

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Venezuela repudiates CAP-IMF alliance

The twelve-hour shutdown was a warning to Pérez: abandon the IMF policies, before it is too late.

Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez's first 100 days in office were greeted by a general strike—the most effective in over 30 years—which completely paralyzed the country for a full 12 hours on May 18. *EIR's* Venezuela bureau reported that "Caracas was as quiet as a one-horse town on a Sunday afternoon" during the strike. "I am not exaggerating when I say that 98% of the national work force heeded the strike call," Venezuelan Labor Confederation (CTV) President Juan José Delpino told reporters shortly before it ended. "We are hoping that the government will revise its measures, so that the poorest suffer least." CTV General Secretary César Olarte declared, "The generalized support for the work stoppage can be interpreted as a referendum against the national government and its neoliberal packet of economic measures."

It was the CTV which initially called the strike, but the action was immediately joined by the steel union SUTISS, headed by Congressman Andrés Velázquez, and then by the General Workers Confederation, the Social Christian Confederation of Autonomous Unions, and the Unified Confederation of Venezuelan Workers.

However, the real success of the strike stemmed from the Venezuelan people's determination to express its repudiation of Pérez's economic policies in an organized form. Small and medium-sized industrialists threw their support to the strike, as did regional associations of agricultural producers. Some 1.2 million farmers joined the stoppage. Banks and schools locked

their doors as well. Not a single newspaper appeared, with journalists joining the stoppage for the first time since the 1958 general strike. Radio stations were shut down as well.

Even part of the Catholic Church joined the protest. Exemplary was Archbishop Domingo Roa Pérez of Tachira state, who told labor leaders that he would not open his church until after the strike. Air traffic controllers joined the strike. All land, air, and sea transport ceased on May 18. Neighborhood businesses shut their doors, and not a single restaurant, except McDonald's, opened.

There can be no doubt that the population's fury was aimed directly at the President—known as CAP—a Project Democracy toady who once called the International Monetary Fund "arsenic," and who has now invited the Fund to dictate his administration's economic policies. It is those policies, ranging from drastic price increases, imposition of new taxes, raising interest rates, eliminating food subsidies, freezing wages, privatizing state sector enterprises, and devaluing the national currency, which triggered simultaneous riots in 17 Venezuelan cities Feb. 27. Over 1,000 people reportedly died in those riots, leading at least one Ibero-American statesman to comment that CAP was "paying the debt with cadavers."

In a weak attempt to defuse the strike's impact and rescue his tainted image, CAP insisted that the strike was directed against the nation's speculators in the private sector. In the days following the February rioting, CAP had similarly told reporters that the

social violence was "against the rich, those who speculate, exploit, and show off their wealth." This time however, Hugo Fonseca Viso, president of Fedecámaras (Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry), told the press that the May 18 strike was "not a defeat for Fedecámaras, since the strike was called to protest the policies of the government, as was stated repeatedly in the days preparatory to the strike."

Indeed, it was widely known that CAP's strategists had hoped to divert popular outrage against the business community, to use the strike as an "escape valve" to gain time for implementing IMF measures.

Steel union leader Andrés Velázquez was unequivocal when he asserted, "The strike on the 18th was against the government, and not against speculation and hoarding." Secretary General Eduardo Fernández of the opposition party COPEI told the press May 22, "I want to insist that the general workers' strike May 18 was a categorical pronouncement by the country against the government of Acción Democrática and Carlos Andrés Pérez."

Finally, the national council of Chambers of Commerce issued a communiqué warning that it would not serve as CAP's scapegoat: "One of the most worrisome things about the national strike is that, since it is against the government and the economic measures, the Executive has not yet assumed its responsibility."

Despite all the warnings, CAP announced to reporters after the strike, "Our economic policy will continue to be developed with full firmness." He then added, in a less than firm voice, "After all the sacrifices, we will be able to destroy—eh, I mean enjoy. . . ." The word around Caracas is that "CAP has lost control of the country."