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The Russian Revolution and National Freedom

How the early Soviet government led the struggle for liberation of Russia's oppressed peoples

By John Riddell

co-editor, Socialist Voice.

When Bolivian President Evo Morales formally opened his country's Constituent Assembly on August 6, 2006, he highlighted the aspirations of Bolivia's indigenous majority as the central challenge before the gathering. The convening of the Assembly, he said, represented a "historic moment to refound our dearly beloved homeland Bolivia." When Bolivia was created, in 1825-26, "the originary indigenous movements" who had fought for independence "were excluded," and subsequently were discriminated against and looked down upon. But the "great day has arrived today ... for the originary indigenous peoples." (<http://boliviarising.blogspot.com/>, Aug. 14, 2006)

During the preceding weeks, indigenous organizations had proposed sweeping measures to assure their rights, including guarantees for their languages, autonomy for indigenous regions, and respect for indigenous culture and political traditions.

This movement extends far beyond Bolivia. Massive struggles based on indigenous peoples have shaken Ecuador and Peru, and the reverberations are felt across the Western Hemisphere.

Measures to empower indigenous minorities are among the most prestigious achievements of the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela.

At first glance, these indigenous struggles bear characteristic features of national movements, aimed at combating oppression, securing control of national communities, and protecting national culture. Yet indigenous peoples in Bolivia and elsewhere may not meet many of the objective criteria Marxists have often used to define a nation, such as a common language and a national territory, and they are not demanding a separate state. The response of Marxist currents to the national aspects of Latin America's indigenous struggles has been varied, ranging from enthusiasm to a studied silence. Yet an ability to address the complexities of such struggles is surely the acid test of Marxism's understanding of the national question today.

Such disarray among Marxists is all the more costly in today's context of rising struggles for national freedom across Latin America and the Middle East today. The challenge is also posed in the imperialist heartlands, where we see a rise of struggles by oppressed minorities that bear more than a trace of national consciousness. For example, in 2006 the United States witnessed the strongest upsurge of working-class struggle in 60 years in the form of demonstrations and strikes for immigrant rights that were also, in part, an assertion of Latino identity. And the oppression of non-white and Muslim minorities in France has given birth to the provocatively named "Mouvement des Indigènes de la République." (www.indigenes-republique.org/)

The Marxist position on the national question was forged around well-documented debates on the independence movement of long-constituted nations such as Ireland and Poland. But the writings of Lenin and his contemporaries before 1917 have little to say about nationalities in emergence, that is, peoples in struggle who lack as yet many characteristic features of a nation. But precisely this type of struggle played a central role in the 1917 Russian revolution and the early years of the Soviet republic. In the course of their encounter with such movements, the Bolshevik Party's policies toward national minorities evolved considerably. Sweeping practical measures were taken to assure the rights of national minorities whose existence was barely acknowledged prior to 1917.

The Bolsheviks' policies do not indicate what course to adopt toward national struggles today, each of which has a specific character and set of complexities. Nonetheless, the Bolshevik experience is a useful reference point.

Pre-1917 Positions

The initial position of Russian Marxists on the national question was clear and sweeping. In 1903 the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), adopted a program specifying the right of all nations in the Russian state to self-determination. The program also advocated regional self-rule based on the composition of the population and the right of the population to receive education in its own language and to use that language on the basis of equality in all local social and governmental institutions. (Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23*, London: Univ. of London, n.d., p. 14.)

In the decade that followed, the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP became the first Marxist current internationally to recognize the importance of the liberation struggles then taking shape across the colonial world. Lenin wrote in 1913, "Hundreds of millions of people are awakening to life, light and freedom" in a movement that will "liberate both the peoples of Europe and the peoples of Asia." (V.I. Lenin. *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960-71. Vol. 19, pp. 99-100. Most quotations in this study can also be located by Internet search.)

Lenin also insisted on the distinction between the advanced capitalist countries, where "progressive bourgeois national movements came to an end long ago," and the oppressed nations of Eastern Europe and the semi-colonial and colonial world. (CW 22:150-52) In the latter case, he called for defense of the right to self-determination and support of national liberation movements, in order to create a political foundation for unification in struggle of working people of all nationalities.

Limitations

In the test of the Russian revolution, these and many other aspects of the Bolshevik's pre-1917 positions proved to be a reliable guide. Some positions expressed before 1917, however, required modification.

For example, consider the definition of a nation provided in 1913 by Joseph Stalin: "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." (J.V. Stalin. *Works*, Moscow: FLPH, 1954. Vol. 2, p. 307) Stalin's article was written in collaboration with Lenin and was viewed at the time as an expression of the Bolshevik position. His objective criteria are a good starting point for analysis, but they have sometimes been misused to justify denying national rights to indigenous and other peoples that appear not to pass the test.

In addition, Lenin stressed that his support for national self-determination "implies exclusively the right to independence in the political sense." (CW 22:146) In 1913, he stated, "Fight against all national oppression? Yes, certainly. Fight for any kind of national development, for 'national culture' in general? Certainly not." (CW 20:35) Lenin is sometimes quoted as being opposed to federalism as a form of state, although he also endorsed federation as a stepping stone to democratic integration of nations. (CW 22:146)

Such pre-1917 positions are sometimes applied today in order to justify opposition to the demands of national liberation movements. But they should be interpreted in the light of the way the Bolshevik position was applied in the decisive test of revolution.

The indigenous peoples of tsarist Russia

The oppressed peoples that made up the majority of the pre-1917 tsarist empire can be broadly divided into two categories.

On the western and southern margins of the empire lived many peoples—among them the Finns, Poles, Ukrainians, and Armenians—that met all of Stalin's objective criteria of nationality. As nations, they possessed clearly defined historical and cultural traditions. It was these peoples that the pre-1917 Bolsheviks had chiefly in mind when they discussed the national question.

But there were also many peoples in Russia—in the Crimea, on the Volga, in the Caucasus, and in central and northeast Asia—that had been subjected to settler-based colonization similar to that experienced by the Palestinians, the Blacks of South Africa, and—in much more extreme form—the indigenous peoples of the Americas. These subjects of the Russian tsar, whom the Bolsheviks often spoke of as Russia's "Eastern peoples," had seen their lands seized, their livelihood destroyed, and their language and culture suppressed. They had suffered discrimination and exclusion from the dominant society.

When revolution broke out in 1917, these peoples, although varying widely in their level of social development, had not yet emerged as nationalities. The evolution of written national languages, cultures, and consciousness as distinct peoples was at an early stage. Most identified themselves primarily as Muslims. Assessed by Stalin's criteria for nationhood, they did not make the grade. But in the crucible of revolution, national consciousness began to assert itself,

provoking and stimulating demands for cultural autonomy, self-rule, and even national independence.

This fact itself is worth pondering. A revolution is, in Lenin's phrase, a festival of the oppressed. Peoples long ground down into inarticulateness suddenly find inspiration, assert their identity, and cry out their grievances. We cannot predict the shape of freedom struggles that will emerge in a revolutionary upsurge.

The soviets take power

On November 15, 1917, one week after the workers and soldiers of Russia took power, the Soviet government decreed the "equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia" and the right of these peoples to self-determination up to and including independence. (John Riddell, ed. *To See the Dawn* [hereinafter cited as *TSD*]. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1983, p. 248)

Subsequently, five nations on the western border, including Poland and Finland, asserted their independence, which the Soviet government recognized. Others opted to federate with the Russian Soviet republic.

But the matter did not stop there. The Soviet government invited each nation within Russia to hold a soviet congress to decide whether and on what basis to participate in its federal structure. National minorities were offered not only the ultimate right to separate but autonomous powers over language, education, and culture that gave expression to the right of self-determination. The government spelled out this policy in April 1918 with reference to Russia's Eastern peoples in an article by Stalin, then its Commissar of Nationalities. These regions, he stated, must be "autonomous, that is have their own schools, courts, administrations, organs of power and social, political and cultural institutions," with full rights to use the minority language "in all spheres of social and political activity." (Smith, p. 24.)

This policy applied also to religious customs and traditions. Thus the Sharia—the Muslim common law—was recognized in traditionally Muslim territories as an integral part of the Soviet legal structure.

The Soviet government also endorsed the rights of the Muslim peoples to lands recently seized by Russian colonists, including when these lands had been utilized only seasonally by Muslim peasant nomads. It supported local initiatives to repossess such land in the North Caucasus and endorsed resettlement of Russian colonists in Turkestan as a means of restoring land seized by settlers after the defeat of an uprising of subject peoples in 1916.

It also worked to educate government personnel as to the social structure of the Eastern peoples. An appeal to Red Army personnel in 1920 urged that soldiers see the small independent producers and traders of these regions as allies, as toilers, not as profiteers. It noted that among these peoples, "a clear class differentiation has not yet taken place.... The producers have not yet been torn away from the means of production. Each craftsman ... is also a merchant. Commerce ... rests in the hands of millions of small traders, [each of whom] only has a penny's worth of goods." Given all this, "the rapid implementation of communism ... nationalization of all trade ... of craftsmen ... is impossible." This analysis is strikingly applicable to the

conditions of the indigenous masses today in Bolivia and other Latin American countries. (*TSD* 307)

Promotion of national culture

With regard to the Eastern peoples, Soviet policy went far beyond support of land claims and autonomous governmental structures. The Soviet government supported the evolution into mature nationalities of peoples still only at the dawn of national consciousness. In this way, these peoples would be able to reach a cultural and political level that would facilitate their integration into Soviet society on a basis of equality.

The soviets therefore embarked on an ambitious program to promote national cultural development. Local experts were engaged to choose, for each ethnic group, the dialect best adapted to serving as the basis for a national language. Alphabets were devised for the mostly pre-literate peoples. Dictionaries and grammars were written and put to use in the publication of minority-language newspapers.

Education was started up in the minority languages, including within the Russian-speaking heartlands—in every locality where there were 25 students in the minority language group. By 1927, across the Soviet Union, more than 90% of students from minority nationalities were being educated in their own languages. The governments of autonomous republics were responsible for education in their national language beyond their own borders—a policy that bore some similarity to the Austro-Marxist program of “national-cultural autonomy” against which the Bolsheviks had argued prior to 1917.

The same principle applied to the Jewish minority, which had no national territory. A Jewish commission of the Soviet government administered hundreds of Yiddish-language schools scattered among several national republics. Many leaders of this body came from the Bund, a Jewish Socialist current that had advocated such structures, against Bolshevik objections, before 1917.

By 1924, publishing activity was under way in the Soviet Union in 25 different languages, rising to 44 in 1927.

Preferential hiring

The Soviet government strove to assure that each nationality was represented in local governmental organs in proportion to its size in the population as a whole. This policy was termed “korenizatsiia” — “indigenization” according to the Oxford dictionary, or “affirmative action” in modern idiom.

The Turkestan region of Central Asia provides a good test case, for there the soviets initially excluded Muslims from their ranks and turned a harsh face to the demands of the Muslim majority. In March 1918, the Soviet government called a halt to this policy, and when soviet elections were held in Turkestan the next month, 40% of those elected were Muslim. The proportion of Muslims in the local Communist Party membership rose from almost zero to 45% by the end of 1918. In 1919, the Communist Party central committee specified that candidates

for government office could be nominated independently of the party by any Muslim workers' organization.

One veteran of those days recalls that Lenin reacted angrily to information that all the soviets in Turkestan used the Russian language, saying, "All our talk about Soviet power will be hollow so long as the toilers of Turkestan do not speak in their native tongue in their institutions." (Smith, p. 145)

By 1927, minority nationals predominated in the soviet executive bodies in their regions.

The Communist Party universities, a major source of new cadres for party and state, gave preference to candidates from minority peoples. By 1924 these peoples made up 50% of the overall student body, roughly equal to their weight in the population. But it took time to make good the imbalance in party membership. By 1927, Muslim peoples' weight in the party membership had reached about half their proportion of the population as a whole.

Efforts were also made to speed economic development in territories of the Muslim peoples. They were encouraged to enter the working class, which in these territories had previously been almost entirely Russian in composition. Progress was rapid: by 1926 minority peoples made up a majority of the work force in Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, and Dagestan, and about 40% in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

These achievements, of course, were possible only through the initiative and leadership of revolutionists from the minority nationalities themselves. With rare exceptions, there was no Bolshevik movement among the Muslim peoples prior to 1917. The leaders of this transformation came mainly from revolutionary nationalist movements—which many Marxists, then and now, disparagingly term "bourgeois." The central leadership of the Communist Party repeatedly allied with these forces in order to overcome resistance to its policies toward Muslim peoples from within its own ranks. (For Lenin's comments in 1920 on the terminological side of this question, see Riddell, ed. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite*. New York: Pathfinder, 1991. Vol. 1, p. 212 or Lenin, *CW* 31:241, or do an Internet search for "unanimous decision to speak of the national-revolutionary movement")

Baku Congress

The Bolsheviks argued within the Communist International in support of their approach toward oppressed nationalities, and it was codified by resolutions of the Comintern's Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East in 1920 and Second and Fourth World Congresses in 1920 and 1922. In his closing remarks to the Baku Congress, Gregory Zinoviev proposed an amended wording to the closing words of the Communist Manifesto: "Workers of all lands and oppressed peoples of the whole world, unite"—a concept that remains valid for our times. (*TSD* 219) And armed with this understanding, the International won support rapidly during those years across Asia.

The mood of these years is captured by Babayev, who attended the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku as a young Muslim Azerbaijani in 1920, serving as a guard. Interviewed many years later, he recalled that "when the call to prayer came, he found it natural to set aside his gun during devotions, after which he would 'go back to defend with our blood the conference and the

revolution.’ Inspired by the [conference’s] ‘declaration of holy war against the enemy of revolution,’ he explains, “thousands of people, convinced there was no contradiction between being a Bolshevik and a Muslim, joined the Bolshevik ranks.” (TSD 29-30)

The Muslim delegates also utilized the Baku congress to voice their concerns about chauvinist abuses by Soviet officials in the autonomous republics. A lengthy resolution on this topic was submitted by 21 delegates, representing a wide range of nationalities. In his closing remarks, Zinoviev promised energetic corrective action. After the congress ended, 27 delegates traveled to Moscow to meet with the Communist Party Political Bureau, which adopted a resolution drafted by Lenin. The resolution’s sweeping provisions included the decision to found the University of the Peoples of the East and instructions to rein in the authority of emissaries of the central government in autonomous regions.

Stalinist reversal

During the 1920s, a privileged bureaucratic caste arose in the Soviet Union, headed by Stalin, which showed increasing hostility to the rights of minority nationalities. This trend led Lenin, in his last months of activity, to launch a campaign to defend the rights of these peoples. (See “Lenin’s Final Fight,” Pathfinder Press, or do an Internet search for *Nationalities or “Autonomisation”*)

After Lenin’s death in 1924, the Stalinist forces gained control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet state apparatus. Soviet republics in Asia were subjected to bureaucratic centralization, chauvinist policies, hostility to minority language rights, and massive counterrevolutionary terror. Nonetheless, the gains of the Russian revolution in the domain of national rights were not wholly extinguished. In particular, the Asian Soviet republics retained enough strength to successfully assert their independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

Conclusion

Lenin’s pre-1917 articles on self-determination provided the Bolsheviks with a foundation for their course during the revolution. But the Bolshevik approach to the struggle of the oppressed nationalities was radically enhanced by the experiences of the revolution itself. In the process, the Bolsheviks showed a capacity to ally with and learn from the most advanced fighters for national freedom. They set aside old schemas and allowed real social forces to shape their strategy, one that might today be called “unity through diversity.”

Today, in the midst of a new rise of liberation struggles in several continents, the policies of the Bolsheviks of Lenin’s time provide an example of how the working class can ally with oppressed peoples in common struggle. The unity of the working class depends on solidarity with oppressed peoples and sectors. The program of this struggle includes not just political self-determination for oppressed nationalities, but unconditional support for their struggle to win the political, cultural, and economic rights needed to achieve genuine equality. And that may well involve—as in the case of the indigenous peoples of Russia in the years following the 1917 revolution—positive measures to assist these peoples in developing their cultural and political potential as nationalities.

Further Reading

This study has drawn extensively on Jeremy Smith's important work, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, which utilizes Soviet archives released after 1990. See also Dave Crouch, "The Bolsheviks and Islam," in *International Socialism* no. 110.

In the Pathfinder Press series, "The Communist International in Lenin's Time," edited by John Riddell, see *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International* for the pre-1917 discussion; *To See the Dawn*, for the Baku Congress; and *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite*, for the Second World Congress.

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Two Views on Cuba's Leadership Transition

The following is an exchange on Cuba between John Riddell of Socialist Voice and Mike Gonzalez of the U.K. Socialist Workers Party.

- *“Cuba's Dynastic Succession,” by Mike Gonzalez, first appeared in the September 2006 issue of Socialist Review, and is reprinted with permission.*
- *“Why Socialists Defend Cuba,” by John Riddell, appeared in the November 2006 issue of Socialist Review, where it was shortened for reasons of space.*

Cuba's Dynastic Succession

By Mike Gonzalez, *Socialist Review*, September 2006

For the first time in 47 years Fidel Castro is not formally in control of the Cuban state.

Recent photographs show the man of legendary energy in slippers and pyjamas, recovering from an operation whose purposes remain the object of unsubstantiated rumours. And the same absence of concrete facts to work with informs the great debate about who will follow Fidel.

It is astonishing that the left should accept dynastic succession as a practice. It was intolerable in Eastern Europe – why should it pass without criticism in Cuba? In fact, Fidel has already passed the mantle of head of state to his brother Raul Castro. For several days, Raul made no public statement to verify the announcement, but his recent speech about imminent US aggression was delivered in the same tone and language as his more voluble older brother.

Raul was with his brother from the assault on the Moncada barracks on 26 July 1953 onwards. It was Raul who brokered the rapprochement of Fidel's 26 July Movement with the Cuban Communists and was the critical go-between with Moscow in those early days. Since 1959 he has been in charge of the army, a critical pillar of a society in which military and political control were and are exercised by a single small interlinked group dominated by Fidel.

Over the years the membership of that small ruling group has changed. But those changes did not come about through elections or public debate. Nominations were sometimes rubber stamped by a National Assembly or occasional congresses of the Communist Party, but the key decisions remained the province of an unaccountable group at the top. Raul was part of that group, and there is no sign that he intends to do anything other than protect it.

The 26 July Movement worked with a military conception of political organisation – the party organs transmitted instructions and decisions downwards for implementation. This has remained the structure of power ever since.

That is not to say that there have not been significant changes in Cuba. The collapse of Eastern Europe left Cuba isolated and in crisis, deprived of markets for its exports and providers of

almost all its consumer goods. The crisis was resolved by a new economic strategy – opening Cuba’s economy to foreign investment.

World market

The US continues its crippling economic embargo – first imposed a few months after the revolution of 1959. For Spanish, Italian and other investors, however, there are no such barriers. They enthusiastically put their money into the burgeoning tourist trade. In 1995 stringent laws limiting the participation of foreign capital to a 49 percent stake in any enterprise were changed to allow foreign investors to control 100 percent of any enterprise. Cuba’s laws protecting labour were also amended to make it a more attractive prospect. Cuba has become an active participant in the world market, despite the US embargo. Carlos Lage, the minister of the economy, is clearly a man of a different stripe. No beard or olive green uniforms for him – his suit suggests he is more at ease in international economic forums. Raul, meanwhile, still wears his uniform, though his personality has nothing of his brother’s charisma. Yet these two men are the linchpins of the Cuban regime without Fidel. They suggest the future that has been prepared – openness to the market combined with a control as rigid and centralised as in the previous decades. Liberalisation is strictly economic. Political dissidence is silenced, and there remains as little control from below over the shape and direction of Cuban society as ever.

The difference internally is that the economic inequalities which were concealed or denied are now visible and inescapable. The Mercedes-Benz franchises, the new clothing stores, the obvious presence of a wealthy class, tell a very clear story. The irony is that there are now persistent moves by sections of the US Congress to remove the embargo, because they are anxious at the loss of business opportunities for US capital in oil, agriculture and tourism as well as consumer and industrial goods.

Condoleezza Rice, oddly enough, has insisted that there is no intention of imposing a new regime – but there is every intention of opening Cuban markets to the multinationals. Democracy comes a very poor second to that concern. The Miami Cubans, or some of them at least, would love to imagine a return to the corrupt but highly profitable pre-1959 Cuba. That is out of the question.

How can the Cuban people regain control over their own society? There is no simple answer other than to continue to organise and fight for the right to organise freely and democratically in defence of their own interests. This was denied under Fidel, and it was undermined by all the previous US-supported regimes. To talk of succession, in whatever terms, is to continue to deny them that right, and with it the possibility of an authentic socialist democracy.

Why Socialists Defend Cuba: A Reply to Mike Gonzalez

By John Riddell

Writing in the September issue of Socialist Review (“Cuba’s Dynastic Succession”), Mike Gonzalez deplores the fact that Fidel Castro was succeeded as Cuban head of state by his brother Raul.

The grounds for his indignation are unclear. All states make provision in advance for orderly replacement of an incapacitated head of government, and family ties among political leaders are hardly uncommon. Raul's "vice-presidential" status was discussed and decided in Cuba many years ago.

Anti-Imperialist Continuity

It is more useful to focus on the political content of Cuba's transition in leadership. Gonzalez indicates this rightly in reporting that Raul Castro's "recent speech about imminent U.S. aggression was delivered in the same tone and language as his more voluble older brother." In other words, Cuba's course of combative opposition to U.S. imperialism and to neo-liberal attacks on the economic sovereignty of Third World peoples will continue.

This continuity was ratified not only by the unity of Cuba's Communist Party leadership but by meetings held in neighbourhoods and workplaces across the country. The international big-business media, always eager to attack Cuba's policies, unearthed no ground swell of unease regarding the transition.

This context shows the real meaning of the Condoleezza Rice statement quoted by Gonzalez that the U.S. has "no intention of imposing a new regime." The U.S. government has in fact repeatedly legislated and meticulously planned for forcing through regime change in Cuba. Facing an unfavorable political climate in Cuba, Rice was signaling to Washington's supporters, "Now is not the time."

Mike Gonzalez criticizes Cuba's political and social order as being essentially no better than capitalism: "the key decisions [are] the province of an unaccountable group at the top." I disagree with that view and look forward to an exchange on it on another occasion.

Tightened Embargo

The main task facing socialists outside Cuba is posed on a different plane. We must assess Cuba's role in world politics and decide, in that framework, on our course of action toward the embattled island.

Here Gonzalez is less helpful. He notes that "the U.S. continues its crippling economic embargo" but also reports "persistent moves by sections of the U.S. Congress to remove the embargo." That's significant, but how should socialists in imperialist countries respond? He does not say.

Ending the U.S. embargo would be a historic victory for Cuba and the world's peoples. But there's no sign that U.S. policy is headed that way. Quite the contrary.

Far from loosening the embargo, Washington has in recent years tightened it dramatically. To take one example, the U.S. forbids its residents from visiting the revolutionary island, with narrow exemptions. In 2003, enforcement of this policy was radically tightened, and the number of U.S. visitors to Cuba has fallen by 80%.

Embargo Has Worldwide Reach

Gonzalez says that the Cuba embargo poses no barriers to investors based outside the U.S. That is not so. The Helms-Burton Act of 1996 extends the embargo internationally, in effect forcing

non-U.S. enterprises to choose between economic dealings with Cuba and with the incomparably larger U.S. economy.

These provisions, a blatant violation of the sovereignty of Washington's "allies," are now being applied much more aggressively. For example, in the last 12 months, locally owned banks in the UK, Canada, Switzerland, France, Spain, etc. have blocked Cuban currency transactions or permitted U.S. confiscation of Cuban funds confided to their care.

The U.S. has adopted 458 pages of regulations regarding how Cuban society is to be transformed according to the banana-republic model and Cuban wealth handed over to imperialist interests. How this is to be achieved is not stated, but military intervention is clearly the only conceivable means.

In an ominous move, the U.S. in August appointed a special CIA mission manager for Cuba and Venezuela reporting directly to George Bush, Junior. The only other countries singled out for such treatment are Iran and North Korea.

In this context, it seems prudent for Cuba to have organized its leadership transition in a manner that maximized continuity and unity in the face of the enemy.

Would all this end under a Democratic Party presidency? Not likely. The U.S. aggression against Cuba was considerably heightened during Clinton's term of office and has been a constant under ten presidents, among them four Democrats.

What We Defend in Cuba

And here, I hope, Mike Gonzalez and I will find common ground. Whatever their views on Cuba's political order, socialists around the world have an elementary duty to unite in active defense of Cuba against these imperialist assaults.

We should also give thought to what drives the imperialist fury against Cuba and what it is in Cuba that we are defending.

Socialists defended Iraq's right to self-determination under Saddam Hussein, and that's the very minimum we should do for Cuba.

But Cuba is very different from Saddam's Iraq: more than self-determination is at stake. For almost half a century, Cuba has followed a course of militant opposition to imperialism. In the Iraq, Lebanon, and threatened Iran conflicts, Cuba is our steadfast ally. The Cuban people have given anti-imperialist governments in Venezuela and Bolivia generous assistance. Indeed, whatever its faults and shortcomings, the Cuban revolution's prolonged vitality and achievement stand out in world history.

What gives Cuba this astounding power of resistance? Labeling Cuba "capitalist" leaves that critical question unanswered.

Whatever the institutions and revolutionary acquisitions that give Cuba this unique resilience and extended anti-imperialist role in the world class struggle, they must be identified and defended. And more: they must be hailed as evidence of the capacity of the working masses to build a new world.

Note: For a fuller discussion of Washington's plans to subjugate Cuba, see Ricardo Alarcón, "Washington's Regime Change Plan for Cuba." on the Socialist Voice website.

For Washington's regime-change plan, see www.state.gov/documents/organization/32334.pdf

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Challenges for Venezuela's Revolution: An Interview with Michael Lebowitz

(Green Left Weekly, November 10, 2006) Michael Lebowitz, professor emeritus of the department of economics at Simon Fraser University, is a director of the Centro Internacional Miranda (CIM) in Caracas, and author of the newly published book *Build it Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century*. He was interviewed by Coral Wynter and Jim McIlroy for the Australian newspaper Green Left Weekly.

“There is a fascinating process happening here”, Lebowitz explained. “The process began with the [1998] election of [President Hugo] Chavez, but took significant form with the establishment of the [Bolivarian] constitution [in 1999]. There are enormously unique elements in this constitution: in particular, the focus on human development, the focus on the full development of everyone’s personality, and the clear recognition that this can only occur through practice.

“Only through meaningful practice in struggle are people able to develop themselves: these are not just the abstractions of the constitution, but there are concrete references to self-management, self-government, these kinds of institutions.

“The constitution itself, however, was a contradictory document. At the same time as you had these aspects, you also had the elements of support for private interests, private capital, the maintenance of the independence of the central bank and so on. So, it was a snapshot at that point of the stage of consciousness, and of the coalitions that had emerged at that time.

“Which way it would have gone is unclear to me. But, as Marx explained, slaveholder revolts put the sword in the hand of the social revolution, so it moves faster as a result. That’s precisely what happened in Venezuela, with the opposition [from the right wing] to the laws that would put some teeth into the process [of implementing] the constitution.

“Then there was the [April 2002] coup, which was reversed relatively quickly, and even more important was the bosses’ lockout, which went on for months [from December 2002 to February 2003]. The consciousness of people expanded enormously in that period, even more so than at the time of the coup and reversal of the coup, because that happened so fast. That longer period [of the lockout meant] coming together and struggling together, with new groups emerging.

“So the revolution began to move significantly forward at that time, after those developments in 2002 and early 2003. And the kinds of things that Chavez started to talk about then, the social economy, meant that it wasn’t a gigantic leap when he began to talk about socialism, because he had already been saying those kinds of things about the social economy. But it was important because, when he began to talk about socialism, it was a whole process of beginning to change the consciousness of people. That’s the role Chavez plays, as teacher and leader, in terms of developing the consciousness of the masses.

Chavez and Chavistas

“One of the problems, of course, is that there is a gap between the promises and the rhetoric and what is actually realized in practice. Partly that gap is the result of the state that Chavez inherited, a state that was filled with people on a clientalistic basis, by the old regime, by the Fourth Republic.

“Another part, though, is that all the supporters of Chavez are not necessarily in agreement with the socialist direction. In the concluding chapter of my new book, one of the things I talk about is that there is significant opposition within the Chavez camp to the advance of the revolutionary process. Some people talk about Chavism without Chavez. Far more significant is the group of people who want Chavez without socialism; who don’t want to see self-management and co-management within the enterprises; who don’t want to see communities making decisions at the local level; who want to retain the power to make decisions from above, both because of their own economic interests — and corruption is a major problem here, it is part of the tradition — but also because they don’t want to lose the power to engage in clientalism.

“The Chavez parties are engaged in this sort of activity — they want credit for everything; they want to engage in these activities, to make the decisions. So, you have this tension, between people in the local communities and the Chavez parties, the functionaries, who want the power and control within the communities — thinking, like so many people on the left, that if we don’t have the power, everything will go wrong. And that is precisely contrary to the conceptions in the constitution, which talk about the fact that people develop through their own activity.

“Rosa Luxemburg said the working class demands the right to make its own mistakes and learn in the dialectic of history. If they’re going to be prevented from making mistakes, you won’t have the continuing advance of the revolutionary process.

“This is a tension right now, which is reflected in the current [presidential] election campaign. If we remember the [2003-04] referendum campaign [an opposition attempt to use the provisions of the new constitution to hold a referendum on whether Chavez’s term should end prematurely and a new election be called], Chavez had turned first to the Commando Ayacucho, bringing together the parties and the party leaderships to conduct the campaign against the opposition before the signatures were actually achieved. And the way they functioned was by making grand speeches, macho speeches, and did very little at the grassroots. They were completely lost, they were ineffective.

“The opposition did get the signatures. The response from the parties was, well, it’s a fraud, don’t go with this. Chavez had better sense. He concluded it was necessary to accept those signatures, take on the referendum campaign, and turn it into a positive thing. He then went around the parties to create Commando Maisanto. The leadership was all picked from civil society, rather than the parties. He went to the people in the neighborhoods, formed local committees. It was a struggle for the parties to figure out, where do we fit into this process.”

Organizing the grassroots

“In this current election campaign”, Lebowitz continued, “one of the things that has happened is that it has returned to the Commando Ayacucho concept. It’s back to the parties at the top making the decisions, organizing everything. That is a concern that I have.”

Most opinion polls show that Chavez has a crushing lead over right-wing candidate Manuel Rosales, the governor of the state of Zulia, in the presidential election campaign. Lebowitz said his sense is that it would be very difficult for Rosales to defeat Chavez “but you never know what imperialism has planned”.

“I’m sure they have lots of plans”, he explained. “One of those may be to have Rosales withdraw to discredit the process. They are probably sitting in back rooms on a daily basis [discussing this].

“One of the options that was written about in Green Left Weekly was building on Rosales’s campaign to create a process of separation, separatism [in Zulia]. Chavez is very conscious of that, and will throw a lot of resources into Zulia, to keep those [opposition vote] numbers down. It’s certainly seen as a critical place for the electoral struggle. But anything is possible. Vigilance is essential.”

Lebowitz described the election as “crucial”, adding that “one of the critical questions is what way will the election campaign be carried out”. “There needs to be a mandate for the revolution to proceed. Everywhere, you hear people say that 2007 is going to be a qualitative difference, and how it will [signify] the deepening of socialism. If these questions of socialism are raised increasingly in this campaign, then that will create the conditions for a significant advance next year.”

On September 9 Chavez called for the creation of a “great party of the Bolivarian revolution” to unite the groups that support the revolutionary process in Venezuela. Lebowitz believes that the proposal for a “unique party” is a good one in principle, “but it depends on its content”.

“If its content is just more of the same [an amalgam of the existing parties], it will in fact be a way of reducing democracy from below. If its content is going to be one that strengthens people within the communities for the ability to struggle, and also strengthens the ability of people to organise in the state sectors, where there has been an incredible campaign against co-management, then it [can be positive]. If it doesn’t strengthen people from below, the unique party will be a blockage on the way to revolutionary change, to socialism, rather than an advance.

“That is something I discussed about in my book, which talks about the need for a revolutionary party that can unify those people in the communities and the workplaces, to create people power from below.”

GLW asked Lebowitz about the role that organisations created as part of the Bolivarian revolution — the social missions, the Communal Councils — have played in the revolutionary process.

“I wouldn’t lump them all together”, he replied. “The missions command enormous loyalty from the people. But all the missions aren’t the same. Health, education, the food mission Mercal, those have been very successful. Mission Vuelvan Caras [a cooperatives-based training and employment mission], though, is another question. It is not clear whether it’s delivering on its promises. There has been some disappointment, and pressure on the government to move faster.

“I look at these kinds of institutions, and say, this is what is unique about the [Venezuelan] process. There is a process whereby people are developing their right to make decisions, and it’s not easy to do that in any country. But people have been poor, and apathy has been part of the pattern. So, it is exciting to see the awakening of people, and their sense of ‘this is our right, to go and demand this’. That is the future of the revolution. The question is, will it be nurtured, or will it be cut off?”

Revolutionary democracy

“I gave a talk recently to a meeting in Vancouver. There was an Iranian militant who said that it was like this in the early days of the Iranian revolution. We had these factory committees, he said. We worked closely with the communities, but it didn’t last. There were all these processes set in motion, but it was cut off. I said, it was similar in Cuba. In the early days of the revolution, there were these workers’ committees in the factories, there was a sense of active workers’ power ...

“These things can be part of the fervor of the early days of a revolution. The problem is how do you institutionalize them, how can you create the means by which they can, in fact, not be transitory? Things like the Communal Councils are extremely important, because they institutionalize something here that is not present elsewhere. If they can work, if they can get, for example, the money from those who have it for their own projects, then you can achieve a symbol for revolutions everywhere.

“In Cuba, there is a process where there are neighbourhood committees, there are local councils, but their power is really limited. One of the things I hope that the Venezuelan revolution can succeed in is to stimulate the possibilities in Cuba as well. This is a real dialectic, which is very healthy.”

Chavez has declared the Bolivarian revolution’s goal to construct a “socialism of the 21st century.” Lebowitz explained, “One of the things that Chavez has been very good at in his statements on this is that we are not going to repeat the [previous] process. We don’t want to worship machines, the state; we want a humanistic socialism that starts from human beings, and that’s what the constitution is saying. I think that those are central characteristics.

Socialism

“The link between socialism and democracy is an ideal that is being pursued here. And that means democracy, not just as, every four years you vote, and not as a form, but democracy as practice. Democracy as a process by which people take control over their lives, make collective decisions at every level of their societies. And I think that is a unique conception.

“Compare Yugoslavia [under Josip Broz Tito]. For a whole period, you had the process of self-management in the enterprises, functioning within the market, competing against each other, but no sense of responsibility for a community. Everything was self-interest there [in Yugoslavia].

“That is something Chavez is very sensitive to. I know he’s been very interested in this. We talked about the problem of Yugoslavia, and the problem of self-interest there. That is why he has insisted on a focus, not on exchange of commodities, but on a process in which, as Marxists

like Istvan Meszaros [author of *Socialism or Barbarism: From the 'American Century' to the Crossroads* and *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition*] talk about, there is exchange of human activity based on communal needs and purposes.

“Chavez talks about the need to create a new socialist morality — socialist consciousness, which is based on solidarity. That’s why he has been focusing on the Empresas de Produccion Social [Enterprises of Social Production], the EPSs. The idea is that these would be enterprises that would be oriented to satisfying people’s needs. That was his conception of it.

“And why not cooperatives? Isn’t that sufficient? Because cooperatives are self-interested — collections of producers who have their own goals. And what Chavez was stressing was the need for these groupings of people to internalize their responsibility to the communities in which they function.

“Now, with the EPSs, again there’s always this gap between the conception and the way in which that conception is realized. The way the EPSs are going right now is horrible. They’re not realizing this conception ... they’re creating institutions that see their responsibility to the community as [providing] 10% of their income. We call that taxes! So, that shows the possibility of the perversion, the distortion of the concept.

“There are a lot of potential problems. And, to quote my book, in describing the situation before the revolution, before the election of Chavez, talking about the corruption, clientalism, and bureaucracy of the state, it stated that Venezuela ‘required an economic revolution, a political revolution and a cultural revolution’. And, as I go on to say later, the economic revolution is underway, but the political revolution has only just begun. [The political revolution] made a leap forward with the constitution, but it requires a real transformation of the state.

“And, furthermore, the cultural revolution, which requires a strong attack on corruption and clientalism, has hardly begun. So, without those other two, the revolution cannot help but be deformed. That is the central question.

“People keep saying, the problem in Venezuela is, how can you talk about socialism there because they still have private capital, private ownership of the media, private banks, etc. That is not the problem of the Venezuelan revolution. The problem of the Venezuelan revolution is from within. It’s whether it will be deformed by people around Chavez.”

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Nicaragua: The FSLN's Evolution Since 1990

From Revolutionary to National Bourgeois Party

By Phil Cournoyer

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The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) is not the same party that led the Sandinista revolution to victory in 1979 and then formed a revolutionary anti-imperialist government based on mobilized workers and farmers. It is not even the same party that lost the elections in 1990 to the National Opposition Union (UNO), a pro-U.S. coalition led by Violeta Chamorro and the Managua daily *La Prensa*.

The intractable problems inflicted by the long U.S.-sponsored Contra war compounded by the 1990 electoral defeat brought about a political and ideological implosion of the FSLN's national leadership. Many leaders concluded that the whole revolutionary project had been misconceived. Given the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and of the Soviet Union itself, most of this leadership now believed that socialism was no longer a viable option for Latin America, at least for many decades.

Sandinista bourgeoisie

In tandem with this ideological collapse, many were seduced to buy into the new order. A range of Sandinista leaders and associates participated in a privatization process of state and FSLN property. They emerged as a new sector of the Nicaraguan capitalist class, the so-called Sandinista bourgeoisie.

Both Daniel Ortega and his brother and former head of the Sandinista Army, Humberto Ortega, now have significant wealth and investments, as do other Sandinista leaders such as Bayardo Arce. And the list is much longer. The Sandinista ranks originally accepted this privatization believing that it was a measure to protect "Sandinista patrimony" from seizure by the new right-wing government. Also enmeshed in this process was privatization of public enterprises in favor of union and cooperative members – but often ownership ended up concentrated in a few hands.

These measures became all the more confusing because they coincided with the granting of title to lots, houses, and farms to hundreds of thousands of poor families in Nicaragua. While people indignantly decried the corruption and theft of public resources as the "piñata" (a candy basket or a papier maché figure filled with candies that children bash with sticks at parties to retrieve the sweets), there was mass support for the distribution of property to the poor.

This new Sandinista capitalist sector actually operates in the FSLN as a distinct and public current – the Association of Sandinista Entrepreneurs. They now have a firm grip on the

leadership of the FSLN with Daniel Ortega at the helm. Their power, and Ortega's own power has been greatly enhanced with his election to the presidency.

Bourgeois nationalism

The FSLN today is, in Marxist terms, a bourgeois nationalist party responding to the interests of a sector of the Nicaraguan capitalist class. It is this sector that is decisive, not Ortega as an individual. However, the FSLN is a mass party with deep roots in the population, in the unions and social movements, and among most people who maintain an anti-imperialist stand against the United States. Broad forces such as YATAMA (the largest indigenous party in the Caribbean Coast regions of Nicaragua) look to the FSLN as allies to win support for their social, economic, and cultural aspirations.

The FSLN leadership itself continues to take an anti-imperialist stance, particularly in relation to U.S. wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and through ties with Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia. In the eyes of the vast majority of Nicaraguans it still represents the traditions and gains of the Sandinista revolution and is an anti-imperialist force. To maintain this base, it is under strong pressure to respond to the poor majority's class and national interests, as opposed to those of the traditional oligarchy.

Opponents of the rightward, procapitalist drift of the party have been unable to win significant support within the ranks. Workers, farmers, women, and young people have suffered enormous blows since the 1990 Sandinista defeat, and the mass movement has undergone a long retreat. The workers' movement (organized unions) has been devastated and reduced mainly to the public sector unions, the Farm Workers Association, and the traditional craft unions in the building trades. These setbacks are the main reason why it has proven so difficult to defend the historic program of the FSLN – an anti-imperialist and pro-socialist perspective – from defeatist and pro-capitalist currents.

Origins of the MRS

The first significant break of Sandinista currents from the FSLN occurred in 1995. It was led by Sergio Ramírez, the former Sandinista Vice-president and internationally renowned writer, and Dora María Téllez, the legendary woman guerilla leader and former Sandinista Minister of Health. They had the support of a majority of FSLN deputies in the parliament that followed upon the 1990 electoral defeat.

During the transition process, this current made their own pact with then-President Chamorro to try to guarantee stability to her government. This course was opposed by left-wing currents in the FSLN (eventually grouped around the Democratic Left current led by Mónica Baltodano) and eventually by Daniel Ortega. The Ramírez-Téllez wing of the party was defeated at the 1995 congress and subsequently split to form the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS), a separate party.

In political terms, this was a split to the right, particularly with respect to international issues such as relations with the United States and revolutionary Cuba. One of this current's documents

in the FSLN congress debate actually said that blame for the Contra war with the U.S. fell on the FSLN itself, for having aligned with Cuba and the USSR in the cold war.

Following the split, MRS policies were almost indistinguishable from those of the FSLN. The MRS was completely marginalized in both the 1996 and 2001 national elections, and also in the most recent municipal elections, in which the FSLN won most of the urban centers of the country.

The FSLN-PLC pact

In 1999, the FSLN signed a power-sharing pact with the PLC (Constitutional Liberal Party), then the pro-imperialist party with most seats in the National Assembly and control of the presidency. The pact, which was strongly opposed by Washington, sparked the formation of a breakaway group from the PLC – the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN). The new party was led by capitalist and traditional oligarchic elements in the country (including the powerful Pellas family and the newspaper *La Prensa*).

A key issue in the ALN split was opposition to Arnaldo Alemán's ongoing control of the PLC. The former president is now technically serving a 20-year prison sentence for corruption and money laundering during his administration. But thanks to the pact and to outgoing president Enrique Bolaños's own agenda, Alemán has been allowed to serve his time under house arrest in his luxurious country estate and is free to move about Managua, the capital city.

Alemán's agreement with the FSLN was designed to assure him immunity from prosecution in return for a constitutional change that would lower the electoral bar of minimum votes necessary to win the presidency from 45% to 35%. The pact also entailed a division of posts in the Supreme Court and other state entities between the PLC and the FSLN. Alemán is still waiting for his pardon, a move that only the President, the National Assembly, or the Sandinista judges who handled his trial can make. Both outgoing president Bolaños and Daniel Ortega have preferred to keep Alemán on this leash in order to extract successive concessions from the PLC. Alemán's fate is one of the big prizes up for grabs in the interparty negotiations to determine which forces will take the reins of the National Assembly.

MRS regroupment

Many sectors in Nicaragua also expressed strong opposition to the FSLN-PLC pact, including the MRS; left-wing elements within the FSLN, especially the Democratic Left current; and a large part of what is misnamed "civil society" – non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, and other advocacy groups.

The main result of the pact, however, was to deepen divisions within the traditional right-wing forces in Nicaragua.

The strong stand of the MRS against the pact, combined with its ongoing identification with Sandinista traditions, enabled it to become the core of a new alliance that involved significant forces who left or have been expelled from the FSLN because of their opposition to the pact and to the undemocratic regime within the party.

Last year, the popular former Sandinista mayor of Managua, Herty Lewites, attempted to win the FSLN nomination for president, in opposition to Daniel Ortega's determination to run again after three successive electoral defeats. Ortega and the national directorate of the FSLN responded with great hostility, ultimately expelling Lewites and Victor Hugo Tinoco (former General Secretary of the Sandinista Foreign Ministry) despite years of close relations between them and Ortega.

A new Sandinista opposition

In response to this, a range of former leaders and members of the FSLN formed a new Movement for the Rescue of Sandinism (MpRS). They include three former comandantes of the revolution – Henry Ruíz, Victor Tirando, and Luis Carrión.

Later the forces of the Democratic Left current, led by Baltodano and Julio López (former head of the international relations department of the FSLN), left the FSLN and affiliated to the MpRS. This enlarged group then joined forces with the MRS to form the MRS alliance, using the MRS's legal status to run in the elections. The MRS alliance subsequently attracted other forces, including the Nicaraguan Socialist Party, the Citizens' Action Party, the Autonomous Women's Movement, and the Ecology Party.

The MRS alliance electoral base is largely middle class and is concentrated in Managua, and in Carazo and Masaya provinces (south and southeast of the capital). They gained 50,000 more votes for their parliamentary slate than for their presidential candidate. The explanations for this gap offered by MRS spokespersons are instructive. They say that their presidential ticket lost votes both to Ortega and to Montealegre of the openly pro-imperialist ALN. Some of those 50,000 odd voters cast their ballots for Ortega as a way to defeat Montealegre, while others voted for Montealegre as a way to do in Ortega. Voting for Montealegre is a strange way, indeed, to affirm one's affinity to Sandinista traditions and values!

As a result of these developments, Sandinista forces find themselves separated into two bitterly hostile alliances, each of which has abandoned the FSLN's historic anti-capitalist program.

Sorely needed now and in coming struggles is a fundamental discussion of the way forward for Nicaragua's workers and farmers, indigenous peoples, women, and the younger generation – *las grandes mayorías*, as Sandinistas often put it.

- Is the historic program of FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca still valid in its thrust and aim, or does Nicaragua have to settle for crumbs under the table of imperialist opulence?
- Does Bolivarian Venezuela offer a road forward for Latin America?
- Do Bolivia and the MAS party there open a path for indigenous people across the continent, or is the cause of the indigenous people, as many ex-Sandinistas argue, doomed to defeat?
- Can we in Nicaragua support a Bolivarian option for other Latin American countries, while caving in here to the notion that Nicaragua is an exception, a tiny country with no option but to remain on Washington's leash?

Now that the elections are over, electoralism will have to give way to concrete discussions to respond to the demands of each and every sector of the exploited and oppressed. There is no way that these big questions can be avoided, no matter what the organizational framework of the discussion – FSLN, MRS, or broader.

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Nicaraguan Voters Rebuff Imperialism

Vote for Ortega Shows Identification with 1979 Revolution

By Phil Cournoyer

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Nicaragua's Sandinistas will never forget Sunday night, November 5, and the four days of street celebrations that followed. The first official results of the election came in around 11 pm. They foretold that Daniel Ortega, presidential candidate of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), would win on the first round. Partisans of the Sandinista movement, which led the popular revolution of 1979, had waited 16 long, trying years for this day, ever since the Sandinista government went down to bitter defeat in February 1990.

Across the country, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in jubilation. The celebrations went on for days, until it was clear that all the main political forces contending the election, especially Washington, would accept the FSLN victory. In towns and cities across the country, people danced, chanted, and mobilized to express their determination that no one should deny them their victory. Faced with this popular outpouring, the U.S. and their cronies here backed away from their initial efforts to question the legitimacy of the vote.

Assurances to imperialism

The mood of these celebrations was rather different from that of Ortega's campaign, which sought to distance itself from the heritage of the Sandinista revolution.

To win more support, the FSLN formed a broad convergence of political forces, baptized as United Nicaragua Will Triumph (*Unida, Nicaragua Triunfa*). It included capitalist politicians from other parties, ex-contras (the name given to the counter-revolutionary forces organized and supplied by the U.S. to make war against the 1979 popular revolution), and the Miskito indigenous peoples' party YATAMA (based in the Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions).

Ortega's running mate for vice-president was Jaime Morales Carazo, former chief negotiator for the contras and longtime wheeler-dealer of the PLC (Constitutional Liberal Party), a traditional bourgeois party. The program of this alliance was packaged as "Government Program for Reconciliation and National Unity." Ortega pledged to keep Nicaragua in the U.S.-sponsored Central American Free Trade Agreement and to abide by Nicaragua's international commitments to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). He also assured the business sector that his "national unity" government would fully respect private property and would block any moves towards land occupations.

The FSLN leadership emphasized its rapprochement with Cardinal Obando y Bravo and new, warm relations with the Catholic Church. The church hierarchy exacted a high price for their embrace – FSLN support for a new law banning therapeutic abortion (performed when the pregnant woman's life is in danger; women have had this right in Nicaragua since 1891). Both Daniel Ortega and his wife (and campaign manager) Rosario Murillo have recently become outspoken advocates of the Catholic faith and they suffused their electoral appeal with religious themes and symbols.

Nonetheless, the FSLN proposed to involve Nicaragua in such Latin American-wide efforts as the Venezuelan-sponsored ALBA (an institution that champions fair economic and social relations among its members). Ortega used the campaign to condemn "savage capitalism," calling on voters to oust the national oligarchy from power and elect a "government of the poor." The theme song of the campaign was John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance" with modified Spanish lyrics – "all we are asking is jobs and peace." The main official slogans were "By voting FSLN you win," "FSLN, a preferential option for the poor," and "Reconciliation, Peace, Jobs, Wellbeing."

That was enough to provide Sandinista voters with an opening to deliver a message.

Message from the masses

Although the FSLN alliance chose pink as its election color, every rally evidenced a sea of red and black flags – the colours of Augusto Sandino (the revolutionary national hero of Nicaragua), the long struggle of the FSLN, and of the 1979 revolution – in the hands of enthusiastic supporters. And everywhere they chanted "The people united will never be defeated!"

The election outcome was a telling blow to the U.S. and pro-imperialist forces here. Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia – among other anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist forces across Latin America – immediately hailed the FSLN victory.

Final results showed that Ortega won the presidency with 38% of the vote, well above the criteria for a first-ballot victory (35% of the vote and a minimum 5% lead over the runner-up).

Four other party alliances contended the elections: the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN – backed by Washington); the PLC (controlled by former president Arnoldo Aléman); the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS); and the Alternative for Change Alliance (AC) led by former Contra leader Eden Pastora. The ALN won 28.3%, the PLC 27.11%, the MRS 6.3%, and the AC 0.29%. Results for deputies to the National Assembly and the Central American Parliament were similar.

The election left no doubt that the incoming administration is a minority force in the country. Daniel Ortega and the FSLN caucus will have to negotiate with other parties in the National Assembly to carry out their policies.

U.S. meddling

The U.S. government, the imperial ambassador in Managua (Paul Triveli), and the U.S. Republican Party fought hard to block Ortega from taking the presidency. They missed no

occasion to warn Nicaraguans of the dire consequences of failing to back their candidate, Eduardo Montealegre of the ALN. Their intimidation crusade included threatening to block migrant family remittances on which Nicaragua is now economically dependent, tourist advisory warnings, and efforts to cudgel the two pro-imperialist parties – PLC and ALN – into unity. The U.S. even withdrew visas from recalcitrant leaders and members of the PLC. Millions of dollars flowed from the U.S. to grease the wheels of a vicious anti-Sandinista campaign.

Despite this intimidation, the Sandinista movement improved slightly on its traditional core vote of around 41%-42%. But Sandinista support was now divided between two electoral alliances: FSLN and MRS. The dissident Sandinista alliance – the MRS – won fewer votes than expected (6% of the presidential vote; and up to 14% for their parliamentary candidates in some provinces). Nonetheless, Sandinistas entered and emerged from the elections as a divided force.

The MRS alliance was formed through a convergence of forces who left the FSLN in splits or expulsions since 1995 with other political currents such as the old Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN, once the pro-Moscow force here).

The MRS candidate was Edmundo Jarquín, a former official of the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) who had served as Nicaraguan ambassador to Mexico under the former Sandinista government. The MRS had originally nominated Herty Lewites, the popular Sandinista mayor of Managua. Lewites died last July, and was replaced by Jarquín, his running mate. The immensely popular Nicaraguan musician, singer, and composer Carlos Mejía Godoy ran as vice-presidential candidate.

Sandinista “renewal”

The MRS campaign distinguished itself from the FSLN mainly in terms of a shrill and relentless attack on Daniel Ortega. It condemned Ortega for corruption and totalitarianism, for the FSLN’s 1999 pact with the PLC, and for allegedly accepting support from Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez and Cuba’s Fidel Castro. The MRS alliance accepted money from the U.S. Republican Party to train its electoral workers and met with visiting U.S. senators. It accepted without protest the U.S. characterization that it was an “acceptable democratic alternative” to the “anti-democratic pact” parties – the FSLN and the PLC. The MRS leader and other candidates seemed to believe that this seal of approval from Washington would somehow help their cause.

The MRS refused to pledge support to the FSLN in the case of a second-round vote – which cost it the support of some Sandinistas.

The MRS Alliance contains a current, the Democratic Left led by Mónica Baltodano, that has articulated the need for a socialist alternative for the Americas. Baltodano and her cothinkers joined forces with the MRS as a tactical move to help advance that perspective. However, the MRS Alliance itself shied away from any identification with anti-imperialist or anti-capitalist policies, maintaining a center-liberal orientation that remains programmatically indistinguishable from the FSLN, except on the important question of women’s right to therapeutic abortion services.

Many observers from the national and international left have noted that there was really no “left” option in the Nicaraguan elections. This is a valid appreciation if “left” is taken to mean pro-socialist. However, the combined FSLN-MRS vote indicates that a significant 44% of the population continue to identify with the heritage of the Sandinista revolution and used the elections to express defiance of imperialist arrogance and power. Even PLC voters expressed indignation over U.S. attempts to sideline their party.

Formidable challenge

The incoming Ortega government and the FSLN are now faced with formidable challenges. They will take over the reins of an impoverished country.

When the pro-U.S. coalition defeated the FSLN in a national election in 1990, both international and national capitalist pundits predicted that Nicaragua would grow economically and would soon overcome the devastation and hardship brought on by eight years of the U.S.-orchestrated Contra war. But the new order inflicted even worse on the country. Since 1990, two million people have joined the ranks of the poor. Four of every five Nicaraguans (more than 4.2 million people) live on less than two dollars a day. Fifteen percent of the population migrated to the U.S., Costa Rica, and other Central American countries in search of work. As the country’s principal export, these mainly young workers sent over \$1 billion last year in remittances to their families here. The country is now dependent on those payments and on international donations and loans.

Illiteracy, which the 1979 revolution had managed to reduce to less than 13%, has now climbed to 34%. Expenditures in health, education, and other public services have declined; both the health and educational system are in tatters. In 1989, despite the economic embargo and devastation of the war, the Sandinista government invested \$35 per person annually in health services. By 2005, health spending had declined to \$16 per person

Although some economic indicators have turned positive in recent years, this has only increased concentration of wealth in the hands of the oligarchy and upper middle classes. According to the United Nations Human Development Report for 2005, the poorest 10% of Nicaragua’s population dispose of just 0.9% of the nation’s wealth in contrast to 44.7% consumed by the richest 10%. [Economic and social indicators cited in this article are taken from Oscar-René Vargas, [*Nicaragua: el fracaso neoliberal.*](#)]

During these years of defeat, Nicaraguan working people have been unable to mount effective resistance.

Nicaragua’s new president has appealed to both sides of the class divide in the country. He has assured the international “community” (read capital) and local bankers and oligarchs that they have nothing to fear from the incoming government. At the same time, he has maintained that he will carry out his commitments to Nicaragua’s poor and dispossessed classes.

Workers, farmers, indigenous people and the young expect a lot from the incoming government. They expect improvements in the education system and government support for a massive campaign to reduce illiteracy. People want access to improved and affordable health services.

Farmers demand affordable credits to purchase necessary inputs and passable roads to get crops to market. People everywhere are demanding an end to repeated power cuts and to steep increases in water and electricity costs. They want to block privatization of water and return the electrical system to public ownership. More and more communities are demanding effective measures to protect their environment.

Several of the main unions of the country have put president-elect Ortega and the FSLN on notice that they will press ahead with the same demands they made against the outgoing government, most notably in the health and education sectors.

Women and human rights supporters both here and internationally will not let the incoming government sweep the issue of their right to therapeutic abortion under the rug of the Presidential Palace.

Indigenous people will continue to press for settlement of their communal land claims and to put teeth into laws guaranteeing real autonomy for the Caribbean Coast regions. They are watching closely events in Bolivia and are in touch with indigenous forces there. They are less likely than ever to accept yet another long postponement of their demands and permanent denial of their right to dignity and full participation in Nicaragua society. (The FSLN's main ally on the Coast is the most influential indigenous party, YATAMA.)

With Venezuela or Washington?

The FSLN government thus faces some challenging questions:

- How can Nicaragua both comply with the economic policies dictated by the IMF and backed by local capitalists, and make good on improvements in the standard of living of formal and informal workers, farmers, and marginalized sectors?
- How can the incoming FSLN government both deepen its commitments to free trade with the U.S. and other Central American countries, and also bring the country into a framework of collaboration with anti-imperialist governments in Cuba, Venezuela, and elsewhere? Cooperation with Cuba will be vital in efforts to improve public health services. Nicaragua desperately needs to firm up agreements with Venezuela for cheaper petroleum products and oil, and to take advantage of its offer of long-term, low interest credit and even to accept payment with agricultural and other products. Venezuela already has such agreements with Cuba and other Caribbean and Latin American countries.
- Will Nicaragua set out to reclaim its sovereignty and independence, or will it deepen its ties and dependence on U.S. imperialism?
- Will it recognize the Peoples Republic of China, or maintain its ties with the imposter regime in Taiwan in return for more investments in tax-free sweatshop zones?

Already the FSLN have sent high-level delegations to Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and other Latin American countries. At the same time, high-level talks have been held with the IMF and the International Development Bank. U.S. ambassador Paul Trivelpiece now says he is willing to talk

with Ortega, and no doubt such conversations will take place – salami style, if Triveli gets his way.

Pro-imperialist forces in Nicaragua, not to speak of the Bush administration, are trying to block the FSLN from carrying out any aspects of an anti-imperialist policy, such as joining ALBA or making an oil deal with Venezuela. Prominent right wing commentators, politicians, and business leaders here have issued strong statements warning against such a course.

“Si se puede!”

The outcome of this tug-of-war depends not only on the will of the FSLN leadership or only on forces within Nicaragua. It also depends on how the coming confrontation between the U.S. and Venezuela plays out, how developments relating to Cuba unfold, and on wider international issues.

Nicaragua’s impoverished masses will have their say, too, in all this. The election has raised their hopes and inspired many with a new sense of confidence that “*si se puede*” (yes, we can do it).

Looking further down the road, it is clear that Sandinistas are challenged to reclaim our heritage, to find a way to recommit ourselves to the historic program of Carlos Fonseca, and to link up to a growing world-wide movement for socialism now being spearheaded by Venezuela and Cuba.

Whether the FSLN itself can be won back to this course cannot be foretold. Those committed to a socialist course will no doubt have different tactical approaches, particularly with respect to where to devote key forces – in the FSLN or the MRS, and/or elsewhere.

Our challenge is to find as many points of unity as possible in the daily struggles of workers, farmers, students, and women to defend and advance their rights. Sandinista renewal can be achieved only in ongoing struggle in defence of the class, ethnic, social, and national interests of the oppressed and exploited sectors of the population. These interests include the need to defend Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia against U.S. harassment and attack. Opposition to all imperialist wars like those being waged against Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine also forms a vital component of our ongoing struggle.

People feel that they have won a new opening in this election, the chance for a new course. That could become real. But only if we seize the opening and hold the new government to account. Business as usual is not an option for the poor, the jobless, and the oppressed. We keep on chanting *Sandino vive, la lucha sigue! El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!* (Sandino lives, the struggle goes on! The people united will never be defeated!)