

Bureaucracy Is Suffocating The Bolivian People's Movement

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May 15, 2001

By the end of April, 2001 discontent was widespread, and the popular movement was posing a serious threat to the Banzer government. Workers in the majority of industries were resisting the state's structures and institutions, and even capitalism itself.

The COB National Convention also took place at the end of April. Its delegates agreed upon a total blockage of all highways throughout the country as a way of demanding the ouster of the Banzer government and an end to neoliberalism. But, the convention was manipulated by people friendly to the government, delegates were bribed, and Felipe Quispe "El Mallku" was re-elected. Nevertheless, Convention delegates were able to pass some radical resolutions; but these were later ignored by Quispe, as he set out to confuse the population with ambiguous and contradictory statements. For example, one day he announced in no uncertain terms that the highway blockades would begin on May first, the next day he said they would be earlier, and later on he said they would be postponed to the end of May. He did all this arbitrarily, without consulting anyone. Quispe also attacked the other groups in the struggle, making all kinds of vague accusations against them. Finally, on April 28, he announced that the highway blockades would be postponed for a month, which drained the popular movement of much of its strength. But the COB delegates resolved to continue with the protest, and on May First a march of five thousand workers from Oruro to La Paz was begun. The march arrived in La Paz on May 9, but by that time the bureaucrats had already negotiated with the government.

Just hours before some four thousand workers were scheduled to enter La Paz, at a time when everything was pointing to a truly insurreccional situation that would decapitate the Banzer government, the Central Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Labor Organization, COB) struck a deal with the government. The nearly four thousand workers, who had walked 200 kilometers (124 miles) during the previous nine days, along the Altiplano highway, entered the center of La Paz a little past noon.

The wave of conflicts began a month ago when the farmers who produce coca in the Chapare region launched a march on the capital, then blocked the highway between Santa Cruz and Cochabamba. They were showing their opposition to the government's program of coca eradication. Tensions increased when the Confederación de Campesinos (Farmers Confederation) threatened to block the highways to force recognition of their demands. This was followed by

a strike of employees of the main public health insurance program, a voluntary fast by 3,500 retirees calling for an increase in their pensions, and protests against the bad condition of the highways by the transport workers union. Then president Banzer's government reached agreements with all of the groups involved.

During 2000 a similar wave of protests came close to toppling Banzer and the present economic system. Freed from the guidance of the bureaucracies, groups of exploited people engaged in direct action and build truly grass-roots organizations which brought spontaneity and popular initiative to the potentially revolutionary situation.

Notable among the demands of many of the groups has been a call for repeal of capitalist neoliberal policies and the expulsion of multinational companies. One of the most combative groups was the retired miners, who started an indefinite hunger strike that claimed the life of one elderly man. Their determination and tradition of struggle brought their goals within reach.

Because of the pressure from the involvement of more than 35 labor groupings, the C.O.B. announced a general strike for the First of May. The strike movement was weakened by the farmers' leaders, headed by Felipe Quisp "El Mallku"), who in a shameless maneuver refused to follow the resolutions of the farmers convention which had called for highway blockages. By doing this, "El Mallku" committed one of the most repugnant acts in the history of the farmers' union bureaucracy.

Ultimately, the bureaucrats sold out the struggles in exchange for a few crumbs, including the temporary postponement of the privatization of enterprises such as the postal service and the airports, some wage increases, and training and health benefits. Careful consideration indicates that the postponement served only to disorganize the working class.

The government was particularly deceitful in saying that it would reconsider two articles in Decree 21,060 of 1985, which instituted the free market model. The articles relate to free recruiting of labor.

The government came to an agreement with the COB, but it is still facing regional conflicts. For example, the population of the southeastern part of the country have raised barricades which are blocking the highway and railway to Argentina. They are demanding that the highway be paved.

In addition, small debtors are continuing their campaigns in several cities to obtain cancellation of debts from the banks. There have been 38 more suicides; in La Paz more than 7,000 have participated in continuous demonstrations. The anarchist collective Mujeres Creando (Women of Faith) has played a major role and its ideas and practices have been influential in the movement.

Now, more than ever before, we urge: NO CONFIDENCE IN THE BUREAUCRACY!

We denounce all of the leaders for collaboration with the government and dictatorship over the ordinary people. The compromising policies of the hierarchical labor unions have caused people to become confused, and only small vestiges remain of the direct democratic practices they built.

The Coordinadora del Agua (Water Coordination) is a grass-roots organization that expelled the multinationals and has latent potential for self-management. But, it has been disfigured by dogmatists, by a variety of opportunists of Bolshevik origin who have shared rewards with the political right.

Meanwhile, "El Mallku," the farmers' leader, puts himself forward as the savior of the indigenous people and claims to act on their behalf. He has demagogically declared that his part of the population will mobilize on its own and that anyone who accuses him of betrayal will be severely punished. But, there is evidence that he has been inspired by a government bribe.

The general strike was not called by the COB officials as part of a plan to gain victory for the workers. It only put pressure on the government in order to obtain partial economic demands.

Thus the bureaucracy deligitimized the message and impact of the general strike, which can be one of the most powerful weapons available to the exploited against the capitalists. It converted the strike into a means for putting pressure on the government to “convince” it of the need to throw the exploited a few crumbs.

The widespread readiness to fight, by the workers in the cities and the farmers in the countryside, contrasts sharply with the tepid list of demands made by the bureaucracy.

While the workers and farmers were resisting the police-military repression with blockades, pickets and demonstrations and showing in practice that they were ready to take their struggle to its logical conclusion, the bureaucrats were negotiating with the government ministers, looking for a few crumbs to justify ending the strike.

In addition to the narrowness of the list of strike demands and deliberate disorganization introduced by the bureaucrats, the general strike was weakened by the fact that the industrial proletariat had no part in it. The strike was basically limited to service sector workers and coca growers.

The miners and oil industry workers did not participate actively in the general strike for reasons related, in the first place, to the COB’s policy of permitting the struggles to exhaust themselves one by one, as a way of strengthening its strategy of compromise. And, the industrial workers had been previously weakened by the intensified subjugation of the mid-1980s.

Until the middle of the 1990s, the miners were on the front lines in proletarian struggles and had one of the most powerful traditions of struggle in Latin America. But a succession of defeats stemming from a lack of revolutionary strategy paved the way for an offensive by the government and the employers that has profoundly restructured the industry. A drop in tin prices led to the closing of operations of the Corporación Minera de Bolivia (Mining Corporation of Bolivia, COMIBOL), leaving more than 90 percent of its workers in the streets. Tens of thousands of miners came together to form cooperatives doing piece work and working freelance. Nowadays there are very few profitable mines, and the mineworkers are mostly young people who lack great traditions of struggle.

Today the group of workers with the greatest weight in the Bolivian economy is in the oil industry, ahead of mining and agribusiness.

But there are major differences between the aware working class of the 1980s and the oil workers of today. The miners had a decades-long tradition of struggle, while the oil industry proletarians are relatively young and have few traditions. The new workers in the profitable mines and other industries have the same limitations as the oil workers; in addition, their jobs are less secure than were those of the miners of the COMIBOL.

The bureaucrats of the COB are “working” not to reverse these conditions, but to freeze them in place, thus justifying the division of struggles and promoting their strategy of compromise.

The COB bureaucrats haven’t done anything to rally the industrial workers, either before or during the general strike. Earlier, when the mines and related enterprises were shutting down, the bureaucrats didn’t call for occupations. Later on, they went along with the weakening of job security, agreeing to demands for flexibility made by one government after another.

The main task now is to remove the bureaucracy’s role as intermediary and unify all the struggles, to call for a general strike with a single list of demands.

This task cannot be accomplished if it remains in the hands of the COB, which bases its strategy on compromising with the government. Self-organization is an urgent priority. Only assemblies composed of grass-roots representatives should have control; all attempts at indirect delegation should be rejected.

For this to happen, the most active groups of workers and other exploited people (such as sanitation workers, farmers and students) need to organize themselves. They need to require the COB to call a convention of grass-roots representatives from all parts of the country which would formulate a working-people's program, re-launch the general strike and take on the task of coordinating the struggle.

If all of the groups of people in struggle come together to rein in the COB and oust the bureaucracy, this convention, based on assemblies within all of the unions, could start up the general strike again with a potential for victory. But, if the fate of the struggle remains in the hands of the bureaucracy, only exhaustion and new defeats can be expected.

There is social ferment in the streets. It comes from the dreadful poverty and a total mistrust of the bourgeoisie and its present system. The government is a servant of the multinationals, and it is not able to fulfill its commitments. The government's repression and demagoguery are pushing the ordinary people to unleash the decisive battle.

The ideas and actions of the farmers' and workers' leaders are based on compromise. They have used every means to avoid organizing the general strike as a weapon to be used for getting rid of the government and fulfilling the demands of the exploited. The bureaucrats, who only lead us to starvation and bloodbaths, don't deserve the support of those members of the working class who are ready to fight. We need to arm ourselves against political repression and to rely on our own strength. Demanding dialog makes no sense; the bourgeoisie and the workers have opposing interests. We need to manage things ourselves to do away with imperialistic capitalism.

FOR WORKERS' SELF-MANAGEMENT, ON TO ANARCHIST COMMUNISM, LONG LIVE THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION!

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Retrieved on 3rd August from <http://www.ainfos.ca/01/may/ainfos00550.html>
(Translation from the Spanish by Robby Barnes and Sylvie Kashdan)

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