



On the situation of unions in Venezuela

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- Under current conditions, unions in Venezuela are extremely weak.
- This is due on the one hand to government opposition to the Confederación de Trabajadores Venezolanos (Confederation of Venezuelan Workers) (CTV) as part of the political opposition, and to the fact that it is not recognised as a partner in negotiations. On the other hand, new unions that are faithful to the regime, and whose goal is not so much improving wages and working conditions as providing political support for Chávez's "revolutionary" project, have formed under the aegis of the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (National Union of Workers) (UNT).
- The two other union federations, the Confederación de Sindicatos Autónomos de Venezuela (Venezuelan Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions) (CODESA) and the Confederación General de Trabajadores (General Confederation of Workers) (CGT) are currently in negotiations with the CTV on establishing a unified organisation, which could then be a member of the planned Confederación Sindical de las Américas (Union Confederation of the Americas) (CSA).
- International union organisations should actively support the national unification process, particularly by providing consulting, and especially by coming to a clear assessment of Mr Chávez's policies.

The CTV in the corporate system (1958-1998)

The union federation CTV (Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela) (Confederation of Venezuelan Workers) was founded in 1946 under the tutelage of the Acción Democrática (Democratic Action) (AD) party. As the first governing civil power since the country's independence, the AD party monopolised politics and the administration from 1945 to 1948 before succumbing to a military coup. Out of this historical experience the AD and the other parties which had meanwhile emerged, and which overthrew the military dictatorship of Marco Pérez Jiménez in 1958, concluded a pact (Pacto de Punto Fijo),

which was designed to keep the military out of politics and included all civil political entities, apart from the Communists, and which established an initially relatively open, corporate competitive democracy. Unions were a supporting pillar of this political system with the central function of politically and socially integrating the workforce. The state recognised the unions as legitimate representatives of workers' interests and provided them with attractive opportunities to participate in all decisions affecting union members. In return, the unions undertook to maintain industrial peace and channel their demands through government authorities. The influence of the AD and other parties in the CTV, the predominant union federation, set strict limits on the unions' autonomy and restricted their freedom to act. Labour laws were also restrictive and interventionist. The executive regulations of the Labour Act of 1974 made it almost impossible to use the right to strike and a further law passed in 1990 obliged union leaders to annually disclose their financial conduct, threatening

them with the intervention of state auditing authorities in case of non-compliance. On the other hand, the CTV had its own parliamentary faction, which was able to propose legislative initiatives for reforms benefiting workers. The relationship with the state was determined mainly by the Ministry of Labour, which usually promoted those individual unions it was sympathetic to as much as possible and treated them preferentially in collective negotiations. Out of its specific role, the CTV developed a self-image based on cooperation and dialogue but not on conflict and confrontation. Within the American regional organisation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores (Inter-American Regional Organisation of Workers) (ORIT), the CTV was or still is regarded as a fairly conservative organisation.

The corporative system was successful for more than twenty years. Based on growing income from oil exports, it succeeded in reaching normally mutually exclusive goals concomitantly. Fast-growing consumer spending was proven to be compatible with levels of investment that increased just as quickly. Wages in the industrial sector grew much faster than productivity without in any way restricting entrepreneurs' high profits. The state's high levels of social spending were compatible with enormous public investments in the productive sector. After the nationalising of the oil industry in 1974 in particular, the political elite relied on the model of bond-financed state capitalism, which assigned the role of central economic agent of development to the state. But the megalomania of political projects, the creation of increasing numbers of new institutions and swiftly proliferating government bureaucracy, the government's significant administrative and organisational inefficiency and excessive political clientelism led to the failure of this model against a background of stagnant and declining incomes from oil in the eighties. The state claimed to be omnipotent, but was in fact only omnipresent. The devaluation of the national currency in 1984, a traumatic experience for many Venezuelans, meant a visible and particularly drastic end to the bonanza, produced sharper distribution conflicts and eroded the basis of corporativism's legitimacy. The accompanying bureaucratisation of political parties and unions and their comprehensive inability to recognise the structural reasons for the failure of the bond-based development increasingly distanced them from their societal base. In 1984 a tripartite social pact collapsed due to a lack of resources, as did President Carlos Andrés Pérez's attempt to introduce a fundamentally appropriate but socially unbalanced change of course towards a market-

based development strategy in 1989, which was greeted with a national uprising (Caracazo). This planned reform revealed the limited autonomy of the CTV, with various public service unions going on strike over the project, but union representatives in parliament agreeing to it. The policy of President Rafael Caldera (1994-1999), with its underlying radical-populist discourse, also ended in failure, completely discrediting the main actors in the pact of Punto Fijo, not without their active contribution. The twenty-year economic decline was expressed in a rapid informalising of the economy and the labour market with various signs of social anomie. By 1995, the rate of union membership, which was 33% in 1975, had declined to 13.5%. According to the most recent available data from the Labour Ministry, around 11% of the workforce were subject to collective bargaining agreements at the end of 2005. Because not all these employees were union members, the current rate of union membership may be well below this figure.

The marginalising of the CTV under the Chávez Government (1999-2004)

Hugo Chávez contested the presidential elections in 1998 with an extremely popular fundamental critique of the "representative" democracy of the so-called "4th Republic", which he contrasted with his concept of "participative" democracy. He left no doubt that the "corrupt" and "bureaucratised" CTV was one of his main opponents. At the beginning of 1999, the CTV countered these attacks with an extraordinary congress, which made a decision on the fundamental democratisation of all base unions and the union federation, but which was not initially followed up with action. After President Chávez took office on the 2nd of February 1999, the new government attacked the unions head-on with a series of measures ranging from the intervention in an organisation and the seizure of its headquarters, up to the confiscation of bank accounts. To prevent further assaults, the entire CTV board resigned and commissioned a provisional leadership with the holding of union-internal elections. In addition to various other factions, the Chávez-linked Frente Bolivariano de Trabajadores (Bolivarian Workers' Front) (FBT), which was also represented on the election commission, was involved in this attempted re-legitimation. The Frente Unitario de Trabajadores (United Workers' Front) (FUT), which was close to the party Acción Democrática and other political groups, formed the opposition. Even in the preparatory phase there were fierce confrontations that so politicised the process that it was no longer concentrated on union issues, but on siding either with the political opposition or with Chávez.

The new elections for leadership of the union in the base organisations and the union federation were dragged out from August 2001 until January 2002, thereby opening the floodgates to countless irregular procedures and attempted manipulation from all sides. What does seem certain however is that more than 920,000 employees in the base organisations and about 304,000 people in the union federation were involved. This is a clear indication that at the beginning of 2002 the CTV could be regarded as by far the strongest federation with the highest number of union members. On the other hand, the long election process ended with the disappearance of 49% of the completed election lists, so the result can be said to reflect the actual balance of power only to a limited extent. The count of the available lists gave the FUT's leading candidate, Carlos Ortega, 57.4% of the votes and the FBT's candidate, former mayor of Caracas and subsequent Minister of Education Aristóbalo Istúriz, 15.8%. The election of Carlos Ortega as President of the CTV with a majority may be fairly plausible, because as a labour leader for many years in the oil sector, he was a proven unionist, while his opponent entered the race as the personally preferred candidate of President Chávez without having any union background. In addition to this, the organised workforce, being part of the middle class, cannot really be regarded as belonging to the "natural pool" of Chávez voters. Chávez's side did not recognise these results and was supported by the country's highest court. The government responded to the failed takeover attempt with a policy of not recognising the CTV and its individual unions as legitimate representatives of employee interests and promoted as far as possible the establishment of parallel unions through the Labour Ministry, which were of course supported by the Ministry. In 2003/2004 alone, the number of individual unions recognised by the Labour Ministry increased from 2,974 to about 4,000.

Under Ortega's leadership the CTV was completely integrated into the ranks of the political opposition. In view of the increasing protests against the Chávez government, the CTV called a strike against the government's "increasingly dictatorial policies", thereby contributing to the mass demonstrations that on the 11th of April 2002 resulted in the attempted coup by short-term President Pedro Carmona. From December 2002 until February 2003 the CTV and the business umbrella organisation FEDECAMERAS (Federación de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción de Venezuela) (Venezuelan Federation of Commerce and Production Chambers and Associations), acting in an unusual alliance, organised a "civil strike" aimed at overthrowing

the President. This civil strike was followed by the paralysis of oil production and export caused by the management of the state-run oil company PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anónima). After the failure of this adventure, Ortega went into exile in Costa Rica in 2004, but was sentenced to 16 years in prison after illegally returning to Venezuela in December 2005. Ortega escaped from prison in August 2006 and now lives in Peru, whose government has granted him asylum for "humanitarian reasons". The CTV sees him as one of those persecuted by the Venezuelan judiciary for political reasons and still regards Ortega as their legitimate President.

Under the leadership of CTV general secretary Manuel Cova, who had been a candidate together with the exiled President on the FUT list, the federation continued its adopted policy as part of the Coordinadora Democrática, a loose political opposition alliance. At the beginning of 2004, this alliance forced a referendum over his dismissal on the President in accordance with the Bolivarian constitution, which resulted in a clear victory for Chávez on the 14th of August 2004. Opposed by the state, supported only by weak and resigned opposition parties, losing its member organisations and probably also financially depleted, the CTV's real influence shrank to a minimum. The organisation had drifted into insignificance.

The other union federations of the "Fourth Republic"

The three remaining union federations are less important in terms of the size of their memberships. In 2001/2002 only 9,300 members in 34 national and regional organisations took part in the union-internal elections of the Confederación de Sindicatos Autónomos de Venezuela (Venezuelan Confederation of Autonomous Unions) (CODESA). In the Confederación General de Trabajadores (Workers General Confederation) (CGT) 7,940 members in 49 national and regional organisations voted. Both organisations belong to the Christian World Confederation of Labour (WCL) and at a continental level to the Central Latinoamericana de Trabajadores (Latin American Central of Workers) (CLAT). The CGT initially sympathised with President Chávez's project and several of its board members have been given high positions in the administration. The union arm of the Communist Party (PCV), the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Venezuela (United Workers Confederation of Venezuela) (CUTV), is another union federation, supported in particular by metal workers in the state of Aragua. No statements can be made about their membership numbers because they have not been involved in any elections. At an

international level, the CUTV is a member of the communist World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and at a continental level it is part of the Comité Permanente de Unidad Sindical de los Trabajadores de América Latina (Permanent Congress of Trade Union Unity of Latin American Workers) (CPUSTAL), which is now mainly based on Cuban unions.

The Communist Party and the CUTV as its driving force support the Chávez project in principal. The general secretary of the PCV, Oscar Figuera, is both President of the CUTV and a sitting member of Parliament and represents orthodox Marxist Leninist positions. The Communist Party's refusal to comply with the President's demand, made in mid-December 2006, to dissolve the PCV and integrate itself into the Bolivarian socialist unity party (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) (United Socialist Party of Venezuela), is an indication of the party's distance from Chávez.

Union federations under Chávez

In one of his frequent addresses, which all state and private radio and television stations are required by law to broadcast (Cadena Nacional), President Chávez declared on the 26th of March 2007:

"We need the Party and the unions, but not every organisation separately, not autonomously. For the unions, the same applies as for parties who seek autonomy and want to make decisions; that cannot be. We are not here to make a muddle, but a revolution."

The then Minister for Telecommunications and President of the telecommunication company CANTV, Jesse Chacón, now a Minister in the President's Office, noted in an address to the employees of the then recently nationalised company in April 2007:

"You are now all employees of the revolutionary government and must subject your rights to the interests of the Revolution. Anyone who doesn't agree with this is free to leave the company ..."

President Chávez's political concept is that of "delegative" democracy, in which all powers are transferred to the President during his time in office by the people, whose wishes are then carried out. Separation of powers, judicial independence and intermediary institutions such as parties or unions have no place in this concept, because they would only disrupt direct communication between the leader and the people and the will of the people would perhaps be falsified. The organisation of employees into unions therefore only makes sense if these are an integral part of the revolutionary unity party, whose role is strictly limited to the preparation and organisation of elections, mobilising the population and functioning as a loudspeaker for

his message. It is therefore not surprising that there has so far under Chávez been no formally constituted federation of trade unions that has received the President's blessing.

Since April 2003 a provisional union junta has existed under the name of the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (National Workers' Union) (UNT), which consists mainly of organisations previously belonging to the CTV. According to their own not very reliable information, the UNT had about 600,000 members in 2005. Since they are under direct pressure from the government, these organisations may well be drawn mainly from the public authorities and state-owned enterprises. From the outset, several factions have competed for dominance within the UNT. For this reason, the founding Congress of the more than 2,000 delegates required to elect a proper board could only be convened in June 2006. This turned into a confrontation between two factions, an apparent majority around union leader Orlando Chirinos, who argued for immediate elections, and a minority around union leader Marcela Máspero, who advocated a delay in view of the Presidential elections in December 2006. The Congress collapsed after the minority withdrew.

Orlando Chirinos represents the Trotskyite Corriente Clasista Unitaria Revolucionaria Antiimperialista (C-CURA), which has links with the Third Internationale and now advocates a united "democratic, participative and autonomous" union movement. When the constitutional referendum was held on the 2nd of December 2007, he called on voters not to vote and was probably for this reason dismissed by his employer, the state-run company PDVSA, in February 2008. Marcela Máspero was a parliamentarian in the "Fourth Republic" for the Christian socialist COPEI (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente) (Independent Electoral Political Organization Committee) party, a board member of the CTV and CLAT, and currently heads a group called Opción de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Option of the Revolutionary Left) (OIR). She advocates unconditional support for President Chávez and has applied for membership in his socialist unity party. In addition to a series of mini groups, three further factions are active in the UNT: The orthodox Fuerza Bolivariana de Trabajadores (Bolivarian Worker's Force) (FBT), which supports Chávez and is led by the current Labour Minister José Ramon Rivero, former Minister for Light Industry, José Khan, and parliamentarian Oswaldo Vera, who recently proposed dissolving the UNT with the argument that it had fulfilled its main task by "liquidating" the CTV; the Autonomía Sindical as the union arm of the Chávez-linked Patria para Todos (Fatherland for All) (PPT) party led by parliamentarian Orlando

Castillo; and the Movimiento de Trabajadores Revolucionarios Alfredo Maneiro (Alfredo Maneiro Movement of Revolutionary Workers) (MONTRAM), which has a certain support base in the public sector and whose leaders, Franklin Rondón and parliamentarian Francisco Torrealba, have also applied to join the PSUV.

In view of the number of factions and especially the frequently observed personal ambitions of the actors it may be regarded as very unlikely that the UNT will ever become a union federation and legal entity in its own right with its current staff. In view of the regional and municipal elections due in October/November it may also now be an absolute priority for President Chávez to finally get his United Socialist Party onto its feet, because it is so far not legally constituted. It must also be added that President Chávez's proposed constitutional reforms, which were rejected with a small majority in a referendum on the 2nd of December 2007, included provisions for creating "workers' councils", which might have tended to deprive the unions of their membership base.

The Venezuelan union federations from an international point of view

The Venezuelan government is the sole recipient of the country's large oil revenues and determines their distribution. This demonstrates the government's unusually strong supremacy as compared with the private sector and society in general and makes life very difficult for socio-political organisations seeking a higher degree of autonomy. The Chávez government's goal is to develop domestic production, against the established private sector, using state-owned companies, cooperatives and so-called "social production enterprises". In practice however, it is not making progress towards this goal. In fact, the bond-financed state capitalism model of the "Fourth Republic" is celebrating a comeback, this time in an authoritarian plebiscitary democracy, in which unions are at best tolerated and are permitted little freedom of action. Preoccupied with their own survival, the Venezuelan unions are playing no active role in the process of unifying ORIT and CLAT or are rejecting it, as have the UNT and communist CUTV. UNT leader Marcela Máspero, who was until January 2007 a member of the executive committee of CLAT, now believes that the fusion of ORIT and CLAT is a manoeuvre by oligarchs and imperialists designed to isolate the Chávez government. The three union federations, the CTV, CODESA and CGT are currently negotiating the formation of a unified organisation in 2008, which could then be a member of the planned Confederación Sindical de las Américas (Union Confederation of the Americas) (CSA). It would be desirable, if

unlikely, if the fusion of CTV, CODE-SA and CGT were accompanied by a replacement of staff and a rethink of union policy positions. International union organisations should actively support the national unification process, particularly though consulting, but especially more clearly assess Mr Chávez's policies.

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