

## Schooling for Capitalism or Education for Twenty-First Century Socialism?

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### Introduction

*UK 2012, Tory plans for the future of workers' rights:*

- Bosses allowed to fire at will.
- Relaxed rules on child labor and firms able to opt out of equality laws.
- Less trade union rights.
- Workers to pay more for and work longer for a worse pension.

*Venezuela 2012, Chávez's plans for the future of workers' rights:*

- Doubling of compensation for unfair dismissal.
- The prohibition of all discrimination, including on the grounds of age, 'race,' sex, religion, sexual orientation and disability.
- The enshrining of trade union freedom, including secondary/solidarity action.
- A retirement bonus, based on workers' monthly wages at retirement multiplied by years working.

We are in the midst of yet another crisis in capitalism. In the UK, we have the most right-wing and ideologically-driven government since Thatcher, using the crisis to drive through a social counter-revolution: intent on drastically diminishing workers' rights and living standards, the latter having been pushed back thirty years (Shaoul, 2012), and undermining the welfare state. At the same time, there are developments in Latin America, in particular Venezuela, where workers' rights are being increased, and a massive welfare state is being actively constructed. Under the government of President Hugo Chávez, Venezuela is heralding the dawn of a new politics and recovering the voice of Marx, but with a twenty-first century socialist focus, thus giving hope to the lives of millions of working people. This is why the world media is intent on discrediting Chávez, particularly in the run-up to the 2012 Venezuelan presidential election; and insisting, at the same time, along with the politicians, that ordinary people have to pay the cost of the crisis in capitalism. What role can radical left educators play at this pivotal moment? Now is a prescient time to bring twenty-first century socialism to the educational institutions of the UK, the US and elsewhere, to teach Marx across the curriculum (see Malott & Cole, 2012).



We can make a distinction between schooling, on the one hand, and education on the other, with the former referring to the processes by which young people are attuned to the requirements of capitalism both in the form and the content of schooling, and the latter, a more liberatory process from birth to death, a process of human emancipation and socialism.

### **Schooling for Capitalism in The UK**

Schooling is being privatised and, therefore, coming increasingly under capitalist control.<sup>1</sup> UK education secretary, Michael Gove, recently gave the go-ahead to a for-profit company, IES Breckland, to take over schools—“the key, for market ideologues, to the transformation of English education” (Milne, 2012). As Seumas Milne puts it (2012), the “‘educational services industry’ believes this loophole of outsourcing school management (rather than directly owning schools) should open the corporate floodgates.” Sir David Bell, top civil servant at the education department until recently, Milne goes on, says he expects profit-making companies to be introduced to running state schools “very gently.” More sweeping privatisation is heralded by the massive growth of “academy schools.” When the coalition came to power in May 2010, there were a few hundred. Today, “[c]ash sweeteners and forced conversions have now driven that to 1,529, including 45% of all state secondary schools.” As Milne (2012) concludes, such schools are less democratic and pave the way for direct business control of what is taught: “[a]cademies are less accountable, less transparent, less locally integrated and less open to parental involvement (governors are appointed, not elected) than local authority schools, while the sponsors or companies that run them can bend the curriculum to their whim.”

### **Education for socialism in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela**

#### *Public Education*

In many ways, the whole Bolivarian project of twenty-first-century socialism is *in its very essence* education in the liberatory sense of the word. In 2010, Chávez described the nature of the Bolivarian Revolution and the role of knowledge and education as the first of three forms of power in the revolutionary process, the others being political power and economic power:

When we talk about power, what are we talking about...The first power that we all have is knowledge. So we've made efforts first in education, against illiteracy, for the development of thinking, studying, analysis. In a way, that has never happened before. Today, Venezuela is a giant school, it's all a school. From children of one year old until old age, all of us are studying and learning. And then political power, the capacity to make decisions, the community councils,

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<sup>1</sup> This process is particularly advanced in universities. As Glenn Rikowski (2012) puts it: “during the ‘highest development of capital’ (not yet reached generally in HE in England) – capital owns and runs universities out of *capital itself*, underpinned by payments (fees) from the buyers (parents/[carers], employers or students), even if deferred through a loans system, and generates value, and surplus-value. Some of the latter is socially transformed into *profit* – which finds its way into the hands of definite individuals or groups of people (be they owners of educational institutions, shareholders or institutional investors). This is when capital acts as capital in the university system in a more *developed* fashion. As Marx notes in the first volume of *Capital*, the nearer schools (and then also universities) approach these circumstances then the more do they become ‘teaching factories.’”

communes, the people's power, the popular assemblies. And then there is the economic power. Transferring economic power to the people, the wealth of the people distributed throughout the nation. I believe that is the principal force that precisely guarantees that the Bolivarian revolution continues to be peaceful. (as cited in Sheehan, 2010, para. 12)

In Gramscian terms, what Chávez describes is the fostering of the development of organic intellectuals of the working class. Chávez made it clear that he doesn't refer to the *reform* of the Venezuelan capitalist state, but its overthrow. As he put it, in perhaps his most clearly articulated intention to destroy the existing state:

we have to go beyond the local. We have to begin creating...a kind of confederation, local, regional and national, of communal councils. We have to head towards the creation of a communal state. And the old bourgeois state, which is still alive and kicking—this we have to progressively dismantle, at the same time as we build up the communal state, the socialist state, the Bolivarian state, a state that is capable of carrying through a revolution. (Chavez: 'I also am a Trotskyist,' 2007, para. 7)

This strategy has been described as the “state for revolution” strategy (e.g. Artz, 2012, p. 2), as part of a strategy of “parallelism” —the creating of parallel institutions—social “missions” which not only provide basic social democratic reforms, but in tandem with the existing capitalist state, build a “self-government of workers” (p. 2). The communal councils which discuss and decide on local spending and development plans provide, in the words of Roland Dennis, a historic opportunity to do away with the capitalist state (cited in Piper, 2007).

If it is the case that Chávez genuinely supports socialist revolution from below, which will eventually overthrow the existing capitalist state of Venezuela, and I believe that he does, then, for Marxists, he must be seen as an ally. Whether he is or not, however, is less important than the fact that he openly advocates and helps to create genuine revolutionary consciousness among the working class.

Venezuela as “a giant school” and “education for socialism” is exemplified by the Revolutionary Reading Plan launched by Chávez in 2009: “A change in spirit hasn't been achieved yet,” Chávez suggested, and argued that the plan will be the “base for the injection of consciousness through reading, with which our revolution will be strengthened even more” (Pearson, 2009, para. 5).

The plan involves the distribution by the government of 2.5 million books to develop the communal libraries. Chávez said that part of the plan was a “rescuing of our true history for our youth,” explaining that many standard textbooks do not acknowledge the European imperialist genocide of the indigenous peoples and their resistance (Pearson, 2009). Chávez went on to recommend that people do collective reading and exchange knowledge, mainly through the communal councils and the popular libraries. He called on communal councils as well as “factory workers, farmers, and neighbors, to form revolutionary reading squadrons,” one of whose tasks is to have discussions in order to “unmask the psychological war...of the oligarchy” (Pearson, 2009, para. 9).

“Read, read and read, that is the task of every day. Reading to form conscious and minds,” Chávez noted, “[e]veryday we must inject the counter revolution a dose of liberation

through reading” (To School for Reading Classes with Karl Marx and Che Guevara, 2009, para. 4). Moreover, the revolutionary reading plan is intended to reaffirm values leading to “the consolidation of the new man and the new woman, as the foundations for the construction of a Socialist motherland, unravelling the capitalist imaginary” (para. 5).

### *Formal Education*

As far as more “formal” education is concerned, since the election of Chávez, there has been a massive increase in funding for primary, secondary and higher education. With respect to the curriculum, the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture stated on its website that the plan will help schoolchildren get rid of “capitalist thinking” and better understand the ideals and values “necessary to build a Socialist country and society.” Education is increasingly put forward by the state as a social good, and a central factor in shaping the system of production (Griffiths & Williams, 2009, p. 37). In line with the Bolivarian Constitution, in addition to the urban and rural poor, access has been extended to traditionally disadvantaged or excluded groups, such as those of African descent and indigenous communities.<sup>2</sup>

Tom Griffiths and Jo Williams (2009) outline the essential factors in the Bolivarian Revolution’s approach to education that make it truly counter-hegemonic. The Venezuelan approach, they argue, draws on concepts of critical and popular education within the framework of a participatory model of endogenous socialist development (Griffiths & Williams, 2009, p. 41). At the forefront, they note, is “the struggle to translate policy into practice in ways that are authentically democratic, that promote critical reflection and participation over formalistic and uncritical learning” (p. 41).

As in the U.K. and the U.S., formal school education in Venezuela is based on an explicit, politicized conception of education and its role in society (ibid., pp. 41-42). However, whereas in the U.K. (e.g., Beckman et al., 2009) and the U.S. (e.g., Au, 2009), the capitalist state increasingly uses formal education merely as a vehicle to promote capitalism, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, “the political” in education is articulated *against* capitalism and imperialism and *for* socialism. In 2008, a draft national curriculum framework for the Bolivarian Republic was released. It stated that the system is “oriented toward the consolidation of a humanistic, democratic, protagonistic, participatory, multi-ethnic, pluri-cultural, pluri-lingual and intercultural society” (Ministerio del Poder Popular Para la Educación, 2007, p. 11, cited in Griffiths & Williams, 2009, p. 42). It went on to critique the former system for reinforcing “the fundamental values of the capitalist system: individualism, egotism, intolerance, consumerism and ferocious competition... [which also] promoted the privatisation of education” (Ministerio del Poder Popular Para la Educación, 2007, p. 12, cited in Griffiths & Williams, 2009, p. 42).

However, as Tamara Pearson (2011) points out, “so far such a vision for education is limited to a number of ‘model’ schools and the majority of Venezuelan children continue to be educated [we might say ‘schooled’] in the conventional way.” She goes on, while education in Venezuela is now accessible to almost everyone, illiteracy has been eradicated, the working conditions and wages of teachers are much improved, and education is more linked to the outside world, mainly through community service and the communal councils, “structural changes in

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<sup>2</sup> As argued in Cole, 2011, chapter 5, while these are welcome developments, there is still much to do.

terms of teaching methods and democratic organising of schools and education have been very limited” (Pearson, 2011). She concludes:

Building a new education system is an important prong to building a new economic and political system, because the education system is where we form many of our values, where we learn how to relate to people, where we learn our identity and history, and how to participate in society. Hence we need an alternative to the conventional education systems that train us to be workers more than anything else, to be competitive, to operate under almost army-like discipline, to focus only on individual results not collective outcomes, and to not really understand our history, or the more emotional aspects of life... The effort to change Venezuela’s education system is intricately connected to its larger political project. (Pearson, 2011, para. 4)

In this respect, it is absolutely crucial that Chávez wins the presidential election on October 7, 2012. In the meantime, there is much to learn from alternative schools, such as the one in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, Mérida.

### **Revolutionary Education in an Alternative School in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, Mérida**

#### *Creating Space*<sup>3</sup>

The school is a small project, started by committed socialist revolutionary residents and activists of Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, perhaps the poorest community in the city of Mérida in western Venezuela. At the time of the research, it had been operating for only six months, and was very much in its initiatory phase. The teachers want to create an alternative for young people who have been left behind in the public school system and re-engage them in participatory pedagogy consistent with socialist and democratic values. The school is currently linked to the Ministry of Education under the title of “alternative school” and receives some state funding.

Reflecting on the overall context of his fieldwork at the school, Ellis points out that the fact that the school is the exception rather than the rule as far as education in the country as a whole is concerned “need not be understood as distressing. It can be seen... as a great opportunity to empower and encourage new forms of change.” He underlines the spaces that the Chávez government has opened up—in this case for “independent and autonomous... new projects to grow and develop.” As Gerardo, a part-time collaborator at the school, a long-time community activist from the barrio, and an organic intellectual of the working class par excellence states: “ten years ago this wouldn’t have been possible. This would have been called ‘terrorist’ and would have to be underground.” As he puts it, revolutionary teachers, unlike before, can advance faster, no longer having “to worry about being hunted down.”

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<sup>3</sup> The initial fieldwork at this school was carried out on my behalf by Edward Ellis, and first appeared in *Racism and Education in the U.K. and the U.S.: Towards a Socialist Alternative* (Cole, 2011). The subheadings in this section of the paper reflect the main issues and concerns that arose in Ellis’s interviews. The issue of racism was also raised (see Cole, 2011, chapter 5). Cole (2011) as a whole specifically addresses racism, and chapter 5 of that volume also considers racism and antiracism in Venezuela.

Gerardo points out that the school has opened many doors for people and that there are “a lot of expectations” from the Ministry of Education, which is hoping that the school might work as “a model for other schools.”

### *Twenty-First-Century Socialist Praxis*

Gerardo is committed to socialist praxis, noting that “socialism is done, not decreed.” Given that the words “revolution” and “socialism” are omnipresent in Venezuelan society, and can be used “without much thought,” Gerardo is working on the *construction* of socialism in the school, being “a bit more responsible in this sense.” As he explains, “here we practice socialism with concrete elements from everyday life...sharing, working in a collective way, friendship, getting along, the fundamental bases of socialism with praxis.” Having seen societies torn apart in a capitalist system based on consumption, and underlining Chávez’s stress on participatory democracy, Gerardo notes that the teachers are trying to teach the children to be “critical and proactive”—“not just criticism but how things can be changed;” “we are trying to show that the children have a participatory role in society, and that this role can be transformative.”

Communication tools are crucial in this process—“the radio, the television, the written word... these things can lead to the transformation of society.” Lisbeida, a university student studying criminology, and a dance instructor, working at the school and in the community as a volunteer, says of twenty-first-century socialism, it “is being redefined, something that is flexible. I believe there are new understandings of what socialism is and how it can be implemented”:

But basically, the core concepts are the same: equality, social justice, elimination of class differences, more horizontal processes, all of this inside our school is an intrinsic part of what we are doing. It’s our base...So we are trying to transmit these values of equality, solidarity, cooperation, collective work.

James Suggett, a writer for venezuelanalysis.com<sup>4</sup> who is also a community activist and a volunteer at the school, reflects Freireian analysis<sup>5</sup> when he says he is critical of those teachers who view socialism as being authoritarian, those who believe they should be getting students into line. For Suggett, “socialism means creating a democratic space in the classroom,” encouraging people “to recognize oppression and overcome it.”

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<sup>4</sup> Venezuelanalysis.com, in its own words: “is an independent website produced by individuals who are dedicated to disseminating news and analysis about the current political situation in Venezuela. The site’s aim is to provide on-going news about developments in Venezuela, as well as to contextualize this news with in-depth analysis and background information. The site is targeted towards academics, journalists, intellectuals, policy makers from different countries, and the general public.”

<sup>5</sup> For Paulo Freire, learning environments, as democratic spaces, entail an absence of authoritarianism (Freire, 1987, p. 102, cited in Freire & Shor, 1987). Such an absence is not to be confused with a lack of authoritativeness. As Peter Ninnes (1998) points out, Freire explains the importance of teachers being authoritative, rather than being weak and insecure or being authoritarian. In addition to democracy, dialogic education centralizes the need to develop an open dialogue with students, and requires a balance between “talking to learners and talking with them” (Freire, 1998, p. 63, cited in Ninnes, 1998). Freire maintains that only through talking with and to learners can teachers contribute to the “[development of] responsible and critical citizens” (Freire, 1998, cited in Ninnes, 1998, p. 65). Freire makes a distinction between the progressive and democratic teacher, on the one hand, which he favors, and the permissive or authoritarian teacher, on the other, which he rejects.

### *Communal, Cooperative, and Democratic Living And Learning*

At the Alternative School in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, each day starts with a communal breakfast, after which students are brought together to discuss what will take place that day. Sometimes communal cleaning of the community center where the classes are held ensues; sometimes the day starts with group activities, focused on reading, writing, or mathematics, depending on what students wish to work on, or need to improve.

Addressing the socialist roots of Venezuela's indigenous communities, Gerardo illustrates Freire's process of conscientization (the pedagogical process by which counter-hegemonic awareness is achieved) as he points out that indigenous peoples have a tradition of companionship, solidarity, respect, and sharing, and that private property did not exist, and how the teachers are trying to break the paradigms of Western society that value "capital more than people," and that prioritize individualism and competition. The school aims to provide the children with a point of departure so that they can all advance together toward socialism. Gerardo points to the use of a pedagogy that "involves the children in collective work and thinking" and includes cooperative games. When the teachers meet with the children, as Jeaneth (the main teacher of the school, a member of the community whose children are studying at the school) explains, the teachers try to emphasize "that we are a collective, and if something happens to the group, it affects us all." Learning at the school is in line with Freire's advocacy of "dialogic education," which entails a democratic learning environment and the *absence* of authoritarianism, of "banking education" (where teachers deposit "facts" into empty minds) and of grades. As Jeaneth puts it:

we plan activities and then ask the children which they would like to work on. They choose the area. We have some basic parameters that they need to work in but they choose. Also, when we leave the school for a trip, we propose the idea to them and they take part in the discussion about how to plan the trip.

Tamara Pearson, like Suggett, a writer for *venezuelanalysis.com* (who is referred to a number of times in this paper), and also a volunteer teacher of reading at the school, points out that:

is forced to do anything and there are no punishments. If they don't want to participate in an activity, they can simply go somewhere else, or sit and watch. Hence, the weight is on the teacher to properly motivate the students and draw them in through the activity rather than discipline and threats of lower grades or whatever.

"There is no grading or competition," Pearson explains, "there's simply no sense of them competing with others." "The idea of the school," she believes, "is to teach using more creative and dynamic methods, without the usual competition and grades and failure and passing and who is first etc., with teachers who are very supportive and friendly, while also involving the community in school life, and vice versa."

### *Socialism and the Community*

As Edward Ellis states, "there is a real emphasis on trying to increase students' participation in all activities." He gives the example of how "the students watched a movie and then discussed how to organize a screening of that same film in their community. A group

conversation was held to identify what the steps necessary would be to put on this screening.” As Ellis explains, “there is a lot of collaboration on the part of the community and different activities are led by different folks...It is quite common for the students to leave the classroom to attend an event in the community.” In addition, as Lisbeida points out, the school’s “activities [are] open to the entire community so that the community is a protagonist in what happens in the school. In that way, the dance group which is part of the school is also part of the community.” Emphasizing how Participatory Action Research (PAR)<sup>6</sup> works in the community and school, Lisbeida explains:

the idea is that the children have an impact in their community, carrying with them this experience to their homes and to their families so that their families also become integrated in the educational process that the school is trying to carry out. So there’s a kind of feedback that we are trying to accomplish between the community and the school. And school-community means family, workers, etc. There is an important interaction which is very relevant to the educational process in the school.

This is not to glamorize the students’ community. As Gerardo explains, some of the students come from homes where there are problems of violence, alcohol, or drugs, or unemployment and its attendant problems. However, as Lisbeida believes, this can also be a source of strength for the students:

As these students come from backgrounds that are very difficult, I think that this gives them the ability to see certain social realities with more clarity: justice, the marked differences between violence and love. I see this as a potential to create criticisms and questions with more meaning. Because they have experienced very difficult things, they are not going to be afraid and they are going to have a very strong base to be critical of things.

Gerardo points out that there is help from some government missions, such as Mission Barrio Adentro (literally “mission inside the barrio”), which provides comprehensive publicly funded health care, and sports training to poor and marginalized communities. Barrio Adentro delivers de facto universal health care from cradle to grave.

In addition, the teachers are trying to improve human relations, not only with cooperative games, from which the teachers are also learning, but there are physical spaces “with a community vision,” such as a community library and a community radio station. As Lisbeida puts it:

we’ve noticed that the children are arriving at their house with new attitudes, and although we don’t have a way to scientifically measure it, we can feel a difference in the attitude of the parents as well... how they treat their children. Something very interesting is happening. Things are changing...[the children] learn things

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<sup>6</sup> Participation Action Research (PAR) involves respecting and combining one’s skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities; taking them as full partners and co-researchers; not trusting elitist versions of history and science that respond to dominant interests; being receptive to counter- narratives and trying to recapture them; not depending solely on one’s own culture to interpret facts; and sharing what one has learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable (Gott, 2008).



based on what they already know and live. In this way, they can also learn that they have the potential to change the reality that surrounds them.

The students at the alternative school in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo are clearly being empowered, and already there are signs of progress. As Lisbeida enthuses, “one of the things that we have seen with this process in the school is that the ones who were thought to be completely without potential or capacity to learn are making people turn their heads. They are doing some incredible things.” As Gerardo concludes:

we’ve only had a short time operating but I have noticed a change in the way the children see things. Before, their world was just the barrio, but now they are looking a little bit beyond this. And I have seen that the children are speaking now, they are conversing... Before everything was resolved through violence. Now there is more talking. There are still some very sharp words, but we are working on it. This has opened many doors for people. There are a lot of expectations...And there are many things that we have learned about ourselves due to the students.

### **Revolutionary Education in an Alternative School in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, Mérida: Update, 2012**

In the summer of 2012, Edward Ellis revisited the school, and talked to its co-founder, Miguel Cortez. Cortez explained how someone from the Ministry of Education described the school as the concretization of the Bolivarian curriculum, so that in one sense the school is not an *alternative* school. However, in another sense, because no one is actually implementing the Bolivarian curriculum to the same extent elsewhere, it *is* an alternative school. He repeated what has been alluded to above, namely, the central contradiction between the very progressive ideas in Government documents, and the difficulty of translating them into practice in the day-to-day curriculum.

In a generally extremely positive account of Chavez’s 39-page proposed plan for the 2013-2019 period of the Bolivarian revolution, Pearson (2012) notes that with respect to education, while the plan mentions increasing enrolment, the building of new schools, the introduction or improvement of certain elements of the curriculum content—such as “the people’s and indigenous history of Venezuela”, as well as strengthening research into the educative process, there are “no structural or methodology changes.” There have hardly been any changes, she argues, in the last 12 years. She concludes:

The achievement of literacy and enrolment of the poorest sectors is important, but the teaching methods are still traditional authoritarian, competitive ones, and while some schools have become more involved in their community life, many are still merely producers of obedient workers and a source of income for the teachers. More radical change than what has been proposed is needed. (Pearson, 2012, para. 21)

What is happening in the alternative school in Barrio Pueblo Neuvo serves as an example of the radical change that is needed to create educative processes rather than schooling to produce obedient workers. Cortez states that when the alternative school was started, the staff decided not to be indifferent to the needs of the students, and soon found out that the students

wanted to participate, that they needed to be a part of everything happening in the school. He describes how the staff proceeded to give the students more and more responsibility, and how the relationship between them and staff is one of mutual respect. In Venezuela, he argues, there is now a generation who understands what is going on—and who need to be subjects of social transformation. “We are building a community,” he stresses, which realizes it has an impact on the barrio.

He gives the example of a money-raising initiative, initiated by the students whereby they made pizza to sell from scratch. In doing this, he argues, they were acting as true researchers. Everyone got a chance to be involved, to write, to look after the money and so on. The students provide a model for participatory democracy, and, as Cortez notes, “they are more democratic than us.” Everyone has access to the money, and the treasurer is currently a five-year-old girl. Crucially, the students take their activities to the central location of the street. Indeed, Cortez talks of “taking the streets,” which would otherwise be under the control of gangs and narco-traffickers. In so doing, the students are helping to foster democratic socialism in the community.

Cortez concludes by stressing the importance of democratizing history, of the centrality of local history to bridge the gaps between generations. All histories are important, he concludes, because they occur in the context of life in the barrio. For the development of participatory democracy and twenty-first-century socialism, the barrios need to be organized, and a discourse has to be constructed. The students at the alternative school in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo are actively involved in this construction, thus providing an exemplar for the resolution of the major contradiction between the progressive policies of the government and schooling as practiced in Venezuelan schools.

## Conclusion

The Bolivarian Revolution and the fostering of twenty-first-century socialism should serve as a revelation for those seeking an alternative in countries ravaged by neo-liberal capitalism. The government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, led by Hugo Chávez, represents, I believe, the best currently existing model in the world for a future socialist society. However, as noted above and stressed by Gerardo, the part-time collaborator in the alternative school in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, and by Chávez himself, the revolution will not be decreed from above.

From a Marxist perspective, it is important to stress the Chávez government’s dialectic and symbiotic relationship with the Venezuelan working class. As Martinez et al. (2010, p. 2) argue, President Chávez continues to be “the defining political factor” as revealed “by the typical political labels that... divide many Venezuelans between *Chavistas* and *anti-Chavistas*.” It is “precisely in the relationship and tension between the Venezuelan government and the social movements that the process of building a participatory democracy comes alive most vividly.” Greg Wilpert (2010) underlines this fact:

To learn about...the movements that stand behind the Chávez phenomenon is...as important as learning about the Chávez government itself. One cannot truly make sense of one without the other. And making sense of and defending what is happening in Venezuela is perhaps one of the most important tasks for progressives around the world today, since Venezuela is at the forefront in the effort to find a real progressive alternative to capitalism, to representative

democracy, and to U.S. imperialism. (pp. viii- ix)

A victory for the “centre right” candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski<sup>7</sup>, in the presidential election taking place on October 7, 2012, would amount to a triumph for capitalism, for neo-liberalism and for imperialism. It would represent a major setback to the building of twenty-first-century socialism. For this reason, and to reiterate, the importance of a Chávez victory cannot be overstated.

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<sup>7</sup> Radonski is running on a platform that supports the massive social programs created by the Chávez Government, but with the claim that he will run them better. As Peter Bohmer (2012) points out, this is indicative of the popularity of these programs, and contrasts significantly with the 2006 election where the opposition ran on a more openly neo-liberal platform.

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