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What's Happening in Bolivia?

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Bolivia has received less attention than any other country in the world. Isolated, poor and without any special role in world trade or diplomacy, it tends to be ignored in academic texts and press coverage.

Bolivia is an enormous and potentially rich country, the size of France and Spain combined. Its society and economy are classic cases of unequal and uneven development. It is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in the western hemisphere, with the lowest per-capita income in South America. Nearly half of its population is illiterate. Bolivia has the largest indigenous population of any Latin-American nation: more than fifty percent are speakers of Quecha or Aymara. Rural agricultural workers comprise more than sixty percent of the nation. Nevertheless, in many ways, the combative Bolivian working class has been politically the most aware on the continent.

The country has had a single-industry economy par excellence, first with silver, then tin; recently its contribution to world trade in great part has been as a source of the primary material for cocaine. This has been the pretext for interventions by the North American bourgeoisie in the so-called "drug war."

Still, for those seeking to understand the continent's social processes, the history of Bolivia is full of veins that deserve to be mined. As noted, Bolivia has the largest indigenous population in the Americas. Also, its workers movement has traditionally been strongly combative, and its demands have been among the most radical anywhere in the Americas. For the most part, the Bolivian proletariat has the strongest awareness of history of any working class on the continent.

The country was the scene of large-scale proletarian struggles; it is the only country in the hemisphere to have anything like a successful workers' insurrection. In 1952 workers' and farmers' militias destroyed the army of the oligarchy and threw the tin barons out of their palatial mansions. But that insurrection was neutralized by the bourgeois nationalists.

Although Leninist politicians, working together with bourgeois "progressives," never managed to domesticate the combative workers movement, they did disarm it. For example, in 1971, workers, farmers and students formed the People's Assembly (Asamblea Popular), a kind of workers council movement which showed the beginnings of direct democracy. They were able to push aside the regime of then-president Torrez and establish a parallel self-governance. The reformists and the Leninists, as always, acted to abort the social revolution. This time they encouraged the people in a suicidal hope in the "progressive" government of Torrez, instead of arming the population. The result was the bloody fascist Banzer coup d'etat financed by the C.I.A., the Brazilian dictatorship and the narcotrafickers.

A nearly insurrectional general strike broke out in 1985, when 12,000 tin miners, equipped with dynamite and supported by the majority of the population, occupied the seat of government in La Paz for 16 days. They called for an end to the capitalist system and the establishment of "a workers' and farmers' government." But a lack of strategic clarity and sabotage by the authoritarian left brought an end to the strike. Since that ignominious defeat

the workforce at the state-owned COMIBOL mine and mineral enterprise has gone from 32,000 in 1986 to 60 workers today. Those sacked were ejected from the Altiplano region and had no choice but to cultivate coca in order to survive. At the same time, the former president, Sanchez, and his family have bought up the more lucrative mines and have filled their pockets. Right now the private mining industry employs 4,000 miners. Lay-offs have followed the least sign of discontent, and the workers are afraid to protest because they live in dread of losing their jobs.

In this situation, the trade union bureaucrats have prostituted themselves to the government, which has lost them the confidence of all types of workers. Popular initiative and the infinite creative capacity of the ordinary people have given life to grassroots organizations that are much more democratic and combative than the creaky old Bolivian Labor Central (Central Obrera Boliviana--C.O.B.), the hierarchical union structure that includes all workers. It was displaced, in practice, by the Interunion Bloc (Bloque Inter-sindical) formed by rural teachers, farmers, tradespeople and truckers in the Altiplano region. And the Interunion Bloc has not been the only grassroots organization to achieve immediate results.

In April of 2000 Cochabamba was the epicenter of a tremendous shakeup endured by the ex-dictator and current "democratic" president, General Banzer. Great numbers of people mobilized against the privatization of water, blocking the highways with barricades, setting up pickets that confronted and repelled attacks by the armed forces, and bringing the whole population into the mobilization. They built an organization from the ground up, the Coalition for Water and Life (Coordinadora Por El Agua y La Vida), based on the demands of workers and farmers. (Attempts by the political parties at infiltration were rebuffed.) The organization's example spread rapidly throughout the country. This irritated Banzer's regime, which had no hesitation about strewing the streets with the dead and injured. But at that point the police went on strike to demand higher pay. In its generosity,

the population showed uncritical solidarity with the police strike, notwithstanding the opportunism of the police demands. But as soon as the government compromised and raised their pay the police were back on the streets again to brutally repress the people, never mind the solidarity they had shown. All this makes obvious the importance of developing clear policies with regard to the repressive forces.

But, despite everything, the mobilization succeeded in heading off the water privatization and expelling the British multinational leading the project, showing once again that only the population's direct action can ensure that their rights won't be trampled. After an agreement with the police, the government signed agreements with many other groups of people. But the government reneged on these agreements, leading to much bigger and more widespread mobilizations the following September and October.

The farmers were the strongest protagonists in the actions during September, which included strongly defended highway blockades that nearly paralyzed the whole country. The urban centers were nearly strangled by the farmers' uprising. It was an uprising against a regime that condemns them and the country to poverty and backwardness. It was a mass rebellion of those who have been discriminated against and marginalized, people fighting to be included in the national development and to occupy a place in the history of humanity.

The farmers' movement was notable for its denunciation of the discrimination against and oppression of indigenous peoples. This touched one of the worst of the festering wounds of the bourgeois society we live in.

The white minority that discriminates against and oppresses the majority indigenous peoples didn't take seriously the movement's "insolent" attitude. Despite many attempts at elitist manipulations, the movement relied on the guiding influence of pre-Inca tribal traditions, which foster structures of direct democracy. It was not

only against the government but against the whole traditional political system in place, including the parliamentary opposition, etc. The framework of the bourgeois state is collapsing. The government has no social support and its leaders don't know what to do.

The dramatic confrontations in Bolivia have an importance quite out of proportion to the country's economic and political strength. It has borders with Chile, Brazil and Argentina, where the exemplary South American working classes are very active. While all of Latin America creaks under massive foreign debt and suffers the scourge of "austerity" imposed by the banks, a revolution in Bolivia could light the fuse on the "debt bomb."

This year's experience has shown us the kind of radicalization of struggles that has not been seen for some time, frequently going as far as direct class struggle. This is where we lacked activity around an anarchist program, going beyond demands to make truly revolutionary proposals, ones which could bring the struggle to a logical conclusion. That is to say, we lacked a kind of anarchism, both local and global, that is up to responding to the circumstances.

For workers self-management of our enterprises; for free, self-managed cultivation, sale and processing of coca for the voluntary use of the local peoples of the Americas; against the coca trade (the child of capitalism); against the commercial enrichment of the international coca dealers and against the exploitation of the inhabitants of the impoverished and miserable slums of the world's urban areas; for the land to those who work it; against the privatization of water, the farmer's life-blood; for the right to education, health care and work for all; for the abolition of private property - and on to libertarian communism: Long live the revolt of the exploited! Death to the useless bourgeoisie! Down with the fascist government! Long live those who struggle!

uncommon to see assemblies of more than 25,000 farmers deciding on the movement's direction.

The nationwide oppression of the indigenous majority is a problem today, as it has been for more than 500 years.

Capitalism came to Bolivia as an invading force driven by imperialism. It established an economy combining capitalist and pre-capitalist forms which keep it from developing. The great majority of indigenous people remain stuck in pre-capitalist conditions.

The history of rural uprisings, which are the background of class struggles in our country, shows that in order to triumph, any rural uprising needs to ally itself with working class struggles in the cities and adopt their orientation: the destruction of major bourgeois private property and the establishment of the social property of freely-organized and federated producers.

During the recent struggles, the reformist left parties were not visible on the political scene. The insurgent farmers quieted anyone talking about ending the struggle.

Despite the dictatorial state of siege, the ordinary people held their ground; they welcomed the formation of self-defense committees, clearly working to take back their lives from the police and the military. Strictly speaking, the only thing besieged was the government.

The mobilization of September, 2000 was notable both because it expressed the needs of all and because there was an effort to make the struggle more and more general. In other words, the many different kinds of protests in the struggle came together to strike with one fist. Those in the countryside and in the cities attempted to unite their strengths in the struggle. The exploited and oppressed strove to take their problems into their own hands and solve them. They only faltered for lack of a clear revolutionary strategy and because of the role of the reformists in stifling the movement.

Being weak and disorganized, the anarchist movement participated timidly in the actions. But, the popular initiatives that are prominent in anarchist theory came to life more than ever before.

The weak participation was due in part to the hesitation of older anarchists to make contact with younger people and in part due to the sectarianism of some collectives.

The union leaders, with their subserviance to the bourgeois parties, dragged the COB and the labor movement into passivity. Not surprisingly, it was the union bureaucrats who the privileged elite put most directly in charge of maintaining the status quo. The reformist left politically disarmed the miners' movement and the university students. The Trotskyites encouraged the suicidal illusion of supposedly progressive military officers, the same ones who had shot the workers point-blank and sown the roads with corpses, machine-gunned demonstrators from military planes, murdering more than thirty and wounding more than a hundred. Within the officer corps there is a traditional mentality of subordinating the population, which is supposed to get out of the way, disperse and generally be passive. The army has shown itself to be the enemy of the exploited always and everywhere. The Trotskyist collaborationist policy is not surprising.

The heroic and sacrificial struggle of the exploited was partially defeated by the self-serving activities of Felipe Quispe, leader of the Altiplano farmers, who went along with an agreement with the government that dealt with the demands of only part of the movement. The coca cultivators were the principal group abandoned. They also suffered from the reformism of their own leader, Evo Morales. Others, such as the landless farmers ("los sin tierra"), are still fighting. With the agreement the rest of the contesting groups of workers lost their strength.

The government, unable to drown the workers movements in blood, once the social explosion had been brought to a standstill, found it best to make concessions, and make minor changes to the bourgeois laws. But, the stalemate didn't mean that the exploited would give in or go away and dissolve the struggle, but that, given the incentive of the ongoing poverty and oppression, they could return to the attack.

By the end of December 2000, no one could doubt the rejection of the government resulting from its inability to solve national and social problems, and on account of its extremely immoral actions. This was clearly evidenced by the sharpening of the class struggle. The Banzer government is inept, and the popular rebellion in the streets was the riotous protest against the disastrous consequences of the economic crisis of capitalism, which, in Bolivia, is concretized in the categorical rejection of neoliberal policies and the multinationals. It is notable that the ordinary people blamed the Banzer government for all of the calamities the country was suffering. Whatever harmful means the state used, the people applied pressure and made it known that they viewed the authors as part of North American and native imperialism.

Now the government boasts about putting an end to all the coca cultivation, leaving thousands of coca growers in the streets. Even though the ruling class has seen sharp blows to the culture, the economy and the future of working people, it is counting on the cooperation of the corrupt and stupid union bureaucrats to help it out. But when they gather to celebrate their sinister work we will raise our banner, which reads: Free cultivation, sale and processing of coca.

Even today thousands of tradespeople in Bolivia's largest city are blocking the mayor's proposal to ban street vendors from "decent" neighborhoods. The Alteños are putting on demonstrations demanding the expulsion of the multinationals that are enriching themselves from water and electricity. The people of Oruro mobilized to block the sale of the Vinto smelter to multinationals. Workers laid off from state-owned enterprises have occupied them and resisted the police. They are pointing out that there was no reason to dislodge them, since the facilities belonged to them.

The coca growers and farmers of the Altiplano region are threatening to take action during the first months of 2001. They frequently make demands related to various problems of daily life. This means that social insurgency is ready to break out again, not