

What does the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores stand for? New trends in Venezuelan labour

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As a Venezuelan worker, it is an honour for me to be here with this group of Canadian workers, especially at this quite historic moment, when it's very important for us in Venezuela to have the understanding and solidarity of workers around the world. In my presentation this evening, I would like to talk a bit about the background, about how the union movement was before the government of President Chávez, the current political situation, and some of the political issues we were facing leading up to the birth of the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (U.N.T.), National Workers Union, and how things stand now.

The largest trade union central for many years in Venezuela was the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV), the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, and it fought many important battles, especially during the years of the dictatorship. Over the years, it started to lose credibility, however, because of positions it took, which were very pro-government and because of its many agreements with management and the government, which were reached behind the backs of the workers. The CTV saw the need to democratize itself and renew its credibility which led to an approved vote in 1995 undertaken by all rank-and-file members. This was agreed to at a convention and that was how I managed, in that last phase, to get onto the executive board of the CTV. But we were very disappointed when we joined the new executive to find out that the whole idea of democracy and renovation was not really going to materialize.

When we look at why the CTV began to lose credibility, in addition to all the agreements that were made behind the backs of workers with government and business, there was also a sense of the privilege that those labour officials had, and especially those labour officials who were involved in some of the financial institutions that were supposed to be benefiting workers, such as the Workers' Bank. Lately that institution was the source of a major scandal and a number of the leaders, the members of the board of the Workers' Bank of Venezuela, had warrants out for their arrest and a lot of those financial institutions ended up not actually meeting the needs of rank and file workers although the people who sat on the boards of these financial institutions, supposedly represented workers. They actually were there to only line their own pockets.

For us, the democratization of the CTV did not happen as was planned and I can speak from my experience as a member of a private sector union. When we tried to form a group of people to make up a slate to run against the current leadership, we found out

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that the CTV was very powerful and many of the people who dared to form an opposition slate were either fired by their companies or brought up on charges by the union itself.

The political moment was one when the International Monetary Fund was wielding a big stick in Venezuela and our government was basically on its knees doing whatever the large international financial institutions wanted . I'm referring to the period of the last Presidency, the one before President Chávez. During that period, the CTV and the Federation of Chambers of Commerce, formed what they called a "tri-partite movement" with the government and this is one issue the International Labour Organization (ILO) talks a lot about a "tri-partism". We really reject their view of what trade unions should be doing in terms of forming agreements. What happened was, that the top leaders of our labour movement, joined up with the Chamber of Commerce and the government, to hatch a plan to completely transform the social benefits and the whole regime of unemployment benefits and fringe benefits that workers had enjoyed. It was supposed to be based on improving benefits, based upon seniority and a living wage package, social security for everyone.

People had a lot of hopes during this period. But it didn't turn out that way at all and the failure of this so-called "agreement" to improve the lives of Venezuelans led to an even greater loss of credibility for the CTV and again there was a very low expectation on the part of workers that their union organization would do anything positive for them.

This led to the national elections in December, 1998, in which people felt betrayed by the traditional political parties; they felt betrayed by the government that was in power and workers in particular felt betrayed by the CTV. There was really a lack of credibility in all the major institutions of our country and it was at that moment people started listening to Hugo Chávez who was a candidate for the Presidency and who talked of building a better society. I actually believe people voted for Chávez without any direction from their trade unions about how to vote or any particular ideological orientation, but rather they were seeking solutions to their problems and what Chávez was promising at that point was to clean up the corrupt institutions, to bring in a new constitution and to change the way government operated.

When he assumed power, his first major programme was to set up a national constituent assembly to develop the new constitution. This was something that began in the middle of 1999 as a process which involved large numbers of people and the resulting constitution was a document that definitely did improve the social and labour rights of people. It was also a real switch from a kind of representative democracy as had been structured before, to something that we could now call participatory democracy. The new constitution included a number of clauses that were very new, such as a requirement for social oversight of all state agencies and a co-responsibility, which involved evaluation of all government policies by the people.

The trade union centrals and the political parties participated in the constituent assembly. The goal was to bring the top decision makers together, to reach some agreement about the legal instruments that would re-structure trade unions from that point

forward, especially with respect to a legislative bill that was called "The Union Democratization Act". This Act had a number of elements, a number of which the ILO has complained about as being too "interventionist", but I would like to say that the very contentious measures that were in the union democratization bill, were written partially by the trade-unionists themselves. My organization participated in the writing of those rules and we felt that was the way we wanted to do it. One of the important elements of this law was that unions would produce their financial statement, their accountability statements, and present them to a national body, where they would show where they got their money and where their money was going.

The people who had participated in this high-level discussion were the top leaders of the CTV. These were people who historically had enjoyed some of the highest level of privileges of anybody in Venezuela. Some of these trade-union leaders are richer than some business owners and the government functionaries who had lined their own pockets. These are people not without their own financial interests. And this led to a lot of confusion.

However, the government implemented a rather large outreach programme. All the trade union centrals participated in the discussion about how the new law would be structured to ensure there would be trade union democracy, or at least a move towards a more democratic trade union movement and the top leaders were involved, although I was not, as I was an alternate at that point.

An agreement was reached to have a referendum on the unions. This proposal was also questioned by the ILO, because this was a referendum that was to be put not only to members of trade unions, but before all the Venezuelan people who would be able to vote on whether the trade unions should go through the democratization process and re-confirmation of their leaderships. After the CTV reached an agreement that this was the process they would undergo, they then got rid of all their current leaders and put in place some boards to go through this democratization process. This was not the way it was supposed to be, but it was a decision that they made internally and not one that was imposed by the government. Rank-and-file votes took place in all the work-places; all the labour centrals were involved in them, except for two which did not participate.

After these agreements were accepted, all the unions had to run their elections and present their results to a national electoral council, which had the power of oversight over all the trade union votes in the country. Each union set up its own electoral council to internally oversee its own votes and to establish their own rules. The CTV unions participated in this, as did the General Confederation of Labour (CGT).

These union elections led to a renewal of leadership. All I can tell you is that there were some unions that had had the same secretary general for forty years. And they never had had local elections where the rank-and-file could vote, so this was a real democratizing process. There was participation, there was real participatory democracy and that process changed workers and of course the leaders of the federations did change during the process.

Sadly, the CTV then took an unfortunate route. Although they may have held elections wherever they had a base, forty-eight percent of the reports of their election results were never filed with the national electoral council and this cast a shadow of doubt over the whole process about whether it had been fair and about who had actually won these elections. When they presented their slate of their new board of directors, the new executive of the CTV, President Chávez was put in a difficult position. He said, "I don't know if these people have won or didn't win. I can't sign off on this because you haven't presented the papers that you were supposed to present on completion of the elections." So there was a new leadership of the CTV; it was renewed in some way, but it didn't match what the election results had been and it wasn't done according to the rules that they themselves had agreed to and this led to more loss of credibility for the CTV.

At the same time there were organizations within the CTV, different currents within the CTV, that were very much in favour of deeper changes, more transformation of the way the labour movement operated in our country. I, for instance, participated as a member of an organization called the Bolivarian Labour Forces, we were members of the CTV, and before the elections within the CTV, we had major discussions about whether we should participate in these elections. Many of us felt it was good to challenge from within and it was good to carry out a fight that would cause an internal debate. We felt we should go forward with this and if it would change the CTV from inside, it would avoid further fracturing of the labour movement, which we felt would be very good. We had four labour centrals at the time, of which the CTV was the largest. The activists believed in working inside the CTV.

Around this time, the National Assembly was discussing forty-nine pieces of enabling legislation that would really change the way government operated and we wanted to be part of that. For instance, one of the forty-nine pieces of legislation was the Fisheries Act that had special provisions for those inshore fishers who were casting nets close to the shore and it protected their rights to have a livelihood.

Another one was the land-reform act that was commonly and erroneously known, although it was not, as an "appropriation act", something of which internationally we have been accused. We have a country where there are a lot of people who are hungry and there is a lot of land that is not being farmed. And the purpose of the Land Act was to ensure that any land that was not in use and could be farmed, would be farmed. And the land that was not in use could be turned over to peasants so that they would farm the land and develop food security for our country.

There was a lot of social context in these pieces of legislation. There was a micro-financing law for example; there was also a law on the public service. There were some things about the Act when it was first presented with which we didn't agree. We had a big debate about it; changes were made to it and we were much more satisfied with the resulting legislation. However, the CTV on the other hand, took the position that this was the exactly wrong direction for the country to go in and together with the Federation of the Chambers of Commerce, called a strike in December of 2001. I don't know, but this

may be the only strike in the world where the people showed up for work, were sent home and were paid their salary to be on strike against their companies.

Things started to really heat up in the streets. There was a lot of opposition from those people who had the most privilege to the fact that we had land reform and poor people had access to credit. A lot of people, who traditionally held positions of privilege, didn't like the way things were turning out. And in 2002, these people who didn't like the new direction of the government, got together and led a coup against President Chávez. This was also a work stoppage. Many of the presidents of the various trade union federations, in the electrical sector, in the oil sector, in the public sector and private sector unions, were against the work stoppage that led up to the coup. We could see that the only purpose of it was to overthrow President Chávez. There were no worker demands behind this work stoppage at all, it was really just meant to paralyze the country and throw the President out.

This time when the work stopped, nobody got paid. But what did happen was that President Chávez was thrown out of office and for forty-eight hours he was not able to govern the country. The people came out on the streets in a massive way without any particular programme except that we wanted our president back. With one stroke of the pen, the interim government wiped out the new constitution and all the very important changes that we had worked so hard for and had built a consensus around, the idea of having the people's involvement in determining policy. This was a big mobilizing issue during the forty-eight hours when the interim government took over from President Chávez. The representative national assembly and even the Supreme Court were wiped out by these people, so when President Chávez came back, some people thought there should be some very hard measures taken against those people who plotted the coup. But what happened instead, was that President Chávez called for a round table and a national dialogue.

I was fortunate to be one of the workers' representatives at that national table. There were four worker representatives. I was still with the CTV at that time and there were representatives from a number of sectors, including the media, university workers, business leaders; the whole purpose was to develop some kind of consensus. This round table dialogue didn't last very long, but when it looked like it was moving towards a consensus that was very progressive, some of the reactionary people who had been involved in this dialogue, started to pull out. Why did they pull out of the process? Because these were the people with privileges who thought that their privileges would be taken away or certainly not guaranteed.

We formed a team internally in the CTV to have a dialogue with our rank-and-file, with small companies and with the government, to talk about how to make the country work better, how to make things more productive. For instance we took part in a discussion around an industrial strategy for the auto sector and we arrived at an agreement between the unions and the business sectors. It was an industrial policy which balanced the need to have jobs with the need to have productivity and to put in place a policy to make sure that our auto assembly plants would stay in the country, and they

have, to this day, been able to generate not just bigger sales of automobiles, but also more jobs.

We were lucky that President Chávez was interested in convening the round tables. We had some large meetings, for instance, at the Ford plant and the President actually signed on as a guarantor of the agreement on our Auto Pact that was also signed by the Ministers. It was very important to us that the President was close to these discussions in the various industrial sectors, which also took place in the textile and electrical sectors. At this time, the state electrical company seemed to be on the verge of a major privatization and that well-known strategy was being used where they try to run down the state-owned company, to make it look really inefficient and claim that it is not working and then turn it over to private hands. When we brought this to the attention of President Chávez, he became the number one opponent of privatization and he said so in all his speeches and he said that he would not only oppose privatization, but he also proposed co-management with the workers to make sure that the state-run electrical company would operate efficiently.

Obviously, the CTV's open role in the coup, led to a lot of friction within the labour movement and in September of 2002, a national meeting of workers took place, lasting two days, in which we put forward the proposal for the organizing of a new trade union central, the UNT. We invited President Chávez to attend. We had a long list of demands we wanted him to hear. That was our founding meeting, December, 2002, which also coincided with the next attack on the Chávez government, a work stoppage and sabotage that began in December and continued to February of 2003. This time our Federations acted from a class perspective and from a worker's perspective and we went right to the plant gates and stood at the gates and we said, "Open these gates; these workers want to work!" And again, it was a work stoppage called by the Chambers of Commerce and the corrupt leadership of the CTV; with no workers' demands whatsoever. Its only purpose was to get rid of President Chávez.

The major target of this work stoppage was the PVDSA, the national petroleum company, the largest in the country, and we said, and the labour movement said it generally, workers want to work and it was the workers — and many of you may know this from the reports — it was the workers who were able to restart the operations at PVDSA.

During that disruption, people sometimes had to line up for twenty-four hours to get gas. This was even true for the state owned trucking companies that were bringing important supplies into the cities from around the country. But the people really pitched in to help, people would share food or whatever they had. We wanted to have our country back.

People outside have said about Venezuela that there is no freedom of expression, that the press is being coerced, that people have no right to information, but I can tell you that over the seventy days of the strike, the President of the CTV and the Federation of the Chambers of Commerce were on the air ten hours a day giving their war reports every

five minutes about how well the strike was going and what was happening in this or that place and "to hold on, people of Venezuela, we will win. Keep those stores closed; keep those businesses closed!" And you know, they never ever said it was over. Even when it was over, they never admitted that it was over. And their strike had a huge damaging impact upon the economy of the country.

You may have heard about the 18,000 workers who took their complaints to the ILO about how they were fired. Well, these weren't just 18,000 ordinary workers. They were the managers. They're the ones who sat across the table from us in collective bargaining, but they were also members of the union. They were the ones who were actively sabotaging the oil company; you don't hear much about the 100,000 people who those same managers fired and who can't get their back-pay nor get their jobs back.

So at this point during this chaos in the country, a lot of trade-unionists were asking: "why should we stay in the CTV?" We then formed the UNT which has a much more horizontal structure. We registered our leadership with the Ministry of Labour, even with some incomplete by-laws, but we are still building on them. But it did allow us to begin to concentrate our struggle. We have had a good start, our principles are laid out, we have our ethics and an analysis of the situation. We have formed twenty-four regional bodies of the UNT. We represent all the major sectors, the private sector, the electrical, the petroleum, construction sectors and the public sector, in health and a number of other sectors. Some of these unions have come straight over from the CTV to the UNT and others are new unions in the process of being formed now.

Outside our country, some people claim the UNT doesn't really exist and doesn't negotiate contracts. The fact is we have been negotiating on behalf of workers. We have been at the bargaining table in almost all the important sectors. The UNT has developed a position on autonomy; we believe we have to be autonomous of government, even though many of our positions are in favour of the government.

We support the process to create a Venezuela that has social justice, and that has also a participatory approach, but we need to be free of any forces upon us that would distort our responsibility of representing workers and meeting their needs. It doesn't mean that we never protest; we go out all the time on mobilizations and demonstrations against particular government officials who we feel are not doing what they should. It is our right as a trade union to exercise that tool.

We have also opposed some of the measures that have been put forward such as "work flexibility" and privatization in the public sector. We also oppose the rule of the IMF over our country and also those policies that favour imports over the re-development of our domestic industry. We were very, very active in the referendum process that culminated in August. As trade unionists, we felt that was a struggle that did have a worker's agenda. So we were there, not just in favour of the government, but in favour of the kind of transformation that this government promises to make for workers and is making every day, such as a job security law and increased wages, both of which were opposed by the CTV and the Chambers of Commerce.

The new job security law that we did get, over the protests of the CTV, is not a full guarantee of employment for everyone, for ever and ever, but it makes sure that workers will not be punished when they displease their bosses. It will not be so easy for them to be punished for their politics.

The other thing that our government has done is to foster co-management; I mentioned the exciting example of the electrical sector. In that case, two union leaders were named to the co-management of the electricity system and they have successfully fought off privatization. Similar things are happening in the area of culture.

We have seen, not just an increase in the minimum wage, but also an increase in the social wage and the government has established a number of parallel programmes that ensures access to health and education. Over eighteen million Venezuelans have benefited from programmes which are known as the "missions", which include getting food at low cost. We think that these are measures that help workers. They are pro-worker measures. They help build a society where there are jobs and it helps to reduce the gap between those rich people who seem to be getting ever and ever richer and the poor people who seem to be getting ever and ever poorer. These processes are more participatory. We believe we need to see less polarization and movement away from an approach of confrontation to an approach of appreciating what everyone can contribute to the process.

In conclusion, I would like to express my thanks to all the organizations that have come together to organize this event, especially Sheila Katz and Steve Benedict from the Canadian Labour Congress who recently visited us in Venezuela and got a chance to understand what we are going through. And now they know who we are and that we are struggling on behalf of workers.

We will be holding a constitutional meeting in February of 2005 which will let all our members decide on the structure of our new UNT. We had to postpone the meeting for a while because it was not convenient for some workers. Before we vote for the UNT we wanted to make sure that everyone had a voice in the structure and constitutional by-laws of the new organization. So again, the workers will decide and we need all of your organizations, both internationally and in our country, to help us we can learn from each other and also to make sure that the unions have support. Thank you very much.

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