

Report on December 2013 solidarity delegation to Venezuela

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The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Australia-Venezuela Solidarity Network's (AVSN) December 2013 solidarity delegation to Venezuela.

Participation and preparations for the delegation

The 2013 delegation was the 14th brigade to Venezuela organised by the AVSN. Importantly, it was the first following Chavez's death in March 2013, and coincided with both the municipal elections and the unleashing of a range of new economic measures undertaken by the government as part of beating back the opposition's "economic war" against the revolution.

This year's delegation was comprised of 11 participants and two organisers (Ewan Robertson and myself). Of the participants, one was from Bulgaria, one from England, one from Scotland (but living in Venezuela), one from New Zealand and the rest were all from Australia.

An important component of this year's delegation was the participation of a number of members of the Trade Union Choir that participated in a choir festival in Cuba just prior to the start of the brigade.

Agenda of visit

Below is a brief outline of the activities held during the brigade. There are a number of photos taken by brigade participant Peter Auer online here

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/apo0gkfbuywouk4/wB8yoWzteG#/>

There is also an article first published in Correo del Orinoco and then Venezuela Analysis here <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/10243>

Wednesday, December 4

While the official activities were not due to start until that night, as some brigade participants were arriving that afternoon, **Ruben Pereira, from the ALBA Social Movements Council**, offered to organise a day's worth of activities with those already in the country.



The morning began with an interview involving brigade participants on **Ruben's radio program on Colectivo Radiofonico Petare** (<http://radiocrp915.blogspot.com.au>).

Afterwards, Ruben took us to meet activists from the **Commune in Macas**, located in Petare and which features in the documentary "Comuna under Construction" (http://www.ressler.at/comuna_under_c

onstruction/). Participants had the opportunity to find out more about the process of forming communal councils and communes, as well as getting to see some of the projects the commune has undertaken. This included a direct communal property companies entrusted with gas distribution service, an Infocentre which provides free internet access, and a locally-run public transport route.



We also visited a cooperative-run chocolate factory, where we spoke with the workers about their struggle to get the company up and running under workers' control, as well as enjoyed some of their produce. Workers there had also decided, together with the community, to designate part of the land to building rooms to hold local Mision Sucre university classes.



That night we had our orientation session, which essentially went through some of the important organizational issues (security, ground rules of delegation, etc.) and the agenda of the visit. We also had a lovely dinner prepared by our friends at the Ateneo Popular, where most of the brigade stayed when in Caracas.

Thursday, December 5

In the morning we met again with Ruben Pereira, this time in the **offices of the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) Secretariat, located within the ALBA Bank building**. He gave the delegation a warm welcome and some introductory words about ALBA.

From there we travelled via the **new Metrocable cable car** to Mariche to visit the **Latin American School of Medicine Dr Salvador Allende (ELAM)**. Students from a number of countries, including from the **Caribbean, Mexico, Paraguay and Palestine**, among others, together with the school's director, **Dr Sandra Moreno**, greeted us on our arrival. A meeting was organised in the main hall, where each student provided the group with a little information about ELAM, how they came to be there, and what it meant



to be able to study for free to become a doctor and go back to help their communities. After lunch, we walked around the installations of ELAM, including an onsite medical centre where we spoke to some of the Cuban doctors about the work they are doing in Venezuela.



An article on our visit is available on the ELAM website at:

<http://noticiaselam.wordpress.com/2013/12/05/australia-en-la-elam/>

Afterwards, we returned to the ALBA offices to hear a **presentation on Petrocaribe by Amaylin Riveros, manager for social and socio-productive projects in Petrocaribe**.

Her report not only looked at the trade side of the initiative but also the social programs that accompany it in the countries that have signed up to Petrocaribe. Shortly after the brigade finished, a joint ALBA-Petrocaribe Summit was held in Caracas (on December 17).

As a number of participants were still suffering from jetlag, most of the group went back to the Ateneo Popular after the meeting. Those who were keen went along to the **closing rally for the election campaign of the Chavista candidate for Mayor of Caracas, Jorge Rodriguez**.

Friday, December 6

We took a day trip out to Valencia, in the state of Carabobo, to visit **Industrias Diana**, a food processing plant that was nationalized in 2009 and now operates under workers' control. After a tour of the factory, which also houses a PDVAL food distribution point, a free medical clinic, a government-subsidised pharmacy and a state bank outlet, **we spoke**



with some of the members of the workers' councils. They talked of the improvements for workers' rights that had occurred since nationalisation, the dilemmas they faced to ensure the company was self-sustaining, as well as the recent confrontation they had with the government over the name of a new manager.

A photo gallery of our visit is available online here:

<http://venezuelanalysis.com/images/10264>

Saturday, December 7

In the morning we did a **tour of the historic centre of Caracas**, looking at how the government (local and national) has been working to improve it. The guided tour included a visit to Plaza Bolivar, Simon Bolivar's house, and a number of the government-supported outlets in the area selling chocolate, coffee, books and other Venezuelan products at "just" prices. While some stayed in the area to walk around on their own, a small group went on to visit Puente Llaguno, Plaza de la Revolucion, Miraflores Palace and some other nearby sites that hold important value for the Bolivarian revolution.



In the afternoon we met with **Zulieka Matamoros, an activist from Barrio 23 de Enero and leading member of Marea Socialista, a current within the United Socialist Party of Venezuela**, who took us on a guided tour of the community and provided participants with a history of the radical neighbourhood. We walked past some of the Barrio Adentro modules that provide the community with free healthcare, a "Simoncito" Bolivarian childcare centre, and other community spaces.

We visited an old police station that had been taken over by the community and was now being used to house a community radio, an Infocentre and a bookshop, and which provided a space for community groups to meet. We also walked up to the **Cuartel de la Montana**, the military barracks where Chavez's remains are housed.



Afterwards, Zulieka fielded a range of questions regarding the revolution, the state, communes, criticisms from the left, etc. The day finished with a number of participants hanging around for a party that was organised in the local area.

Sunday, December 8

This was the day of the municipal elections. **We visited the polling station at Andres Bello school**, the largest in the country. There we spoke with **Antonio Vivas, CNE (National Electoral Council) president for the Candelaria district of Caracas**, who was heading up that particular polling booth on the day. He gave us a rundown of the voting system and answered questions from the delegation.



Afterwards, participants were shown some of the main sites in the **Bellas Artes cultural centre**, including the Teresa Carreno Theatre, some nearby art galleries and museums, the Hotel ALBA Caracas and a local organic farm. A number rode the nearby **Metrocable up to San Agustin**.

Monday, December 9

In the morning we met with **representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Relations, including the Orietta Caponi, Director for the Department covering Asia, Middle East and Oceania region, and Daniel Gasparri and Ana Robles, who also worked in this ministerial department.**



The meeting took place in the historic Casa Amarilla that dates back to colonial times. Participants were able to ask numerous questions about Venezuela's foreign policy (including about the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka, Libya and Syria, and other topical debates).

Afterwards, we briefly visited **the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV)**, before later that afternoon heading off to Merida

Tuesday, December 10

This was largely a free day to allow participants some rest and a chance to recover from the bus trip, as well as to see some of the sights in Merida.

In the early evening, we had a meeting with **Tamara Pearson, Ewan Robertson and Ryan Mallet Outtrim, journalists from Venezuela Analysis** (<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com>). This was an opportunity to find out more about the work of Venezuela Analysis but also to ask general questions about what has been going on in Venezuela.

Wednesday, December 11

We headed off early in the morning to Mucuchies, further up the Andes, where we met with **local farmers from the Proinpa cooperative who are working with the government on a seed bank project**. The principal focus is providing seeds to farmers for potato harvesting, including through the recuperation of local seeds that had almost disappeared. We visited both the laboratory and greenhouses they have in place for seed production, as well as finding out more about agricultural production and issues facing farmers in Venezuela.



See online photo gallery here <http://venezuelanalysis.com/images/10247>

From there we travelled further uphill to speak with **Carmen, one of the spokespeople from the local Commune "Pasos de Bolivar 1813"** about the process of building communes and their experiences in popular participation.

Finally, we travelled to **Apartaderos** to see some of the projects the Commune had been working on, including a new school, infocentre, medical clinic and sports field.

Thursday, December 12



In the morning, brigade participants visited the **Alternative School in Barrio Pueblo Nuevo**. This was an opportunity to see the school in action, interact with the children, and speak to some of the teachers.

There is a short video about the school with English subtitles online at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHG89aHxHIo>

There is also a local Barrio Adentro module attached to the school, so participants got to find out more about the health program.

In the afternoon, a meeting was organised at a local space taken over by communal councils at which participants spoke with **student activists from the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) and independent activists.**

That night the delegation travelled back to Caracas



Friday, December 13

Although originally a meeting had been scheduled with **Yul Jabor, a PCV deputy in the national assembly and head of the foreign relations commission**, the meeting was cancelled as Jabor had to travel to South Africa to attend Nelson Mandela's funeral.



In the afternoon, we met with **Amílcar Carvajal, Director for Co-ordination of Culture and Solidarity with the Peoples**. This provided the group with an opportunity to express their opinions about what they had seen during the visit as well as ask questions about issues and doubts they still had.

That night, we had a final debrief session and farewell dinner at the Ateneo Popular.

Conclusion

Overall, the visit was a good success. The different meetings and visits gave as broad as possible an overview (in the limited time we had) of the revolution and its achievement to date in different spheres (social missions, communes, workers' rights, agricultural production, etc.), while attempting to address perhaps the three key areas of major interest given the current context (the elections, the economic war and the process of building communes).