What is at stake in Venezuela today?

We publish in this opening article of this issue of *La Vérité/The Truth* important extracts from the speech made by Andreu Camps, member of the International secretariat of the IV International, at the rally organized on September 2 at the cemetery in Paris in Thiais, in homage to Leon Sedov and all the militants of the working class victims of Stalinism.

Dear friends, dear comrades,

What is at stake in Venezuela today? Certainly, it’s the fate of a people, but it’s also the fate of a whole continent and beyond.

12 August, Donald Trump menaced Venezuela with a military intervention. It was imperialism’s response to the victory that the Venezuelan people had just won in the Constituent elections, 30 July 2017. Twelve days later. These elections had all the reactionary forces against them, as much on the international level as within Venezuela itself.

Thus, the paramilitary bands of the so-called democratic opposition call for peace and simultaneously organise war.

What will happen in the coming weeks? Nobody knows. But, today, we are confronted with the following question: Trump’s policies have not been approved unanimously and have obliged many Latin-American governments to say that a military intervention could provoke an uprising on the whole continent, notably in Brazil. Brazil: 200 million inhabitants, a neighbouring country to Venezuela with an organised working class, a working class that has shown that its ability to resist a putschist government.

And even the most servile, such as the president of Columbia, Juan Manuel Santos, or the president of Mexico, Enrique Peña Nieto, have declared that it is possible that it is not the best solution. The “democratic opposition” had also taken, for three months, the path of street provocations, of killings and assassinations, notably through the intermediary of paramilitary bands, to break the resolve of the Maduro government, a government that was democratically elected.

However, it has not broken. And, as the “opposition” was beaten in the elections to the Constituent Assembly, they are now playing the negotiation card.

Wednesday, 30 August, the former Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero landed in Caracas to say that negotiations must be reopened.

As you know, imperialism has more than one way to conduct its politics. There is the military option, but if the military option does not work, there is the “negotiation” option, with the same objective: to crush the Venezuelan nation.

The stakes, today, in Venezuela are thus high for all the people of the continent, as well as on the international scale.

A Review of the History of Venezuela

First, a reminder of the history of Venezuela: this country holds the largest oil deposit in the world, larger than that of Saudi Arabia. But the stakes are higher than the sole question of oil and concern the whole continent: it is the fact that there exists the possibility that a government could conduct policies slightly different than those dictated by American imperialism. The stakes are national for the oil, but they are placed on the international scale.

Because it is a question of imperialism’s ability to control, to the smallest detail, the lives of all countries – in this case, in Latin America, but also that of the American working class itself.

The oil in Venezuela was nationalised in 1975. It was a formal nationalisation. A state corporation was indeed created, the PDVSA (1). But an administration of this corporation was simultaneously created which, in reality, was a state within the state, that was in no way accountable to the national state, and which negotiated directly with American multinationals. It was in this way that the PDVSA built its 200 businesses in the United States. A contradictory situation, which has made it that it is now very difficult for American imperialism, for the Trump administration, to legally organise the boycott, since these businesses are legally North American… Although the “imperialist bandits” would not hesitate for a second to break their own laws.

The oil revenues have not benefitted the Venezuelan people. They have benefitted a small oligarchy, which has earned a nickname, “Dame dos!”, which is to say, “Give me two!”, because, since these folks regularly go shopping in Miami, there is a joke: “How much does it cost? Oh! That’s not expensive, give me two!” That is the Venezuelan oligarchy. You know, all the heads of the opposition, presented by the French and European press as freedom fighters, are billionaires, and a good number of them are the same putschists who organised the April 2002 coup d’état against Chavez. For example, Leopoldo Lopez or Maria-Corina – she who has made it that she is only called by her first name, since her family name is not noble enough – were among the supporters the 2002 military junta. It only lasted three days.

A certain press considers these putschists, as political prisoners. This is what the European press says, notably in France and Spain.

However, what changed was that, in the presidential election of 1998, Chavez won. He won on a sole watchword: a Constituent Assembly was needed to restructure the country. There was thus an election campaign to the Constituent in July 1999. And this campaign was organised around three principal axes: for agrarian reform, for the oil to serve the population and for a labour law. Because there were no labour laws in
Venezuela. And the oil question was at the centre. Particularly from the point of view of the working class, because the first union formed at Maracaibo, in the 1930s, was that of oil workers. So, there was thus an articulation between the organisation of the working class, the place of the demand for oil nationalisation and the relationship to power.

The Constitution of 1999, which came out of this Constituent, thus put the real control of oil revenue at its centre.

**Defend the Social conquests of the Venezuelan People**

The major question was for a good part of oil revenue to be used to satisfy the needs of the Venezuelan people. It is the essential question.

I had the occasion to listen again to the Chavez’s last discourse, in his last electoral campaign in October 2012. He was already very ill. He was a military man, as you know: he cited statistics, he did not make a Castro-style speech, his speeches were relatively short. He said, “What has our government done? When we came to government, 60% of the population suffered from famine. Today, it is half that. When we came to government, unemployment was at 20%. Today, it is 7%. When we came to government, there were five public universities. Today, there are 22.” He also announced: “What we want for the next term is zero famine, zero unemployment and all the students in a university”, etc.

He then found himself confronted with the following contradiction, which he himself lucidly recognised: “What we are doing is in danger because the semi-colonial state structures remain in place.” Which is to say that this whole revolutionary process had nonetheless not succeeded in destroying the semi-colonial bourgeois state and in implementing the power of the workers. As a military man, he kept a certain sort of relationship with the working class: he said, “all for the class”, but without the class itself. Which is to say that he was not for the independent organisation of the working class. And this question is posed anew today.

Let us once again take up a question that is a part of our struggle: in 1987, we helped organise a conference in Caracas against the payment of the debt. From this conference, the watchword of “No to the payment of the debt” became that of the labour movement – or of a part of the labour movement – against all the attempts of renegotiation, etc. And today, the question of the debt is posed once again.

In the elections to the Constituent Assembly, there were, among the candidates, 79 worker candidates – I will not judge from here, in France, if this is the way forward: it is not from here, where we haven’t had a Constituent for a long time, that one could give lessons. And among them, there are some who will participate in the 9th Open World Conference in Algiers. And notably, comrade Raul Ordoñez, a union leader.

Here is what these comrades explain: since the installation of the Constituent thirty days ago, a series of question have been treated. The first – very important – was posed in the following manner: the government is accused of massacring protesters. The international press says that there have been 142 deaths following police or other interventions. It is possible that some mortal blunders took place: a commission for the truth was thus created within the Constituent Assembly to establish who was responsible for these acts. The last report by the UN, an organisation which is not favourable to Maduro, announced that there were no more than 26 deaths caused by the police. Except that the Constituent, if it wants to move forward, must clear up this question.

Secondly, it was decided to open legal proceedings against the former president of the National Assembly, Julio Borges, and against the vice-president, Freddy Guevara. Following declarations by Trump, these men addressed themselves to the American government to ask for a military intervention. Should they be judged, or not? I ask this because, the day before yesterday, I read in the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* that Stalinist trials were being put into place in Caracas! Imagine if someone, here, in opposition to Macron – to compare what is comparable – called for a military intervention against him!

Beyond these two questions, the Constituent has not taken any other measure to take care of the country’s principal problems. The comrades explained that the will discuss the following two questions: the payment of the debt and the monopoly of foreign commerce. They will demand – will they succeed, or not? – that the government decide to not pay the debt, in order to satisfy the needs of the population, and to implement the monopoly of foreign commerce. Two measures, among others, that would allow the Venezuelan nation to defend itself, faced with the real blockade that imperialism and all the governments are in the process of organising against Venezuela.

This blockade has hidden its real objective: to starve the Venezuelan people so as to provoke an uprising against the government. A real battle is thus now being waged within the Constituent, because the government supports the idea that the patriotic bourgeoisie must be taken into account and that they must continue to receive easy money. But the problem is that the dollars given to the bourgeoisie usually end up directly in Miami.

So, there is true class warfare. Not against the direct agents of imperialism, but within the Constituent itself.

The stakes of this conflict are now high.

**The Policy of the 4th International**

These questions oblige us to take up again, in relation to our own history, the policy of the 4th International. Leon Trotsky had fixed, while in exile in Mexico, what should have been the policy to be led concerning the Cardenas government, a nationalist government that had decided to nationalise oil. At the time, oil was the property of large British “majors”. And Trotsky unconditionally supported the law of oil nationalisation. He did more than support it. He even addressed himself to the English Labour Party to say: you can put pressure on Chamberlain, the Prime
Minister, who is menacing Mexico with military intervention. On this occasion, he affirmed: "In all the cases where the national bourgeoisie directly confronts foreign imperialisms or their reactionary agents, we give it our full revolutionary support, all while conserving the complete independence of our organisation, of our programme, of our party." Because, at the same time, the Cardenas government was trying, and to a certain extent succeeded, to restrain the working class, by enclosing it in corporatist policies. We thus support any measure against imperialism, while maintaining our independence. However, he added, "Without losing sight of the fact that only a consequent revolutionary line, based on the participation of the large masses in active struggle and on the rupture, without reservation, with all the supporters of collaboration with imperialism, can lead the oppressed masses to victory."

What Leon Trotsky said in 1938 could not be more pertinent today.

When, 16 February 1938, the KGB assassinated Leon Sedov, the son of Leon Trotsky, he was in Paris organising a conference to proclaim the IV International. He was the worker and political linchpin of the organisation of this conference, as his father was 8,000 kilometres away. At the very moment that Sedov was assassinated, Leon Trotsky, in Mexico, was in the process of aiding, if we can say so, the Cardenas government to nationalise oil. What better tribute could we give to Sedov, to Trotsky, to all the victims of Stalinism, to all the anti-imperialist combatants, than to explain what was done by Leon Trotsky in 1938 and what the militants of the IV International are doing today? In effect, it is not a Venezuelan question. Behind all this demagoguery, this campaign, they are trying to say to the peoples of the monde, to the workers, that there is nothing to be done, that it’s useless to defend their conquests. However, there are conquests in Venezuela. For example, there is not only oil, which serves in a large measure to satisfy the needs of the population. There is also the Labour Code (the LOTTT) (2) that was adopted a few months before the death of Chavez. This Labour Code, you can read it: it bans firings, it fixes the length of the workday, it bans the night work of women, etc. It’s the equivalent of a Labour Code among the most advanced of Europe. But most of the entrepreneurs, including certain governors close to Maduro, do not respect it. It is for this reason that, for us, the independent organisation of the working class is the central question. It is for this reason that the fight of the IV International is concentrated today, in Venezuela, on helping independent organisation, on the union level as well as on the political level.

Comrade Ordoñez, deputy in the Constituent, and who will be present at the conference in Algiers, has declared: “We support all the measures that will defend the sovereignty of the nation, that reinforce the mechanisms of direct democracy, but also those that will consolidate and affirm the social and labour rights of the working people. Always keeping in mind that only the organised workers and popular sectors will be able to effectively defend these conquests against the intervention of imperialism and its lackeys.”

I do not know if comrade Ordoñez has read Trotsky, but it is sure that between 1938 and 2017, there has been a political continuity. That is what the IV International is. The IV International is more than a memorial. The best tribute to the memory is to say today that the IV International places its militants at the head of the defence of workers and peoples for social and democratic emancipation.

Long live the IV International!

(1) Petróleos de Venezuela, SA (abbreviated PDVSA) – Petroleum of Venezuela.
(2) Ley Orgánica del Trabajo, los Trabajadores y las Trabajadoras (LOTTT) – Organic Labour Law of male and female workers, 30 April 2012.