

Fifth International?!

Contributed by Michael Albert
Saturday, 06 February 2010

Michael Albert: Fifth International?! (2010.) Published with the permission of the author. To be a contender, “21st Century Socialist” vision needs elaboration, advocacy, and program. To improve focus and increase power, worldwide anti-capitalist organizations, projects, and movements need shared coherence and mutual solidarity. To fulfill these needs, Venezuela’s President Chavez recently announced to widespread support and also some critical response that a gathering in Caracas this April would establish a new International. But what might this new International look like? What might it accomplish? How might people, such as those reading this essay, and particularly people in grassroots movements around the world, relate to it? Not Our Predecessor’s International Suppose a new International is an excellent venue for debate but has no practical component, or, worse, is a gathering place for big egos who mostly preen at long, aimless meetings. Or suppose a new International intelligently addresses programs and ideas, but is a vehicle for a small group to issue instructions from above.

Michael Albert: Fifth International?! (2010.) To be a contender, “21st Century Socialist” vision needs elaboration, advocacy, and program. To improve focus and increase power, worldwide anti-capitalist organizations, projects, and movements need shared coherence and mutual solidarity. To fulfill these needs, Venezuela’s President Chavez recently announced to widespread support and also some critical response that a gathering in Caracas this April would establish a new International. But what might this new International look like? What might it accomplish? How might people, such as those reading this essay, and particularly people in grassroots movements around the world, relate to it? Not Our Predecessor’s International Suppose a new International is an excellent venue for debate but has no practical component, or, worse, is a gathering place for big egos who mostly preen at long, aimless meetings. Or suppose a new International intelligently addresses programs and ideas, but is a vehicle for a small group to issue instructions from above. Or suppose a new International’s focus, structure, or operational procedures are conceptually rooted in past flawed macho, racist, authoritarian or otherwise oppressive practices. Even if it grew large, such a new International, built with the intellectual bricks, social mortar, programmatic inclinations, and personal habits and ideas of the old world, would not likely help us attain a new world. Liberation will not stand well on old foundations. We must plant the seeds of the future, as best we can, in our present endeavors. Most politically sophisticated people of today’s movements would not sign up with an old-style International. Even considering the relatively few eager souls who would sign up, most would not remain inspired for long. Predictably, support would not grow strong enough to win major change. We can’t win a new world without attaining wide and deep support, and we can’t attract wide and deep support offering structures and methods embodying the core ills of the past. Thus, lesson one, already familiar to most: If a new International marches to the beat of past drumming, no matter what its members might want, and no matter how courageously its members might seek their worthy dreams, the support they gain will be too limited and their efforts will be too compromised by past destructive residues to generate desirable 21st century outcomes. The Focus of a New International Issue Focus The “subject matter” of a new international should and will inevitably address all concerns which go into and are part of developing and sustaining a liberated society and world but there is no reason to think all sensible and caring people would or should agree about all such matters. Much will have to be worked out in practice. Much will differ from country to country. Maybe there is a best position - but we don’t yet know it. Maybe most people think they know a best position, but a few people differ, and perhaps the few will prove right later. This indicates that regarding unity we ought to settle only on a minimalist but profoundly important set of principles and commitments that would characterize a new International. What minimal commitments would a new International need to adopt to do its job well. Those who agree with essential inviolable commitments, could join. Those who don’t agree with them, might want to join, but couldn’t. Few would doubt that a new International should be centrally concerned with economics, gender and kinship, culture and community, politics, international relations, and ecology. Further, however, there is no need for, and we have learned in recent decades there is also no point trying to elevate any one of these focuses above the rest. They are all centrally important and powerfully entwined. Thus, it should be the case that a group in a new International might in some country, or at some time, or for some purpose, be primarily focused on one or another of these focuses, but to be part of the new International it would also have to acknowledge that their priority was just one among many, and that other priorities should inform their work as well as be informed by their work. Surely, at least these six areas of struggle must be elevated by any organization trying to create a new world because: (a) all these six central domains will critically affect the character of a new world, (b) each of these six domains is capable of manifesting influences that would subvert efforts to reach a new world, and (c) the constituencies most involved in and affected by each of these six domains would be intensely alienated if their prime concerns were relegated to secondary importance. But what minimalist political focus and commitment might a new International have regarding each of these six broad areas of concern? What would it initially need to universally agree about each area to gain the wherewithal to really change that area and legitimately appeal to and empower constituencies most concerned about that area? Some possibilities for general agreement are that: economic production, consumption, and allocation should be classless - which of course includes equitable access for all to quality and accessible education, health care and the requisites of health like food, water, and sanitation, housing, meaningful and dignified work, and the instruments and conditions of personal fulfillmentgender/kinship, sexual, and family relations should not privilege by age, sexual preference, or gender any one group above others - which of course includes ending all forms of oppression of women, providing daycare, recreation, health care, etc.culture and community relations among races, ethnic groups, religions, and other cultural communities should protect the rights and identity of each community up to equally respecting those of all other communities as well - which of course includes an

end to racist, ethnocentric, and otherwise bigoted structures as well as securing the prosperity and rights of indigenous people. Political decision making, adjudication of disputes and implementation of shared programs should deliver people's power in ways that do not elevate any one sector or constituency to power above others - which of course includes participation and justice for all. International trade, communication, and other interactions should attain and protect peace and justice while dismantling all vestiges of colonialism and imperialism - which of course includes canceling the debt of nations of the global south and reconstructing international norms and relations to move toward an equitable and just community of equally endowed nations. Ecological choices should not only be sustainable, but should care for the environment in accord with our highest aspirations for ourselves and our world - which of course includes climate justice and energy renovation.

Is there room for difference and debate in what exactly each of the above points means, much less about more specific details? Of course there is. But having room for debate is good in an International that means to be a massive bloc of diverse projects each of which retain their own history and agenda. The International becomes the greatest sum of all its parts. It embodies differences as a source of strength. It avoids the temptation to become just a coalition attached only to universally agreed but least common denominator claims, or to homogenize all views into one narrow pattern. Underlying Values What about underlying values? Surely a new International would elevate solidarity as part of its ethos. An International is, after all, about aligning worldwide movements and projects into mutual aid and collective benefit. A new International should also certainly elevate diversity as a core value, both due to the obvious ecological necessity of doing so, and due to the observation that in any undertaking minority views can become majority, or what is thought to be crazy today can lead to what is brilliant tomorrow. A new International will no doubt also adopt equity as one of its core values, even if it retains contradictory "certainties" about just what constitutes equity. More, over time, presumably members will reach increased clarity about just what equity entails and requires. One possibility is, for example, that it means every person who can work gets a share of income based on his or her duration, intensity, and onerousness of socially valued labor, but not based on property, or power, or even output, while those who can't work get special needs addressed and, beyond that, average income. Peace with justice and ecological sustainability and wisdom would surely also be guiding values. Serious movements would have no problems with that. Finally a new International will of course have to have an attitude about decisions, participation, and power. At a minimum a new International would presumably commit to the value called "democracy." For myself, however, I would hope it would reach further to a more inspiring conception of "people's power," or "participatory democracy," or "self management." And that it will seriously assess the kinds of structural changes and innovations essential to ensure informed, confident, participation by all citizens in political, economic, and social life - perhaps also including, for example, changes in the way labor is divided and carried out, the way education is conceived and implemented, and of course the way preferences are debated, explored, resolved, and implemented. Perhaps that will prove possible, too! At any rate, given its place and time of origin, suppose a new International adopts a name like Participatory Socialist International (PSI), where "participatory" connotes that it isn't our forebears' International, but is really new. Suppose also that it commits to prioritizing at least economics, gender, race, power, peace, and ecology, and commits to solidarity, diversity, equity, peace with justice, ecological wisdom, and people's power or self management. These commitments would certainly go a long way toward providing a new foundation for a new International. But what about all the many clashing views that various members would hold beyond the minimal views they would universally share? How might different positions exist in a new International in mutual respect? How might they engage in mutual careful and creative consideration? Currents in a New International How can a new International be true to its core commitments, yet also a vehicle for constant growth and development? How can a new International prioritize shared core views, yet also practice diversity and prioritize innovation? One possibility is to include and celebrate "currents" that serve as vehicles for contending views. There might be a current composed of various member organizations, projects, and/or movements who share a particular contested economic goal (such as participatory economics or market socialism, etc.), or a certain contested strategic orientation (such as electoralism or nonviolence, etc.). The International's various currents would not be seen as a weakness undermining unity but as a strength warding off sectarianism and guaranteeing constant growth. The respectfully contending positions would all be part of the International, together interactively exploring their disagreements in hopes of reaching new insights. To establish a congenial, productive context, currents would take for granted that the intentions of other currents were good, that differences were about substance and not motive, and that they were subject to substantive debate which would be a serious part of the whole project. The International would thus welcome different currents affording each ample visibility and means to engage with all others to try to advance new insights bearing on policy and program. Currents would not have hidden agendas or think everyone else is a fool because only their own views have merit. Rather, currents would take for granted that even ideas they think odd, strange, or counterproductive, might prove useful in time, so that all views held inside the International should be respected and substantively explored without defensiveness and without doubting the motives of other International members. In short, in this formulation, as long as any particular current accepted the basic tenets of the International and operated in accord with its norms and methods, respectful dissent would be considered a strength preventing knee-jerk agreement and constantly pushing the envelope of beliefs toward new insights. In debates about policy and program, for example, currents would always be heard. Minority positions would, to the extent possible, be given space not only to argue, but if they don't prevail, to continue developing their views and trying to establish their merit or to discover their inadequacies. The idea of a political or programmatic line that everyone follows would be foreign to the culture and process of this type new International. Members and Decisions in a New International What permits one to be in the new International? Well, the International would presumably include movements, parties, organizations, and even projects -

but a strong possibility is that individuals would not join as at-large members, belonging instead only by way of their group affiliations. What kind of group could belong? I would think any group that convinced some agreed percentage - let's say, hypothetically, 75% - of the existing membership that it sincerely accepted the defining norms of the International could belong. This could be political parties, movements, organizations, or even projects - so, for example, it could be the PSUV from Venezuela, or the Landless Workers Movement (MST) from Brazil, or the Rosa Luxembourg foundation from Germany, or even media organizations like ZCom, say, from the U.S. Members, employees, staff, etc., of each new International member organization would in turn gain membership in the International by virtue of their collective organizational membership. Individuals who want to be members of the International, therefore, but who have no member group that they belong too, would have to hook up with one. An at-large membership wouldn't exist, at least in this conception. The benefit of this approach would be that the legitimacy of a person as a member need not be assessed by the international - but only by the member organization of the international that the person is part of. There would be no "paper" members and no mass of unattached and therefore essentially unknown members. What kinds of decisions might an International make? Every member group would have its own agenda for its own separate operations which would be inviolable. At the same time, each member group would presumably be strongly urged to make its own operations consistent with the norm, practices, and shared programmatic agendas of the International. There would be solidarity among member organizations, but, regarding their separate operations, there would also be autonomy. The International would have shared program, policies, norms, and rules to continually decide on, as well as having to decide on gatherings to hold, campaigns to support or undertake, and perhaps much else. How might such decisions be made? Membership groups would have wildly different sizes, no doubt - so in the future there could be a group with a handful of members in the International, and another group with thousands, or even millions of members. But since the International's decisions would not bind those groups other than regarding the collective International agenda, a good way to arrive at decisions might be serious discussion and exploration, followed by polls of the whole International membership to see peoples' leanings, followed by refinements of proposals to seek even greater support and to allow dissidents from minority viewpoints to make their case, culminating in final votes of the membership seeking to convey self managing participatory influence to all parties. The little group with five participants could have at most their five votes unless they were more heavily affected by some decision than others were. A big group with ten thousand or a million participants could have at most that number of votes - again, unless they were more affected by some choice - but member votes would not be delivered in bulk, by group, but rather one by one, each being counted individually. Online, this is no longer a technically daunting matter. Are there other possibilities? Of course. This is just one hypothetical, but desirable, possibility.

Possible Program in a New International What might a new International do? A new International might call for international events and days of dissent. It might support campaigns for existing struggles by member organizations. It might support member organizations against repression. It might undertake widespread debates and campaigns to advance understanding and mutual knowledge. More ambitiously, an International might also decide on campaigns and projects of its own, financed via its membership. It might settle, for example, on a massive international focus on immigration, on ending a war, on shortening the work week all over the planet, and/or on averting climatic catastrophe. There might then be materials to prepare, education to convey, activist campaigns to carry out, boycotts to initiate and sustain, support for local efforts to engender, and even efforts to provide material aid and participants for events occurring across borders. All such general programs, would be up to member organizations to decide how to relate to, yet there would be considerable collective momentum for each member organization to participate and contribute as best it can. Thus, program decided by the International would either be about the International's own actions or would be very strong advisories to members, or perhaps calls to them and to the broader world - not legally binding, so to speak, but powerful and effective nonetheless. Finally, regarding program, clearly one reason to have an International is to help organizations, movements, and projects escape single issue loneliness by becoming part of a larger process encompassing diverse focuses and united by agreements on various major shared endeavors.

Dream, or Reality? The above is one possible rough picture. It isn't complete and it isn't unique. It could adapt, bend, mature, enlarge, or be refined in all manner of ways, whether before April in preparation, or after April, as an International develops. Is it only a dream that worldwide parties, movements, organizations, and projects could operate with intellectual and programmatic respect and mutual aid, with deep diversity and sharp focus, with strong solidarity and equally strong autonomy, with profound coherence and commitment and also with material and social equity and overarching self management? Yes, today this is a dream, or a wish, or a hope. But tomorrow, and literally, this April, it could become a reality. Wouldn't that be a huge and historic step forward?