

# Community Organizing and Rebellion

Neighborhood Councils in El Alto, Bolivia

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Visitors to La Paz in August 2004 experienced a rare event: a day without car horns, gasoline fumes and traffic congestion. A strike by transportation workers protesting an increase in gasoline prices sparked a series of road blockades, converting major downtown arteries into impromptu soccer fields and pedestrian-friendly boulevards. The streets soon filled with thousands of indigenous demonstrators demanding the nationalization of gas. Women in traditional skirts and bowler hats discoursed eloquently on the link between the lack of basic neighborhood services (including cooking gas) and the role of transnational corporations in exploiting Bolivia's natural resources.

To a progressive planner, even more remarkable was the realization that these groups were marching for nationalization under the banners of their local neighborhood councils—chapters of FEJUVE (the Federation of Neighborhood Councils), a grassroots community organization in the neighboring indigenous city of El Alto. In fact, during the tumultuous “Gas Wars” of 2003-2005, while many groups (including *campesinos*, coca growers, workers and students) participated in the broad-based social movements that brought down two neoliberal governments and ultimately elected Evo Morales as Bolivia's first indigenous president, the role played by FEJUVE-El Alto was decisive. It was FEJUVE that forged a national consensus and mobilization around the demand for nationalization of gas. By barricading El Alto's gas storage plant, blockading road access into La Paz and carrying out massive civic strikes, FEJUVE and its allies created a prolonged state of scarcity that paralyzed the national economy and government. And El Alto paid the price, providing most of the Gas Wars' sixty-seven victims.

How did a grassroots urban community organization focused on the delivery of basic neighborhood services become the major protagonist in a civil insurrection against the neoliberal order? How did FEJUVE move from organizing the community to organizing rebellion? What challenges does FEJUVE now confront in relation to the new MAS (Movement Towards Socialism) government? These issues are of interest to progressive planners and others seeking to understand the relationship between urban neighborhood organizations, popular movements and government in Latin America and elsewhere.

## El Alto and the Neoliberal City

As Bolivia experts Linda Farthing, Juan Manuel Arbona and Benjamin Kohl have noted, the La Paz/ El Alto metropolis is a dramatic expression of the neoliberal globalized city. El Alto, an impoverished township of rural migrants steeped in traditional indigenous customs, sits on the rim of the Altiplano overlooking and nearly surrounding La Paz, the colonial capital driven by market forces and the perpetuation of elite privilege.

El Alto itself is largely a product of Bolivia's neoliberal structural adjustment policies, which expelled massive numbers of miners and *campesinos* from the Altiplano over the past twenty years as unprofitable government mines were shut down and cheap food imports (along with drought) undermined traditional peasant agriculture. From a village of 11,000 in the 1950s, El Alto became an independent municipality in 1985 and now has a population exceeding 800,000. It is the fastest growing city in Latin America, soon to surpass La Paz in population.

El Alto is dominated by the informal economy, which has increased by 162 percent since 1985. Seventy percent of the employed population works in family-run businesses or microenterprises. Many *Alteños* commute daily into La Paz, where they build the infrastructure and provide the

services that enable the reproduction of global elite lifestyles. A high percentage of Alteños are street vendors. Sixty percent of the population is under age 25.

This explosive population growth has vastly outstripped El Alto's capacity to provide basic services to its residents and neighborhoods. Land use and urban settlement patterns are basically unregulated, allowing for the creation of subdivisions without public services or community facilities (schools, churches, parks). Most neighborhoods have no paved streets, trash pick up or telephone service, while most homes lack indoor plumbing, potable water and electricity. Seventy-five percent of the population lacks basic health care, and 40 percent are illiterate.

## FEJUVE: Community Organizing

The earliest neighborhood *juntas* in El Alto were established in 1957 to provide basic services for the recently urbanized migrant population, later becoming affiliated through FEJUVE in 1979. Historically, the *juntas* have played multiple roles, including:

*Self-help.* Through the *juntas*, ex-miners and *campesinos* have pooled their resources (including miners' pension funds) and technical skills to buy land, build schools and parks and install basic utility services. This has enabled residents to basically self-construct their communities and neighborhoods.

*Regulation.* The *juntas* regulate neighborhood transactions, such as the buying and selling of homes. They may mediate neighborhood disputes and administer community justice (with sanctions ranging from community service to the occasional lynching). In many respects, the *juntas* function as neighborhood micro-governments, substituting for the mostly absent state.

*Protest.* The *juntas* also have a long tradition of mobilizing residents to demand from municipal authorities what they cannot build or deliver themselves. In 2001, FEJUVE was a major protagonist in the struggle to found the Public University of El Alto. In 2003, FEJUVE successfully resisted a municipal tax on building and house construction. In 2005, FEJUVE spearheaded a campaign to throw out the privatized water company. In this role, FEJUVE mediates between residents and the state outside the traditional political party structure to make government more accountable.

The neighborhood *juntas* were greatly strengthened in 1994 by the Law of Popular Participation, a neoliberal democratic reform that devolved 20 percent of the national budget to municipalities and gave local councils an enhanced role in participatory planning and budgeting. The ability to demand and deliver funds for neighborhood projects significantly increased FEJUVE's power and influence.

Today there are close to 600 neighborhood councils in El Alto, organized by geographic zone in each of the city's nine districts and affiliated at the citywide level through FEJUVE. According to Uruguayan analyst Raúl Zibechi, the basic unit at the neighborhood level must have at least 200 members. The elected leadership committee meets regularly and calls a general neighborhood assembly monthly or semi-monthly. An elected leader must have at least two years of residency in the zone; may not be a merchant, transportation worker, real estate speculator or political party leader; and cannot be a traitor or have colluded with dictators. Farthing and Kohl state that women represent 20 to 30 percent of the neighborhood *junta* leadership, a higher percentage than is found in most popular organizations in Bolivia.

A parallel set of territorially-based organizational structures exists for small proprietors and workers in El Alto's informal economy, who are highly organized. As anthropologist Sian Lazar

explains, the street vendor association represents vendors (mostly women) who sell in the same street or market. It regulates access to stalls, monitors upkeep and cleanliness, mediates disputes and negotiates relations with the municipality. Taxi and bus drivers are organized by route, and the union (*sindicato*) regulates departures, allocates itineraries and performs other functions similar to the street vendor association. These types of organizations dominate El Alto's citywide trade union federation and ally with FEJUVE on critical issues.

Both the neighborhood councils and their counterparts in the informal economy are patterned after the traditional communitarian organization of rural indigenous communities (*ayllu*) in terms of territoriality, structure and organizational principles. They also reflect the traditions of radical miners' unions, which for decades led Bolivia's militant labor movement. Fusing these experiences, El Alto's migrants have reproduced, transplanted and adapted their communities of origin to facilitate survival in a hostile urban environment.

## FEJUVE: Organizing Rebellion

FEJUVE's success broadening its role from organizing the community to organizing a rebellion against neoliberalism during a period of national crisis can be attributed to several factors:

*Strategic location.* Due to its unique location on the rim of the Altiplano, El Alto controls access to most of the roads that connect La Paz with the rest of Bolivia. In a tradition dating back to the indigenous siege of La Paz in 1781 and continuing with the militant miners' entry into La Paz from above during the 1952 revolution, El Alto residents have regularly exploited their strategic geographic location. The global economy has only enhanced this advantage, since El Alto is also the site of La Paz's international airport. Road blockades during the Gas Wars, for example, effectively cut off La Paz from the rest of the world.

*Autonomous organization.* Through the neighborhood *juntas*, El Alto has developed as a self-constructed city run by a network of micro-governments independent of the state. In Raúl Zibechi's view, the autonomous organization of labor in the informal sector, based on productivity and family ties instead of the hierarchical boss-worker relationship, reinforces this sense of empowerment: Citizens can self-manage and control their own environment.

*Collective traditions and experiences.* El Alto's traditional culture, reinforced by the practices of the neighborhood *juntas*, provide the infrastructure for social resistance in a number of critical ways.

*Collective identity.* El Alto's residents identify strongly with their neighborhoods, making territorially-based organizations the logical vehicle for collective action. But the settlement patterns of these neighborhoods also reflect their rural communities of origin, with which Alteños maintain strong ties (often owning land in the *campo* and returning to grow crops, according to Lazar). This has been an important factor in promoting national indigenous solidarity. When peasant-led blockades caused food shortages and rising prices in El Alto, most Alteños identified with the *campo*, despite their immediate economic hardship as consumers.

*Participation.* A high degree of member participation in collective organizational activities is expected and achieved in El Alto. During the civil strikes that characterized the Gas Wars, all shops, markets and businesses closed; transportation stopped; and thousands mobilized for daily marches and demonstrations. This solidarity is produced by a unique blend of social coercion and incentives that dates back to the *ayllu*, where non-participation was commonly sanctioned (or

understood to result in a loss of benefits). Similarly, failure to participate in a “voluntary” neighborhood campaign or *orsindicato* activity might result in a fine, a denial of neighborhood services won by others or assignment to a less favored market stall or taxi route. While these “consensual obligations” (in Zibechi’s words) depart from the liberal democratic tradition, they are generally accepted in El Alto as part of the way the community works.

*Direct democracy.* During the Gas Wars, grassroots mobilizations were strengthened by the traditional practice of community assembly, where residents meet to deliberate, exchange information and reach decisions by public consensus. Community radio facilitated direct communication and the growth of “horizontal” networks at the base, acting without traditional leadership. Neighborhoods took responsibility for maintaining individual road blockades, utilizing the traditional tactic of shift rotation to allow the protest to continue indefinitely. The tradition of leadership as a form of community service (not a privilege) served to further empower the grassroots networks which formed the core of the social resistance.

## New Challenges

With the election of Evo Morales, FEJUVE faces new and substantial challenges that demand further changes in its ever-evolving role. While broadly supporting Evo Morales’ agenda to regain popular sovereignty over natural resources and re-found the Bolivian state, FEJUVE has maintained a critical posture towards the MAS government. This includes denouncing the Minister of Water, FEJUVE’s former president, for failing to move decisively to return El Alto’s privatized water company to public ownership. FEJUVE continues to press for accelerating the pace of the government’s nationalization programs to generate revenues for economic development, housing and social services in response to neighborhood demands.

At the same time, FEJUVE has recognized the need for more pragmatic tactics in the current political environment. In its recent campaign to oust the governor of La Paz for promoting regional autonomy (which would deprive the federal government of necessary resources), FEJUVE withdrew its threat of civic strikes and road blockades to facilitate a potential legislative solution.

Whether FEJUVE can retain its strong, independent neighborhood base and organizational capacity under current political circumstances—despite the potential challenge this poses to the MAS government—remains to be seen. To the extent that FEJUVE can remain a potent national force while delivering concrete benefits to its neighborhood-based constituency, progressive planners and community advocates will continue to draw inspiration from this creative grassroots organization.

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