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Building Socialism from Below: The Role of the Communes in Venezuela

Interview with Antenea Jimenez

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We met with Antenea Jimenez, a former militant with the student movement who is now working with a national network of activists who are trying to build and strengthen the comunas. The comunas are community organizations promoted since 2006 by the Chávez government as a way to consolidate a new form of state based upon production at the local level. She told us about the important advances in the process, as well as the significant challenges that remain in the struggle to build a new form of popular power from below.

Can you tell us about the barrio where you live and the comuna?

I live in a barrio in the north part of Caracas and work in a national network that is building comunas. Currently we operate in seven states; the majority of the comunas are situated outside Caracas.

We are working with the comunas to construct a political space in participatory way. It is a new experience in Venezuela. Above all, the comunas is a political space, not like the State or a parish; it is created by the people for the people.

Currently there are many comunas in construction in the rural areas, where they are the strongest. Every comuna has its own reality depending on political culture and the form of production in the specific locale. For example, on the coastal zone the community is dedicated to fishing, while in a rural zone the production is based on the land.

We are working to discover which elements and principles unite these different experiences, which elements are the same despite the fact that the methods of production and cultures may be different. We organize national meetings where the comunas from north, south, east and west can share their experiences and learn from each other – the errors as well as the successes.

What is the main aim of the comunas?

The aims of the comunas are diverse, and take different forms. Before the comuna existed there were all kinds of community organizations where people would participate looking for solutions to their problems, their neighborhood association, the municipal government, etc. The goal of the comunas is to build on these processes and consolidate them by organizing on the basis of territory where people live.

For us the comuna is a territorial space, but also a political space where the aim is to build socialism on a permanent basis, where the people take charge of their own education and political formation. We teach about “convivencia” (living together well) and elaborate a plan for a particular territory. What is new about the process is that the people are also elaborating their own plan of formation.

The people are very creative; the most advanced work with the other neighbors in this process to create a permanent space of formation. Civil servants, working for the state, who went to these spaces, quickly learned that the people were elaborating their own plan by and for themselves.

Obviously some comunas are more advanced than other ones. It is much more difficult to build a comuna in urban areas, for example, because they have no experience with [different forms] of production; for example, they have no experience with [non-capitalist] social relations with the land. There is a dynamic in the city that is very capitalist. But in the rural areas they have conserved many elements of what is “ours,” from our ancestors, the indigenous communities, the Afro-Venezuelan communities. These values are still there. For this reason it is easier in the rural areas than in the urban areas. While there are fewer people in the countryside, the quality of the compañeros is very high. Sometimes there is not one person who did not vote for Chávez; this is less common in the urban areas.

Can you describe your personal political formation? How did you get involved in the comunas?

I was a student activist in University. I was active in political movements before Chávez, but there was no relationship between the social movements and political parties. In

1992, when Chávez was released from prison, things began to change. We have always been involved in the grassroots of the popular movement; there were few political spaces to participate in before [Chávez's release] so you would get involved instead in your neighborhood, in your popular organization, in your cultural group.

But since Chávez was released [and began to build a political movement for the 1998 elections] things changed. I got involved; it was our responsibility to help build the process and the movement in Caracas. I was involved in the Popular Coordinator of Caracas, and afterwards the initiative to create the comunas. Now we are a group that works on the comunas.

There are a lot of different ideas about the comunas, for example, between our network of activists and what Chávez has suggested. There are various ideas. We are building it from the people, not the government. We have had extraordinary advances; but the strongest advances have come when the people have been convinced that this is the path, when they have become active in their own neighborhood.

How do the comunas work?

Historically there were diverse organizations that came together to resolve the problems of the neighborhoods. Our idea was to bring these organizations together to start to participate with concrete issues. We organize workshops. Let's say that a community does not have water. We will organize a meeting about water. The people say, "Ah see! We can solve our own problems."

We look for a socialist solution to the problem. Not just to hire a private company to fix something, but to work with the government and the people to fix the problem. Working first from the basic needs of the people will inspire them to participate. We also work with them to think more about the future, how we can improve things over the long term.

Step by step we work together toward solving simple things, like living together. Things that just require norms, a little bit of effort that helps us live together better. The community might decide that "We can't drink in the streets," for example. Other people see these small changes and then join the struggle when they see the results. They see that collective organization is possible.

There is a network of promoters of the comunas that coordinates, but the participation of the people is fundamental. There are people of all kinds that participate in the comuna: people from the left, people from the right, people that don't care about anything. The people get involved with a problem that touches their family, the school for example because it involves their children.

Not everyone is socialist. Actually, a minority of participants in the comunas are socialists. We have to attend to the issues that matter to them. This can only be done through practice, and this is the way people get involved.

What are some of the main problems that you face trying to build socialism from the neighborhoods up to higher levels?

There is one factor that impedes our work which is the electoral dynamic, which is very exhausting. Constantly being in campaigns does not permit us to consolidate the organic process at the neighborhood level. It is difficult to deal with the problems in the community when we have to focus on issues like the constituent assembly, then the referendum, general elections, then presidential elections, then elections for governor, etc. Currently we are in elections for municipal councilors. This constant electoral dynamic weakens the organic process at the local level because it distracts us from confronting the daily issues that people confront in their neighborhoods.

What are the main demands in the north zone of Caracas where you live?

The main problem in this area is unplanned urbanization. Most of the land is in the hands of a very small bourgeoisie and so the common people have had to build their houses on the hillsides near the canyon, areas that were originally left vacant [because of the precarious conditions]. There are 29 rivers in the area of Caracas, and every time it rains heavily the people who live in these areas are at great risk. Their houses get washed away. Many people die. For example in 1999 there was a disaster in which many people were killed. People want a resolution of this problem.

The other theme is physical security or insecurity. It is difficult to find a place to meet because people are afraid. It is a real problem. But the right-wing opposition and the media has exaggerated the issue, and made it the problem in the barrios. I think that there are more serious problems. Security is the issue of the opposition, the press covers it, so there is debate about this problem.

How has the quality of people's lives changed since the beginning of the Bolivarian revolution?

One of the main changes is in the area of education with the missions, Mission Sucre, for example. Now anyone who wants to go to university can go. Before only 7% of the students in the UCV were poor people like me. And perhaps only 2% of the students in Simón Bolívar were poor. Now everybody is studying at night. In fact, sometimes it is difficult to find a time to meet because everybody is studying! We can only hold meetings during the weekends.

Another fundamental thing that has changed is that before 1998, there was no political debate in the barrios. I was part of a small vanguard that was resisting this, trying to raise political debate in the university. In the 1980s, it was only the students who would mobilize, come out on the streets. But now people are talking about politics everywhere, on the bus and in the bars. It is rare that two people having beers are not talking about politics.

Another important success is that people talk about socialism. Maybe they do not talk about socialism in a “scientific” way, like about what Marx or Lenin said. But they talk about socialism with familiarity. There is still some fear, but way less than before. For example, once we showed a film about socialism in a barrio in the 1980s or 1990s. People just repeated what they heard from the press, that the socialists will torture you and that all socialists are dictators. Now people associate socialism with democracy. Indeed, the very concept of democracy has changed. If Chávez was assassinated, which is a real possibility because there have been many plans to assassinate him, there would be a civil war.

But no matter what happens, the advance of participatory democracy is irreversible. We cannot go back to representative democracy. There could be another kind of left, but now the people always have to participate; participatory democracy is a fundamental part of this revolution. The people understand the importance of it, demand it, and want to do it.

And they notice the difference in how politics works. Before the political reality was centered on what happened in “Miraflores” (the presidential palace). Now there is a lot of political activity, there are important social movements. There is possibility, there is hope. Now people do more than just wait every five years to participate in elections. We have seven million people who are militants in the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). There are millions of people participating in the communal councils.

This does not mean that everybody has a developed political consciousness or political experience; it is still a process in transition. There can be no revolutionary party without revolutionary militants. And the commitment to forming revolutionaries remains underdeveloped.

There are still problems in the Bolivarian process. There have been important economic improvements, for example, less unemployment, higher minimum salary, better pensions, but there is still a low level of political consciousness. People have to be able to handle political and economic theories if we are to advance further, like in Cuba, where the average person on the street has an analysis of what is going on in the country, in the world. In Cuba there is a high level of political consciousness. This level of [revolutionary] consciousness is still lacking in Venezuela. It is dangerous for the revolution. We have come a long way but we can still do more.

What does participatory democracy mean in the comunas?

There is a saying here that suggests that participatory democracy is not about what we are doing but about how we are going to do it. It means that we all build together that which we want to do, we decide what we want to contribute, our projects for improving our lives.

Participation has to be for everyone whether they are with the government, against the government, from the left, from the right. The only one who has authority is the assembly

of citizens. It is the assembly, not an elected group... no, it is the assembly that decides on the development plan in each comuna.

When there are debates we try to reach a consensus, and if we don't, we keep debating. When there is no agreement we break the issue down bit by bit to reach agreement on smaller parts. Participation for us is in the formulation of politics; we also participate in the execution of the project. For example, a community wants an aqueduct. The state says, "Ok. Here is the money. Now build it, execute the funds."

But we do not participate in the formulation of national policy, not directly. The policy of the ministers is not decided by a participatory process. We have said, "But we should participate!" We participate at the local level, but socialism is not something that happens only at the local level. We need to weave together a web that brings together the local spaces, the territories, and the comunas, because the national and international levels have an impact on what's happening at the local level. We can't just be a socialist comuna, a little island in a sea of capitalism. After all, who are we going to exchange with?

There is a Ministry of Popular Power for the Comunas and Social Protection but there are no participatory mechanisms to set its policy. Right now this is happening with the indigenous communities. There is a Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and the communities are participating, they decide. They have a national council that makes policy. We have put forward a proposal to have more control over the Ministry for the Comunas, but it has not yet been approved. There is a lot of resistance.

You have to understand one thing. The comunas are a space of power. There are comunas that have executed more resources than some municipal governments. So, the comunas are constituted spaces of power; a majority of the comunas are formally part of the PSUV, but often Chavista officials at the local levels do not really want to share power. Instead, there is a confrontation between the comunas and the Chavista mayors and governors. Although we all stand with our arms together in the photo with Chávez, in practice there is a real confrontation. The governors do not understand this dynamic because the governors do not want to lose power.

The governors and mayors think that they are going to build socialism from their municipality, from their leadership. But we say, if a communal state is not born, socialism will not be possible. At the moment there is no perfect socialist comuna, where everything is debated, where there is an alternative, socialist, economic plan, where the teachers are also from the comuna, giving classes to the youth. This might be possible one day, but not now when there is another level of government that is deciding the overall budget. The project is to connect all these comunas at the national level; at the moment this is not viable because in most places we do not even participate in deciding the budget of the municipality. We participate in small projects, and the local government continues independently as if we were not in a socialist transition.

I only know of two isolated cases where this [participatory budgeting with the involvement of the comuna] takes place in reality: in the city of Torres in the state of Lara, and in Bolívar city in the state of Falcón. This is the case because in these municipalities the comrades [the mayors] are really from the left. The majority of the governors are not from the left. In most cases, the state is a bourgeois state and taking apart this state is the focus of continual conflict. This is taking a lot of political energy. The president is aware of these contradictions but I don't think that he has found a way to overcome the problem. It is not simple. On the one hand you have people who are organized and making proposals and on the other hand people from the same party who are consolidating the bourgeois state.

What is the role of women in the comunas?

The majority of the people who participate in the comunas are women. I think that when we are talking about the advances of the process, this is a very important one. Right now there is a lot of participation by women and the grassroots level. But it ends there. When it is time to hold elections for positions with more responsibility, then it is men who are the candidates.

The president has put forward a number of initiatives to counter this tendency, and there have been many advances. In the party, for example, 50% of the candidates must be women. And when you go to the communities, the majority of those who are participating are women, and the majority of people who are studying in the missions are women. Historically in Venezuela and in Latin America, the societies have been very sexist and it has often been difficult for women to even leave the house. Before Chávez came to office, women's participation was really rare. Women from the Left – from the vanguard – have always participated in social and political life. But now it is more widespread. I think that in the higher levels of the process, there are a number of valuable women doing incredible things.

There are some things that still need to change. Like the laws. For example, if I get pregnant I have six months of rest but my husband does not even get a day. One of the things that we have asked for is equality on this issue. I think that we will win on this issue.

Another limitation is that women are responsible for the children in Venezuela. It is difficult for women to participate, in the communal council, for example, because they have to leave their kids somewhere. This influences women's decisions not to take political positions with more responsibility, especially if the position involves travel. This is a real barrier, although the level of participation in the communities is really high.

What is the long term vision for promoting participatory democracy from below through the comunas?

Here I have a different vision from the government. The vision of the government is that I show up in a community, starting from zero, and within half a week give workshops on

politics. As I mentioned above, the level of political consciousness in Venezuela is still weak.

The process of building political consciousness, formation, can not be instantaneous. It is not like you can go to a school for a week and get a certificate. It has to be permanent. If you have a team constituted by the same people from the communal council raising the consciousness of people in their community, this is the way to create facilitators. It is a long process to learn about all of the different categories: anarchism, socialism and its various currents. It takes at least fifteen years. It is not just theory; it is also learned in practice. You learn in practice, but also through reading and reflecting. It takes a long time to figure out that certain social and political practices belong to socialism, while other ones are capitalist.

Some communal councils have higher levels of political formation than others. These organizations understand that the communal council is not just a space to receive resources. They understand that the council is a new “civil association.” It is a political space and a political exercise. Honestly, the majority of the councils do not understand it this way. We are still working with the councils to work on the idea that “hey, we can solve this problem in a capitalist way or a socialist way.” We want to solve the problems, but do so in a new way. But it is difficult when the companies that provide the services, for example, produce the materials for a house, are still capitalist. Housing is a good example because the problem of housing continues to be serious. Maybe we are making the blocks, but we have to buy the cement from a capitalist company. And then hiring the person to lay the blocks... It is not just solving the problem, but how we solve the problem... to build socialism rather than strengthen capitalism. We have 500 years of colonialism and exploitation, so this is a big challenge, to rebuild all of the socio-economic system. Building a new state is a big challenge.

For example, in some cases we have increased agricultural production. But the rice has been sent to a company that processes and packages the rice and sells it back at ten times the price. It makes me laugh, it doesn't make sense. We have to take over the plants, take over the companies. But it is not easy to do. And the communal councils are not necessarily ready to take on all these tasks.

We find ourselves in a bit of a vicious circle. The only way to overcome this is to create relations between the communal councils, public institutions and the state. The councils are in the process of becoming stronger but it will take a lot to move to the next step.

What is the idea over the long term? Will the comunas continue to exist alongside the bourgeois state, or will they eventually replace it with new forms of self-governance?

This question makes me think because the revolutionary process has taken place through many kinds of organizations that got stuck on the path. The president mentioned once that the nucleus of endogenous development did not function well. The people often ask, “What kind of organization do we need, which is the adequate tool to help bring us what

we want... a comuna, a cooperative?" And I explain what a cooperative is, a company of social property. The comuna is something else. We are doing everything to try to make sure that the comuna becomes the main instrument of social change because we are Marxists... it is the only way to build socialism, from below. In addition, in Venezuela there are historical experiences with comunas. This is our original form of organization. It is not strange for us. Of course, because of colonialism all of this changed. But the original form in "Our America" was this one. This is the political form through which people collectively governed their lives.

We have also seen other forms of socialism that were constructed by the state, like the Soviet Union. When that state collapsed, everything was destroyed. So, something happened there. Did the people really feel like they were a part of this process? There were some successes but people did not really feel part of it. The experience of all the revolutions of the past, in Russia, in Cuba, in the other countries of the South, show that if the people do not really participate, the bourgeois state simply continues. Such a conception of socialism is not viable, because the bourgeois state is not of the people. We are working now to build alternative systems, of solidarity exchange and barter. The idea is that the comuna also starts to run the community radio stations, the TV stations.

We are discussing how the comunas will be structured. What will be the relations of forces, which powers will the comunas be in charge of – judicial, executive, etc. All that exists now is the assembly for debate. But authentically socialist comunas do not yet exist; we are still constructing the comunas. We are in comuna when we govern ourselves, when we do not need a judge to tell us, "This house is not yours." Or let's say you live in a neighborhood and you need a letter that proves your place of residence. You have to go to an institution that says this. The comuna could do this. Your neighbor can verify where you live.

Capitalism created a layer of people who are the owners of peoples' lives. If you do not have a residence card, there are many things that you can't do. Why do we need resident cards? The bourgeois state has created this class of administrators that we do not need, who pretend they know things. The popular layers of community at the bottom have to wait until they solve the problems. But the comuna can do all of these things, decide all of these things. Before the Spanish came, this is how we lived. But it is a long process to raise the consciousness of the people so that they can take charge of their lives. It is also not an "anarchist thing" where anyone can do whatever they want. There are norms of living together that one has to respect. There are norms that regulate working life that also have to be respected. People have to respect these laws out of consciousness rather than because there is a law that represses them.

Ultimately, whether President Chávez is here or not, the process depends on the people. At the moment, the process as a whole is too dependent on the president. He is seen as the guarantee that this process will go forward, and for this reason the reactionaries want to get rid of him.

If another government replaces Chávez it may no longer be possible to meet politically in the streets. With the right-wing governments of the past, you only had to have a single book by Marx, Che Guevara, or Fidel Castro, to be persecuted. •