



Written Contributions/ Report prepared by the “United Steel Workers” for the summary prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Universal Periodic Review of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

1. Now Comes, The United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union, AFL-CIO/CLC (“USW”), a labor union founded in 1942 and representing 1.2 million active and retired workers in North America and the Caribbean.

2. The USW represents employees in numerous industries and bargains on behalf of these employees in order to improve their wages, benefits and other terms and conditions of employment. Throughout its history, the USW has literally represented millions of workers and helped to advance the rights and working conditions of these workers and of workers generally throughout North America and the Caribbean.

3. The USW uses this occasion with the Universal Periodic Review of Member States of the United Nations to present this written contribution to the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations on Venezuela. In particular, we will focus on the issue of labor and workers rights and conditions in Venezuela.

4. We base this report upon written research as well as several visits made by the undersigned to Venezuela between 2006 and the present. During these visits, the undersigned met with numerous labor organizations to discuss the issue of labor and workers rights in Venezuela.

5. In short, it is our view that, over the past decade or so, Venezuela has made great strides toward greater social and economic justice, the improvement of the lives of the poor and working people and an overall more egalitarian and democratic society. While much of this is obscured by the media coverage of Venezuela and President Hugo Chavez, the facts are incontrovertible.

6. For example, in the past 12 years, Venezuelans have seen a five fold increase in pensions, a large decrease in unemployment and one of the highest minimum wages in Latin America. In addition, and quite incredibly, 60% of the country's national budget is now spent on social services.

7. Of particular importance to the USW, since 2001, there has been a huge increase in unionization, with 4,000 unions in Venezuela, up from 1,300 ten years ago. In Venezuela, approximately 11% of workers are now represented by unions – a rate approaching that of unionization in the U.S. (around 12%). When compared to Venezuela's neighbor, Colombia, with a unionization rate of around 4% and a crisis with serial state-sponsored murder of trade unionists, the situation for labor in Venezuela looks even brighter.

8. Just as importantly, the Venezuelan government in the past 12 years has encouraged greater worker control and even worker ownership over their workplaces. In other words, it has

9. promoted increased workplace democracy. For example, the government has supported the creation of more than 100,000 cooperatives with low-interest loans and free training. This represents a more than 100-fold increase in the past 12 years. In addition, in cases where factories were idle the government has allowed former workers to take them over so that dozens of worker co-managed factories were created. The democratization of the workplace has had its deepest effect in the agricultural sector, where rural land reform has benefited more than a million Venezuelans, with tracts of land, training, credits, technology, and access to markets.

10. The Venezuelan government's economic policies over the past 12 years have had a profound impact on working people. To wit, there has been a 50% drop in the poverty rate and the extreme poverty rate dropped by nearly two-thirds. While most of this drop in poverty is attributable to social policies that benefit the poor, much of it is also traceable to a dramatic drop in unemployment, which fell by nearly half, from 14.5% in early 1999 to around 7% in late 2010. Moreover, inequality in Venezuela, as measured by the "Gini coefficient," has dropped from 0.49 in 1998 to 0.39 in 2010, one of the lowest levels in Latin America.

11. In addition, in the area of education the government has almost tripled the rate of university attendance, from 28 per 1,000 inhabitants in 1999 to 78 per 1,000 inhabitants in 2007 (from 657,000 university students in 1999 to 2.1 million in 2007); it achieved a 50% increase in the enrollment rate in primary education from 40.6% in 1999 to 60.6% in 2008; and increased by 30% the percentage of GDP dedicated to education, from 4.87% of GDP in 1999 to 6.34% in 2008.

12. In the area of health the advances include: universal health coverage, via the Barrio Adentro

Mission (community doctors in most neighborhoods); a drop in the infant mortality rate from 19.0 per 1,000 live births in 1999 to 13.9 per 1,000 in 2008; and a 1.5 year increase in Venezuelans' life expectancy, from 72.4 years in 2000 to 73.9 in 2009.

13. In addition, Venezuelans, under the current government, have greater access to clean water and food. Since 1998, for example, caloric intake has risen to 91% of the recommended levels in 1998 to 101.6 % in 2007. In addition, malnutrition-related deaths have fallen by more than 50 percent, from 4.9 to 2.3 deaths per 100,000 in population between 1998 and 2006. These improvements have resulted from Venezuela's school-feeding program, which provides 4 million students with two free meals and a snack. Moreover, 92 percent of Venezuelans now have access to clean drinking water (up from 80% in 1998), and 82 percent now have access to sanitation (up from 62% in 1998). All in all, compared to the year 1998, around 4 million more Venezuelans now have access to clean drinking water, and over 5 million more Venezuelans now have access to sanitation.

14. With regard to retirement and social security there has been a steady increase in the coverage and in the level of social security benefits for retired persons, which has led to a doubling of resources dedicated to social security, from 2.28% of GDP in 1999 to 4.75% in 2008. In terms of the population covered, this has increased from 20.3% of those over 60 years old in the year 2000, to 43.3% in 2009.

15. As a result of these policies, Venezuelans report to have an exceptionally high level of general well-being. According to Latinobarometro, 84% of Venezuelans say that they are satisfied with life, which is the second highest level in Latin America and well above the average

of 71% for all of Latin America. Also, Venezuela's Human Development Index (HDI), with which the UN Development Program tries to measure a variety of social indicators, increased from 0.78 in 1998 to 0.84 in 2008 (the world's HDI hardly changed at all during this time).

Conclusion

16. Despite struggling with a coup in 2002, and an oil strike the next year, Venezuela has mounted huge economic and social gains for every-day Venezuelans – especially for poor and working people. While Venezuela still faces obstacles toward its goals for future economic and social improvements – chief among them, the world-wide recession which began in 2008 – the trajectory of the current situation in Venezuela for labor and for workers is well in the positive direction. We applaud Venezuela's accomplishments in this regard and urge the UN to support Venezuela's process of bringing social justice to its people.