

Caldera tells IMF 'no' once again

by David Ramonet

Despite intense pressures, both at home and abroad—including the threat of a coup d'état—Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera once again defied the expectations of the international financial elites. In his Second Message to Congress March 12, he did not announce the austerity “shock treatment” that has been demanded, in the name of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), by opposition forces ranging from neo-liberal to neo-communist, which have recently formed a pact to control Congress. Caldera reiterated that his government is committed to the “Venezuela Agenda,” as he has dubbed his economic adjustment plan, which will be carried out “whether or not there is an agreement with the International Monetary Fund.” He said that exchange controls would be kept in place as long as needed to avoid capital flight, and that the price of gasoline will increase only to keep pace with inflation, but not to the international price demanded by the IMF. He also called on the opposition-dominated Congress to approve the fiscal measures necessary to implement his plan.

Two days later, awaited changes in the ministerial cabinet were announced. Eight posts were changed, producing a much more cohesive team backing the President. One Caracas daily emphasized that the new appointments produced “few surprises, but were decisive.” For example, the new interior minister, José Guillermo Andueza, is a nationalist closely identified with the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. Confirmed in his post as finance minister was Luis Raúl Matos Azocar, who has repeatedly resisted IMF blackmail.

The international financial oligarchy, based in London and Wall Street, want to do away with Caldera because he is an anti-IMF reference point for the rest of Ibero-America, in the wake of the collapse of such neo-liberal “economic miracles” as Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. Caldera is well aware of this. In his message, he used a very Venezuelan term to emphasize his commitment: “I am an old hand in the fight for Venezuela, which is also a fight for the ideals which have sustained Latin America in its difficult march toward economic development with social justice. . . . Venezuela is for many a reference point today in our continent.”

Alberto Quiroz Corradi, a long-standing British agent in Venezuela and member of the pro-drug legalization Inter-

American Dialogue, had given Caldera an ultimatum in the week just prior to his Message to Congress. According to Quiroz, Venezuela must submit to the IMF's prescriptions and resume the path laid out by Carlos Andrés Pérez. This must be announced by Caldera on March 12, insisted Quiroz. If the President does not do so, warned Quiroz, the Congress under its new leadership should demand Caldera's resignation and proceed to carry out an IMF economic plan. In fact, the outline for precisely such a scenario was issued earlier this year by a British intelligence mouthpiece, the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, and republished as a “prediction” by the anti-Caldera newspaper *El Nacional* on Jan. 29.

Wailing and grinding of teeth

Other mouthpieces of the opposition, such as 1993 Presidential candidates Oswaldo Alvarez Paz of Copei and Andrés Velásquez of Causa R, joined forces to call on the new opposition alliance in Congress to overthrow President Caldera. Commentators linked to the media outlets of magnate Gustavo Cisneros (whose brother Ricardo is currently a fugitive from justice, along with other bankers accused of fraud and other crimes), such as José Vicente Rangel, Jorge Olavarría, and Alfredo Peña, also are demanding Caldera's resignation.

These same forces tried to trigger a “social explosion” last October, which was frustrated largely by the denunciation of these provocateurs by Venezuelan Labor Party Secretary General Alejandro Peña, in a widely distributed pamphlet, “Who Wants to Overthrow Caldera, and Why?” President Caldera referred to these provocateurs in his message, when he said that “well-identified groups have sought to use [social unrest] to detonate a supposed social outburst.”

The international campaign against Caldera has gone so far as to claim that the entire Venezuelan population wants Caldera to resign. A classic example of this “Big Lie” was the international coverage of a major labor demonstration on March 13. The rally of workers from the country's four major labor federations, was scheduled to follow Caldera's Message to Congress, specifically in order to counteract the campaign of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry rejecting the recent wage increases and demanding instead a Chilean-style privatization of social security.

The march was also to support President Caldera in his negotiations with the IMF, and to reject the shock economic measures. Speaking to 30,000 workers waving anti-IMF signs, rally organizer Federico Ramírez emphasized: “This demonstration is not against anyone in particular; President Caldera must hear the voices of the workers. . . . President Caldera must understand that a change of direction is required, but one that is in favor of the Venezuelan workers.” CNN television, as well as the international wire services, nonetheless chose to present the march as a “protest against Caldera's message to Congress.” To prove this, they broadcast the demands of Causa R party leaders such as Andrés Velásquez, who called, on cue, for Caldera's resignation.