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By Bill Van Auken
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US escalates regime-change machinations against Venezuela

Seven months after proclaiming himself Venezuela's "interim president" and gaining immediate recognition from Washington and its allies, the right-wing and previously unknown politician Juan Guaidó announced on Wednesday his creation of a new "Center of Government" to be staffed by a collection of likeminded US-backed political reactionaries.

This pretense of setting up a parallel administration or "shadow cabinet" follows a series of political fiascos for the US-orchestrated regime-change operation in Venezuela, culminating in an abortive coup attempt on April 30 that failed to elicit any significant support from the country's military.

In the meantime, Washington has steadily escalated unilateral and illegal economic sanctions against Venezuela, with Trump signing an executive order on August 5, imposing a freeze on all Venezuelan assets in the US and threatening any company doing business with the Venezuelan state, its central bank and its economically critical state-owned oil company, PDVSA, with secondary sanctions.

This has been combined with undisguised threats of military intervention, with the commander of SOUTHCOM, Admiral Craig Faller, declaring recently that the US armed forces "remain on the balls of our feet" in readiness to carry out orders for military action against Venezuela. There were simultaneous reports that Trump has repeatedly pressed his advisors over the feasibility of imposing a direct naval blockade of Venezuela, militarily preventing any goods from going in or coming out.

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Guaidó's announcement Wednesday was carried out in direct coordination with the US State Department, which made its own announcement the day before that it is establishing a "Venezuela Affairs Unit (VAU)" that will operate out of the US Embassy in Bogota, Colombia.

Stressing that this unit had been created with "bipartisan support from the US Congress," the State Department declared its mission that of working with "the legitimate government of Venezuela"—i.e., the US puppet Guaidó—"for the restoration of democracy and the constitutional order in that country, and the security and well-being of the Venezuelan people."

Washington's concern for "democracy" and "constitutional order" in Venezuela has found concrete expression in its attempts to foment a military coup. As for its dedication of the "well-being of the Venezuelan people," this has been realized in practice through a sanctions regime that has cut off supplies of food and medicine and drastically intensified the immiseration of masses of working people. According to a recent report prepared by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), some 40,000 deaths in Venezuela can be directly attributed to US sanctions.

The individual named by Guaidó as his "presidential commissioner for foreign affairs" is the right-wing politician and founder of the Primero Justicia (PJ) party, Julio Borges, a former parliamentary deputy who lives in exile in Bogota under the protection of the Colombian government. Borges is wanted by the Venezuelan police for his alleged role in organizing a failed August 2018 attempt to assassinate Maduro with an armed drone.

The so-called Lima Group, consisting of the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay and Peru, immediately recognized Borges as Venezuela's "legitimate" representative.

Named as the "coordinator of the Center of Government" is Leopoldo López, the leader of the hard-right Voluntad Popular party to which Guaidó belongs. He was sprung from house arrest—imposed in connection with his conviction on charges relating to violent demonstrations in 2014—in order to join Guaidó outside a Caracas air base on April 30, where the two issued their fruitless call for a military uprising.

After the failure of the coup, López found refuge in the Spanish Embassy in Caracas, where he has remained ever since. It is far from clear what precisely he will be able to coordinate under these conditions. Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell stated that his

government “would limit” the right-wing politician’s activities and would not allow its embassy to become a “center of political activism for the opposition.”

The Socialist Party-led government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, however, has bowed to Washington and recognized Guaidó as the “legitimate president” of Venezuela, cooperating with the Trump administration in furthering schemes to oust Maduro.

Other “presidential commissioners” named by Guaidó include a foreign-based “special prosecutor” who is wanted on criminal charges for defrauding the state-owned oil company PDVSA. Tapped as the “presidential commissioner for economic development” is a co-founder of the anti-government NGO Súmate, which was financed by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a US agency created to back political destabilization operations previously run by the CIA. Designated as “presidential commissioner for human rights” is the director of a Venezuelan NGO that is financed by the US NGO Freedom House, which in turn gets 80 percent of its funding from the NED.

Neither Guaidó nor his “commissioners” control anything in Venezuela. They are merely a puppet government in waiting, staffed by US-paid operatives and dependent upon Washington to succeed in its regime-change operation.

Nonetheless, Maduro announced this week that his government has been in touch with both the opposition and the Norwegian government, which has mediated talks between the two. While Caracas broke off the talks earlier this month after the US imposed its most punishing set of sanctions and the right-wing opposition supported them, the Venezuelan president indicated that they would soon resume.

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In an interview with the Chinese news agency Xinhua, Maduro predicted “good news about the dialogue process in the next few days.”

Earlier this month, Maduro confirmed reports in the US media that he had authorized secret talks with the US government seeking “dialogue” with the Trump administration and to “normalize” Venezuela’s relations with US imperialism.

For all of its anti-imperialist pretensions, Maduro and his ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) are legitimizing a right-wing opposition that enjoys no credibility among the broad masses of the Venezuelan people and seeking to accommodate itself to a US government bent on regime change.

While it is prepared to seek some form of negotiated settlement with US imperialism and its Venezuelan puppets in order to defend the wealth and privileges of the ruling strata of financiers, corrupt state officials and government contractors—the so-called *boliburguesia* — this same government has ruthlessly repressed the struggles of the working class, imposing the full burden of the country’s deep economic crisis on the backs of Venezuelan workers. Living standards have been decimated by a runaway inflation rate, while the shrinking of the economy by roughly a third has driven up unemployment.

In the context of Washington’s talks with the Maduro government, the Trump administration’s special envoy for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, used an interview with the *New York Times* to appeal directly to the Venezuelan president assuring him that US officials wanted “him to have a dignified exit and go.”

“We don’t want to prosecute you; we don’t want to persecute you,” Abrams added. “We want you to leave power.”

The *Times* did not bother to remind its readers that Abrams knows whereof he speaks in relation to escaping prosecution. He himself was convicted for lying to Congress about a covert and illegal network for funding the terrorist “Contra” forces organized by the CIA to attack Nicaragua, but then pardoned by President George H.W. Bush.

The personification of the lying and thuggish character of US imperialism’s policies in Latin America, Abrams should still be prosecuted for his criminal defense of the US-backed dictatorships in Central America in the 1980s, covering up for their bloody massacres, torture and assassinations.

The fact that the Maduro government is seeking an accommodation with such elements is a warning as to the immense dangers confronting the working class in Venezuela and throughout Latin America.

These threats can be confronted only to the extent that Venezuelan workers recognize that they can rely upon neither Maduro nor the high command of the country’s military to defeat the conspiracies of Washington and its puppet Guaidó.

The only progressive way out of the increasingly dangerous crisis unfolding in Venezuela lies in the independent political mobilization of the working class, fighting for the arming of the masses, the seizure of bourgeois property and foreign capitalist holdings and the placing of the country’s vast oil wealth under popular control.

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