

## Andean Report by David Ramonet

### Venezuelans fight IMF

*A wave of strikes is challenging the economic and political deterioration under President Carlos Andrés Pérez.*

**R**esistance continues strong to the austerity package imposed in February by President Carlos Andrés Pérez at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). César Olarte, secretary general of the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), charged June 4, "One would be justified to name the package 'the package of death.'" Certainly, social democrat Pérez had no qualms about drowning the first round of protest in the blood of a thousand people, Feb. 27-March 3. But, the austerity is also taking a slower toll by means of increased hunger and a dramatic expansion of malaria, a disease once eliminated in Venezuela.

The government refuses to grant wage increases to compensate for the inflationary effects of the doubling of gasoline prices and the other measures which provoked the February-March riots. Planning Minister Miguel Rodríguez responded to the CTV union leaders June 15, "The government's plans do not include any wage increase by decree, much less any [cost of living escalator] indexing." Any measures to preserve real wages, he observed, correctly, would violate the letter of intent his government signed with the International Monetary Fund.

Strikes are erupting in many sectors. On June 12, the social security system physicians struck to demand the funding required to maintain adequate health care for the millions of workers enrolled in the system. The next day, the Venezuelan Medical Federation, for the first time ever, called a 12-hour strike of all the country's doctors to protest the subhuman conditions in all the hospitals.

Transport workers also all went on strike. On June 15, more than 200,000 teachers walked out, demanding that the Education Ministry sit down and negotiate a new contract. The same day, 5,000 people joined a "march of the dummies" in Caracas. Although manipulated by political interests trying to capitalize on the mass ferment by rallying it behind "anti-corruption" slogans, the march again illustrates the depth of discontent in the normally apolitical Venezuelan population.

Pérez, the State Department socialist President saddled on Venezuela for the next five years, condemned the strikes. He admitted, "there aren't any good wages in Venezuela today and nobody can make do with what he earns." But, like the Nazi dictum, "Work makes you free," Pérez could only exhort people to work harder to overcome the country's "transitory" crisis.

The agitation and strikes of recent days are only the beginning. On June 30, the ban on layoffs which was imposed after the February riots, expires. The ban was an attempt to prevent further social explosions from people who suddenly lost their jobs. It was expected that producers would respond to the sharp reduction in buying power, by laying off part of their work force.

The planning ministry projected June 16 that 172,000 jobs would be lost during the coming months. The petroleum workers' union, the most strategic one in Venezuela, is studying the idea of convoking a new national strike, should it be hit with mass layoffs at the end of the ban. Half the

petroleum workers are employed by private contractors and lack the job security of employees of the big state sector oil companies.

Most of the recent strikes have been against specific aspects of the austerity package. A step toward presenting a comprehensive national development program, based on the community of interests of all Venezuelans, was taken by the Poultry Producers Association. Its president, Rafael Russian, got together with CTV labor leaders to demand action to defend the sector.

Since February, poultry consumption has fallen by 40%, while interest rates have risen from 8.5% to 37%. Russian says that under these conditions, chicken farmers could avert bankruptcy only by firing 50-60% of their workers and reducing chicken and egg production to 40% of previous levels. But the combined labor-producer movement could save the industry.

The president of the National Peasant Federation, Adalberto Cubilón, charged June 11, "In practice, the packet's measures are the death blow to agriculture." He judged that to blame cabinet members for the economic and political degradation of Venezuela "would be like saying there is no President in Venezuela. But, there is a President, and he is the one who is really to blame for the present situation."

Dangelo Morfesse, the president of the Guárico State Producers Association lamented on June 10, "farmers will have to find another line of work, given that it is impossible to plant." He said there have been "significant decreases in the number of hectares planted, because farmers' total costs have risen 20-80%, and the farmers cannot afford to purchase enough fertilizer to meet the requirements of the soil."