



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

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Venezuela

# "Co-management" in the Alcasa aluminium factory

- IV Online magazine - 2005 - IV371 - October 2005 -

Publication date: Wednesday 5 October 2005

## **Description:**

An interview with a member of the management team at the nationalised aluminium company Alcasa, about the experience of 'co-management' there, and its more general significance in the Bolivarian process.

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**At the beginning of 2005, president Chávez nominated Carlos Lanz a head of the nationalized aluminium company, Alcasa. This nomination was a surprise, since Lanz is a former guerrilla who is now a sociologist clearly identified with the revolutionary left.**

**From his arrival at the head of the company he began a process of "co-management" which has made this company a political symbol and this experience a national test. We interviewed a member of Lanz's team, Rafael Rodriguez, in charge of economic development, who works for the development of co-management at Alcasa and in the communities.**

► **Can you tell us what is specific about co-management at Alcasa?**

► Alcasa is a company manufacturing aluminium, which is well adapted to respond to import substitution policy and where we have the possibility of developing an experience. Alcasa has made losses for the past 17 years. For some years corruption and embezzlement have practically rendered it bankrupt.



Carlos Lanz speaking at Alcasa workers meeting

For eight years (since Chávez became president) it has made losses which are very difficult to overcome without technological restructuring. Bankruptcy became a business for some; there have been many studies, projects and so on that have cost millions. There are gentlemen with attaché-cases who came, gave their opinion, left... and nothing changed.

We came here with the objective of salvaging Alcasa with the help of the workers. With Carlos Lanz we are convinced that the workers can build socialism in a practical manner, on the move. That is why we have proposed co-management here.

We have never had the intention of implementing a social-democratic and reformist co-management as in Germany, but tactically we have adopted this name. It amounts to indicating that we wished for co-management as transition towards self-management.

Here we have co-management with workers' control and a factory council with a view to giving the workers all the power over production, distribution and commercialization. The goal is to develop and diversify the production of aluminium, finding foreign clients outside the USA - like the Japanese for space construction, for example - but also to develop national markets, like the construction of cheap quality housing.

For us co-management at Alcasa has its meaning in the peaceful and progressive construction of socialism. As

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Marxists and Gramscians we want to construct a counter&mdash;hegemony. For that we have set up a centre for socio-political training, so that the workers are involved in the process. We have been called every kind of name, Communist catechism and so on. But little by little the workers have become involved in this training and several hundred now attend. Now, according to the subject, it's increasingly the workers themselves who provide the training.

### ▶ **What is the situation as regards the ownership of the company?**

It remains state-owned. We are not for the kind of co-management that distributes capital to the workers, or associates the workers with capital, or divides the shares among them. And in Venezuela the problem is not really that of private ownership.

The state already possesses the essentials in this country: the majority of land, oil, the biggest companies... It is more a problem of the redistribution and restructuring of the state in a socialist sense. That's why do not conceive of co-management as being confined to the company, for us it should extend to the entire social environment and to all the problems including the military question. But on this level we should say that we have not advanced very much.

### ▶ **What powers do the workers and the directors have at their disposal?**

▶ When we came here, some have said to us "we have to fire all the leaders, all the directors". We replied "No, that is the last thing we will do". At PDVSA (the national oil company) after the employers' sabotage, they dismissed more than 2,000 managers at one fell swoop and that has created big difficulties for them to this day. If we had done the same thing and installed committed but untrained Chavistas in all the leadership posts that would have been a catastrophe.

We wanted a process from below, elections in each workshop, in each work group of "spokesperson delegates". A system of direct election, control and accountability, revocability, rotation of tasks and so on. At the first meeting that we organized 26 workers came (out of 2,700 at the company).

We worked by every means to convince, meetings, leaflets, newspapers, debates and so on. After a few months the workers saw it was in their interest to participate, to "take power" in the company. And then, we proceeded to elections at the management level.

The leadership team was considerably enlarged; for each former leader, we elected three new ones. Then there are 300 spokesperson delegates elected at the rank and file level by the workers. Today each department has its "administrative council" with spokesperson elected in each team where all the problems of production are planned and discussed.

When there is a problem to settle an assembly of workers in the department is called. We proceed in the same way at the level of the company as a whole. At the central meeting the directorate submits its plans to the representatives of the workers and the latter raise their problems. It's no longer the director alone who decides, he must take account of the will of the workers.

### ▶ **What future do you see for this type of co-management across the country as a whole?**

▶ We have been dismissed as "mad", but we have the feeling that we are advancing. On the industrial level and on the political level. Production has grown, productivity also. We have ambitious industrial projects, the construction of a fifth production line, a redeployment and so on.

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On the political level we have the feeling of being in tune with what president Chávez has said on the necessity of building socialism, of putting an end to capitalist relations.

In our state, in the industrial heart of the country in the basic industries, the process advances; co-management is advancing in several other companies. We have contacts with other enterprises which practice co-management in the country, there have been some meetings, there will be others. We are conscious of being observed with much attention.

But it's conflictual because there are several conceptions of co-management and we are not in agreement with the totally reductive vision that is formulated in some ministries or in the draft legislation that is being discussed at the moment.

*Interview conducted by Fabrice Thomas*