

HANDS OFF VENEZUELA!

In November Wrexham Socialist Forum hosted a speaker, Ramon Samblas, from the *Hands Off Venezuela* Campaign. The basic principles of the Campaign are:

- Solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution
- Opposition to imperialist intervention in Venezuela
- Building direct links with the revolutionary and trade union movement in Venezuela.

Ramon explained the background to the Venezuelan revolution, led by President Hugo Chavez and the Movement for the Fifth Republic (the revolutionary Party) and appealed to Wrexham people to support these aims.

Hugo Chavez, a career soldier, was elected President of Venezuela in 1998, although in 1992 he had led an unsuccessful military coup against the government of President Perez. Chavez appealed to the poor and indigenous people of Venezuela with a democratic socialist programme emphasising Latin American unity and anti-imperialism, the principles behind the mass social movement known as the Bolivarian Revolution (after Simon Bolivar, the 19th-century liberator of Venezuela, Columbia, Peru and other South American nations) and now enshrined in the 1999 Venezuelan constitution which received 70% support in a national referendum.

Chavez was re-elected in 2000, again with a large majority drawn mostly from the poorer people of Venezuela, and survived a coup in 2002, which is widely believed to have been supported by the CIA. His presidency was also threatened by unrest among workers in the oil industry, protesting at the nationalisation of the country's most important economic resource. Since then Chavez has survived a recall vote in August 2004 with a convincing 59-41 majority, and in December 2005 the Movement for the Fifth Republic gained a large majority in Parliamentary elections, with 68% of the votes cast.

Opposition groups routinely claim that Venezuelan democracy is in danger, and withdrew from the recent election in an attempt to undermine the parliamentary system. These claims are then repeated by the Bush administration in Washington. However the complaints are unfounded. The opposition still controls much of the media, the corrupt judiciary has been reformed and elections are monitored by international bodies.

So, what has this elected socialist President achieved? The Venezuelan economy has grown over 10% per year, helped by rising global oil prices. The programmes of land redistribution and social welfare reforms continue through the Bolivarian Missions, taskforces that tackle such problems as education, housing, medical care and indigenous people's rights. Chavez has recently focused on foreign affairs, extending the Bolivarian Revolution ideal to countries like Brazil and Columbia.

This is not to say Chavez is without opposition, at home or abroad. Some call him authoritarian and militarist. There is still poverty and unemployment in Venezuela, and many hospitals still lack necessities. The Venezuelan middle-class has seen its standard of living steadily

eroded. There are allegations, documented by Amnesty International, of human rights abuses.

It is also said that Chavez spends too much time opposing the Bush government in the USA. But who can doubt that the globalising, dominating ideology of the USA is hostile to the interests of less powerful countries such as Venezuela? Washington views the Chavez regime as "a threat to regional stability" (Thomas Shannon, US Secretary of State for Latin America, Nov 2005) and dislikes Venezuela's closeness to Castro's Cuba and support for radical movements throughout Latin America. US "Christian" evangelist Pat Robertson's recent (Aug 2005) call for the murder of President Chavez met with only a weak rebuke from the White House.

One of the key platforms of the Bolivarian Revolution is to forge alliances with poor and working people throughout the Americas. This is an effective counter to the US Republicans' continual propaganda against Chavez and Venezuela, but also an act of principle. Volunteers based at Citgo (the US arm of the Venezuelan state oil company) refineries in Lake Charles, Louisiana and Corpus Christi, Texas, provided medical care, food and water to approximately 5,000 refugees from Hurricane Katrina. Chavez has announced that Venezuela will soon begin to ship cheap heating and diesel oil to schools, nursing homes, hospitals and poor communities within the US.

The Chavez regime may not be perfect, but it is vital for all democrats and anti-imperialists to support Venezuela and its people as they struggle towards a better world for themselves and, ultimately, all of us.



President Hugo Chavez

Web links

www.venezuelanalysis.com

www.handsoffvenezuela.org

Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) has good articles on President Chavez, Venezuela and the Bolivarian Revolution.

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR PEACE

In 1984 five people, including the Tory MP Sir Anthony Berry, were killed by an IRA bomb in Brighton planted by Patrick Magee. Magee was given multiple life sentences for the crime, and the judge recommended that he serve at least 35 years. In 1999, after 14 years in prison, Magee was released under the Good Friday Agreement.

Sir Anthony's daughter, Jo Berry, talks about the bombing, her feelings at the time, how she met Patrick Magee, and how they have come to work together for peace and reconciliation.

My father Sir Anthony Berry was attending the Conservative Party Conference when an IRA bomb blew up the hotel which killed him. I had never thought Dad was a target for the IRA and it came as a huge shock. I felt I was catapulted into a war which I knew nothing about but now became my war. I felt the pain of the families of everyone killed and wanted to somehow bring something positive out of this tragedy.

I knew I had a choice in the days after the bomb, to stay as a victim, blaming others for my pain or to go on a journey of healing and understanding. I made an inner commitment to go on a journey with no idea what that meant but knew that life would give me the experiences I needed to learn.

During the first year I began to walk in the footsteps of the bomber, meeting by chance the brother of an IRA man who had been killed by the British Army. I corresponded with a Republican prisoner who shared his story with me and spent an afternoon with a man in Sinn Fein. I began to understand the conditions, the injustice and the oppression.

In 1999, when Magee was released, I relived the day of the bomb all over again. I felt the grief and shock again and a deep rage at Patrick Magee. "How dare he kill him! How dare he destroy my family!" I knew this was the time to become involved again. I found myself at a victims group in Glencree Reconciliation Centre in the Wicklow Mountains. I met victims from all sides and knew it was safe to share my story as no-one would be scared of my pain. I felt so much grief, anger, sadness and also found so much comfort and joy in connecting with other victims. I also met ex-prisoners who knew Pat, which was an important preparation for our eventual meeting. By meeting the so-called enemy I had discovered how likeable and normal they were; did that mean my Dad didn't have to die? I had discovered emotionally the waste of war. The enemy is always my brother and sister.

On November 22, 2000, I met Pat for the first time. We filmed some of our meeting which became a documentary for BBC2. We met many times, often on our own for many hours at a time. My motivation was to hear his story, to meet him as a human being. It soon became clear that he was willing to go on a journey with me. He was very open at the first meeting and said "I want to hear your anger, I want to hear your pain." It was a profoundly healing experience which left me feeling elated but also disorientated because I'd broken a taboo of society by meeting Pat.



Patrick Magee and Jo Berry

I had been walking in his footsteps for a long time and had reached a place of understanding and acceptance in me. This was strengthened the more I knew him and discovered his humanity. The judgement fell away as I realised that if I had lived his life I may have made the same decisions. Also I knew the roots of violence were complex and the whole community were responsible for creating the conditions which supported violence as a way of meeting needs.

The miracle was that Patrick was prepared to go on a journey with me and saw it as something that was helping him. He said that the cost to him of taking violence was that he had lost some of his humanity and he was finding it by having me in his life. He now sees my Dad as a real person rather than a faceless enemy. We have shared together at conferences and groups and will continue working together for peace. My sense is that this is only the beginning.

Looking back I can see how I met Patrick in the most challenging way in that there was no facilitation or ongoing support. I can see there are lessons here on how to facilitate other such meetings. I am involved in a project with Pat in researching how to develop safe and healing ways that such meetings can happen.

Meeting Pat has given me so many opportunities for healing and transformation. My humanity is being restored, my compassion grows as I accept that Pat is now a friend and an important person in my life. But it is still so challenging to parts of me that I call Pat my friend and he is now someone I care deeply about.

My experience has shown me the importance of looking at the roots of violence and that on the deepest level we are all responsible. It is so easy to blame and to project our violence onto others. I believe that the way forward is for all of us to see and experience the humanity in our enemy.

For more information on Jo's current projects or to contact her, visit this web site:

www.buildingbridgesforpeace.org