

MINUTES – MA-DSA MEMBERSHIP MEETING
March 29, 2008

The meeting was called to order at the Friends' meeting house, with 21 in attendance.

Treasurer's report: Newsletter cost more than anticipated, but has received a very good response, including an unsolicited \$50 contribution and a compliment from a member of DSA's National Political Committee.

Education committee -- meets Sunday, April 6 at 7 pm, in the clubroom at Norm's building. Bob Caine will lead a discussion of the first two chapters of Michael Harrington's Socialism Past and Future.

Next membership meeting, April 26 -- Will focus on the Economic Justice Agenda. Presentation by Milt, with comments by three responders: Norm, Charles and one other (volunteers welcome).

Kempton's proposal for a retreat to share our perspectives and get to know each other better -- He is working on it and will report soon.

Steering committee -- Next meeting is Saturday, April 5 at 11:30 in Norm's club house.

May membership meeting -- Charles proposed a documentary on Haiti.

November Douglass-Debs dinner -- Bill Lucy, AFSCME secretary-treasurer is confirmed as keynote speaker. IBEW hall confirmed. Date is first Saturday after election. Awardees will be state senators Vincent Fort and Nan Orrock, plus possibly one other. Honorary chairs will be Charlie Flemming, Rev. McDonald, Nancy Lenk. Adam requested that the awards ceremony and speech be recorded for WRFG. General agreement. We'll also ask if Gary Cameron could film it for public access TV. Need to book entertainment. May have to raise ticket price.

WRFG marathon -- Milt and Barbara were on Adam's show helping pitch, and Norm also pledged. We urge everyone to call this coming Thursday between noon and one to pledge your contribution and support not only Adam's show but also all public affairs on WRFG.

Grady Coalition -- Ted reported that the legislature has arranged that appointees to the new Grady Hospital board cannot be challenged but at 10 a.m. this Thursday there will be a picket in front of Crawford Long Hospital to protest a conflict of interest on the part of one board member who is an owner of Crawford Long. The Chamber of Commerce-associated members have a slight majority over community representatives.

Web page -- Norm's son is working on this but there would be a cost of \$498 and \$298/yr thereafter. The steering committee will discuss this further.

Membership -- Two new members have joined recently. Jorge suggested that we reach out to our friends and associates who share our politics, especially people of color/minorities and youth.

Announcements -- Naomi Klein and Bill Fletcher speak at Historians Against War national conference at GSU Friday April 11; April 21 health care meeting at IBEW; April 18 Georgia Standup program on re-entry for incarcerated people; Democratic Party neighborhood leadership training offered every day between now and April 10; North Carolina organization for Obama's campaign wants volunteers to register voters leading up to the May 6 primary.

Speaker -- Ted Brodek reported on his recent trip to Venezuela with a group organized by a former lay Maryknoll worker. He is an activist for peace, active in the Grady Coalition, a former union organizer, and a mediator and interpreter.

His tour group was able to meet with Venezuela's vice-president and were there during the buildup for the referendum, in August. He was most impressed with the role of women. They all wear slacks and jeans, which is different for South America. He visited a new school uniform factory in one of the poor neighborhoods, which mainly employed women. Almost all the students in an adult education program were women, and in one small town all the adult students were women, some of whom had recently learned to read and write. The town's whole city council now is women.

There are many new projects throughout the country. He visited a cooperative tile kiln funded by the federal oil money, which is no longer controlled by a small elite. These local development projects get grants, not loans. The group heard Chavez once, at a ceremony where grants were being awarded for projects planned by rural communities, such as a model home that families could build themselves. The community found a way to stretch the money to allow them to build more homes than the government had planned. New universities and professional schools are also being built, parallel to the established schools, which is threatening to some.

The guide was not an uncritical Chavez follower and disagreed with aspects of the referendum. The proponents of the referendum added a guarantee of private property rights to try to gain support but it failed anyway. One high level Cuban doctor they met said Venezuela is a mixed economy, not socialist. There are still many very wealthy people, although they have lost political control.

Negatives included Chavez' attempt to force the left parties to merge into a unified party, which failed. The group met no people from the elite. Ted reminded us that no one was imprisoned or executed for participating in the 2002 coup attempt against Chavez, though a few are now living in Florida.

There is a tour available soon focusing on Afro-Venezuelan culture. Chavez makes a conscious effort to include all groups. Ted took a side trip to a small coastal village in an Afro-Venezuelan community. People were friendly and he was able to hitchhike back.

Jorge touched on some themes: Chavez' charisma and ability to connect with people. After 1959 under Betancourt two middle class parties that were similar began to alternate in power (the upper class controlled so much wealth and media that they didn't need a party). 69% of Venezuelans are poor. Race consistently correlates with class, with some regional variations.

The Cuban revolution also occurred in 1959 and for a few years some Cubans attempted unsuccessfully to overthrow the Venezuelan government. Chavez led an unsuccessful coup vs. President Perez in 1992.

The pre-Chavez government was blatantly corrupt and politicians accumulated vast wealth. The governor (mayor) of Caracas never paid taxes and stayed in the U.S. to live in luxury after Chavez was elected. Venezuela was a showcase for the Interamerican Bank's attempt to promote neoliberalism, including structural adjustments like school fees, which created a lot of downward social mobility.

Are Chavez' "missions" -- development and social service projects funded by oil revenue, loans to other countries and bartering (such as oil for 20-30,000 Cuban doctors) -- sustainable? What will happen in the future?

Jorge distributed a bibliography of selected sources for more info.

Ted mentioned that some governments including Venezuela have ceased sending their officers to the School of the Americas. His tour guide participated in Fr. Bourgeois' efforts to achieve this.

Questions included the role of a military commander promoting social change -- comparison with some other historical examples; investment in weapons; strength of grassroots support; role of the student movement; organized religion; future of Venezuelan socialism (certain sectors are socialized as necessity dictates, for ex. oil, but most other sectors are not touched); extent to which Venezuela could be a model for us (not same situation except need to defend public space and resources like Grady, slow down ethnic cleansing and gentrification of Atlanta). Shortages of commodities? Stores have been established in poor neighborhoods to address this (as under Allende in Chile -- Jorge). Crime rates high in poor neighborhoods? A real concern but may be hyped by the media, which is almost all anti-Chavez. Are the new co-op factories sufficient? Probably not. Are sufficient funds being set aside for future needs? Hard to say. Will wealth redistribution survive Chavez? Some institutional structures have been established. Hard to say if they would survive. Current constitution gives him till 2012, although he could maintain control in other ways. Jorge: He is pro-active, having learned from situations such as the CIA-backed destabilization and coup that overthrew the Popular Unity government led by Allende in Chile.

Ted: It's a great place to visit! To contact his tour guide: lisavenezuela@gmail.com

