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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

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Spotlight on Manuel Cova (CTV- Venezuela).

Call for social dialogue and trade union unity in Venezuela

Brussels November 18, 2004 (ICFTU online): Manuel Cova, General Secretary of the CTV, the ICFTU's affiliate in Venezuela, explains the difficult climate of constant threats endured by the CTV owing to its role in defense of trade union rights and the movement opposing President Chavez. The CTV, which is planning to reform itself in order to address the major social challenges in Venezuela, is launching a call for trade union unity and the establishment of arrangements for dialogue and participation with all the other social actors.

The CTV has taken part in the opposition movement against Chávez. How do you think relations with the government are to develop in the future, following the recall referendum on the President's mandate?

The CTV has undoubtedly played a leading role in the opposition to the Chávez government, not as a political option - which corresponds to the parties - but based on the mandate given to us by the workers and the trust they have placed in us to best defend their interests.

The CTV has been confronted with constant threats, which have now been renewed, against any kind of trade union action that is not sympathetic to the Chávez Regime. These threats have taken the form of anti-union rhetoric that no government of Venezuela has ever before used and concrete measures violating international labour conventions and standards, disregarding the right to collective agreements, preventing freedom of association, using the weapon of mass dismissal for political motives, and interfering in the internal processes of trade union organisations, even taking intervention to constitutional level, as in the case of trade union elections, in a flagrant violation of ILO Convention 87. The ILO direct contact mission that visited our country in October will undoubtedly corroborate these assertions, in the same way as the ILO Committee on Standards has done.

The CTV share in the view held by the majority of the Venezuelan population, the political parties and other civil society organisations that the recall referendum was plagued with irregularities designed to forestall the smashing defeat that the government would have seen had the process been transparent. We have no doubts on this matter. But, at the same time, we are equally aware that the workers have elected us to defend their interests, whatever the circumstances. The fact is that Chávez continues to be the President, and, over and above any wider political issues, given the nature of the Venezuelan economy, he (the President) continues to be the biggest employer, and it is with him that we have to address the workers' problems. If he wants a dialogue, we are ready to talk, and we have clearly demonstrated this at all levels and through all possible means. We are ready and willing to sit down and talk with the national government, as well as the regional and local governments, as well, of course, as pursuing our negotiations with private sector employers, which have also been distorted by the government's action. The CTV sees dialogue as an effective tool, not as a means of rhetoric, which is why we are insisting on the need to go beyond any political or ideological differences and initiate a dialogue with other trade union organisations, the public sector, employers and other social agents.

The government's calls for dialogue following the latest referendum have been ephemeral, conditional and exclusive. We believe that the government has lost a great opportunity to re-establish consultation mechanisms, to bridge the massive divide it has created among the Venezuelan population. Rather than promoting and exploring the avenues of negotiation needed in any democratic system, it has intensified the concentration of power within the hands of the State and its use of judicial powers as a means of political reprisal, once again reiterating its announcement that destroying the CTV is one of the government's priority aims.

The referendum was intended to ease the conflict and promote democratic unity in diversity, but the result has been quite the contrary.

Do you believe in the possibility of united action between all the trade union confederations in Venezuela, including the UNT?

We firmly believe in this possibility, which is why we have made a formal and public call for such action on two occasions. The first call was made within the framework of the Andean Labour Council, which brought together all the confederations and where we called on the trade union movement to set aside all political interests in function of the higher interests of the workers we represent - particularly in light of the magnitude of the problems they are

now facing, which has created the need for concerted and unified action. We then confirmed this call in writing, sending it to all the trade union confederations, including the UNT, and requested a meeting to draw up a joint agenda for action. CODESA and CGT responded positively, but the CUTV and UNT, linked to the ruling power, did not respond.

The CTV, as the largest body of organised workers in Venezuela, will place every effort into progressing along the road of unity. We believe that the other trade union confederations form part of the country's reality, and group a number of legitimate organisations, which is why we are determined, for the sake of the workers and democracy, to promote concerted action to strengthen the autonomy and independence of the trade union movement and address issues such as unemployment, social security, the casualisation of labour, occupational training, and other problems that urgently need to be tackled and overcome.

The CTV is insisting on unity and dialogue with other trade union organisations, making social dialogue a key priority, as a tripartite instrument to tackle the most pressing problems of Venezuela's workers.

The CTV has decided to hold internal elections. Are you expecting major changes in the Confederation's policies?

We are expecting significant changes, given that this electoral process has not been conceived as a merely administrative procedure based on the statutory expiry of the executive bodies' mandate, but as part of a process of profound reflection that will enable the CTV not only to withstand the blows delivered by the government, but also to renew its leadership structures in accordance with the new political, social and economic situation that exists in the Venezuela of today. We need a CTV capable of successfully combating the growing authoritarianism in the public sphere as well as the anti-union practices being deployed by some employers in private sector, particularly the multinationals; we need a CTV capable of providing a response in a society where over 60% of the active population is employed in the informal sector and more than 20% is unemployed; we need an organisation capable of effectively articulating workers' demands and winning their claims regardless of the strength of the adversary.

How do you see the CTV's role within the international trade union movement, and what do you expect from the ICFTU.

The CTV has always been a confederation with a strongly internationalist vocation - an important legacy of our founders and leaders and one which has shaped our organisation since its inception almost 70 years ago. We will continue, as far as our resources and capabilities will allow us, to take an active part in all the structures of the international trade union movement.

Throughout the history of our organisation we have been given a firsthand insight into the impact of international trade union solidarity and action on the spiritual and material welfare enjoyed by the workers of the world. We have received and offered solidarity. We now intend to pursue and strengthen our role in the changes and new challenges affecting trade unions at international level, such as the globalisation of the economy and all the dangers it entails. The challenges and opportunities that globalisation presents have reinforced the need for a global trade union movement that is united in the proposals it makes, and effective and democratic in the action it takes. In this sense, we see our International Confederation's forthcoming Congress to be held in Japan in December as a historic moment. In today's world, maintaining the status quo is tantamount to regression: we have to make the changes required to adapt to our new circumstances. This is what we expect from the ICFTU, and it is at this level that the CTV is preparing to contribute, as an essential part of its international commitment.

In Venezuela, these changes translate as greater solidarity in light of the totalitarian measures we are facing, the deterioration in the conditions and rights of our workers, and the unconditional opening our government is giving to transnational capital in sectors directly controlled by the State. We also expect the ICFTU to back the call for unity we have made to other Venezuelan trade union organisations.

We also hope international strategies will be drawn up so that we can give a human face to economic integration processes, so that priority for human beings rather than the trading of goods paves the road to modernity. We are hoping for timely and proactive measures, taken at global level, to successfully and realistically tackle this new world where the speed of information, capital flight, the casualisation and tertiarisation of employment, not to mention the incredible speed at which production and jobs can be shifted from one place to the next, are threatening the very essence of humanity, freedom and wellbeing.

We need the ICFTU and ORIT to be actively present in our country. In terms of concrete action we hope that the ICFTU will organise a Mission to Venezuela without delay, to witness the situation of our workers on the ground, observe the main political trends, draw attention to democratic values, and highlight the fact that these values rest on unrestricted trade union rights and freedoms. We hope that this Mission will contribute to the unity of Venezuela's trade union movement and the establishment of participation and dialogue mechanisms with other social actors, including the national government.

The ICFTU represents 148 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 152 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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