining operations that began in 2002. Perhaps the largest, however, is an 8,000 km trans-Amazonic gas pipeline that would stretch from Caracas to Buenos Aires, providing energy to Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay (another key US ally) along the way. Despite PDVSA's own admission that the pipeline carries "more operational risks" than petrol, and government-funded studies predicting an "ecological catastrophe", the project is being hailed as the crown jewel of *integración*, a

milestone in South America's economic development that will allow Venezuela to provide the continent with the centuries of energy necessary to match the insane consumerism of the North.

Such pipelines are well known for being prime targets of sabotage and are unreliable delivery systems, regardless. The similar - but significantly smaller - Camisea pipeline in Peru has had four major ruptures since becoming operational in 2004, and Amazon Watch has already described it as "arguably the most damaging project in the Amazon Basin". In addition, gas pipelines uniformly suffer from a continuous corrosion that either leads to more spills or simply creates a massive filter for toxins.

However, it is in fact in the area of coal exploitation that we find a convergence between the most pressing issues of ecology, national sovereignty, and indigenous liberation in Venezuela.

## 7. EL CARBÓN ES MUERTE

On November 13th of 2003, Hugo Chávez announced that Venezuela would be tripling its coal production, principally through the incredibly destructive method of open pit mining - again, keep in mind that Venezuela does not actually need this energy for its own development, and the primary consumers of coal in the near future will continue to be the United States and Europe. It hardly seems a strategy for reducing reliance on Northern markets, particularly as this *desarollo* will rely directly on the participation of several multinational companies, and is in fact a welcome mat for them to enter the country.

The increase in production is to be centered in a region of Zulia known as the Sierra del Perijá, which is home to hundreds of families from indigenous Wayuú, Yukpa, Barí, and Japreria tribes. Several of these groups have already suffered greatly as a result of mining operations already underway on their lands, and regard the Chávez government's plans as an impending death sentence. Seven Barí and three Wayuú tribes are already currently encircled by mining pits through which the coal companies forbid all outside visitors to pass, and members of the tribes themselves are allowed to come and go for only two days out of the week.

Although the Bolivarian Constitution states that the government can only have access to natural resources "without rupturing the cultural, social, and economic integrity of [the people] and, equally, will be subject to the prior informing and consulting of the respective indigenous communities," in reality this - like much of the Constitution - doesn't mean much in practice. The process by which these tribes were allowed to demarcate their own land (as stipulated by Article 119 the Constitution) was undertaken by a joint government/community commission on the matter that included ample representation from business interests and some questionable participation from discredited indigenous "leaders" selected by the state. The result is that while a large land package was in fact offered to the tribes, the final territorial boundaries proposed had some suspicious holes cut out of them in exactly the areas where you might find the largest coal deposits...

This has been a divisive issue within the tribes themselves, as several voices in

a kind of mystique and street credibility unmatched by any other group in the country. In a conversation with the non-politically active older brother of an anarchist activist in Caracas, the Tupas were described in these terms: "They're not the ones who talk about doing things, they're the ones who show up and then it's already done ... during [the failed coup] in 2002, people were really afraid because if anyone was going to come out and start shooting, it was going to be them." And indeed, if you want an introduction to the Tupamaros you need look no further than the scenes in *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* that depict numerous middle-aged "Chavistas" with handguns trading shots with the opposition snipers; you couldn't ask for a better profile of a stereotypical MRT member.

In the years of the Caldera administration, the Tupamaros underwent a slow change (some even say a split) into a "civic-military" organization that now operates as an above ground political party with the open secret of also being an armed faction - it was only 2003 before MRT leaders decided that it was safe to show their faces without masks. The relationship between the Tupamaros and the Chávez government is extremely complex and an excellent example of the conflicting forces at work within the Bolivarian Revolution.

It is known that during the MBR 200 years, Chávez readily supplied the MRT with military-grade weaponry. Whether or not this exchange has continued during his presidency is anybody's guess, but the Tupas remain a loyal enforcement base for Chavismo, and were given control of security during the FSM (they boasted to me that this year's saw fewer deaths than any other previous Forum). During an International Women's Day march, they had armed members (all of which were men, of course) covertly positioned throughout the crowd to "protect the women" in case "anything happened". The anarchists in CRA - who have a bit of bad blood with the group since they disallow the distribution of *El Libertario* in El 23 - see them as no better than a mafia for performing the paramilitary functions of Chavismo. Interestingly, they claim that the MRT organizes occupations of derelict buildings and then collects rent from the squatters, thus finally giving the banks that own the property a way to collect revenue from it. Nevertheless, among many of the younger anarcho-punks and Venezuelans in general, they are idolized as heroes of the struggle, and it is without a doubt that they have mass community support.

I got in touch with the Tupamaros through a social worker who had been working in El 23 for years and was able to put me in contact with the heads of the movement. Although during the Fifth Republic they have branched out to become a national organization, their base still remains in Caracas, where I met Oswaldo Kanica and Jose Pinto - the MRT's President and General Secretary, respectively.

While I did not find Pinto to be particularly engaging, Kanica and I became fast friends after overcoming an initial mistrust. During my first interview with him inside the group's tiny offices, he began to ask me about RAAN before we had even had a chance to begin discussing his own organization. I was caught off guard, but realized that screening me was probably a necessity for a man in

ity of left-wing and liberal Chávez supporters have endeavored to do. The major reason for this is that the Tupamaros, or "Tupas" as they are often referred to, really don't fit into the nice prepackaged version of Bolivarianism that is being sold to the international left.

As the reader will recall, the dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown by a general strike and mutiny on January 23 in 1958, and in the process several modern housing developments around Miraflores Palace were occupied and held by poor and working class Venezuelans. By far the most famous of the barrios that would develop in these areas came to be known as *El 23 de Enero*, and became internationally famous as a bastion of revolutionary workers' power, an autonomous community that would again and again rally to the support of Chávez, most notably by providing the crowds that immediately surrounded the presidential palace during the failed coup of 2002.

In many of the officialized accounts, *El 23* is presented as a conscious community existing in a vacuum, completely united behind the government's Bolivarian project and, by sheer virtue of its historic tradition, magically giving birth to revolutionary movements on the president's doorstep. What these accounts totally fail to take into account is that after the failed revolution of 1958, *El 23* quickly developed into a drug-ridden slum like any other in the country; a violent place where even residents feared to go outside without the protection of local narco-traffickers, and open-air arms markets sold military grenades and C-4 like candy. The transition between this 23 de Enero and the one today, a radical, open, and safe community which has been lauded by everyone from *AdBusters* to the international Trotskyists as being at the "vanguard of the revolution", would not have been possible without the MRT. And for this reason, they are despised, ridiculed, or ignored by the opportunist groups who have no such claim to credibility.

The Tupas are that rarest of rarities in the world - a successful urban guerrilla group. They of course take their name from José Gabriel Condorcanqui, also known as Túpac Amaru II, who in 1780 led a surprisingly effective indigenous rebellion against Spanish forces in modern day Peru. Since then, his name has been taken up by guerrilla movements in Uruguay and Peru itself, all of which are seen by the MRT as belonging to the same anti-imperialist tendency as their own group. The Venezuelan Tupamaros came together around 1984 from an ideologically-diverse base of ex-guerrillas who shared the immediate aim of kicking the drug dealers out of *El 23*. In a 2003 interview with RAAN, autonomist historian George Katsiaficas described them as among "the best revolutionary organizations in the Americas [all of which] developed outside - or in opposition to the established left."

The clandestine MRT, wearing hoods to cover their faces, engaged in an armed campaign against both the narco-traffickers and police who supported them, eventually kicking both out the barrio and establishing a security cordon within which they quickly set about organizing the 300,000-strong community towards revolutionary consciousness and self-defense (*El 23*'s surrendered police station was turned into a community center). This activity gave the Tupamaros

the community have been quick to point out that for a government to even *recognize* them, to say nothing of offering them an - admittedly limited - control over their own land is totally unprecedented and should be taken up as the golden opportunity it is, while it lasts. Others have explained that even in those lands the tribes would be continuously under siege by the environmental contamination of the adjacent export mining activities, and that the total destruction of the surrounding area, its water supply and bio-diversity is far too high a price to pay.

For a variety of reasons the struggle of the indigenous people in the Sierra del Perijá has received startlingly little attention, even within Venezuela. To begin with, the extreme urban concentration of the national population (80% living on 1% of the land) means that vast expanses of the national territory are kept far from the eye of public politics, which at any rate is centered almost exclusively on and in Caracas. To some degree, this also explains how various Venezuelan governments and multinationals have been able to maintain ecologically destructive means of resource extraction without directly affecting or alerting any "significant" number of the populace; the Southeastern region of Guyana, for instance, makes up 40% of Venezuela's landmass but only one percent of the total population actually lives there, and those only in relatively few cities - there are *still* areas which have not yet been explored.

Additionally, the Bolivarian government has long been promoting a mythologized caricature of the nation's indigenous population, usually based on more well known, tokenized, or secluded populations such as the Yanomani, who stretch into Brazil. Through this outlook, indigenous peoples who live in developed areas of the country or wear "modern" clothing are almost totally disregarded simply as an impoverished, uneducated, inebriated, and *invisible* lumpen-proletariat - much like elsewhere in the world. Thus the Chávez government can play with the imagery of indigenous "rights" and especially "recognizing/paying tribute to indigenous heritage" without actually engaging in the daily reality of a good deal of the country's indigenous citizens. During one public speaking event in Caracas, I saw a local community leader explain his pride at being part of the Venezuelan majority's uniquely distinctive racial makeup by explaining, "we are neither whites, nor blacks, nor *Indios*; we are our own category." Such public discourse, coupled with the Bolivarian government's incessant propaganda campaigns glorifying indigenous resistance to colonialism and their cultures which have been "criminally eradicated", allows for the focus to be kept off the socio-cultural and economic realities faced by the originarian peoples that do in fact still reside within Venezuela.

To be sure, the rather ill-defined *Mision Guaicaipuro* has recently sprung up as the government's tool for intervention in these matters, but in many cases it has been used as a simple propaganda venture by which small schools with a limited mandate (generally, literacy programs) are set up and run by the state for a few months before being abandoned and left for the tribes to take over themselves (which of course, when it happens, is a good thing). Only recently is the government beginning to make moves on the issue again, no doubt as a way to

increase "solidarity" work within these regions in the hopes of potentially undermining community opposition to the exploitation of coal (in Spanish, *carbón*).

However, the biggest problems for the anti-carbón activists come (unsurprisingly) from the coal companies themselves. In Zulia, coal exploitation is coordinated by a firm known as Carbozulia, which is owned by PDVSA and controlled by Corpozulia, the umbrella in charge of all development projects in the state. The extent to which these interests are willing to go in order to secure foreign access to Venezuela's coal include publicly denying that there are any indigenous or other residents within the affected areas, and should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the dealings of similar corporations, "revolutionary" or otherwise.

## 8. CON EL PUEBLO TODO, CON EL PODER NADA

Corpozulia is headed up by Brig. General Carlos Martínez Mendoza, a prime example of the FAN's "officers in suits and ties" (or red shirts, depending on the photo opportunity) that Chávez has recruited in his ultra-militaristic campaign to reshuffle the national bourgeoisie in his own image. Mendoza was quoted in May of last year admitting that the construction of Puente Padilla over Lake Maracaibo was for the "exclusive benefit" of Colombian commerce into the country. More generally, he has put his authoritarian background to good use in combating the anti-carbón movement with a fear-mongering campaign matched only by the United States government's own "green scare". In addition, Corpozulia claims to have done extensive research into the projects that it is about to undertake, but as expected the investigatory commissions on the matter were stacked with Carbozulia partners against only 2 community organizers opposed to the development.

The anti-carbón movement is ostensibly led by indigenous activists, though a university professor named Lusbi Portillo - who coordinates the environmental group Homeo et Natura - is more or less in control of the contacts between Wayúu organizers and the movements in solidarity with them. Also involved are the groups Amigransa (Friends of the *Gran Sabana*) and Red Petrolera - Oilwatch Orinoco, which in 2005 published an important book, *Chevron: Right Hand of the Empire*. Also at the front lines in terms of publicizing the arguments against coal exploitation is the country's long-running green magazine *Era Ecológica*. These groups are involved primarily over environmental concerns, whereas Portillo himself is of the opinion that the anti-coal campaign cannot be successful unless it is able to tie up the immediate issue of indigenous and ecological survival with the greater neo-liberal scheme of IIRSA; to present a more comprehensive critique that takes into account the construction of Puerto Bolívar, among other factors. From a tactical standpoint, it seems the only way to transcend the disdain towards the *ecologismo del Norte* is by connecting the issue to broader concerns of sovereignty and the ultimate construction (or betrayal) of the "Socialism of the XXI Century". Additionally, the tribes are particularly opposed to turning anti-carbón into a "human rights" campaign with themselves at the center, since such a move would likely only

to work, I thought the turnout was actually pretty good, and was impressed by the amount of work the anarchists had done on painting large protest banners and preparing a variety of different informational flyers about the arrests, hundreds of which were handed out.

During my last weeks in Caracas, a number of important developments began to take place in the anarchist scene. The first was the creation of a brand new periodical named *Samizdat*, (a Russian word referring to anti-government literature passed out in Soviet times) which was an eclectic mix of different anarchist resource listings, histories, and articles printed on a single page of newsprint. *Samizdat*'s sensibilities seem to run more towards direct action, with the cover of the first issue calling on readers to "organize your rage". Interestingly, the zine comes with no contact information in an effort to de-emphasize the importance of organized political groups, but is known among anarchists as a publication "of the CNA". Regardless, I was impressed by the layout even if the content was mostly recycled anarchist tracts from the Internet, and hopefully it will take its place alongside *El Libertario* and some of the more well known anarcho-punk zines as an important source of anti-authoritarian propaganda.

Also around this time, the CA3 informed me that they were planning on splitting up as a group, as they saw little future potential in their activities. They had a couple film screening events planned over the next few months, and after those would be ceasing to organize independent actions under that name. However, all the members remained committed to anarchism and were hoping to focus more energy on the CNA, of which they were all members to begin with. Simultaneously, the *Cruz Negra* itself was undergoing some changes, with members making tentative plans to begin working directly on solidarity campaigns with non-anarchist prisoners in Venezuela, the big proposal being literacy initiatives. The CA3's film screenings would hopefully be raising the funds to get these projects off the ground.

Meanwhile, the CRA itself was going through an identity crisis. Due to an equal combination of the extra attention they have been receiving because of the Bolivarian Revolution and FSA, *El Libertario*'s growing influence as a point of reference for the entire South American movement, and the kind of critiques groups like CA3 have brought against it, the CRA has begun holding a series of meetings discussing the essential nature of the collective and if it would be appropriate to formalize the group, change structure in some way, or begin working on projects that have not been considered in the past. The final results of these discussions are still up in the air, and they may not actually lead to anything. What has become clear, however, is that in modern day Venezuela the anarchist movement needs to rethink its tactics and decide how they are going to more actively intervene in the processes shaping the country.

## 20. LOS TUPAMAROS

One might have thought it impossible to adequately understand the Venezuelan revolution without having first devoted some time towards a serious study of the Revolutionary Tupamaro Movement, (MRT) but that's just what the major-

began coming up to us and in a pretty confrontational manner, demanding who we were and who had given us permission to paint on that wall. The situation was tense for a minute, but was then defused surprisingly fast once we had made it clear that we were an autonomous collective holding a workshop, and had planned to consult with neighborhood residents before finalizing any design for the mural (at that point we hadn't even begun to draft it). Once this was clarified, the residents opened up to us and it became clear that their initial anger and strong reaction to our presence was based on what they had seen as the opportunistic use of their community for propaganda purposes by Chavista groups in the past.

"Just look at all this, look at how we're living," explained the most vocal member of the group, "they come in here, they set up a Barrio Adentro, they take some pictures, they put up some programs inside the school walls where we can't even go, and then they leave. They take pictures and then they leave." He motioned behind us to a tiny Barrio Adentro that had closed for the day, and the community center next to it that is always locked up except for a silk-screening workshop on Saturdays; nobody in the neighborhood had any idea who ran it or how they were supposed to get involved. The man continued, "they're not doing anything for the *chamitos*, and that's what we need. They have no sex education, no drug education, no art programs, they're just being forgotten."

Over the course of this discussion, we were able to make plans with the residents regarding how we were going to design the mural and - potentially - get a group of the neighborhood kids together to paint it. They seemed genuinely interested in this and were more than willing to help with these projects when it became clear that we were not interested in just occupying their wall for our own purposes. All in all it was a very eye-opening experience and gave me hope that, if more anarchists were able to unite with CA3's focus on immediate community involvement and organization, the movement in Caracas might have a chance of breaking out of its ideological ghetto in some very real ways.

The theme that kept coming up again and again during my involvement with CA3 was their total lack of funding. As an all-teenager collective, they were often scrambling to put money together for some of the most basic needs such as painting supplies, and usually running on a very shoestring budget. The CRA on the other hand receives a good number of international donations due to its visibility through CESL, but it is unlikely that those amount to anything very significant, or that they filter through in any way to more independent groups such as CA3.

The other common concern voiced by libertarian street activists I spoke to was that the anarchist movement was incredibly small, and they often had trouble figuring out projects that they could realistically work on. On March 6th, there was a joint CNA/RASH/CRA demonstration outside of the Spanish consulate in support of comrades in Barcelona who had been jailed on terrorism charges, which drew about 30 people - including a handful of internationals. Taking into account that the majority of the Redskins couldn't attend because they had

give the United States more fodder in its attacks against Chávez.

In response to these groups' attempts at raising awareness on this life-or-death issue, Corpozulia has gone on a propaganda offensive aimed at totally destroying the credibility of the environmental organizations and galvanizing Chavista support against those who would seek to derail the country's "revolutionary strategy" for modern development. It should come as no surprise that Corpozulia publishes its own newspaper *Carboinforma*, often featuring a cheerful cartoon character "Coalie", who tells kids about how great coal mining is and what wonders it will work for the nation. On the not-so-cute side, the Ministry of Energy and Mines has openly (and obviously, without substantiation) called Lusbi Portillo a "terrorist" in the pages of that publication. They are also quite taken to referring to any anti-coal sentiment as coming from a shadowy "*Mafia Verde*" (Green Mafia) supposedly funded by the CIA. This is serious.

Last year, Mendoza was able to turn an indigenous Earth Day march on Corpozulia's headquarters into a PR stunt by paying coal truckers and other government workers to turn out in a "completely spontaneous" pro-carbón counter-demonstration complete with police escort and professional sound equipment. These tactics are reminiscent of Chávez' own methods for conjuring mass rallies out of thin air in Caracas, including giving state employees a paid day off and free lunch to attend the event. Often, the authorities can bus in these recruits from out of town. In Corpozulia's case, the intent was to sow divisions between coal workers and the indigenous movement and cast the latter as *golpistas* trying to disrupt the nation's Revolutionary Process.

Venezuelans live under a siege mentality, and after the failed 2002 coup and subsequent economic sabotage campaigns, no one can possibly blame them. As I mentioned, the chief legacy of the *paro petrolero* has been to associate anyone who is opposed to the normal functioning of PDVSA with the coup plotters, and since there is not exactly a lack of precedent for US military interventions in the region, this game of loyalties can be played with high stakes and offers Chavismo an incredibly effective way to publicly denounce anyone who might criticize the way the energy industry is being run. The culture of defending PDVSA's "sovereignty" at all costs is hammered in continuously over the course of all Bolivarian propaganda, both through playing up fears of a Yankee invasion and the constant reminder that all of the Revolution's social programs (relatively inadequate as they are) are being provided by the oil giant, which was irreversibly "retaken" by the workers during the *paro* and is now considered to be "one" with the Venezuelan people...

Meanwhile, in the North we have only just begun to see a massive pro-carbón corporate advertising campaign aimed at promoting coal as a "clean, sustainable" energy alternative for the future. Considering what a wonderful supply of it they just locked down in Venezuela and Colombia, this should come as no surprise. And given that a Rutgers team in collaboration with researchers from the University of North Carolina has in the past month discovered a method for turning coal into diesel fuel, we should be prepared to see a worldwide surge in the amount of attention paid to coal mining, and hopefully a comparable rise in

the militancy of movements against it.

Fortunately, it is not only the corporate side of the issue that has been able to publish its views on the matter, though obviously theirs have had the broader distribution. The anti-carbón organizations and publications named above have all sought to keep a spotlight on the struggles of the indigenous peoples of Zulia, and in particular the only national anarchist periodical *El Libertario* has for years shown a single-minded determination to press for this issue as the most important point of intervention for anti-authoritarians in the country's current social struggles. This is important, since only a truly radical anti-capitalist critique is capable of exposing IIRSA and the wider issue, which is the imposition of a foreign mode of consumption upon the people of Zulia and Venezuela as a whole.

In Maracaibo, the anarchists have been active through the Union of Alternative Collectives, (UCA) a more or less broad coalition of groups working to stop local expansion in the coal industry, and the genocide and destruction it would entail. The indigenous movement has already tried everything from mass propaganda to street art and mural campaigns to make their struggle known, and through all this the anarchists have remained their most reliable foot soldiers. To a degree this has been a shaky marriage, as the tribes consider themselves to be Chavistas and Lusbi Portillo in particular has remained untrusting of an alliance with libertarian groups despite the fact that only they are willing or capable of expanding on his systemic critique against IIRSA and the energy industry. From the side of the anarchists, working with Chavistas has been a *major* ideological leap that probably wouldn't have occurred had this not been an indigenous movement over indigenous land, in which the tribes involved must of course be given the ultimate overall tactical command of the campaign. The Wayuú, Yukpa, Barí, and Japreria are at this stage advancing the strategy of trying to use the new Constitution to stop the open pit mining, calling themselves Chavistas not only out of genuine affinity for the Bolivarian Revolution but also with the calculation that they will have more success in identifying themselves as *also* being "part of the process", albeit the *cost of it*.

For North Americans, awareness of the anti-carbón movement began with Christian Guerrero's article "What's so Revolutionary About Venezuelan Coal?" in the July-August 2005 issue of the Earth First! Journal (to their credit, this publication was also on top of reporting on the Pémon struggles in 2002). The article went a long way in proposing a global alliance between the Zulia campaign and other anti-coal activists who are often combating the same companies in different parts of the world, and this will inevitably form the backbone of any substantial international solidarity movement to combat what Chávez intends for the people of the Sierra del Perijá.

And yet ironically enough, our best tool for consciousness-raising and organization against IIRSA was commissioned by the Venezuelan state itself. Two years ago, Italian filmmakers Elisabetta Andreoli, Gabriele Muzio, Sara Muzio, and Max Paugh were approached by the National Council of Culture (CONAC) to film a documentary covering the Venezuelan oil industry and

self-motivated anarcho-punks from whom I saw no activity other than a film screening at a high school that was cancelled at the last minute. Truthfully, the only importance of RACHE was in the fact that a recent split over differences in strategy had given birth to the CA3 (*Colectivo Autonomo Amanecer Anarquista* - Autonomous Collective for an Anarchist Tomorrow).

The CA3 began recently as an effort between some three or four Caracas anarcho-punks, a Colombian comrade, and two anarchists traveling from Spain. These internationals have since left, leaving the collective sapped of its original energy and more or less in limbo. This should serve as a stark warning to the new waves of "revolutionary tourists" from the North who might be planning to come down into Venezuela to participate in anarchist projects: these groups are *not* charity cases to be built up over summer vacation and then discarded once you get your plane ticket back home. International anarchists traveling to do solidarity work in Venezuela should do so only with a thorough understanding of what the situation is for the movement down there, and an awareness that asks, "Are my actions going to help build this in the long term, or are they just for my own self-satisfaction in the short?"

Regardless, the CA3 (who in more than just name, reminded me of our Direct Action Anti-Authoritarians [DAAA] collective in California) is a group committed to direct action and community involvement that, while ideologically in agreement with the positions of the CRA, feels that the *Comisión* has no long-term vision for anti-authoritarian intervention in the Bolivarian Revolution, and are hopelessly disconnected from the street. The CA3 split from RACHE over a determination to get out into the community and at least do *something*, regardless of whether the people they work with are Chavistas or not. The group's focus is immensely practical, and their small size allows for a coordination based directly on direct action, without a need for any weekly official meetings. During my stay in Caracas, I would participate with the CA3 in two events. The first was a joint RAAN-CA3 Parkour workshop that will be discussed in the chapter on network intervention, and the second was one of their own workshops on street mural painting.

The mural workshop was attended by only four people, including myself and the aforementioned "secretary" of RASH, and turned out to be an extremely interesting experience. The CA3 crew has been involved in mural paintings in a number of communities throughout Caracas, and considers the tactic to be one of their most effective since it allows them to work side by side with Chavista groups such as Alexis Vive on street art that usually deals with mutually "neutral" issues such as anti-(foreign)militarism. This particular workshop had been meant only as an introduction to mural preparation, and was held in the Zanjón barrio near the residence of one of CA3's founders. The first half of our work was focused on clearing badly mixed cement from a wall behind a primary school, which turned out to take a good deal of physical effort. Once the wall was relatively smooth, we began whitewashing it with a base coat, which was then going to be the final step for that day.

Before we were too far into the whitewashing, a few residents of the barrio

debate on and between social movements at the FSM, a representative of the government was asked for his position on the national anarchist tendency. His response? That they are *golpistas* receiving money from the CIA. And all that the Chavistas have to do is repeat that enough times for it to become true in people's minds. Do you sense a trend? In their world, anyone who is critical of Chávez is working for the CIA.

Outside of the CRA there are only a few anarchist groups in Caracas, by far the most relevant of which is the *Cruz Negra Anarquista* (Anarchist Black Cross, CNA - known in some parts of the world as the Anarchist Black Crescent). This informal international prisoner support and prison abolition network is probably *the* single most important achievement of the modern global anarchist tendency, and in the capital of Venezuela provides the greatest overlap between CRA and the anarcho-punks (I am unaware of any other Black Cross groups elsewhere in the country). The Venezuelan CNA has been around for three years and is an interesting group because there are actually no anarchist political or social prisoners in the country at the time of this writing. As a result the collective is sometimes unsure of its immediate purpose, but through benefit shows has managed to do some really important work including raising funds for those recently arrested in the United States on charges of belonging to the Earth Liberation Front.

The *Cruz Negra* is also responsible for a full page of prisoner-related content in every issue of *El Libertario*, which is usually an interesting mix of international news, solidarity alerts, and recent statistics about prisons in Venezuela. All in all, it is one of the best features of the newspaper. Unfortunately, the CNA has very little experience with letter-writing campaigns and for the most part international mail is too expensive to make possible regular correspondence with anarchist prisoners.

Outside the dedicated focus of the CRA and CNA, the anarchists of Venezuela, along with everyone else in the country, have found themselves living in extremely turbulent times where traditional alliances have been tested and in many ways broken. There had of course always been the anarcho-punks who went to shows and wore circle-A patches yet never actually contributed to the movement, but now under the Bolivarian Government a lot of these kids are even becoming "anarcho-Chavistas" due to the preponderance of officialist propaganda and the (potentially quite rational) assertion that if it's not Chávez, it's somebody worse. The majority of these kids have had no ideological or practical introduction to anarchist thought other than through the liner notes of their favorite punk bands, and many are uniting under "left" Bolivarian personalities such as Roland Denis, or joining more militant-looking Leninist groups such as the Alexis Vive Collective. Although for the purposes of this text I am dismissing the importance of the anarcho-Chavistas, it is worth keeping them in mind if one is to have a complete picture of the situation on the ground.

Other than the CRA, there are to my knowledge only two "all purpose" anarchist collectives with a street presence in Caracas. The first of these is the RACHE Collective, ("Rache" being German for "Vengeance") a tiny group of

Bolivarian Process. The filmmakers were already well known for their works *Another Way is Possible... in Venezuela*, (2002) *How Bush Won the Elections (in Ecuador)*, (2003) and *Bolivia is Not for Sale* (2004). Undoubtedly, what CONAC had in mind was another fluffy, feelgood "left-wing" (and of course, unreservedly pro-Chávez) documentary along the lines of *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, which could be easily exported towards the growth of an international "Venezuelan Solidarity" movement that Chavismo has long been carefully grooming in its own image.

Unfortunately for them, the final product, titled *Nuestro Petróleo y Otros Cuentos* (Our Oil and Other Tales) turned out to be a blistering exposé of the social realities behind blind petro-populism. Released in February of 2005, "Our Oil" was first privately screened for a group of government ministers, after which CONAC cut all funding (which had been 50% of the production costs) and promotional deals, a functional blacklisting that left the directors in serious financial trouble. This film has only recently been subtitled in English for showing at the Alternative Social Forum in Caracas this past January, and an active campaign to screen and distribute it throughout North America is the first step for any international anarchist intervention on the Venezuelan issue, as will be discussed below.

*Nuestro Petróleo* begins as an exploration of the social and ecological effects of the Venezuelan energy industry over the past decades, and then branches out to directly tackle several of the most pressing issues in the country today. The Wayúu mobilizations against coal are paid significant attention, as is the severe underutilization of Venezuela's own homegrown process for clean(er) fuel, Orimulsion (control over which has largely passed to the Chinese). Interviews with PDVSA employees reveal the corruption of the labor bureaucracy and that after a few months of self-management during the *paro*, old managers were reinstated and the same hierarchies whereby the workers have no say in the actual development of the national energy industry were put back into place. In a particularly poignant scene, a Corpozulia executive who had been speaking of coal as a "sustainable" energy solution is asked by someone behind the camera, "I don't understand in what sense this is a sustainable development?" The executive then hesitates momentarily before admitting that he actually has no idea. The film also pays close attention to the involvement of Chevron-Texaco as a fundamental partner to the "revolutionary" state, regardless of its current and historical involvement in more overtly-violent imperialism elsewhere. The importance of this film as an introductory tool in building the movement against IIRSA cannot be exaggerated.

On the ground however, anti-carbón activists are facing an uphill battle. On March 29 of last year, over one thousand indigenous protestors and their allies traveled to Caracas to march on Miraflores palace and get direct answers from Chávez about the final destruction of ancestral lands that had always been denied them in the first place. Unfortunately, at the time Chávez was meeting with Argentine ex-soccer star-turned-cokehead-turned-political opportunist Diego Maradona, and the mobilization was prevented from reaching Miraflores

by the National Guard. For Chávez (who constantly plays up the fact that his own grandmother was half-native) to deny these people audience in favor of a photo opportunity with Maradona strikes me as being nothing less than extremely fucked-up.

Meanwhile, the situation is already coming to a head as the indigenous populations run out of both time and options for legal protest. During my stay in the country we received word that the National Guard has begun indiscriminately killing Yukpa tribesmen and burning their shelters in Zulia (to my knowledge this has yet to be confirmed). Angela González, a well-known Wayuú organizer for the Zulia campaign declared in an interview with *El Libertario* that "we can live without coal, but not without water". In her words, "[These people] are not going to leave, the army will have to remove us. Chávez says, 'damn the military that shoots its own people' and then what? There will be blood spilled here. The Wayuú are ready to die for these lands". She concludes, "We're going to die here anyway because of the coal, so [why not march to] Miraflores to die there? They'll have to kill us all."

## 9. MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN VENEZUELA

Up until this point, I have been providing the reader with a broad overview of Venezuelan history and some of the less well-known details of the Bolivarian regime. The second part of this text will be reflecting on my own travels in the country and the dialogues I participated in with a variety of different political and cultural groups. I'm hoping that by having introduced the context in such a way, my analysis of the on-the-ground situation will be made much more informative. To some extent I have tried to present the following accounts in a chronologically accurate manner, excepting where that would have made it impossible to effectively present the information in question. Towards these ends I have in some cases sacrificed the "narrational flow" of the text from chapter to chapter, and I hope that the reader will bear with me. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, what follows is nothing more than my own personal take on what I saw and learned.

So that it will not be necessary to repeat myself throughout the following pages, I would also like to say that almost without exception, everyone I spoke to was incredibly friendly, engaging, and interested in my own views as well as sharing their own. This goes beyond traditional Latin hospitality and is indicative of the fact that the Bolivarian Revolution is at all times seen as a societal dialogue in which it is necessary for ordinary people to continuously rearticulate their vision of what is happening around them and what role they have to play in it. The best way to describe this is as Narco News journalist Al Giordano did during an interview with the San Francisco Independent Media Center in late 2002: by using the autonomist Marxist term "self-valorization". Self-valorization refers to the working class' psychological - and eventually, economic - evolution towards conceiving of themselves as "[their] own subject and no longer the object of the ruling elite". Giordano compared the mood of the Venezuelan masses after the overturning of the April coup directly to the self-valorization he had witnessed at Zapatista communities in Chiapas. This

Aside from putting together *El Libertario* and functioning as a clearinghouse of information and contacts for the country, the CRA is mainly involved in two other projects (not counting of course, the FSA). The first is the organization and coordination of the *Jornadas Anarchopunk*, (sometimes called simply *Jornadas Anarquistas* or more recently, *Libertarias*) which are incredibly important "conferences" where the national and international movement has a chance to congregate and share ideas. These have also been held in several cities other than Caracas. South American anarcho-punks formed a continental federation (though not in the sense the word is generally used in the North) in 2002, and in Brazil the *Jornadas* have for years been used as functional alternative forums to the institutionalized Porto Alegre FSM.

The other project that the CRA is responsible for is the *Centro de Estudios Sociales Libertarios* (Center for Libertarian Social Studies, CESL) in the heart of Caracas. The CESL (or as I grew fond of calling it, "Cecile") opened on November 14th, 2004 and due to a lack of available staff is only open on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:30 to 6:00, and Saturdays during the day. During its early days, the Center was open almost all week and two members of the CRA lived right next door, but they have since been evicted. The donated personal collections of CNT veterans who have now passed away accounts for the bulk of the Center's over 2,000 (often rare) titles, making it one of the best anarchist libraries on the continent. They also have a rather extensive section of international anarchist publications that have been donated from abroad. Although there is a small shelf with a few t-shirts, patches, books, and videos for sale, the CESL is really more of an autonomous space than a business.

Unfortunately, a reduction in its hours of operation is not the only setback that the Center has suffered. By practically any standard, the neighborhood in which the infoshop is located is a "*sector popular*", directly at the edge of where the planned city meets the actual barrio. In one corner of the space, a stack of tiny children's chairs harkens back to a time not so long ago when the children of the neighborhood would use CESL as their own space. At first it had been an overwhelming and unexpected development, but collective members soon learned to adapt the Center to the community's needs, helping the children with issues such as nutrition, parental abuse, and homework - one shelf still carries a large collection of textbooks on biology, mathematics, and other subjects. For a while, the children even managed to organize themselves into a forum that would discuss issues such as what film they wanted to watch at the space that afternoon, and the anarchist project seemed on the verge of real integration into the community.

However, this was not to last. Some parents in the neighborhood began to attack the anarchists as "Satanists" and prohibit their children from visiting the space. Although the Center survived this battle, to a large degree it lost the participation of the local kids and has not yet fully recovered from the stigma that comes with such accusations in a largely Catholic nation. The anarchists are thus to a large degree isolated from the population, and have been directly slandered by the Bolivarian government on many occasions. During a public

The big theme is paternalism, and to what extent the government is able to buy off the social movements by making clients of them. Because the Bolivarian Revolution is a fundamentally *political* (rather than post-, extra-, or anti-political) project, its advances come down to the question of elections, and so the social movements can be neutralized in anticipation if Chávez promises that this or that issue will be taken care of soon, but first "one more election" is needed to consolidate power. Ultimately, only the image and not the results will be important, much like Freddy Bernal's redshirts. Meanwhile, the country will continue to import over half of its food and as time goes by the old capitalists are finding more and more ways to get along with the new ones. And like the populism of the past, this one will not be able to survive any substantial change in world oil prices. The anarchists theorize that the national currency will be devalued this year so as to give the impression that the government is spending "more" on social welfare.

Frankly, out of everyone I spoke to it was the anarchists who had the most developed and systematic critique of the capitalist system and understood that - whether he realizes it or not - the role Chávez has played is to reform representative democracy and give a new face to precarious institutions. Many of his "revolutionary" initiatives do not surpass the policies even of the Caldera government, which was already toying with European-style "co-management" via the *Programa de Participación Laboral*.

Chávez' is seen as a hopelessly confused, personalized, and authoritarian project. The roots of his ideology come from Peronist/Nasserist populism with influences of 70's leftism and even the extreme-right wing. During an interview with Méndez, I asked if the Bolivarian Government did not at least create an open space for the discussion of revolutionary ideas, and could it therefore be seen as at least a step in the right direction? His reply was that this was what was said about Peronism in Argentina, and as we saw there, those baited hopes turned out to be completely unfounded. It is on this point that I find myself in a potential disagreement with the editorial line of *El Libertario*. My experiences with the left-wing governments of South America, specifically Lula in Brazil, has been that the outright betrayal of popular aspirations tends to lead to the social movements taking on more radical critiques of electoral politics as a whole. It remains to be seen if this will be the case in Venezuela, but there are certainly some promising indications.

In the meantime, the folks at *El Libertario* are facing an uphill battle, and openly admit that they have had an extremely difficult time getting their analysis out into the public - both nationally and internationally - due to the predominance of the Chavista version of events. The newspaper's website is probably one of the only Latin American anarchist pages with an extensive section in English, which the CRA is extremely proud of but also admits is only in response to the increased attention that Venezuela has been receiving in the past few years. There are currently no plans to create an Independent Media Center (IMC) in Venezuela, as there would be no way to do it openly without the project quickly becoming simply another mouthpiece for Chavismo.

shift in mass-consciousness and perception can only be experienced, not described, and is confined neither to Chavismo nor to Venezuela itself, but is representative of the enormous global upheavals through which we are living in this epoch - the most advanced expressions of which are at this point concentrated to some degree in South America.

I must be clear: despite my adamant opposition to the idea of Chávez as an infallible revolutionary leader and even the structure of the state itself, it is clear that Chavismo and Bolivarian Socialism are only indicative of a deeper process at work. There *is* a **revolution** going on in Venezuela, and anyone with eyes should be able to see it. Anyone with a heart would be able to sense it. The Bolivarian Revolution is simply the (political/institutional) reaction to the Venezuelan [and developing World] revolution, not the other way around.

## 10. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I arrived in Caracas several days before the kickoff of the sixth ("Polycentric") World Social Forum (WSF) and second Social Forum of the Americas in order to get an idea of how the capital looked before the grand spectacle began. My first impressions were of a city more or less like any other in South America - bustling activity in all directions, ample litter and other pollution, and very little overt indication of any revolution whatsoever. Various businesses function as usual and billboards still dot the skyline, which itself is inevitably dominated by a few large banking firms and, in the distance, the endless hillside barrios that surround this mountain city - proof that despite everything the old oligarchy complains about, fundamental change is still a long way off.

Socialist and Chavista graffiti prevails over any traditional tags, and multiple government-funded murals recalling that decrepit celebration from the days of Stalinism, the World Festival of Students and Youth (held in Caracas last summer) provided frequent warnings against an impending US invasion; before long these would be outshone by new paintings commemorating the WSF. Practically every underpass is painted with the enormous faces of Simón Bolívar and other independence heroes, or propaganda from the city government proclaiming that "With you, Caracas has decided to change" (an anti-litter campaign) or "Con Chávez, un solo gobierno" (which simply means that the city mayor is in alliance with Chávez, but also carries the double meaning of "only one government"). On some of the main streets, I saw literally hundreds of stencils declaring, "Chávez *is* the people."

Large banners positioned throughout the city depict Chávez as often as possible, usually alongside slogans such as "the people march forward with their *comandante*," or quotes from his televised surrender in 1992 like, "Before all the Venezuelan people, I accept responsibility for this military Bolivarian movement".

As in many countries outside the US, even mainstream political parties engage in massive postering and wheatpaste campaigns around campaign time. The newest ones I saw were from the elections to the National Assembly late last year, where an opposition boycott was used to mask more widespread voter disillusionment and the various Chavista parties (collectively referred to as

"officialist") gained full control of congress. Almost all of these posters, which generally belonged to candidates of the MVR, PCV, PODEMOS, PPT, UVE, (Union of Electoral Victors, the symbol of which is designed to recall that of the MVR) or some combination of the above, serve as interesting lessons in the county's politics. Because the officialist parties can rarely agree on anything except supporting Chávez, and the voters themselves are only interested in Chávez, many of the posters and accompanying political campaigns are designed in such a way as to reinforce the idea that the candidate in question is "more Chavista" than anyone else. It's a running joke that in order to get elected, all you need is a photo of yourself shaking Chávez' hand, but it's actually the truth. One candidate in particular had a larger picture of Chávez on his poster than he did of himself! My favorite campaign slogan? "Guarantee of Chavismo and Revolution".

This massive opportunism is at the heart of the electoral aspect of Bolivarianism and the creation of a new "Boli-bourgeoisie", and has yet to be significantly challenged by Chávez due to the fact that without it, he would have no political support base.

## 11. REVOLUCIÓN EN LA REVOLUCIÓN

My first encounter with an organized revolutionary group in Caracas happened practically by accident - I was walking down Bolívar Avenue on my first day there, trying to get my bearings in this new city when I noticed a sort of encampment on the sidewalk of a major intersection, complete with a small PA blaring traditional folk music. The huge, hand-painted banners that hung from chain link fences around the large group cried for a "revolution within the revolution", and finding myself quite well disposed to such a sentiment, I walked over to see what they were all about.

In the Bolivarian vernacular, "revolution in the revolution" refers to that constant re-articulation of the process, and an awareness that it is perpetually undergoing change and finding new ways to overcome the limits imposed on it by bourgeois democracy. Leninists have tended to use it in describing a "profundization" of Bolivarian Socialism through the election of more "radical" (that is, Bolshevik) leaders, or the ascendance of such personalities within bodies like the MVR and trade unions. For most Venezuelans however, "revolution in the revolution" means nothing less than pushing for the total dismantling of the present economy and political classes, "Chavistas" or otherwise.

The group who's banners I had been reading turned out to be the Gonzalo Loreno Collective of the *Partido Nuestramerica*, from the Movement 13 April. They were a "nomad" collective, meaning an organized body comprised of the street vendors who make up at least half of the total Venezuelan workforce. These informal economists sell everything from sweets to cheap electronics to nail clippers to Puma knockoff clothing to plastic balls to pirated DVDs, are notoriously hard to "unionize", and can be found practically everywhere in the country. To some extent the government has tried to reorganize them into certain "Bolivarian Markets", but they continue to be particularly concentrated in

of glossy Euro-anarchist publications like several groups in the US. Nonetheless due to one of the collective's members having a proficiency in graphic design, the layouts and artwork are usually top-notch and often quite humorous - sometimes using Star Wars or other pop culture themes to get the point across (Chávez was depicted as Darth Vader on one cover, with a legion of stormtroopers behind him under the headline, "No Army is Revolutionary").

The genius of *El Libertario* is that it finds ways of using statistics from NGOs and the government itself against Chávez, and so usually packs a good deal of information in its pages rather than just theoretical wanderings. In addition, a massive network has sprung up around the newspaper and as a result sometimes upwards of half the content is submitted by contacts in Argentina or e-mailed in from various anarcho-punks throughout Venezuela. Because of this, one gets the sense of *El Libertario* as being a very inclusive publication, and as I heard first hand from a few different anarchists, the CRA itself is wonderful with helping individuals get involved and representing different parts of the libertarian tendency. Surprisingly, the bimonthly anarchist periodical is one of the only consistent left-wing publications in the country; officialism has relatively few.

The CRA seemed for the most part to be run by males - which is not to say that there are not many active *compañeras* in the movement, but that actual influence and power relations apparently remain dominated by men. There have of course been many informal talks and even a CRA-sponsored forum regarding the ideas of anarcho-feminism, but as of yet no independent group has been organized along these lines and all the women I spoke to generally agreed that the scene was too small for such a thing to be of any use at the present time.

The fundamental critiques leveled against Chavismo in the pages of *El Libertario* fall into two categories, economic and social. As I have already demonstrated, the actions of the Chávez regime have only managed to secure Venezuela as an uncritical participant in the insanity of the world energy market, which of course as far as capital is concerned, is the only thing the country is good for. The social critique relates to the lost autonomy of the mass movements against Caldera that have since been absorbed into the Bolivarian process, and the idea that this has been a qualitative regression for the potential of those movements.

What is difficult for many to understand is that Chávez comes from the death of traditional politics, and the tendency towards state-capitalism is a necessary side-affect of the total failure of IMF policies. For the CRA, Chávez has not progressed beyond the populist social welfare schemes of the 60's and 70's, and yet in the aftermath of the Caracazo his policies may even appear revolutionary. Barrio Adentro for instance, is for the anarchists only a nice face to cover up the actual activities of the government, which is creating a "Boli-bourgeoisie" out of the state oil revenue in exactly the same manner as the original capitalist class was consolidated over 80 years ago. But since Chávez cannot draw from the traditional political and ruling classes, he uses the military instead.

International Workers' Association, (AIT/IWA) though not officially "members" of it. The participants in the CRA are pretty evenly split between older (or simply more dedicated) anarcho-punks, and what you might call the "suit and tie anarchists" (not all of whom actually wear suits and ties) - generally the more experienced middle-aged syndicalists or libertarians whose chief defining characteristic is that they have no personal cultural connection with anarcho-punk. This latter group includes constitutional lawyer Humberto Decarli, author of *El Mito Democrático de las Fuerzas Armadas Venezolanas* (The Democratic Myth of the Venezuelan Armed Forces) and Nelson Méndez, a professor of engineering who - via *El Libertario* - may be the most internationally-recognized name in Venezuelan anarchism.

Unlike comparable tendencies in many other Latin American countries, the CRA owes relatively little of its origins to the influence of Spanish Civil War veterans (specifically, those who fought for the CNT-FAI) who fled to the region after the victory of the Franco dictatorship in 1939. If there has been a significant foreign influence on the group, it most likely has come from Argentine, rather than European, immigrants. Nevertheless at least two CNT vets have participated in the *Comisión*. The first is Andres Cerrano, who is undoubtedly the oldest anarchist in Caracas and remains energetically involved in the activities of the CRA. I must say that meeting him was an inspiration, and certainly something I am proud of having had the chance to do. The other ex-CNT anarchist was named Emilio Tesoro, and passed away in 2003. Although the library of CESL has been named after him, in the years leading up to his death Emilio and the CRA suffered a split when he decided to support Chávez on the merits of the comandante's "anti-imperialism". This has more or less been the only division within the CRA itself over the specific issues raised by the Bolivarian Revolution, but opinions within the anarchist movement as a whole are much more varied than the anti-Chávez editorials of *El Libertario* would lead one to believe.

The CRA began in the early 90's when Méndez and a few others came together to produce the zine *Correios A*. The anarchist movement in Venezuela is really too small to sustain the competition of various sects within it, so instead you tend to see a few different tendencies uniting around a general concept (a strategy that North Americans should try to learn from). A little over ten years ago, the group began putting out *El Libertario*, which at this point has generated a massive international network and become probably one of the most important anarchist publications in the world. Nelson Méndez provided me with five years of back issues to assist in my research, and I feel like I got a pretty good idea of what the newspaper is all about.

*El Libertario* in its current format is six newsprint pages on a double fold, meaning 11 pages of content and a front and back cover. Earlier in its life, it read more like a traditional newspaper with lead articles directly on the front page, but as time went by and more contributors signed on, it reached a more aesthetically impressive layout that includes both front and back covers. One thing is for certain, and that is that *El Libertario* is not trying to ape the formats

the main areas of urban traffic. While often times this type of vocation can prove to be a self-contained and "apolitical" family affair, the Gonzalo Loreno Collective seemed to be a particularly diverse community group of people who traveled and sold their wares together - though in practice it was only the older men who spoke to me or offered their political viewpoints, often while keeping an eye on their own merchandise or children out on the sidewalk.

Before delving deeper into the collective's ideology, I think it bears repeating: At least half of the national proletariat survives through the informal economy. It is important to keep in mind this fact of Venezuela's class composition, as it is the key to understanding why one cannot speak of a truly national mass workers' organization in the vanguardist sense (not that you can anywhere else, either). The much-vaunted officialist UNT, (National Union of Workers) which was set up in April of 2003 in response to the collaboration of the old CTV (Confederation of Workers of Venezuela) with the bosses' lockout, is certainly doing the bulk of the labor organizing in the country, but even their efforts are limited in scope and have stalled over infighting, negotiations dealing with how exactly to make the union as participative as possible, and a lack of follow-through on the militant tactics such as factory occupations that they were supposedly to be advancing.

The Loreno Collective members were incredibly articulate in their views on the present state of Venezuelan society and I found myself in full agreement with them. We ended up discussing various practical and theoretical questions for hours, including an on-the-spot translation of the Red & Anarchist Action Network's *Principles & Direction*, which they were very interested in and reacted very positively to. Overall I left with the feeling that if their opinions were at all representative of the Venezuelan masses, the revolution was in very good hands. Their own literature, a bare-bones series of photocopied pages calling for a "bloc of permanent and revindicative social struggles" demonstrated an incredibly advanced consciousness that - as usual - surpasses that of most self-righteous hobbyist activists.

The "nomads" self-identify as lumpen-proletariat, which in the Venezuelan context is a totally unique demographic without a classically identifiable political culture. The lumpen define themselves through the nomadic way of life and method of economy creation by and for the excluded classes (self-valorization through dual power). They point out that the lumpen will ultimately direct the politics of the street because it is they who have continually focused their actions towards the negation of a state in which they have no part; the lumpen "builds in the street a counter state, a 'non-state' that opposes the state which negates it". They are quick to point out that during the December 2002 *paro petrolero*, the economy survived wherever the lumpen were taking active part. They were also openly hostile to what they called the *derecha roja* - (red fascists) the Leninists and Social Democratic politicians who have recast themselves as revolutionaries under Chávez' banner of Bolivarian Socialism. The collective mocked the suburb-like "dignified housing" construction developments of the government and proposed a general redistribution of land and

resources with which they could build their own dignified housing, but, "for real, without filters, without the revolting guises of the *derecha roja*". "Unlike the enlightened vanguards and those who would wish to be professional revolutionaries," they explained, "we fundamentally dedicate ourselves to sharing and constructing conceptual or methodological tools with the people of these nomadic communities to which we belong". Encouragingly, their literature also mentioned the need to build solidarity with miners, "who via the politics of the state are displacing [the lumpen and campesinos] simultaneously from their lands and ways of life."

The group's direct focus on the concept of *dual power*, or sustainable and combative alternative (anti-)institutions, was inspiring. Their organizing was based directly in their own everyday experiences and put an emphasis on building resources for the future. In many ways, they brought new inspiration to the original influences in RAAN, and I believe that our tendency would do well to learn from them. For instance, their organization's "immediate themes" were defined as: Develop the political-ideological struggle for the formation of a nomadic and communitarian social subject; Organize autonomous projects with the methods of production already in existence; Build social intelligence networks; Define the politics of the street and the character of this tactical and strategic alliance.

## 12. EL CENTRO ENDÓGENO FABRICIO OJEDA

Those who visits Venezuela with any type of political agenda in these times, and particularly those who embark on any number of "revolutionary tourism" experiences offered by the government and its allied social movements for the benefit of international leftist groups in awe of Chávez, can tell you that the first things to see are the *Misiones*, the various social programs extended into the barrio by the government. Although I was hardly in Venezuela to study the government's side of the revolution, I figured it would be a positive experience to see these projects first hand, and was able to tag along with a group of German activists on a guided tour of a "nucleo endogeno", (internal nucleus) which is essentially a shopping mall/factory/cultural center comprised of various *Misiones*. Although I would come across the *Misiones* repeatedly during my trip, this was my single most informative encounter.

The Nucleo de Desarrollo Endógeno "Fabricio Ojeda" is a bright new complex built over what had been an abandoned PDVSA petrol post, but was reclaimed under the "new PDVSA" for "social growth and integration". Although it serves as a good example of the extent to which unutilized resources can be put to the benefit of the community given a shift in consciousness, it is undoubtedly also a perfect example of how PDVSA is being elevated to the untouchable level of national savior - "integration" is meant specifically as integration between the surrounding community (a typical Caracas barrio) and the state oil company. On all signs and banners, PDVSA and the Bolivarian Government are celebrated almost as if they were two completely separate entities.

The center's namesake Fabricio Ojeda was the president of the Patriotic Junta that took power after the 23 de Enero 1958, but became a guerrilla leader in the

of various types who usually have little of the time, stability, or interest necessary to organizing (anti-)political projects of any kind. As a result they remain mostly anonymous and do not greatly affect the wider revolutionary situation, though many of them participate in mobilizations when given the chance. The impression I got was that a good deal of them also saw many positive things coming out of the Chávez government, and maintained positions of critical support. Although this demographic has a low visibility, (especially to international observers) they are important to keep in mind if one is looking to get a complete picture of the Venezuelan movement.

The physical base of recruits for the anarchist tendency is, at least on the national scale, found in the anarcho-punk counterculture. Although Venezuela has no appreciable history of explicitly-anarchist direct action and the scene is certainly less militant than others in Chile or Brazil for instance, anarcho-punk, organized or unorganized, is undoubtedly the most consolidated and publicly visible source of anarchist ideas in the country. Those who have studied South American anarcho-punk should know that as a scene it has remained much more united and stylistically orthodox than North American variations, and as a result has had a good amount of success in establishing itself as a culture apart from the wider punk genre. For instance, anarcho-punks in Venezuela tend to be straightedge, or against the use of drugs, while the larger subculture suffers from an almost chronic abuse of cocaine and other intoxicants. There have in fact been incidents of violence where anarcho-punks were attacked by "traditional" punks over these issues, and to a certain degree there is a mutual contempt between the "conscious" anarchos and the street/crust punks - I even saw one wearing a backpatch of the *El Libertario* banner, which has been crossed out! However, this pronounced division can also have a number of positive effects. For instance, sexual assault and open misogyny seems to be (at least from what I could gather from various sources) virtually nonexistent within the anarcho-punk scene, though of course it remains endemic, characteristic, and definitive within the wider national/global culture.

The most important contemporary anarcho-punk bands from Venezuela are *A Patia No* and *Los Dolares*, both of which have relocated to Germany and Spain, respectively. However, both remain in constant touch with the Venezuelan movement and continue to visit, and they have also been responsible for a number of different international benefit albums and shows to provide funding for anarchist projects in their home country. Venezuelan anarcho-punks are often organized around traditional issues such as animal liberation, but at least to some degree appear only as the numbers behind the more detailed theoretical lines of "historical" anarchism being developed by the CRA through *El Libertario*.

The *Comisión de Relaciones Anarquistas* defines itself as an affinity group and is a relatively open body that does not have any stipulations (such as paying dues) regarding the idea of "official" membership. Nevertheless the collective is clearly influenced primarily by anarcho-syndicalism, and they consider themselves to be friends of the Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores -

against the Revolution."

## 19. NOTES ON THE ANARCHIST MOVEMENT IN CARACAS

As the name of this chapter suggests, my analysis of the Venezuelan anarchist movement will be largely confined to my experiences with the representatives of that movement in Caracas. On one hand, even this should be sufficient to give a general overview of what's going on, since practically all national politics are centered in Caracas, and at least in terms of propaganda and theoretical development if not practical action, so are the anarchists.

Nevertheless I would like to take time out to explicitly condemn the ignorant and condescending attitudes of many Northern anarchists towards the movement in Venezuela. Generally speaking, the international tendency has heard of Venezuelan anarchism primarily through *El Libertario* and its parent organization, the Commission for Anarchist Relationships (CRA). While *El Libertario* is unquestionably the best point of reference for the movement, its editorial line is quite pre-determined (possibly even simplistic at times) and certainly not fully representative of all Venezuelan anarchists. More importantly, focus on the CRA has created the perception of the Venezuelan anarcho as a small, isolated group within Caracas (and some scattered individuals elsewhere) whose primary work is the maintenance of the *Centro de Estudios Sociales Libertarios* (CESL) infoshop. This approach results in a hopelessly tokenized image of the Venezuelan anarchists as a "little brother" to the Northern movement, and does not take into account the hundreds of less-visible anarchist and anarcho-punk projects being undertaken all throughout the country. If there is one point I must stress about anarchism in Venezuela, it is that it is as widespread and diverse a philosophy and movement as it is anywhere else, and that focusing only on the activities of our comrades in the CRA results in the marginalizing of whole communities in struggle.

The best example of anarchist activity outside of the capital is the UCA in Maracaibo, whose work on the Zulia campaign should be recognized as at least as important, if not moreso, than anything the CRA is up to. In addition to the CESL in Caracas, there is also the *Ateneo de Contracultura y Estudios Acratas "La Libertaria"* in Biscucuy, which opened on May 2nd 2005 on the second floor of a campesino marketplace, and has a library named after surrealist painter Mauro Mejías. In Valencia there exists a private house that is used as an *ateneo*, (infoshop) and one visiting comrade from Barquisimeto expressed plans to turn her patio into an anarchist library in the near future. Of course one also has to take into account the various DIY anarcho-punk music and literature distros spread throughout the country, as these are also important indicators of the extent to which the anarchists have managed to put a movement together.

Like the anti-statist tendency in any other part of the world, it is extremely difficult to give a coherent overview of the Venezuelan sections due to the fact that they are not necessarily organized, in contact with each other, or even moving in the same direction. A huge part, possibly even the majority, of self-described "anarchists" in Venezuela are traveling street artisans and performers

FALN after becoming disillusioned with the government. In 1966 Ojeda was captured and shot by the FAN. It is important to note that in pre-Bolivarian Venezuela and practically anywhere else in the world, this is not the kind of person who would be having public projects named after them. Thus, the (selective) unearthing and commemoration of Venezuela's rich history of struggle has been one of the true benefits of the Fifth Republic.

The Nucleo is only one out of 120 of different sizes and types spread throughout the country. As mentioned above, the idea is essentially a grouping of all government programs into one massive cultural center that can eventually become a starting point for urban renewal/economic gentrification. This one was rather large - two completed buildings, another open but under partial construction, and fourteen left to build. The nucleus would soon feature a restaurant and center for disability treatment to compliment its Mercal market, Barrio Adentro, outdoor athletic facilities, and two Vuelvan Caras factories. The design of the place itself was open and friendly despite being a walled-in complex with a soldier on guard at the front gate, and during our visit we saw a few people apparently using the property as more or less of a public park. On the basketball courts, local schoolchildren engaged in various cardio vascular exercises. To be sure, the shiny new center was in stark contrast to the impoverished neighborhoods surrounding it.

We received a guided tour of the facility from a PDVSA "social relations" employee who explained that the nucleo's purpose was to "develop each person to their own potential" by providing the community with jobs and resources on credit from PDVSA. Despite this focus, she explained that cultural activities and music made up the most important aspects of the center.

Each nucleo is supposedly based on several local production cooperatives - in this case, up to thirty - around whom the center's functioning revolves. These cooperatives were not preexisting, and so were in fact put into place and designed by the project, and not vice-versa. In the case of Mision Vuelvan Caras, for instance, the cooperatives are not unionized because, in the words of the PDVSA guide, "they own their means of production and therefore are their own bosses". However, everything they own was originally fronted to them by the company, and so what inevitably results is the creation of a total client business that would not be able to survive in the actual market and is therefore utilized primarily as a PR tool by PDVSA.

*Mision Vuelvan Caras* was implemented after the *paro* as a way to promote the education of the populace in skilled labor and foster an economy independent of the oil industry. In reality because the startup capital for these small businesses is provided by PDVSA, they always start off in debt to the company. The guide was open in explaining that the government's vision of *cogestion* (co-management) did not mean worker's management, but state-capitalism. One of the Germans asked the guide if the cooperatives were "autonomous". She looked surprised at the word but replied, "yes of course, but they must be in accord with the revolutionary process". She cheerfully explained that the nucleo's directors at PDVSA definitely "take into account what the coopera-

tives want in making decisions".

The two plants running in the nucleo were relatively small, probably not employing more than two hundred people at a time. At one end of the complex was a textiles factory, where an all-female workforce worked under Bolivarian banners at several rows of sewing machines. From what I saw, they were producing work overalls and red silkscreened Hugo Chávez shirts - both of which were undoubtedly going towards guaranteed markets within the Bolivarian state itself. Across the way was another warehouse filled with a relatively small shoe-making industry based around 25 industrial machines provided by PDVSA. The shoes were uniformly black leather, and of a pretty decent quality. A good number of them would also be bought by the state, but the majority was bound for Cuba.

The Barrio Adentro clinic in the nucleo must have been one of the program's "level 2" specialized centers because it was enormous, complete with an outdoor pharmacy. It is hard to overstate the importance for Venezuelans, particularly residents of the barrio, to suddenly have immediate access to some form of healthcare like this. It's unprecedented.

The last storefront we saw was Mercal, the heavily-subsidized state supermarket chain. Not only is Mercal a way to assist communities, it's also a method by which the state can secure control over certain parts of the economy by ensuring markets for certain preferred distributors. The whole process remains explicitly capitalist, with a focus on increasing visible consumption (which has gone up) rather than nutrition (which has gone down). Mercal has in many ways also deepened Venezuela's dependence on imported food, but with that said, the prices were significantly lower than any other grocery store I encountered and I'm not going to play around like I wouldn't be useful to have a Mercal down the street from me right now.

### 13. THE SIXTH WORLD SOCIAL FORUM

The World Social Forum (FSM) began in 2001 as a response to the high-level World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The FSM was to provide a week-long media counterattack to neo-liberalism beyond the mass protests that had been regularly springing up outside meetings of the WTO, IMF, World Bank, G8, and other symbols of corporate globalization by giving the protest movements a forum in which to explore their own ideas in more detail. While the anti-globalization protests have arguably lost a lot of steam, the FSM has been getting bigger with each passing year - undoubtedly due to the rise of "leftist" governments in South America.

Technically the FSM doesn't "do" anything, it's just a massive convergence where protest movements and political parties - usually of a Social Democratic nature - can come together and talk a lot. Like many such gatherings, it also attracts a certain number of neo-hippies interested primarily in the communal atmosphere provided by such a large leftist forum.

The first three annual FSMs were held in Porto Alegre, Brazil due to the fact that the (now ruling) Worker's Party (PT) had taken control of the city government and was looking for a way to promote itself to the outside world. The

will not belong to the people, it will belong to the Chavistas. The people can hold revolutionary space, but the bureaucrats cannot. Whenever they take something like [that space] it becomes a plaything for their propaganda - they repaint it, fix it up, and then it just sits in the neighborhood and gets used by nobody except themselves. What we need is to organize the community to take back that building and run it in their own interests."

Sooner than I would have expected, I got to see what she meant. For a while we had been walking alongside several of the "abandoned" riverside public parks that had become home to the multitudes of Valencia's street children who are stereotypically either drug addicted, involved in criminal activity, or both. These parks stretched for miles alongside some of the main roads, totally uncared for and brown with debris after years of neglect. At the edge of one however, we came across another park - fenced-in and with high gates - that was obviously being tediously maintained.

Although the park was closed on that day, Alix managed to convince the armed guards to give us a tour for my benefit, though not without first making several emphasized references to her own "Bolivarian" credentials. Inside the gates, the well-manicured lawns burned bright green under synchronized sprinkler systems placed right next to row upon row of freshly planted flowers. Compared to the dusty reality we had just entered out of, this park seemed nothing less than a magical oasis. Some of the highlights found within were a community center for local children (closed at the time, of course) and a statue of the enslaved maid who had raised Simón Bolívar and, according to the officialist legend, instilled in him his hatred of oppression.

The guards at the park were pretty friendly, looking smart in new uniforms and carrying copies of Chávez' *Palabras Anti-Imperialistas* in their jackets. But considering the state of the community immediately surrounding the park, it was clear that it was nothing more than exactly what Alix had described - a shiny propaganda victory for the personal use of the new ruling class, the "red bureaucracy".

I left Valencia with a wealth of experience in dealing directly with the institutions of the Bolivarian Government and some amazing insights into how community organizations are able to take advantage of certain programs while at the same time being ultimately disenfranchised by the Bolivarian process, which in many places is only creating a new ruling class to put in place of the old. A day before my return to Caracas, Alix received word through the president of the Association that the state government had accepted several of the proposals contained in their Artisan's Manifesto. The problem was, they hadn't consulted or notified the Association in any way - the artists had found out about this accidentally when someone browsing the local government's website saw that their own words had been posted there. As we pondered the meaning of this, I asked Alix what would happen if the state really did mean to implement these cultural initiatives over the heads of the communities that had proposed them?

"Then I have to make my *own* revolution in the revolution - if not a revolution

tourism industry. To date, Alix's (unsanctioned) projects in La Cumaca have included two huge murals depicting Arawaco culture, a concrete statue of an indigenous man, and another unfinished one of a woman with a small child. These pieces of "autonomous street art" come together to greatly improve the appearance of the town, and all were created with the active participation of local residents. Reclaiming public space is Alix's primary concern at the moment, and she hopes that in pushing for the awareness and defense of indigenous culture, independent communities and Venezuelans as a whole can then begin to redefine their own - a prerequisite for any profound revolutionary changes in the future.

On February 7th I was invited along with members of the Association to Valencia's Museum of Culture, where we were to give presentations on our experiences at the FSM. The crowd I spoke to included not only the director of the Museum, but the state's Minister of Culture as well. In my talk I again focused on the necessity of breaking with capitalist relations of production; that a "worker-run" business is still a business, and that until it is able to break with exploitation by the transnationals, Venezuela will never be able to advance beyond capitalism.

Alix and the other Artisans explained to me that being able to present their experiences at the Museum and collaborate with that institution on various projects was totally unprecedented, and prior to the Bolivarian Revolution, ordinary street artists such as themselves never would have had access to such a space, much less the Minister of Culture himself. This opening up of resources for public use has been one of the defining highlights of the Fifth Republic, but of course like everything else is only there for those who know how to look for it. Nevertheless it was clear that to the Association, the "openness" of the new government was a qualitative advance in struggle that had to be seized upon and consolidated. This was a constant theme in my discussions with all kinds of people in the country - that the population is willing to be relatively patient with Chávez and the revolution's slow rate of advance because there have already been so many changes in everyday life as compared to the old way, that many people can't even believe that it's even gotten *this* far!

That is of course not to say that Alix and the artisans were uncritical of the Chávez bureaucracy - in fact, far from it. They have had first-hand experience with seeing people who had been living in small houses two years ago suddenly living in large ones and driving SUVs now because they had put on a red shirt and gotten in with the government. After leaving the Museum of Culture, I pointed out a rather dilapidated-looking "Center for the Visual Arts" and asked why that particular space was not open for use by the artisans. Alix replied, "Because that space is still under the control of [directed by] the opposition - you can just see how they've taken care of it... The thing is, I could take that space tomorrow if I wanted. I could just call up the redshirts and we could occupy that thing in a day."

I asked why they didn't just do that and she replied, "Because then that space

fourth Forum took place in Mumbai, India before returning to Porto Alegre for its fifth iteration. Now in its sixth year, the FSM has split into a "polycentric" model and was held both in Karachi and Caracas. Unsurprisingly, it was the Venezuelan forum that seemed to receive the most interest.

I attended the 2003 FSM in Porto Alegre right after the presidential victory of Lula and the PT in Brazil, and in many cases my analysis of the Caracas event will be based off contrasting it with the experiences I had then. At that time, Lula was the "shining star" of the institutional left and Hugo Chávez, while drawing a large crowd, did not have much to offer other than red banners and vague populist rhetoric. One must remember that it was only at the 2005 FSM that Chávez even announced that Venezuela was on a "socialist" path. More importantly, 2003 was the first year that we really began to see the focus of the FSM get taken off the independent social movements and transferred to the leftist politicians. At the time this could be blamed primarily on Lula and the PT, but by 2006 the spotlight had shifted, making the Forum an essential tool for the Chávez government's own self-promotion. I am not going to pretend that the FSM was ever anything but reformist, but there has definitely been a progressive and significant shift in its focus towards and collusion with the state.

I was absorbed into the Caracas FSM almost by accident, several days before the event was to even officially begin. Walking past the city's *Parque Central* (which is actually not a park at all) with my scruffy appearance and traveler's backpack, I was called to by an extremely tall, dreadlocked university student who turned out to be coordinating the registration and translation services for the Forum on that day. I figured that he would know the best way to start getting in touch with other Venezuelan groups, so I followed Enrique (as his name turned out to be) onto a bus that took us to a large stadium outside of Caracas where the registration was taking place. There are at least a few different levels of registration for the FSM, depending on if your organization wants to be officially represented or has workshops scheduled or whatever, but I was only interested in the "credentials" that would allow me access to the international campsite, which ended up costing just a little more than a US dollar.

After I was registered, we hopped back on the bus and were taken even further outside of Caracas to a national park known as "Vinicio Adames". This area was a trash dump for decades, and a number of national civic organizations had been working around the clock to turn it into a campsite for the upcoming Forum. The location was supposedly chosen in order to provide the safest possible environment for the international attendees, although the park itself is adjacent to several violent barrios from which one could clearly make out the sounds of gunfire at night (the entire park had to be surrounded by FAN troops for protection). The location of this campsite - a ten-minute bus ride outside of Caracas and all the venues where FSM events would be taking place - was utterly ridiculous, but since I had already paid my dollar, it was well after dark, and I had no tent of my own, I gladly accepted the hospitality of the volunteers I had bused in with, who at that point seemed to be the only people there.

The translators were almost without exception Venezuelan high school or college students with some background in languages, and had their own campsite set up at the top of a hill next to the army encampment, which was illuminated by floodlights throughout the night. They were buzzing with excitement about the upcoming Forum, and in particular the pact they had made between themselves to maintain a monopoly over local marijuana sources in order to make a hefty profit off the gringos on vacation. As it turned out, Vinicio Adames was a logistical nightmare and had suffered from drainage problems that were not insignificant considering that we were up in the mountains and caught rain just about every night, (which really killed the mood, by the way) and the fact that it was so removed from Caracas meant that I ended up only spending a couple days there before switching to another campsite. Yet during my short stay, I had the chance to witness some interesting dynamics.

The infrastructure of the campsite was still under construction at the time I arrived, which for the most part meant the setting up of showers and potable water supplies by the FAN. The direct participation of the military in the organization of the Forum was my first indication that I was going to see some fundamental differences between this experience and that of Porto Alegre. The large number of (uniformed, but of course unarmed) soldiers running around in the park and building the showers made it clear that the Bolivarian government was deeply involved in the running of the Forum. I would later hear that some non-governmental organizations were given the opportunity to coordinate logistics, but were ultimately unprepared to deal with the massive number of people that the FSM was expecting to draw with its Bolivarian context. One opinion voiced was that the government purposefully engineered this failure so as to later justify the massive involvement of the FAN in the Forum's execution.

I used this opportunity to speak to as many of the rank-and-file soldiers as I could, but was severely disillusioned when not a single one out of perhaps 25 wanted to talk about anything other than drugs or women, and the latter only in a particularly disrespectful and sexist manner. This was not at all what I expected to see from a military that was ostensibly undergoing "revolutionary transformation" and integration with the Venezuelan people. The soldiers I spoke to were all from poor families and had signed up for their two years of service for economic reasons; few of them took the possibility of war with the United States very seriously, and surprisingly none of them even had anything particularly positive to say about Chávez.

One must contrast this with the spectacle projected by Chávez and his generals of a "democratic" military in the process of redefining its role in society. It would seem that this image is only for public consumption, and any actual ideological instruction or debate on the revolution's course is primarily reserved for the officer classes. True, Chávez loves to give televised speeches regarding the nature of the army and its evolution, but from my experience it seems that the military itself remains a hopelessly vertical structure in which the ordinary recruits are excluded from this dialogue and have no direct say in

tion is an ultra-corrupt façade for the benefit of mafiaos alcalde Vicenzo Scarano, whose family has a monopoly over the local construction, cement, and fireworks industries. It is also probably the only city in the country where you can find the mayor's office inside of a shopping mall. Through his control over construction and cement, Scarano has secured the tacit support of the local (and similarly corrupt) Chavistas by offering them discounts for their own development projects while pushing through a number of his own - usually massive and totally unnecessary urban sprawl developments that in some cases require portions of the mountains surrounding the town to be leveled, and of course in the process make him rich.

Valencia, like elsewhere in the country, is the setting for increasingly-militant student demonstrations that have led to burning tire roadblocks and clashes with the police. The organized student movement, which at this point is largely controlled by the officialist JCV and JVR (youth wing of the MVR) have for the first time found themselves in a position of relative power, and are using the advantage to push their demands. A couple weeks into my stay, the visiting mayor of Chacao was kidnapped and held hostage for two hours by student organizations opposed to letting him speak at the university.

In the middle of all this mess, Alix lives in a two-room house that over fourteen years she herself built from brick, concrete, and wood on a small piece of property left by her mother. To say that this house looks a little out of place in San Diego is an understatement. There, Alix and a variable number of local Artisans live, eat, and work communally. Though most of the members of the Association were making a living selling their works on the street, Alix had managed to land a job or two producing commemorative pieces for festivals organized by the state government, which provided a more steady income for the house. Her son David, a 24-year-old electrician and fellow revolutionary, lives and works nearby. David had just recently learned to read through Mision Ribas, and is now receiving a free secondary education via Mision Sucre. Both he and his mother are ex-military.

Although it was her work for the Association that made up the majority of Alix's organizing, she was also involved in some autonomous personal projects that I found to be much more interesting. Just a short bus or truck ride outside of Valencia is the mountain community of *La Cumaca*, a relatively poor barrio that began as an attempt at protecting the area's indigenous petroglyphs from modern development, but was now actually engulfing them under its own random expansion. The petroglyphs, chiseled into stone centuries ago by the now extinct Arawaco tribes, (one of Venezuela's over 50 unique indigenous cultures) make for one of the most enduring symbols of the area's originarian heritage.

Around La Cumaca, Alix is well known by most of the community and receives greetings from many open doors and passers by. Her work here, done entirely on her own time and without any sort of outside funding, revolves around organizing the community in defense of its indigenous heritage and in the process possibly even securing it a small claim to the area's prosperous

The Artisans, as much as any other revolutionary organization in the country, recognize the primary importance of the *revolucion en la revolucion*. You certainly don't need to have been reading Marx your whole life to understand that moving beyond capitalist society means leveling the state along with all past forms of representative politics, and the creation of new relationships between people based on mutual aid rather than exploitation.

Of course, that is a "stage" that the revolution has not yet reached, and in the meantime struggles for more basic needs and long term sustainability through consciousness-building is necessary. One night at our campsite we were faced with the dilemma of not having enough food to go around, as a delegation from Peru had just arrived and our communal resources had been stretched tight. Alix had a burst of inspiration in remembering that not only had Chávez decreed that free showers, electricity, and water would be made available to those attending the Forum, but that *food was to be, as well*. Of course, Freddy Bernal's redshirts would have been the ones responsible for following through on that, but since almost nobody was aware of Chávez' wishes, they had been able to get away with making almost no preparations towards distributing food throughout the encampment.

With Alix in the lead, a small number of us marched to the police post where the redshirts were headquartered and demanded that whatever food they had been handed over in accordance with President Chávez' orders. After surprisingly little back-and-forth, we walked away with some 20 small bottles of water, a similar amount of boxed juices and some oranges, and about thirty prepackaged pasta and meatball meals, which were then distributed throughout the camp. It was clear from the way things played out that the redshirts would have been totally unprepared to deliver had the entire encampment gotten together to demand food.

As I reflected in some degree of wonder at our success at getting the meals, Alix approached me and explained, "*That* is the revolution in the revolution. Whenever Chávez says something, the people have to get the consciousness and organize for it themselves so that the government is forced to comply with the president's strategy."

## 18. MY EXPERIENCES IN VALENCIA

As the FSM came to a close, I was invited by the Artisans to travel with them back to Valencia and see what the situation was like there. Since I was only a week into my trip and had been committed to exploring other communities outside of Caracas, I gladly accepted their offer and ended up spending the next month with the group.

Valencia ended up being a good place to study some of the contradictions of the Bolivarian Revolution. In the middle-class suburb of San Diego, pro-Chávez graffiti from the Stalinist Young "Communist" organization (JCV) battles that of the opposition, whose "Cubanos Fuera" (Cubans out!) tags are rapidly turned into "Viva Cubanos, Fuera USA!" San Diego is the only opposition-controlled town in the state, owing to a 30-party alliance by the opposition that desperately came together to beat the Chavistas. The resulting administra-

its actual implementation. Hence the FAN, like the rest of the Bolivarian Revolution, will remain "democratic" only so long as those in power agree to call it that.

It is worth noting that a brigade of Caracas firefighters was also on hand to help with any safety concerns, refilling gas stoves, or water supply issues. This small group was pretty well organized and I would say much more conscious of the revolutionary process than the soldiers, including in their willingness to talk about it. Overall I got the impression that everyone really appreciated their having been there.

Things finally got interesting once more internationals began arriving at the park. In the first few days, it seemed like a disproportionately large number of them had arrived from Colombia and especially French Canada, although those numbers would eventually be dwarfed by Brazilian and Venezuelan nationals in attendance. In Vinicio Adames I got the distinct impression of the FSM as a plaything for gringo nonprofit "Peace & Justice" NGOs and the student movements of South America. In addition, the isolation of the campsite created a very strange dynamic in which the bright-eyed activists had decided to call for a "General Assembly" of the campers, which would decide how "we" were going to run the site and what "we could make of it".

This idea was ludicrous to begin with, because whatever the "General Assembly" decided, it was still going to have to work with the Venezuelan state, which at no point was ambiguous in showing that it was running the show. Up in "Vinicio", where any type of infrastructure had to be imported from Caracas, the campsite assemblies took on a decidedly reactionary and privileged nature. I attended the first meeting, but got seriously bored very quickly and left with a number of others. The main force behind the organization was clearly coming from "professional" activists with lots of experience in holding such gatherings. I do not wish to give the impression that it was only Northerners who were involved in the efforts of the Assembly, but with few exceptions it certainly seemed that way.

Up in the mountains as we were, the Assembly was only able to come up with two real proposals for the "running" of "our own" campsite: one related to food, and the other to trash. Both initiatives ended up as total failures, but not before the activists had also wasted an entire day's worth of their own labor in carefully arranging fallen leaves on the ground so as to approximate some sort of "path" through the campsite. It then took only about half an hour for this tedious creation to be trampled underfoot and lost in the mud.

The handling of the trash issue was definitely born of a first-world sensibility - you might even say *ecologismo del Norte* - and revolved around setting up various recycling and compost points throughout the campsite to replace the single trash barrels put in place by the organizers. This was from the very beginning a shortsighted venture based only in the activists' own need to make themselves feel more at home, as Venezuela has no recycling program to speak of and therefore would have no use for neatly arranged piles of paper, glass, metal, etc. no matter how many hours the activists spent digging through the

trash in order to sort them out. In the end, it seemed that the only useful separations to make in the trash were for organic matter and tin, since by total luck somebody had met a local man who collected the latter for some type of redemption at who-knows-where.

The "food" working group had only slightly more luck in actually getting something accomplished. The meal situation at Vinicios was that the state had contracted some 15-20 cooperatives to set up shop under a number of pavilions around the park and sell food - usually in the form of traditional Venezuelan meals - to the campers. This aspect was not exceptionally out of line with what I had experienced in Porto Alegre. The prices were not particularly outrageous, but the food itself was generally of a pre-prepared character, with little variety and not much in the way of the fresh fruits and vegetables that a good number of the campers, being vegetarian, were looking for. Even the prepared meals in little aluminum containers that the government was providing to its translators (and those fortunate enough to have gotten in with them) always contained meat. Because of its isolation, the state and its associates had been able to create a monopoly over services in the park, and were running the campsite almost like a carnival.

The solution to this state of affairs was a system by which a small group would travel to Caracas each day and buy a good amount of nutritious food from the street vendors there, who of course were selling it for much less than the cooperatives in the park. The food would then be collectively prepared and cooked at the campsite, (usually to the effect of a Food Not Bombs-ish mix of vegetables, greens, and rice) and sold to the campers at less than \$1 a plate, which allowed those who had done the shopping to get back their money and do it again the next day.

Honestly I thought that on the whole this was handled pretty well and I certainly did enjoy a couple different cheap and delicious meals courtesy of the food collective, but it was never meant to last. For starters, this system was never able to feed more than perhaps 35-50 people a night, which ended up meaning that it became a good way for the General Assembly to feed itself and those who knew about the meals, but not an actual alternative to the state-controlled food supply. More importantly as the day of the Forum's opening drew closer, more and more cooperatives began setting up shop in the park, eventually taking over the last public grill and pavilion where the kitchen and mess had been organized. To my knowledge this resulted in some degree of friction between the activists and the campsite organizers, but I didn't stick around to find out because the official opening of the Forum would mean that other housing opportunities were opening up within Caracas itself, and so at that point I left Vinicio Adames as quickly as the bus would carry me. Although I never went back to verify, I heard from various sources that it was not long before everyone else left, too.

As much from the point of view of the activist General Assembly as from that of the Venezuelan state, the encampment at Vinicio Adames was a total failure and I can only ask, what the hell were they thinking?

thinking is totally strategic, you'll see - he has this whole thing all planned out. For instance a lot of people criticize him for having given all that money to [literacy programs in] Bolivia, but they don't understand the international complexity of this issue. We know there can't be revolution in just one country, because it won't survive. Yes it would have been good to spend that money here in Venezuela, but we have to think about the long-term. Things are complex, and our thinking is realistic. We are ready for anything. Mentally, I mean."

Spending time with the artisans, I gained crucial insight into the social base of Bolivarianism and in particular the fact that respect for Chávez among the Venezuelan people does not extend into blind faith, particularly not when his bureaucracy is involved. Almost without exception, the members of the Artists' Association had never read Marx, Kropotkin, or any other comparable writings, and were proceeding with their own organizational and philosophical expressions of the revolution based primarily in what their instincts tell them would be the best way to attain freedom. For this reason, the FSM was an incredibly important point of contact for them and thousands of others who for the first time were able to have direct discussions with the proponents of various radical movements and schools of thought from around the world. In this sense we can definitely say that the FSM accomplished much more than simply solidifying and glorifying Chávez' grip on power.

The Association was particularly interested in the autonomist ideas advanced by the Red & Anarchist Action Network, and every night at the encampment became an endless dialogue on the points of solidarity between our movements and the relevancy of anti-authoritarian critiques and horizontal organizing to the Venezuelan situation. After having been there for a few days, I came up with the cheesy mantra *Solo una cultura autogestionada puede decolonizar la historia* - "Only autonomous culture can decolonize history" - as a way of showing support for the group's immediate aim: cultural sovereignty. Alix took up these words with a passion and before we knew it, there was a freshly painted banner bearing the slogan hung alongside the Venezuelan and anarchist flags. This made for one of the more interesting looking campsites in the park, and drew a lot of attention over the course of the Forum.

The FSM was of course extensively covered by both national and international media, and as Alix's group was a "Bolivarian" one with not only a flashy campsite but a mandate directly from their state legislature, she was interviewed several times each day by various television and radio programs about the work of their association. In many cases I was asked to participate in these interviews so as to give an international perspective on the Forum and RAAN's involvement, which culminated in an interview for satellite station Telesur (Chávez' answer to CNN, roughly comparable to Al-Jazeera in terms of potential significance) on January 26th, where I explained that any revolution would be doomed to failure if it proved unable or unwilling to break ties with capitalist models of production, consumption, and the multinational entities that enable it.

of "patria o muerte" is similarly confused, and to a degree we must expect this since the concept of *patria* has no exact English equivalent. Nevertheless the specific use of "fatherland" (particularly as opposed to say, "motherland") as a substitute is clearly meant to give the impression of a fascist or even just nationalist ideology, whereas in truth the term encompasses an emotional element that, like the legacy of Che Guevara, cannot be adequately translated. *Patria* is culture, pride, community, family origin, sovereignty, and the very struggle itself. Particularly when studying the Bolivarian Revolution, one must remember the words of Simón Bolívar: "Mi patria es América".

I am not trying to cloud the issue or absolve the Chávez regime's propaganda of any ulterior motives; it is unquestionable that the slogan "patria o muerte" is being manipulated by the state to create a culture of nationalist fervor in support of the Bolivarian Government, but what is truly important is what these ideas mean to everyday Venezuelans, and in the case of *patria*, it can only be linked to that same idea of self-valorization, a collective project for the reclaiming of one's own identity. Another of my new comrades, a younger artisan named Alexander, was emotional in explaining to me, "...before, people didn't know anything about Venezuela. They would say, 'oh, Venezuela, yes yes Amazonas and Caracas.' But now they know that there is so much more than that here; there is an entire population, a whole people and culture here who feel, for once, *like a part of history*."

A good deal of this emotion is, of course, focused against the empire. As Alix put it, "This is the first time that somebody here is really just saying, 'Hey USA! *Suck my dick!*'"

Having said that, she is quick to step back and reflect that of course many mistakes have been made, and massive contradictions remain within the process itself, but at least for the moment this feels to her like a government and a people who have stood to their feet in order to be heard. The "Bolivarian Revolution" is seen as a consciousness-creating machine that will eventually make itself obsolete, a transition point towards a future where the proletariat will have the organizational and psychological culture necessary to break the capitalist system of production and begin "social communism".

The general (and generative) theme I most often encountered with Alix's group was the idea of *buscando cambio real*, or "seeking *real* change". There is a very high degree of awareness regarding the extent to which a total change in the political system is necessary, but like Chávez himself they recognize the process as one that cannot happen overnight, and in the meantime everything will not be perfect. They hold the same uncritical views as Chávez regarding the strategic alliance with Cuba: "They have their own unique process that they are going through," but they insist that Venezuela's is much different.

At least within the Association's camp, there was a very pragmatic approach to the revolution with an emphasis on consolidating the ideological victories that have been won over capitalism in the recent period. Argelia, another activist from Valencia, shed some light on the revolution's long-term strategy: "You have to understand about Chávez, he is a military man just like any other. His

## 14. PARQUE CAOBOS

Once the FSM was about to officially begin, it became possible to set up camp inside the relatively large Caobos Park in the center of Caracas. The park is notoriously dangerous at night, and it had been considered folly to sleep there before enough Forum-goers had arrived for a new encampment to begin. In Caobos I began to see a Forum that more closely resembled the one I had experienced in Porto Alegre - a massive convergence of international "leftists" and radicals concentrated in a central park that, at least in some areas, becomes a prototype for different forms of communal living and dialogue.

The events of the FSM are spread throughout different venues in the city, primarily the Universities and a couple public buildings. Hundreds of workshops by an alphabet soup of international groups with different agendas, music and cultural events, and a few talks by more high-profile personalities make up the "official" activity of the Forum, but since 2003 it has always been my assertion that the *real* forum, the only useful thing that happens at the FSM, is the massive gathering of and discussion between everyday personalities in the encampment. It is far too complex of a process to describe accurately, save for the fact that it inevitably has a profound effect on all those who take part, as anyone who has participated in such a large experiment in intentional (if temporary) community can attest. By far the most positively affected were the individual Venezuelans I spoke to, who were beyond excited to suddenly have direct contact with representatives of so many different movements and ideologies from around the world, and were anxious to learn what they could from the more "experienced" radicals and see which of those lessons could be applied to the revolutionary situation in which they are living. My hat goes off to the Zapatista delegation, which held two nights of open talks regarding their 6th Declaration and so-called "Other Campaign" directly in the encampment itself rather than as events scheduled outside of it. This made the talks not only more accessible to a large number of people, but really brought home the underutilized potential of the FSM campsite as an autonomous forum unto itself.

As for the rest of the official Forum, I did not attend many events because my primary concern was to learn what I could directly from the personal discussions I was having with Venezuelans on a day-to-day basis. I will say that the music concerts organized by the state were usually pretty interesting, with a refreshing mix of genres that was responded to very positively by the crowds. Certain groups, such as the Cuban delegation or that of the (Maoist) "Communist" Party of Brazil had a jump on propaganda or connections to the Chávez government, and were able to make themselves much more visible than they actually should have been.

The FSM workshops were, by almost all accounts, very badly coordinated and executed similarly, which led to such a rash of cancellations, confusing room changes, and re-scheduling that rumors began to circulate that counter-revolutionaries in the bureaucracy had been purposefully sabotaging the events so as to make Chávez look bad in his hour of glory. The Brazilian *Colectivo Critica Radical*, (Radical Critique Collective) a group of middle-aged anti-state

Marxists, had been planning on holding four different events, but all were either cancelled or put in different venues at the last minute. Nevertheless they still managed to organize - for the first time in Venezuela - twin screenings of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* at both the FSM and Alternative Social Forum (which will be discussed shortly).

In Venezuela the local governments are broken up into various *alcaldias*, which are run at the municipal and metropolitan levels and controlled with a relative degree of autonomy by *alcaldes*, or mayors. Most of these *alcaldes* are pretty shamelessly self-promoting, and perhaps none more so than Freddy Bernal, a longtime Chavista and one of the few politicians who can also get away with rocking a red beret on stage. Caobos Park falls under Bernal's jurisdiction, so during the forum every single trash can in the park had his name on it and so did the uniforms used by his army of redshirts, or city employees. The redshirts are used by the *alcaldes* to publicize the revolution and make it look like there are always a large number of government workers running around and rebuilding society. In practice this often means hiring hundreds of them to engage in useless public works tasks such as meticulously sweeping the city streets free of fallen leaves, thus providing the ever-present illusion that something is getting done.

During the FSM, Freddy Bernal's redshirts assisted in trash collection and some of the infrastructure setup, but otherwise their main job was to be a constant reminder that the Bolivarian Government has tons of people working for it. Besides just always remaining visible, this meant guarding the state's supply of tables, chairs, and readymade meals that were kept inside of a converted mounted police outpost for the duration of the Forum. The reason I mention the redshirts is that at some point during the week, the small Palestinian delegation (which had a pavilion inside the park) was made to carry over 100 heavy metal chairs from the police post to the spot where they were to have their presentation, and not a single one of the city employees lifted a finger to help them. Myself and two other Venezuelan comrades had to offer our assistance in order for them to set up their forum on time, and in thanks they invited me to come speak about RAAN and foreign perceptions of Israeli apartheid at the event.

But in terms of shameless self-promotion, Freddy Bernal had absolutely nothing on Chávez, for whom the FSM was a key way to spread his message of Bolivarian Revolution to the international leftist community. The degree to which the government was involved in determining the public dialogue and image of the FSM was unlike anything I'd experienced before. What was undoubtedly an absurd amount of money was spent on creating the largest spectacle possible, an all-enveloping celebration of "the process"... or in other words, of Hugo Chávez himself. A huge stretch of Bolívar Avenue was shut off to motor traffic and turned into something of a Bolivarian exposition, with each of the government's Misiones and programs getting a large, slickly-produced display explaining each of the Revolution's triumphant victories. The presentation was frankly quite effective, providing the illusion of a society boldly

Artisans the year before, a "cultural" pole that drew up an 11-point *Manifiesto Artesanal del Estado Carabobo* relating to the immediate demands of the organized artist's movement. The manifesto's proposals related to the need for Venezuela to reclaim its cultural sovereignty, and that this could only be accomplished through direct community participation in artistic development and local control over the tourism industry. For Alix and those like her, being a street artisan often means a direct confrontation with the state, which views them as riffraff and as a general rule does not allow for such wares as theirs to be sold on the street except in very specific areas, usually away from the public eye. The crux of her struggle, therefore, is for the legitimization of her trade in the eyes of the state and a greater appreciation for the role of the artisan in defining national culture. Their group has presented the *Manifiesto Artesanal* before the Carabobo state legislature, which then suggested that they take the proposals to the National Assembly. Although we would eventually learn that their audience there was cancelled, (which was a bummer, because they were planning on bringing me along) Alix and about six others from the Association who had traveled to Caracas for the purpose were still extremely excited about being at the FSM and having a chance to connect their personal visions of revolution with those of people from around the world.

Once I had been accepted into their campsite, the Artisans asked if I had a flag with me to hang up next to the Venezuelan one they already had prominently displayed. I hesitated only long enough so as to explain that I did have a flag, but it wasn't exactly that of any country, before pulling out the red and black anarcho-communist standard. They were fascinated by this flag they had never seen before, and proudly hung it up next to their own as a symbol of nascent solidarity between movements. Undoubtedly, there are those within the libertarian movement who would question the integrity of my displaying a symbol of anarchy next to the Venezuelan national flag, to which I can only reply, "are you fucking serious?" Such ignorance is born firstly out of a lack of respect for the self-determination of others in the right to define their own methods and avenues of struggle, secondly from never having encountered anyone outside of their own ideological ghetto, and lastly from a Northern protest culture that, as I stated in the *Bolivanarchism* essay, shows an inability to "consider struggles in which the national flag does not necessarily represent embarrassment, oppression, and genocide."

The members of the Association certainly did not view their national flag as a symbol of oppression, and in the context of the societal awakening through which the Venezuelan masses are passing, there is no reason to have expected them to. I had many discussions with my newfound comrades regarding the nature of "patria o muerte", a popular slogan of the revolution that has been imported directly from Castro's Cuba. The Northern media continually translates this cry as "fatherland or death", which is a gross oversimplification tied to the need for imperialism to vilify the Bolivarian Government. Shoddy translation has often been used in propaganda campaigns against Chávez, the best example probably being when he called George W. Bush a "pendejo" (uneducated person) and it was reported as "asshole". The treatment

## 17. ALIX SANTANA Y LOS ARTESANOS DE CARABOBO

Shortly after having ditched the disintegrating encampment at Vinicio Adames a day before the official start of the FSM, I made my way to Caobos Park to find a suitable place to sleep during the events of the coming week. What immediately caught my eye upon entering the park was a cluster of tents surrounded by trees around which yellow "caution" tape was wrapped; a Venezuelan flag was hanging from one of the tents. Upon closer investigation, I was met by an energetic woman who introduced herself as Alix Santana, the "leader" of a small contingent of self-employed street artisans from Carabobo State. She asked if I was prepared to share whatever food I had, and when I replied, "well, this is the World *Social* Forum, after all!" I was gladly welcomed into their campsite.

Alix and the majority of her comrades belonged to a group known as the Association of Artists and Artisans of the San Diego Valley, which is a municipality of Valencia, the capital of Carabobo state and site of Bolívar's decisive battle for the nation's independence. *Artesanos*, which in most cases refers to those who manufacture their own necklaces, bracelets, and other items by hand and sell them on the street (usually to tourists) to make a living make up a huge percentage of Venezuela's informal economy. Across the country, the people's strong tradition and identification with the visual arts has inspired the creation of Bolivarian artisan "fronts" and a healthy commitment by the government towards developing national culture and identity through them.

Alix's group (which in accordance with the stipulations regarding public funding, is arranged as a nonprofit with an elected and legally-responsible president, etc.) received 42 million Bolívars from the state last year for the organization of several art workshops throughout her community, and like RASH had a pro-active view on how to take advantage of the government's cultural initiatives in order to advance the revolution. In fact I would say that from my limited experience, the Bolivarian Government's music and art programs seemed to be exceptionally well geared towards empowering local communities, though of course the content and execution of those programs are kept under tight vigilance - the government wants to know what its money is being used for, of course.

Alix was the first Venezuelan I met who actually *did* carry a tiny blue copy of the Bolivarian Constitution in her pocket, and would sometimes pull it out whenever making a point during our discussions. Despite this constitutional fetish I would hesitate to call her anything other than a true revolutionary, as when I asked if she was a *Chavista* she replied, "I am not a Chavista, nor am I a Bolivarian. I am a *revolutionary*. I see reality, Chavistas see only Chávez. Like you, I am studying the truth, the overall situation. I am studying the man. The man is not the revolution, but if Chávez fell tomorrow, I would go to prison. If there is a chance for revolution, the space for the development of revolution, right now it's because Chávez is in power. I defend the man, but not his mistakes."

The Artist's Association had been present at the First Encounter of Bolivarian

marching into the future, advancing in all spheres of life under the comandante's leadership. Of all the displays, only two stick out in my mind: the first being a collection of new nationally-produced Humvees for civilian and military use, which alongside new tanks and armored personnel carriers are helping to establish Venezuela as an independent military economy, and a little stall discussing a future recycling program, which only caught my eye because it was the only display with an "environmental" design - idealized panoramas of forests, etc. The display featured a little mock recycling bin to show what the program would eventually look like, but what it did not offer was any idea of when it might actually become reality.

In all likelihood, it was just an example of the Chávez government's catering to more international leftist sensibilities, which of course generally contain a heavy component of environmentalism. Hugo loves to talk about ecologically sustainable projects and the need to defend Venezuela's natural heritage, but we have already seen the reality of the hyper-development that lurks behind such words.

The most humorous example of this pandering to the "green" mentality was a bicycle contingent of about 30 riders organized by PDVSA to promote "alternative transportation" and "healthier living" during the Forum. First of all, PDVSA promoting bicycle culture is like McDonald's saying that they now have "healthy menu choices". The riders were all uniformly decked-out with brand new helmets, clothing, and bikes, which had the effect of making them look exactly like the PR stunt they were, with no basis in the Venezuelan reality. Other than the fact that PDVSA had clearly just paid for all those people to be there, I saw no elaboration on where all this new "alternative transportation" was supposed to come from, how it would be implemented in the long term, (after the gringos had left) or how the hell it was going to work in a city like Caracas. But they, like all the other imagery of the FSM, were just there to make you think, "Oh it's cool, they're handling that."

## 15. THE ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL FORUM

To the extent that the FSM was a self-aggrandizing platform of mass propaganda for the international legitimizing of the Bolivarian Government, the Alternative Social Forum (FSA) - a shoestring operation put together by groups at the fringe of Venezuelan politics and held on the same dates as its officialist "big brother" - was its complete opposite.

To those looking in on the event from outside the country, it is tempting to think of the FSA as having been an exclusively anarchist project aimed against Chávez' personality cult. In fact however the *Alterforo* brought together ten different Venezuelan organizations and NGOs including not just the anarchists and some of the anti-coal campaigners, but also a couple Leninist groups such as Douglas Bravo's *Ruptura*, which understands that "A revolution which in this day follows the line of industrial development, economic growth, and scientific advance; of the development of the actual productive forces, like the one conceived in this time, will unquestionably be captured by capitalist civilization."

Similarly, to some foreigners or those who did not attend the FSA, it may have looked like its single purpose was to provide a space of free expression outside of and in opposition to, the officialist events. For the organizers of the FSA however, the forum was not "alternative" for its own sake, but a calculated attempt at pushing the Zulia anti-coal movement into the spotlight and giving the indigenous struggle a significant national and international space in which to make itself known and create alliances in the campaign against IIRSA. From the point of view of the anarchists it was this, rather than a reactive anti-Chavismo, that was at the heart of the FSA, demonstrating again the commitment of the libertarian movement to this issue.

The FSA brought together participants from at least 18 countries for a series of events and workshops that would not have seemed out of place at any US anarchist gathering. There was important participation from international groups such as Earth First! The Argentine Libertarian Federation, and the Cuban Libertarian Movement among others. The First "Festival" of Independent Documentaries and Videoactivism was held as a parallel event, in my opinion primarily as a vehicle for the showing of the recently-subtitled *Nuestro Petróleo*, although various other films including *Society of the Spectacle* were also shown.

Workshops at the FSA tended to focus on a wider libertarian dialogue rather than simply an analysis of the national situation, and featured some well-known presenters such as Frank Fernandez (author of *Cuban Anarchism*) and Daniel Barret, one of the most important anarchist theorists in Latin America. Yet in contrast to the FSA's "anarchist" image, the largest event by far was actually a presentation by Irish Marxist John Holloway, (author of *Change the World Without Taking Power*) which explored the points raised in his book as seen from the Venezuelan context. Holloway, who now lives in Mexico, has maintained steady contact with the national anarchists over many years and was interviewed at least once in *El Libertario*.

My overall impression was that the Alterforo was very well coordinated and, being a significantly smaller event than the FSM, ran much more smoothly. Posters for the FSA and Film Festival were wheatpasted up all around Caracas very effectively, and the organizations putting the events together were also able to publish 10,000 copies of an *El Libertario*-like FSA newspaper containing a full listing of events and articles about issues such as IIRSA in both Spanish and English. The back page of this paper featured a play on the FSM acronym with a picture of a blank cheque from the "World Social Fund" signed by Hugo Chávez, next to the message that giving a "blank cheque" (to the government) will only lead to a "black dawn", and that the social movements should never cede their largest "capital": autonomy.

The only anarchist infoshop in Caracas being much too small, FSA events were spread out evenly between the Central University and the Nelson Garrido Organization, (ONG) an amazing autonomous space. Nelson Garrido is a famous Venezuelan photographer who offers professional-level classes in digital photography, developing, and other skills of the trade at this large three-level

government's cultural programs and forums, they are ironically - at least in Caricua - the most exposure to anarchism that most "ordinary people" will ever get. Given that Chávez is openly hostile to anarchists, the Redskins thus take on an increased importance to any anti-authoritarian study of the country. To be sure, they get asked about the "A" in RASH all the time, and their answers both individually and as a group tend to revolve around their awareness of themselves as only a small part of a global culture, and dedicated to respecting the traditions and history of that culture.

"Anarchist" or not, the members of RASH Venezuela were very comradely and showed a lot of interest in the ideas of RAAN, obviously seeing in it as much of a "sister organization" as RAANistas often see in RASH. The Caracas crew puts on a weekly radio show called *Onda Rebelde* (Wave of Rebellion) through Caricua's Radio Perola community station as part of a government-funded network that is helping to redefine the media in Venezuela. Radio Perola is run out of the bottom floor of an apartment complex that had been an Acción Democrata office until, in the words of the Redskins, "the community chased them out". They now proudly refer to the site as an "occupation" (though it is technically not a squat) through which they have access to media resources they never would have seen before the Fifth Republic.

Radio Perola's recording booth is of a modest size, featuring a table with three microphones and headsets in one corner for the use of whoever is giving the program, and in another the computer and sound equipment used by the technician who assists in the production. With this setup, the RASH crew only has to arrive with a CD of the music they'd like to play, and then talk about whatever they want between the songs. The show for which I was present (January 29th, during the FSM) featured a statement regarding RASH participation in the Forum, national and international news segments, an interview with members of PRAB, news of ongoing police repression in the country, and promotion for an upcoming reggae benefit. In between these features, the DJ kept up a steady supply of international Oi! music.

The walls of Radio Perola were covered with hundreds of posters from the different organizations that had passed through it, including a prominent sticker for the *El Libertario* periodical, an indication that the anarchists are not as completely removed from the government's projects as one might assume. I was also asked to give an account of RAAN and my impressions of Venezuela on the air, which was my first experience in the sheer accessibility of the Venezuelan popular media. Nevertheless we must not fool ourselves into thinking that the government has allowed a total freedom of speech for these independent radio stations, as alternative radio 94.9 FM in Caracas found out on May 10th 2005 when it was shut down by the military and had all of its equipment seized.

Conscious of this fact, I was careful during my interview to refrain from any direct criticism of Chávez and instead focused on forwarding international messages of solidarity from RAAN and the need for *autogestión* (autonomous self-organization) as the most important strategy to advance in any revolution.

social struggles in the global South. The "untouchability" of his image remains a point of frustration to those who see him only as either an authoritarian responsible for Castroism, or a commercialized silhouette devoid of all revolutionary content. To label Ché as an orthodox Leninist is an oversimplification given his own preference for violent guerrilla struggle, not to mention that it is difficult to label him an authoritarian when he willingly renounced his position in the highest strata of the Cuban bureaucracy in order to fight and die in isolated foreign campaigns. To the majority of oppressed people in South America and around the world, Ché remains an incredibly accessible point of reference as a revolutionary driven by deep personal love for humankind and the struggle for liberation; it is this non-ideological aspect that is usually completely lost on anarchists.

To be sure, there is plenty in both Ché's thought and actions that must be exposed and rejected. But an analysis of his evolving ideology and personal writings reveals a man who was evolving directly away from the Soviet Union's conception of "communism", even going so far as to realize in his lifetime that the USSR was itself imperialist, and uncommitted in any way to the liberation of peoples in the global South. Had he lived, it would be my assertion that we would be listing him alongside names such as Luxemburg, Dunayevskaya, and Negri as Marxists who over the course of their lives came to radically different conclusions about the nature of revolutionary struggle and fully rejected the Leninist paradigm.

This is not an attempt by RAAN to "reclaim" the imagery of Ché Guevara, but rather a very necessary move towards placing him in the proper historical context - one that has remained unintelligible to many anti-authoritarians and deserves an especially close study if one is to fully understand the Venezuelan situation.

Ultimately, the tragedy of Ché Guevara's life is that he did not live to see the failure of his own tactics as global capital and the United States in particular quickly adapted to guerrilla warfare and learned how to fight the "Guevarist" movements to a standstill in which they eventually starved themselves of momentum and popular support. It is my assertion that this led to the biggest - and really, only - backdoor of legitimacy for Maoism in this hemisphere, and exploring the universal and romantic appeal of Ché Guevara is key to understanding why groups like the Black Panthers and even modern US hip-hop culture as a whole have remained much more influenced by authoritarian and vanguardist left-wing tendencies than they should have been, a fact that frustrates orthodox anarchists to no end.

But in the case of RASH La Gran Caracas, this is only a partial explanation as to why they have had so little problem reconciling Leninism and anarchism. The big secret is, there are practically no anarchists actually in the organization - at most not more than two. The rest consider themselves "red" or "socialist", often with a very ill-defined and non-ideological base in anti-fascism, as one tends to find elsewhere. Nevertheless because they identify with the international RASH movement and as a result of their constant participation in the

house in Caracas. Apparently, he makes enough money from these Saturday classes and his own art to maintain the house during the rest of the week as a "space open to alternative proposals". The ONG is incredible, certainly among the best resources available to the Caracas anarchists. The building is hooked up with Internet access, a darkroom, and an image library. There are several rooms available for all types of events, including one that is permanently set up with a DVD player and projector. On the first Sunday of each month the ONG hosts a free market and film showings - usually the *Alien* trilogy. Attached to the house is an apartment belonging to Arte Emergente, an alternative arts collaboration based in Divas de Venezuela, a queer and trans-awareness organization that came together in 2004. During the FSA, Arte Emergente was able to provide a good amount of housing for those traveling from outside the country or other parts of Venezuela itself.

The ONG is somewhat below the radar, and except for a few stencils on the sidewalk out in front, you might never know it as anything other than a residence. Apparently, this is a way to keep it in a lower tax bracket, since it is not technically a business. Nevertheless the building is hardly a secret, and the DISIP, Venezuela's secret police, were spotted conducting surveillance several times during the FSA.

Despite this, to my knowledge the only significant problem at the FSA came on the night of January 28th, when a scheduled benefit show for the Anarchist Black Cross was cancelled due to the rain having caused electrical problems at the unfinished building in which it was to be held.

## 16. RED & ANARCHIST SKIN HEADS

Ever since the founding of the Red & Anarchist Action Network in 2002, the global tendency known as Red & Anarchist Skin Heads (RASH) - or sometimes just "Redskins" - has been to a certain extent an inspiration to us and in particular my own attempts to study successful organizational and anti-organizational models that could be useful to RAAN.

Skinhead arose as a literal backlash against the long-haired hippie culture of the 70s, and is driven by an apolitical, sometimes ultra-patriotic (and therefore no longer apolitical) working-class pride. Although the skinhead and Oi! music styles began in Europe from various Caribbean influences brought primarily by nonwhite immigrants, fascist groups all around the world have since had a certain degree of success in turning the skinhead image into one of white supremacist thugs, or "boneheads". As a result there have been several anti-fascist skinhead groups created to counter this influence, notably SHARP, (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) ASAP, (Anarchist Punx & Skins) and RASH, which split directly from SHARP after deciding that revolutionary solutions were needed in order to make "anti-racism" anything more than a slogan. Traditionally the Redskins have organized as tight street crews united by subculture and a militant anti-fascism, such a broad and immediate issue being historically prerequisite for "red & anarchist unity" in the absence of any more developed theoretical or anti-Leninist principles.

The Redskin movement is particularly strong in Spain and other parts of

Europe, while in the United States RASH has mostly died out save for a few dedicated crews who often times are driven by personality cults and find themselves treading water whenever there isn't an obvious bonehead group to oppose. Almost by definition they are confined to their own subculture, but as Chicago anarchist organizer Robert Ebright once said in an interview with RAAN, "Many of the formal organizations operate as cliques of people who know each other, where as the groups that blatantly say they are a crew or clique of people like ASAP actually tend to do more outreach and accomplish tasks." For this reason, as well as their fierce loyalty to the "crew", RASH has remained a point of interest and potential alliance for us in the network.

What many people don't realize is that there are also incredibly active RASH crews throughout South America, notably in Colombia and Venezuela itself. For these groups, boneheads are hardly a real threat in their national contexts and the fact that the vast majority of their membership could never even be confused as "white" means that they have little reason to devote much time to countering traditional misinterpretations of skinhead culture. The result is a much more interesting focus on community solidarity and cultural activities that go beyond their own crew. Interestingly, many Caracas anarchists expressed views of RASH as being a self-contained clique that never participated in other groups' activities (meaning those of the anarchists themselves). In reality however the Redskins seemed much more involved in community work than the anarchists, undoubtedly due to their willingness to participate in the government's unending series of cultural gatherings and music events. RASH members from across Venezuela were registered as official delegates to the FSM, and contributed a band to some of the many free public concerts being held that week, often performing alongside rap or folk acts. At another open-air free concert I attended in Caracas a couple months after the FSM, a Redskin Oi! band opened before being followed by a metal band, a punk band, a reggae band, and finally a ska group. The event, put on as a celebration of local music by the officialist Alcaldia, was an incredibly positive mixture of various subcultures and age groups during which several street punks told me that they were finally getting a chance to be seen by the community as something other than criminals. RASH, like the anarcho-punks, have learned that shows featuring several different genres tend to attract larger, more diverse crowds that result in more interesting experiences for all involved.

Red & Anarchist Skin Heads *La Gran Caracas* (as their chapter is known) began in 2000 and encompasses a small membership in the relatively nearby city of Valencia. There is also another affiliated group in Barquisimeto known as PRAB, (Spanish for "Red & Anarchist Skin Heads of Barquisimeto") which at the time of my visit was involved in "negotiations" with RASH La Gran Caracas to form a unified RASH Venezuela.

The Venezuelan Redskins are involved with more educational and cultural activities than their European comrades, who tend to focus on direct action against fascism. When I asked if they ever had to deal with boneheads in Caracas, they replied, "no way, you'd have to be crazy to be a Nazi around here!"

Nevertheless they have continued their group's strong anti-fascist tradition by raising money for victims of racist attacks in Russia through benefit shows, and refocusing their enmity onto *Primeiro Justicia*, the anti-Chávez opposition alliance. When I asked a member of PRAB if he thought his country was undergoing a real revolution, the reply was "Look, before there were millions of illiterates, and now there is something like less than a thousand. If that's not a revolution, I don't know what is." He had a good point.

In Caracas RASH has a membership hovering around 12 dedicated members of the crew, (pretty large for someone like myself who has never seen the organization outside of the US, and the Colombian chapters are supposedly even bigger) and is based out of the Caricua neighborhood, where a high Caribbean immigrant population has created fertile ground for ska and related cultures. Like most skinhead crews the group is almost all male, though at least a couple women participate actively in its activities and one, Daniella, is its most responsible "secretary" and one of their chief unofficial spokespeople. The group seeks to "unite fun with politics" in an equilibrium that in Venezuela means maintaining dual positions in defense of "national sovereignty and proletarian internationalism". One of the group's most interesting projects involves supporting local Rastafarians in a campaign to legalize Marijuana, which might seem incredibly uncharacteristic to those used to RASH as a very anti-drug (but pro-alcohol) outfit. As an important aside, various groups are using the Bolivarian Constitution's guarantee of the right to traditional and indigenous medicines as a potential "stepping stone" to Cannabis legalization, and last I heard the National Assembly was actually beginning to investigate such a move, which would not be at all out of the question given similar attempts to decriminalize it in other nations.

RASH, at least in its Venezuelan incarnation, is more or less non-ideological and seeks out workable alliances with everyone from the punk subculture to the PCV's Young Communist organization. One of the ongoing projects for the PRAB is the production of a periodical by the name of *Insurgencia Skinzine*, which comes with a CD of skinhead music and has in the past printed works by VI Lenin and Mikhail Bakunin side by side.

At one of the RASH events to which I was invited, I was asked to speak about RAAN and over the course of explaining our anti-Leninist positions, decided to ask the Redskins how they reconciled anarchism and Leninism within their own organization (this has also been one of the key disputes within the North American RASH). Their reply essentially came down to the fact that Latin and South American political culture cannot be seen through the lens of European ideology, and regional influences have to be taken into account in order for one to come to a correct understanding of how their movements function. As was put to me by one of the lead personalities in the crew, "Here in Latin America we have our own heroes such as Martí, Guevara, and Miranda."

To elaborate on this, I'd like to say that Ernesto "Ché" Guevara definitely deserves to be put into his own category. To begin with, North American anarchists rarely understand the importance of this man as a historical figure for