

Latin America: politics, trade unions + solidarity

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June 2006



Introduction

This is an exciting and dynamic time in Latin American politics. Grassroots organisations and left-leaning parties that were traditionally marginalised from the political process have achieved an important 'breakthrough' into the political mainstream and been elected to government - as has been the case in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. This has in turn allowed for the introduction of social policy initiatives that address the needs of workers, the poor and the excluded, while providing popular organisations with access to state institutions and new forms of voice and participation. These political changes have opened up new opportunities for British and European Trade Unions to deepen co-operation and solidarity work with their Latin American counterparts, support democratic and progressive initiatives and build a united international alliance against neo-liberalism, militarism and the unipolar world order.

The Historical Context of Current Developments

Independent popular organisations and left-wing political parties have traditionally been a weak force in Latin American politics, despite their sizeable constituency. This is due to a number of factors that include:

- Historical / colonial legacies: Labour, organisational and social rights for poor / peasant / indigenous people did not exist during the period of Spanish colonial rule (that was rolled back from the 1820s onwards). They were also denied by the post-independence governments, which were based on oligarchic control by a (white) pro-US elite.
- Corporatist and populist traditions: Union / political / voting rights were typically introduced in 1930s and 1940s (in the case of Venezuela, not until 1958) by 'revolutionary' nationalist governments that sought to break with US economic dominance and the political control exercised by the (US backed) oligarchic regimes. However, political and labour mobilisation was tightly controlled, autonomous organisation was repressed and left-wing groups demobilised or incorporated into corporatist 'mass' parties such as the Peronists in Argentina, the PRI in Mexico and the AD party in Venezuela.
- During the Cold War period (and particularly after the Cuban revolution of 1959), the US worked with Latin American militaries and the region's economic elite to eliminate the

influence of the left and union organisations. In the 1960s through to the mid-1980s, US backed military coups were carried out in the majority of Latin American countries (although not in Venezuela, Colombia or Mexico) while the federally funded AFL-CIO built pro-US labour groups in the region. The right-wing military dictatorships brutally suppressed pockets of left-wing and independent organisation and thinking. This period was also characterised by the introduction of neoliberal economic policies, as the military dictatorships sought to break with state-led development models (based on Keynesian economic thinking) that had been in place since the 1930s. The 'exhaustion' of state led development models was underscored by the high levels of debt, inflation and corruption they had generated. Neo-liberal solutions were imposed by the IMF as a means of ensuring Latin American countries would repay their debts and open up their economies.

- Democratization in the 1980s did not allow for the 'rebirth' of the left for a number of reasons. Firstly the transitions away from military control were based on formal (e.g. Chile) or informal (e.g. Argentina, Brazil) agreements between civilian politicians and the outgoing military regimes. These pacts emphasised the need for continuity with neoliberal policies and political stability – which right of centre forces were seen as guaranteeing. Secondly, the left was in ideological turmoil following the collapse of communism in the Soviet bloc and the repression of the 1970s and 1980s, and divided over to whether compromise with the neo-liberal model or continue to pursue socialism or communism. Thirdly, popular and union based organisations were chronically weakened by regressive labour legislation that stressed 'flexibilisation' of employment and restricted union rights. Finally, in some countries, the left was perceived as elitist and detached from the needs and interests of the poor, indigenous groups, peasants and the working class.¹

The Rebirth of the 'Left'

Neo-liberalism and the centre-right orientation of Latin American politics were sustained in the 1990s as a result of continued organisational problems for leftwing, popular and union movements and the demobilising impact of rising poverty levels and the growing informalisation of the economy. US 'democracy' assistance channelled through quasi-governmental

¹ For an overview of these developments – and a general political history of the region see T. Skidmore and P. Smith (2004) *Modern Latin America* Oxford University Press and J. Buxton and N. Phillips (1999) Vol. 1. *Country Case Studies in Latin American Political Economy* and Vol. 2 *States, Markets and Actors*, Manchester University Press.

organisations such as the National Endowment for Democracy strengthened neoliberal parties and presidential candidates electorally. This, combined with a strongly pro-US private sector media, led to the apparent hegemony of free-market and free-trade thinking on the continent.

Although neo-liberalism was successful in generating economic growth in the majority of Latin American countries, there was no 'trickle down' effect and the wealth accrued was concentrated in the hands of a narrow, elite sector of society. Levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment increased as public spending was cut, state subsidies lifted and control of industry, telecommunications, the media, welfare and other publicly owned sectors passed into the private sector (domestic, US and trans-national) following the implementation of IMF sponsored privatisation programmes. Steep increases in poverty, informality and unemployment resulted from the ensuing 'rationalisation' of labour that followed privatisation, and the increase in prices paid by the public for privatised provision in sectors such as health, transport, energy and utilities.

Strategies of regional integration premised on free trade, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, signed between Canada, the US and Mexico) further exacerbated these problems. The employment opportunities that were generated were low-skilled, low-paid and concentrated in the manufacturing sector where union rights were tightly restricted or non-existent. The reduction of import tariffs, in line with the free trade agreements, led to a flood of cheap agricultural and manufactured imports from developed countries, compounding poverty and unemployment in the agriculture and industry. State repression of organised and spontaneous protests in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Argentina in the late 1980s and 1990s deepened the breach between the neoliberal oriented elite and wider society.²

² See D. Green (2003) *Silent Revolution: The Rise and Crisis of Market Economics in Latin America*, New York University Press.

Box 1: Latin American Poverty Index 1981-2001

	1981	1984	1987	1990	1993	1996	1999	2001
Population living on less than \$1 per day (millions)	36	46	45	49	52	52	54	50
Percentage of population living on less than \$1 per day	9.7	11.8	10.9	11.3	11.3	10.7	10.5	9.5
Population living on less than \$2 per day (millions)	99	119	115	125	136	117	127	128
Percentage of population living on less than \$2 per day	26.9	30.4	27.8	28.4	29.5	24.1	25.1	24.5

Growing popular dissatisfaction with the political status quo, hostility to neoliberal policies and rising confidence in non-traditional forms of political organisation, such as the ‘new’ union movement that emerged in opposition to corporatist union organisations, culminated in a dramatic leftward shift in the region in the 2000s. This political reorientation has run parallel with the election of the Bush administration in the US, the appointment of Cold War ‘warriors’ such as John Negroponte, Otto Reich and Elliot Abrams³ to senior positions in the US government and the commencement of the American-led ‘long war’ against ‘terrorism’ – a concept and objective that remains nebulous and vague. The Bush administration has responded to these democratic processes in Latin America in an aggressive and bellicose manner, pursuing a divide and rule strategy in order to preserve its political and economic control of the region and roll back the important changes that are taking place.

‘Types’ of left – the current debate

Following from the election of Hugo Chavez to the Venezuelan presidency in 1998, the Latin American electorate has opted for ‘non-traditional’ and left of centre party political options in national and local level elections across the continent. Elections in Mexico (July 2006), Peru (June 2006) and Nicaragua (November 2006) hold out the prospect of further advances by the left, although the most recent opinion poll surveys from these countries show increasingly tight races. The most significant exception to this regional pattern is Colombia, where the right of

³ All of whom have a history of repressing ‘communist’ advances in Central America during the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

centre, pro-US president Alvaro Uribe was re-elected in 2006 with 62% of the vote, although on a low level of voter participation (just 47%).

While there has been a tendency to bundle together the 'new' Latin American left, they differ substantially in terms of organisational structure, policy orientation, ideological orientation and perceptions of the US. Their election to office has also been determined by factors specific to each individual country. President Lula of Brazil for example comes from a background in trade union politics and opposition to the Brazilian military junta that ruled the country from 1964 until 1985. Similarly Michelle Bachelet, the president of Chile has a background in left wing politics and resistance to right-wing military dictatorship. Both presidents (like President Kirchner in Argentina) come from relatively strong and institutionalised party political organisations. By contrast, the Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez has a military background, his initial political thinking was nationalist rather than socialist in orientation and his Movimiento Quinta Republica (Fifth Republic Movement) party is a loose and inchoate organisation.

What links the 'new' left is their emphasis on: a) reducing inequality and poverty; b) using the state / public sector to compensate for the failures of the free market and; c) enhancing popular participation in local and national level decision-making. There is also a common view that the influence of the US (political, military and economic) needs to be reduced and balanced through the development of a more integrated, independent community of Latin American nations. The differences between them hinge on (among other issues) the extent to which they; a) see the private sector as a partner in development; b) seek to reduce the US presence and; c) support strategies of regional integration. This in turn impacts on their relationship with domestic opponents, each other, the US and the wider international community.⁴

The approach of the US (and also the UK) government, the media and many academics has been to conceptualise these Latin American administrations as either a 'bad' or 'good' left. Those Latin American governments that have repudiated free market policies and been openly and vocally critical of the US – specifically Venezuela but now including Bolivia – represent,

⁴ See for example <http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/news/04-25-05va.html>

along with Cuba, a ‘bad’ left that is perceived as undemocratic, authoritarian, inimical to human rights and statist. It should be noted that the ‘bad’ left are resource rich countries that are currently enjoying strong economic growth as a result of rising energy prices and the global commodity boom. This has reduced their reliance on US trade and investment, while at the same time their strategies of re-nationalising oil and gas has raised US concerns as to its energy security.

Those left of centre governments that have pursued a ‘middle way’ premised on prudent economic management, a positive attitude toward private investment and constructive engagement with the US, are seen to

Box 2: The Good and Bad Left	
‘Good’ or ‘pink’ left presidents	‘Bad’ left presidents
Argentina Ernesto Kirchner	Venezuela Hugo Chavez
Brazil Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva	Bolivia Evo Morales
Chile Michelle Bachelet	Cuba Fidel Castro
Uruguay Tabare Vasquez	

represent a ‘good’, progressive and social democratic left. In contrast to Venezuela and Bolivia, these countries remain reliant on inward capital investment and to date, this has necessitated an economically cautious approach and the maintenance of good relations with the US.

In the view of the US, the ‘bad’ left is to be isolated and rolled back while the latter are seen as partners to be worked with. This position was most recently articulated by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who claimed that Venezuela was a ‘negative force’ in the region and part of a second ‘axis of evil’. Defence of these democratically elected governments by British and European trade unions and solidarity groups has served as an important counter to the pressure applied by the US and the attempts by the Bush administration to discredit and delegitimise them.

‘New’ Unionism

The ‘new’ left in Latin America is identified with the promotion of a progressive social policy agenda and strategies that encourage the participation of civil society groups in policy-making and delivery. In some interpretations, the agenda of the left is simply ‘reformist’ and necessary to address the political and economic underdevelopment of the region.⁵ Trade unions in Latin

⁵ See for example, J. Petras (June 3 2006) ‘Is Latin America Really Turning Left’, *Counterpunch*.
<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/articles.php?artno=1745>

America have consequently enjoyed something of a 're-birth', with confederations such as the UNT in Venezuela, the CTA in Argentina, CUT in Colombia, CUT in Peru and PIT-CNT in Uruguay playing a crucial role in organising and articulating the needs, views and interests of working people and marginalized groups to the 'new' left governments. This 'new' unionism emphasises the importance of democratic and participatory mechanisms in regional organisations, corporate social responsibility, protection for vulnerable groups and the centrality of social consultations for equitable economic growth and harmonious labour relations.

Although structural and ideological tensions persist within some of the separate national union organisations, they have developed cohesive agendas that address domestic and international issues relating to wage levels, welfare protection, labour rights, trade and investment regulations and discrimination. Unity of union organisations across the region and with the international labour movement has been an important goal for national confederations. Unity and partnership is seen as particularly important in relation to efforts by Latin American unions to contain and push back US led economic initiatives (such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas) that have a deleterious impact on working people, and also US political agendas (such as the embargo on Cuba, the militarisation of the conflict in Colombia and support for Colombian president Uribe's 'demilitarisation' strategy). The union movement in the 'good' left Latin American countries – such as Chile, Brazil and Argentina, and those countries that remain under centre-right control (including Peru, Mexico and Colombia) serves as an important counter to the limitations that continued ties with the US impose on national governments in these countries, and a vital lobby in defence of worker and popular interests.

The Social Development Agenda

In the 2000s, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF acknowledged that 'trickle-down' was not working. Latin America remains one of the most unequal regions in the world with a quarter of the region's population living on less than \$2 per day.

Box 3: Regional Poverty Levels

Country	Population below the national poverty line (%)	Population living on less than \$1 per day
Argentina	50.9	3.3
Brazil	14.4	8.2
Ecuador	35.5	17.7
Mexico	10.1	9.9
Nicaragua	47.9	45.1
Peru	49	18.1
Venezuela	31.3	14.3 (survey year 1998)

The regressive impact of neo-liberalism (specifically reductions in public spending in areas such as education, health and welfare) is now recognised as an impediment to national economic growth and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.⁶ The evident limitations of neoliberal ‘development’ strategies combined with the rise of a ‘new’ left attuned to social need has led to the introduction of important social policy initiatives in Latin American countries that are designed to achieve sustainable reductions in poverty through social, capital and human investments. Two basic approaches have emerged. The first focuses on transfers of money, credit or food to excluded and poor groups. In some cases, the transfer is conditional upon beneficiary behaviour – such as employment, inoculation of children against infectious diseases or child attendance at school. This social policy approach is identified with the ‘social democratic’ left.

⁶ See for example Perry, G. (2006) *Poverty Reduction and Growth: Virtuous and Vicious Circles*. World Bank. The Millennium Development Goals are Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Achieve universal primary education; Promote gender equality and empower women; Reduce child mortality; Improve maternal health; Combat HIV / AIDS, malaria and other infectious diseases; Ensure environmental sustainability; Develop a global partnership for development

Box 4: Pro-Poor Programme Initiatives

Country	Programme
Argentina	Jefes y Jefas - \$50 per month cash for work programme. Launched 2002, covers 2 million people.
Brazil	Child Labour Eradication Programme. Launched 1999. \$11-17 per child per month. Coverage of 866,000 beneficiary children aged 7-14. Bolsa Escola. Launched 2001. Cash transfer of \$5-15 per household conditional upon school attendance. 8.2 million children covered. Bolsa Familia. Launched 2003. Target families in extreme poverty. 8.2 million households covered.
Chile	Integrated Extreme Poverty Eradication. Launched 2002, covers 225,000 households in extreme poverty.

While these initiatives are to be applauded for addressing marginalisation and poverty, they have important limitations –more specifically they do not fundamentally alter the balance of economic power or address the need for sustainable, well-paid, quality employment and they neglect wider aspects of ‘insecurity’ such as lack of access to housing, land titles and ‘cradle to grave’ welfare provision. In sum, their impact on inequality over the medium and longer term is questionable, as is their utility in the absence of a large increase in the share of GDP allocated to social policy. Moreover these initiatives do not address political exclusion. As the World Bank has itself argued, poverty in Latin America is structural and predicated on the historical marginalisation of poor groups from centres of decision-making. So, while the PT in Brazil, the Bachelet government in Chile and the Kirchner administration in Argentina do represent an important political change, the extent to which they are positioned to radically redistribute economic and political power is open to question.

The Venezuelan Approach

The Chavez government in Venezuela represents a completely different approach. Since assuming power in democratic elections held in 1998, President Chavez has established new political, economic and social rights (through a new Constitution introduced in 1999) and introduced novel modes of decision and policy-making, with the aim of redistributing political power and expanding civil participation. State institutions have been restructured, ‘protagonistic democracy’ based on regular elections and referenda implemented and the corporatist union structure overhauled following a referendum in December 2001. The

administration's social policy initiatives have been equally revolutionary. The strong rise in the oil price (which has increased from \$10 per barrel in 1999 to over \$60 in 2006) has provided the Venezuelan government with the fiscal capacity to dedicate expansive resources to social policy initiatives (see Box 5 below).

Box 5: Venezuelan Social Policy Initiatives

Education - Education spending has risen to 6 percent of GDP (above 3.9 percent average in developing countries). 1.2 million adults taught to read by 100,000 volunteers leading to elimination of illiteracy and more than 3000 new schools built. School attendance has risen 25%, representing 1.3 million students previously left out of the system. 1 million people (adults) have returned to and graduated from high school. New public universities have been built and 100,000 poor students receive grants. *Creche and breakfast clubs set up in public schools to boost nutrition and work opportunities for parents.*

Health - 60% of the population receive some form of government-sponsored health care. Postnatal mortality rates have decreased 38 percent. Barrio Adentro (Inside the Neighborhood) provides free medical treatment and health education in poor neighbourhoods, staffed by 20,000 medics (from Cuba!) who have carried out 40 million consultations. A subsidized chain of national pharmacies providing medicine to the poor has been set up. The program focuses on the accessibility and distribution of essential medications and supplemental vitamins. Victims of AIDS, cancer and chronic diseases receive free treatment and medication. More than 4,400 community health clinics have been established offering 129 essential medicines without cost. To confront extreme poverty and hunger, 6,000 markets have been set up to distribute subsidised food and commodities. They benefit more than 8 million people and distribute more than 3.2 million of kilos of food per day. 150,000 people in extreme poverty are now able to eat daily at no cost.

Addressing directly the recommendations of bodies such as the World Bank, the administration has established and expanded credit and savings facilities for the poor, with initiatives such as Banco de la Mujer targeting women. Land and housing titles have been distributed to families that have formed community-based collectives and agricultural facilities and investment re-distributed away from traditional landed groups toward landless peasants.

As the table shows, this has led to a reduction in poverty levels – a significant achievement in light of the legacy inherited by the Chavez government and the increase in poverty rates that followed the opposition led stoppage in the oil sector and six-month lock out in 2002 and 2003.

Venezuela: Poverty Rates, 1997-2005

Year	Time Period	Households Below Poverty Line (%)	People Below Poverty Line (%)
1997	1st half	55.6	60.94
	2nd half	48.1	54.48
1998	1st half	49.0	55.44
	2nd half	43.9	50.40
1999	1st half	42.8	49.99
	2nd half	42.0	48.69
2000	1st half	41.6	48.31
	2nd half	40.4	46.34
2001	1st half	39.1	45.51
	2nd half	39.0	45.38
2002	1st half	41.5	48.13
	2nd half	48.6	55.36
2003	1st half	54.0	61.00
	2nd half	55.1	62.09
2004	1st half	53.1	60.15
	2nd half	47.0	53.90
2005	1st half	42.4	48.80
	2nd half	37.9	43.70

Source: Venezuela's National Statistics Institute (INE, República Bolivariana de Venezuela)

The administration has assumed an assertive stance vis a vis foreign private investors. Along with demonstrating a strong preference for working with foreign public sector partners, the Venezuelan government has refused to guarantee the contractual rights of private sector investors, most recently in the oil industry. In this respect, the Venezuelan government is seeking to redefine the balance of power between oil producing and oil consuming nations. As the vice-president of PDVSA (the state oil company) recently outlined in a visit to London, investors are welcome to Venezuela, but they enter on Venezuelan terms. In its industrial and development policies, the government has continued to promote worker co-management (cogestion), an initiative that was first introduced following the opposition lock-out of 2002 / 2003. Privately owned companies that were closed down during this period have been re-opened under worker control and with financial support from the central government. All state, private, small and medium industries that receive financial support or supply contracts from the central government are required to implement cogestion.

The UNT labour organisation has played a vital role in promoting and supporting these initiatives and it has worked collaboratively with regional and European partner unions to defend the Chavez government's revolutionary policy direction, its democratic legitimacy and also the administration's strategy, which is discussed in more detail below.

Regional Initiatives

The Venezuelan government placed itself at the forefront of resistance to the Free Trade Area of the Americas, a US proposal that collapsed at the 2005 Summit of the Americas in Argentina. In place of free-trade based regional integration initiatives, the Venezuelan government has proposed the Bolivarian Alternative (ALBA) model of regional integration that is based on exploitation and exchange of comparative advantages, social justice and political unity. To date, only Cuba and Bolivia are full ALBA members, however agreements based on ALBA principles have been signed with Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. Underscoring Venezuela's resistance to US-based free trade negotiations, Venezuela withdrew from the Community of Andean Nations (CAN) in May 2006 following the decision by fellow CAN members Colombia and Peru to negotiate bilateral trade agreements with the US. The collapse of the CAN is not particularly problematic, as the organization had been losing direction and coherence over the years. A more difficult proposition is the situation within Mercosur, the Common Market of the South that groups Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, with Chile and Bolivia as associate members. Venezuela acceded to Mercosur in May 2006, however President Chavez has been critical of the organization's failure to advance political integration among its members and his government is hostile to strategies of global integration. Discord within Mercosur, combined with limited progress by the European Union, US and WTO in reforming global markets, has undermined efforts to negotiate new regional trade agreements.

Challenges Ahead for Venezuela and the UNT

President Chavez appears to be in an unassailable position. The administration enjoys massive popular support (over 70% in the most recent opinion poll surveys) and Chavez faces no significant opposition challenge in the December 2006 election. A second Chavez term will require the administration to address the tensions that have developed within the Chavez government and the wider Chavista movement. The most important cleavage exists between so-called 'hardliners' (that are seeking to conduct a 'revolution within the revolution' and

support the adoption of worker control, orthodox socialism and a more aggressive stance against the US) and 'moderates' (who emphasise institutionalization of the gains to date and the need for a more cautious economic approach⁷). President Chavez has continued to maintain a pragmatic central position, holding the two currents together. Chavez has himself undergone something of an ideological journey over recent years, shifting from an initial emphasis on 'Third Way' economics toward the adoption of 'Socialism for the 21st Century' unveiled in 2005.

These divisions are also played out within the UNT, which convened its second major congress in May 2006. The UNT was born in 2003 out of widespread worker opposition to the monopolistic and undemocratic control of the labour force that was exercised by the CTV, the old corporatist union organisation that was tied to the AD party. Unfortunately, the 2006 congress revealed deep tensions between Marxist currents (Corriente Clasista Unitaria, Revolucionaria y Autónoma – CCURA), which are pressing for the adoption of a more radical UNT programme and the convening of UNT elections ahead of the December 2006 presidential contest and reformist sections, represented by the FBT (Fuerza Bolivariana de Trabajadores; Bolivarian Workers' Force) and the Autonomous Union, which want to postpone a divisive election contest until after the presidential race and emphasise the importance of a unity of energies behind the Chavez re-election campaign. Ultimately the biggest challenge facing the Venezuela government is the overt hostility of the US and the sustained efforts by the Bush administration to undermine and remove Chavez.

The UK Government and Latin America

The British government has neglected Latin America, even though the region is an important trading partner for the UK and undergoing major economic and political changes that have strategic ramifications for Britain. The government's disinterest also contrasts with rapidly growing public, student, union, media and party political interest in developments in the region and high levels of support and solidarity in the UK with the people of Venezuela, Cuba and Colombia.

⁷ Owing to concerns as to the dependency of the economy (and social policy financing) on oil export revenues. A fall in the international oil price would have deleterious ramifications for the government and its programme.

The Blair government has progressively reduced the British 'presence' in Latin America. The Embassy in Paraguay was recently closed, the British Council is re-examining its recruitment strategies in Latin America and bilateral assistance provided by DFID to the poorest South and Central American countries (such as Bolivia, Nicaragua and Honduras) has been replaced by a policy of channelling UK funds to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and IADB (Inter-American Development Bank). There are particularly serious problems with the latter initiative, specifically that; a) mechanisms for financial oversight and accountability are limited; b) the pro-poor agenda of these institutions is not explicit; c) the IADB is heavily focused on 'traditional' politics and detached from grassroots and popular organisations.

Although the UK has maintained a distance from the US in relation to that government's counter-productive and pernicious stance toward Venezuela, Cuba and the civil conflict in Colombia, there continues to be elements of overlap. Despite the potentially important 'lessons learned' from Venezuela in relation to pro-poor programming, FCO ministers recently stated that Venezuela was not a social or political model to be copied. The democratic legitimacy of the Chavez government has also been questioned, as has its record on poverty reduction. Financial support for counter-narcotics and military programming in Colombia continues and Britain will maintain a critical stance toward Cuba in upcoming EU-Latin America conferences. Both the FCO and DFID are currently developing their long-term regional strategy papers for Latin America. It is expected that these will be characterized by continuity with current approaches, despite their regressive impact on the people of Latin America. Of real concern, it is anticipated that the DFID regional strategy will maintain that department's emphasis on free trade, free markets and global integration. The papers will be released over the summer. Academics in the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford are working with progressive colleagues from other Universities to develop a series of counter-proposals.

By way of a conclusion: the value of UNISON

UNISON is an increasingly influential actor in Latin American union politics and has played a crucial role in developing EU-Latin American labour partnerships. The importance of the support provided by members of UNISON to progressive and democratic causes in Latin

America cannot be underestimated. Union activities such as twinning initiatives assist in developing capacities, good practice and democratic accountability in Latin American sister unions, they provide an opportunity for union members to share experiences and understanding of respective political and labour situations and they serve as an important counter to the regressive and undemocratic policies of the US and UK governments. Through its support for the Venezuelan Information Center, UNISON has assisted in the articulation and promotion of truthful and objective information about the situation in Venezuela and encouraged wider participation in Venezuelan related events and campaigns. This has forced accountability from the British government and media for spurious and false claims that have been made about the Chavez administration and increased pressure for a 'fact-based' foreign policy.

The support of UNISON members for union and political activities in Venezuela and Latin America more widely has been invaluable. With solidarity from European partners, Latin American organizations have been able to promote and draw attention to the centrality of the social dimension to the new economic, trade and political relations that are being developed in the region. In maintaining, developing and deepening these links, UNISON can assist in the consolidation of a progressive global partnership that emphasizes and benefits the needs and interests of working, excluded and marginalized people across Latin America and their historical quest for representative and democratic government.

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June 2006