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## Hugo Chavez: Breaking the chain of imperialism

By Yuram Abdullah Weiler

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“The old and heavy chains of the Yankee colonialism are there on the floor; they were broken by the Great Bolivarian Revolution!” - President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela Hugo Chavez

With an outpouring of great sadness, the world witnessed the passing of one of the great revolutionary leaders of our time, the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela Hugo Chavez, who died on Tuesday, March 5, 2013.

All who value human rights and democracy, which does not include the Washington regime, will miss his inspired leadership.

A staunch fighter against US hegemony in the Americas, President Chavez warned, “But as we all must know, the imperial threat against our beloved Homeland [Venezuela] is alive and latent.”

No sooner had news of his untimely death been announced when lackeys from the US were caught busily trying to stir up a military coup against the Venezuelan government. Vice President Nicholas Maduro announced that a US Air Force attaché and another embassy official were being expelled for plotting to destabilize the government. Previously, the US had attempted a coup in April 2002, but President Chavez managed to return to office within 2 days.

Standing firm against the US oil giants, President Chavez nationalized Exxon Mobil’s Venezuelan heavy oil assets in the Orinoco Belt in 2007, and came out the winner against them in the subsequent litigation. Predictably in response to his death, the well-oiled capitalists of Wall Street rejoiced with an orgy of record highs on the New York stock exchange, accompanied no doubt by wild dreams of “reclaiming” Venezuela. Joining in the right-wing rapture were US politicians from both factions of the corporate party, who greeted the tragic news gleefully. With typical Republican vitriol, Representative Ed Royce (R-CA) stated, “His death dents the alliance of anti-US leftist leaders in South America.”

Particularly noteworthy for its vileness was the statement by Congressman Tom Cotton (R-AR), who acrimoniously declared, “After the welcome news of Hugo Chavez’s death... I look forward to working in the House to promote a free, democratic, and pro-American government in Venezuela.” US President Obama, displaying a minimal facade of respect, stated, “At this challenging time of President Hugo Chavez’s passing, the United States reaffirms its support for the Venezuelan people and its interest in developing a constructive relationship with the Venezuelan government.”

One US official, Representative José E. Serrano (D-NY) broke away from pack of foul-mouthed US political vultures vomiting their venom and actually spoke reverently and candidly about the deceased Venezuelan leader:

“He believed that the government of the country should be used to empower the masses, not the few. He understood democracy and basic human desires for a dignified life. His legacy in his nation, and in the hemisphere, will be assured as the people he inspired continue to strive for a better life for the poor and downtrodden.”

Constantly demeaned in the capitalist-dominated Western media who referred to him as a “theatrical leader,” a “showman,” “insane” or worse, President Chavez left a substantial legacy of progress in his country. Over the last decade in Venezuela, poverty fell by over 20 percent, income inequality is down over 2 percent as measured on the Gini index, the unemployment rate was halved, medical services have been expanded to communities that never before had even a clinic, and the country has been recognized as a leader in providing free internet access for its

citizens.

This has been accomplished as a result of President Chavez's enlightened leadership, which has created a government that invests 60 percent of its income in social programs for the benefit of its population, instead of for the benefit of the moneyed elite. At the funeral, Reverend Jesse Jackson eulogized him, saying, "Hugo fed the hungry. He lifted the poor. He raised their hopes. He helped them realize their dreams."

Among his list of humanitarian programs was providing free heating oil to poor Americans who could not afford the high prices charged by the price-gouging US oil companies. Initiated in 2005 after the dismal failure of the Bush administration to help victims of hurricane Katrina, the program, which helps some 400,000 people, is a lifeline for the retired, elderly and those who otherwise would have to depend on the poorly funded LIEAP (Low Income Energy Assistance Program) that has been subject to 25% budget cuts by the Obama administration.

When torrential rains in late 2010 left over 130,000 Venezuelans homeless, President Chavez responded with an initiative named the Great Housing Mission whose goal is to provide 2 million affordable housing units for needy families within seven years. With almost 300,000 units already under construction, the program is diametrically opposed to the US response to the 2008 financial crisis, which provided bailouts to prop up the same financial institutions that caused the foreclosure flood in the first place by their predatory lending practices and unethical trading in mortgage-backed bonds and derivatives.

In short, President Chavez wisely invested in his fellow citizens while Obama greedily invested in his fellow bankers.

The wisdom of President Chavez's economic policies can be judged by the results: Despite a lagging world economy, Venezuela has posted 8 successive quarters of GDP growth with the last quarter of 2012 at an enviable 5.2 percent; unemployment continues to fall as minimum wages have risen every year; and the oil sector grew at a rate of 1.6 percent while the construction, finance, transportation, community services/non profits, and communications sectors all grew at rates exceeding that of the GDP.

Again, compare these statistics with the abysmal record of the United States, whose 2012 4th quarter GDP grew a sickly 0.1 percent, with 12 out of 22 industrial sectors contributing to the "slowdown" led by retail trade and durable goods, and whose people are suffering from a 4-percent decline in their disposable income in January 2013. In stark contrast to the otherwise pathetic US economy is the 2012 3rd quarter \$68.1-billion increase in profits of US financial corporations, which are still doing quite well, judging by the record highs on Wall Street.

President Chavez leaves a country behind that proudly sets the standard for other countries when it comes to holding fair and transparent democratic elections. The most recent presidential election on October 7, 2012 was witnessed by a team of 245 lawyers, election officials, academics and elected representatives from around the world, and saw a voter turnout of over 80 percent. The Venezuelan electoral system, praised for its "professionalism and technical expertise," boasts sophisticated voting machines that identify voters by fingerprinting which

must coincide with the individual's identity number, thereby practically eliminating the possibility of election fraud.

While the US struggles to pass sensible reforms to its all too permissive gun ownership laws, Venezuela under President Chavez destroyed over 50,000 seized firearms in 2012. He also instituted the "Venezuela Full of Life" program, which imposed a one-year ban on the importing of firearms and ammunition, in order to enhance the safety and security of the citizenry. Organized under the Chavez administration in 2009, the Bolivarian National Police has played a leading role in public safety, crime prevention and community engagement.

Another notable accomplishment by President Chavez is the inclusion of the rights of indigenous people under the Venezuelan constitution. Ratified in 1999, Article 119 states:

"The State recognizes the existence of native peoples and communities, their social, political and economic organization, their cultures, practices and customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitat and original rights to the lands they ancestrally and traditionally occupy, and which are necessary to develop and guarantee their way of life."

Additionally, indigenous people are guaranteed representation in the Venezuelan National Assembly, while in the US, Native peoples are excluded from representation by Article 1 Section 2 of the constitution, which only apportions full personhood to free "persons," meaning whites.

President Chavez worked hard to gain the passage of comprehensive labor laws that protect the rights of workers. The new law signed on May 1, 2012 includes provisions prohibiting the unjust dismissal of workers, requiring the payment of severance pay to the employee regardless of the reason for termination of employment, and empowering the Labor Ministry to impose sanctions on businesses that violate the law.

Additionally, discrimination based on nationality, sexual orientation, membership in a labor union, prior criminal record, or any type of handicap is prohibited. Compare this to US labor law, where draconian "Right to Work" laws undermine employees' ability to organize, and "At Will" employment practices allow an employer to fire an employee for virtually any reason. Of course there are restrictions, but the legal burden of proof is upon the employee who rarely can afford proper legal representation.

Hugo Chavez was a visionary: a rare leader who cared about his people and envisioned a prosperous society in which all could share in the benefits, not just an exclusive few. President Chavez has left this world, but his legacy remains with us. It is now up to us - those of us who share his noble dream of a just society and are willing to struggle for it - to fight on until the last link in the oppressive chain of imperialistic capitalism is broken.