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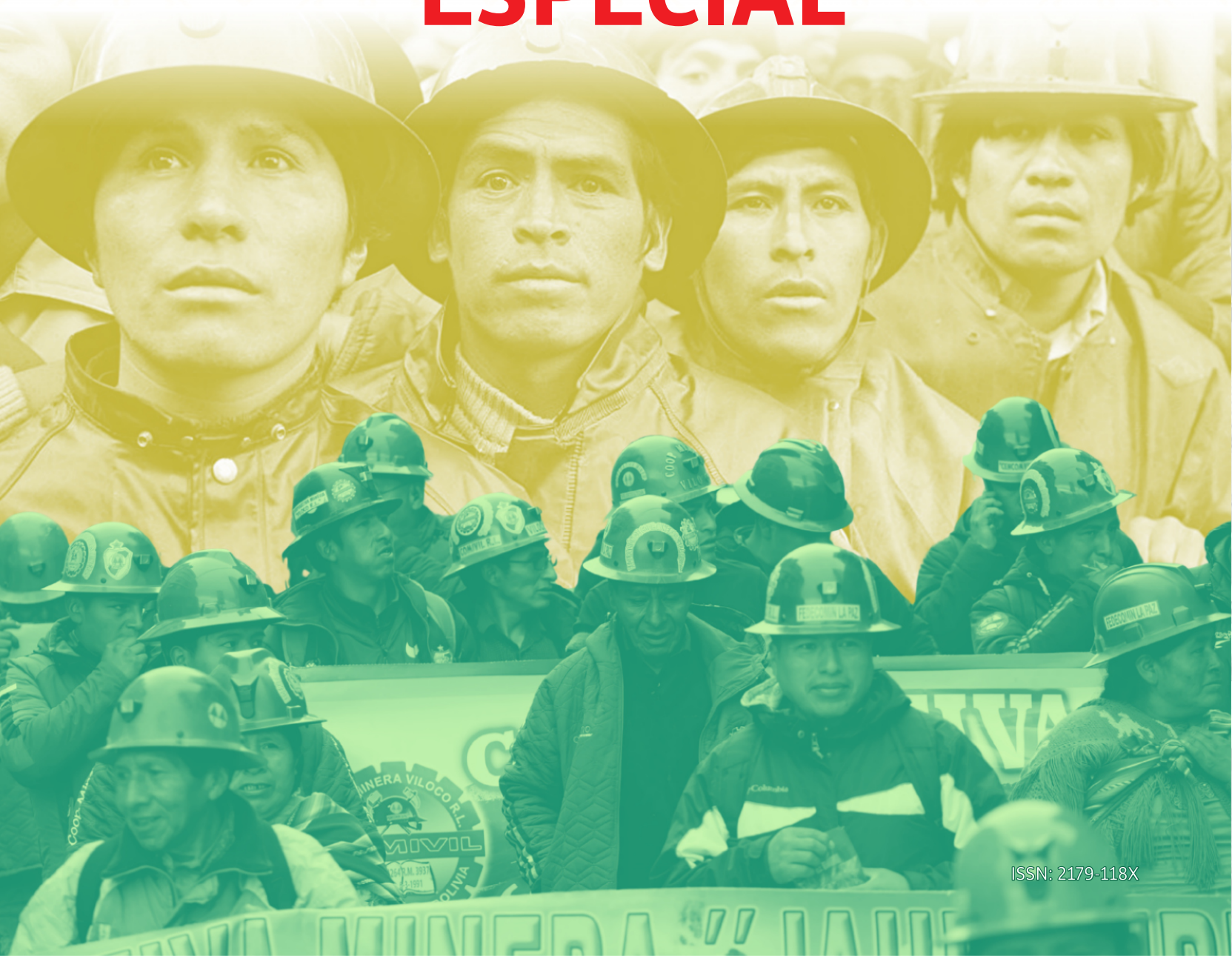
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A NEW POPULAR AND WORKERS' UPRISING IN BOLIVIA IN 2026

LENA SOUZA, PSTU BRAZIL AND FLORENCE OPPEN, WORKERS' VOICE (US)

BACK TO THE STREETS

Bolivia is undergoing its deepest social and political crisis since the insurrectionary days of 2003, when the uprising overthrew Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. Triggered by President Rodrigo Paz Pereira's policy shift, a wave of mass mobilizations, roadblocks, and strikes has paralyzed the country since May 2026. What began as sector-specific demands regarding fuel quality and land tenure has rapidly transformed into a national rebellion demanding the president's resignation under the unifying cry: "Paz must go!" In this new round of protests, the Bolivian Workers' Union (COB) and indigenous, peasant, and neighborhood social organizations are playing a key role, which underscores the pre-revolutionary nature of the situation. At the same time, the Bolivian state's growing repressive response, backed by Trump, is putting a potential victory for the masses and progress toward meaningful social and political change to the test.

THE IMMEDIATE TRIGGERS: THE NEOLIBERAL OFFENSIVE OF THE PAZ GOVERNMENT

The protests are not spontaneous, but the direct consequence of a political earthquake that began with

the August-October 2025 elections. After nearly two decades of government by the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), which administered Bolivian capitalism under a discourse of change, the process drifted toward a growing bureaucratization of its political and union structures and toward division. The economic and political crisis resulting from the exhaustion of this model weakened popular support for the government and opened space for the advance of right-wing sectors, which managed to contest and occupy positions of power within the state. Thus, an electorate weary of the deep economic crisis (dollar shortages, fuel shortages, 14% inflation) severely punished the party at the polls. The MAS went from holding a majority in Congress to having just one representative, and the right-wing candidate, Rodrigo Paz Pereira (son of former President Jaime Paz Zamora), of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), won the runoff election by promising stability.

However, once in power (he took office on October 22, 2025), Paz implemented a brutal package of neoliberal measures that quickly destroyed his electoral support:

1. **Supreme Decree 5503 and the elimination of subsidies:** He repealed fuel subsidies, causing an immediate increase in diesel and gasoline prices. This was the initial trigger that unified the scattered discontent.

2. **Crisis over adulterated fuel:** The government imported low-quality gasoline that caused massive engine damage to vehicles (especially taxis and buses), directly affecting self-employed public transportation workers.

3. **Land Law No. 1720 (April 10):** Enacted to "restructure" agricultural property, it allowed community lands and smallholdings to be used as collateral for bank loans. This was interpreted by



peasant and indigenous movements as the prelude to massive dispossession in favor of landowners and agribusiness, which opened the door to covert privatizations.

4. **Comprehensive economic package:** Repeal of the tax on large fortunes, liberalization of imports, freezing of public sector wages, and announcement of a constitutional reform to prioritize foreign investment in natural resources.

These measures, implemented in just six months, demonstrated a rapid alliance between the government, the agro-industrial oligarchy of Santa Cruz, and international financial capital, reversing the few social gains the MAS had preserved from the 2003–2005 cycle of struggles.

THE ROLE OF THE COB AND SPACES FOR SELF-ORGANIZATION

Faced with this offensive, the working class and indigenous peoples responded with historical methods of direct action. The central factor that channeled and radicalized the discontent was the Bolivian Workers' Union (COB), albeit in a tense, dynamic relationship with the rank and file and other organizations.

The COB, under the leadership of its executive director, Mario Argollo, played a crucial role by convening a town hall meeting in El Alto on May 1, 2026, which declared an **indefinite general strike**. However, throughout the conflict, the COB leadership displayed inconsistencies. While the rank-and-file pushed to intensify the struggle and chanted “Down with Paz,” bureaucratic sectors of the movement—both affiliated and unaffiliated with the

COB, such as the Confederation of Education Workers and transport workers—were inclined toward sectoral negotiations with the government (such as the annual bonus for teachers or compensation for transport workers). Finally, under pressure from the rank-and-file, an expanded national meeting of the COB, the general assembly of the FEJUVE (Federation of Neighborhood Councils of El Alto), and the expanded meeting of the Single Departmental Federation of Peasant Workers of La Paz “Tupac Katari” ratified, in early June, the continuation of pressure tactics and the central demand for Paz’s resignation, marking a defeat for the government’s strategy of sector-by-sector negotiations aimed at demobilization.

The true driving force behind the rebellion has been the capacity for self-organization that overwhelmed the traditional leaderships themselves. The key actors were:

- **The Túpac Katari Peasants’ Federation and the Red Ponchos:** These Aymara indigenous organizations from the Altiplano implemented a total road blockade and indefinite roadblocks at the entrances to La Paz and El Alto, demonstrating remarkable discipline and fighting spirit.

- The **FEJUVE** (Federation of Neighborhood Councils) of El Alto: El Alto once again became the epicenter of the insurrection. The neighborhood councils organized barricades, surveillance posts, and logistics to sustain the citywide blockade, recreating the methods used in 2003.

- **Autonomous marches:** The “March for Life to Save Bolivia,” called by Evo Morales (the Evo-

aligned faction of the MAS), covered 300 km from the Cochabamba Tropics to La Paz and joined the protests on May 18. Additionally, peasants from the Amazon walked for 24 days to the seat of government.

- **Grassroots unions:** urban and rural teachers, miners, and factory workers maintained the strike in various regions, even as their national leaderships accepted agreements, demonstrating the independence of the rank and file.

The unity of action among urban workers, peasants, indigenous people, transport workers, and neighborhood



committees formed a **social bloc in struggle** not seen since the Gas War. The COB, though limited, served as a coordinating umbrella, but real power lay in the blockades and the rank-and-file’s ability to sustain the struggle for more than a month.

THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY CHARACTER AND THE SITUATION OF DUAL POWER

The current situation in Bolivia exhibits pre-revolutionary characteristics, given the emergence of **dual-power structures** across the country.

There is de facto dual power. The Paz government maintains formal control of the state apparatus, the government palace, international recognition, and,

crucially, nominal command of the Armed Forces. However, in large regions of the country—particularly in the Altiplano, the city of El Alto, the provinces of La Paz, and parts of Cochabamba and Oruro—real authority is exercised



by the mobilized organizations.

By early June, peasant and neighborhood organizations controlled more than 104 roadblocks. They determine which goods, fuel, or food enter or leave the cities. The government cannot guarantee free movement or the supply of goods, causing millions in losses for the bourgeoisie and worsening economic paralysis.

While Paz is viewed by the urban middle classes and the business community as a “defender of democracy” against “radical groups,” for the mobilized working-class sectors, the president has lost all legitimacy. His mandate is considered illegitimate for having implemented a program that runs counter to what he promised during his campaign. The slogan “Out with Paz” not only demands his resignation but also expresses the political regime's exhaustion.

One factor preventing the consolidation of a classic revolutionary situation (with the imminent fall of the government)

is the lack of a clear, unified alternative for power among popular organizations. The crisis of strategic leadership presents three possible outcomes:

- The option of **new elections**, promoted by Evo Morales, is viewed with skepticism by the most radicalized sectors, who argue that bourgeois democracy has shown its limits and that elections, without challenging the power of the business elite, will not substantially change the country's situation. However, it remains the option most strongly advocated by the main political and union leaderships of the popular movement, and in the absence of a strategic alternative promoted by those same leaderships, it is also the proposal that currently garners the most support among broad sectors of the rank and file.

- **Vice President Edmand Lara** has attempted to distance himself from Paz to position himself as a “consensus option,” but he is rejected by the rank and file as a maneuver by the bourgeoisie itself.

Vice President Edmand Lara has sought to partially distance himself from Paz in order to present himself as a consensus alternative among the various factions of the ruling party and the opposition. However, rather than relying on popular mobilization, he has opted for negotiations and agreements with sectors aligned with both Paz and Evo Morales. For many activists and mobilized sectors, this approach does not represent a genuine alternative, but rather an attempt to restore governability through pacts among political elites, setting aside the demands of the grassroots in struggle.

- Finally, **an anti-capitalist**

perspective is taking shape: sectors of the revolutionary left (such as the IWL-FI) are raising the slogan “All power to the COB.” Drawing on the accumulated experience of the workers', peasant, and indigenous movements, these sectors argue that a fundamental solution to the crisis would require workers' and people's organizations to build their own power, independent of state institutions and the parties of the bourgeoisie. In this context, they advance the perspective of “All power to the COB and to the workers', peasant, and indigenous organizations,” arguing that these organizations must assume political leadership of the country and carry out structural transformations. However, this position remains a minority view within the movement, as the main union and popular leaderships continue to favor solutions centered on political negotiation or a new election.

Despite these limitations, the balance of power has been most favorable to the popular movement since 2003. The government is cornered, unable to govern in vast areas of the country, and the only way it can sustain itself is by increasing repression and declaring a state of siege.

STATE REPRESSION WITH THE SUPPORT OF U.S. IMPERIALISM

Faced with its weakness, the government of Rodrigo Paz has responded with an escalation of repression aimed at decapitating the movement and regaining control by force.

The government is criminalizing and prosecuting the protests, labeling them “terrorism” and “drug trafficking.” Arrest

warrants were issued against the main leaders of the COB (Mario Argollo, who went into hiding), leaders of the FEJUVE (Justino Apaza), peasant leaders, and former MAS senators such as Simone Quispe. In some cases, judges temporarily revoked these warrants to open a false dialogue. The warrants seek to terrorize the leadership and strip the protests of their leadership.

Judicial repression is accompanied by escalating repression in the streets. Police forces have dispersed marches and roadblocks with tear gas, rubber bullets, and mass arrests. According to reports from social organizations, the conflict has left at least six people dead, including a

mallku from Taraco and a protester killed during the crackdown in San Julián. In addition, there have been approximately 365 arrests, and dozens of union leaders, peasants, and indigenous people have been persecuted or prosecuted. Among the most widely reported cases are the kidnapping of leaders by pro-government civilian groups and the recent repression of the march in La Paz, which ended with further arrests and injured protesters. The mobilized organizations denounce an escalation of repression aimed at dismantling social protest and a media blackout intended to downplay the scale of the events.

The government's most dangerous move has been to rush a

new **Law on the Regulation of States of Emergency through Congress** (June 7, 2026). This law grants the Executive the following exceptional powers:

- **Legal protection** allowing for the immediate deployment of the Armed Forces in internal conflicts and defining protocols for “intervening” on blocked roads, which is generally prohibited by the Constitution.

- **Reduction of protections for the right to protest**, declaring road protests and roadblocks as an attack on internal security, with prison sentences of 3 to 5 years for those blocking roads.

- **Military mobilization:** Empowers the president to declare a state of siege and mobilize the



Armed Forces to “restore order” in areas under a state of emergency.

- **Legal shield** for repressive forces: Article 26 presumes the legality of the actions of the Armed Forces and the Police during states of emergency, while Article 27 guarantees state-funded legal defense for personnel prosecuted for acts occurring during operations.

The enactment of this law transforms the conflict: it is no longer a social protest but a potential internal war, with the army as the protagonist.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has offered explicit support for the Paz government, linking the protests to “drug trafficking” and “terrorism.” This support is not without cost: in exchange, the Paz government has aligned its foreign policy with Washington, reversing decades of relative regional independence. Hegseth stated that his country will support Bolivia so it does not fall “into the trap of the old status quo of narco-terrorist domination.” This international backing strengthens the government’s hand, enabling a crackdown without fear of sanctions.

BOLIVIA AT A NEW REVOLUTIONARY CROSSROADS

Bolivia stands at a historic crossroads. President Rodrigo Paz’s attempt to impose a radical neoliberal agenda has sparked a popular rebellion that, in practice, has created a dual-power **situation**. The Bolivian Workers’ Union and autonomous social organizations have demonstrated an enormous capacity for mobilization and resistance, sustaining blockades and strikes

for more than five weeks despite repression and government maneuvers.

The movement faces decisive challenges

1. **Unity and centralization:** The struggle remains uneven across the country. Cities such as Santa Cruz (a stronghold of the right) are less mobilized than La Paz and El Alto. The COB must achieve the full incorporation of all sectors at the national level.

2. **Defeating repression and martial law:** With the new Emergency Law, the government is pursuing a military solution to the conflict. A massive crackdown, backed by the U.S., could crush the rebellion, but at the cost of a bloodbath and an even deeper crisis.

3. **The question of power:** The demand for “Fuera Paz” is negative (removing one person), but it has not yet translated into a positive proposal for power from the grassroots organizations. Bolivia’s history (2003, 2005) shows that removing a president is not enough unless the state is transformed. Radicalized grassroots movements are pushing for a popular constituent assembly or a COB government, but leaderships are still flirting with institutional solutions (elections, a vice president).

In short, the uprising that began in May 2026 is the most acute expression of the crisis facing the Bolivian political regime. The Paz government, delegitimized by its own program, is sustained only by repression and by Trump’s support. The popular movement, led by the COB but driven by grassroots self-organization, has a historic opportunity to complete the unfinished tasks of 2003: the destruction of the bourgeois state

and the construction of genuine workers’, peasants’, and indigenous power. The outcome of this rebellion will define the country’s course for decades to come. ■

BOLIVIA: THE POPULAR REBELLION IN THE CRISIS OF THE WORLD ORDER

LITHIUM, INTERIMPERIALIST DISPUTE, AND CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE HEART OF LATIN AMERICA

EDU ALMEIDA (IWL) AND FLORENCE OPPEN (WORKERS VOICE, US).

INTRODUCTION

Bolivia is experiencing a new wave of blockades, strikes, and protests. This is not just another political crisis. It is a popular rebellion taking place in a world very different from that of 2003 and 2005. The international order has changed. But the exploitation of Bolivian workers remains intact.¹

However, the inter-imperialist rivalry between the United States and China is not an abstract backdrop. It manifests in Bolivian political forces, shapes class alliances, and runs through the MAS crisis and the rise of Paz. The dispute over lithium, contracts with Beijing, and Washington's backing of the new government: all of this is part of the same narrative. Therefore, to understand the popular rebellion of 2026, one must look simultaneously at the Salar de Uyuni and at the struggle between the world's major monopolies.²

Within this framework, the Donald Trump administration pushed for a profound redefinition of U.S. strategy toward Latin America. U.S. foreign policy has increasingly defined China as its primary strategic competitor. The *National Security Strategy* published in December 2025 identifies competition with China as a central challenge of the period and places the Western Hemisphere among the United States' strategic priorities.³

This strategy began to take shape in new economic and military initiatives. The United States promoted various mechanisms for international coordination aimed at securing access to critical

minerals and reducing dependence on Chinese suppliers.⁴

At the same time, the United States promoted the Shield of the Americas, formalized in a joint State Department statement on May 21, 2026. Member countries—including Bolivia—expressed their support for the government of Rodrigo Paz amid social protests, which they characterized as an attempt to “subvert the constitutional order” supported by “criminals and drug traffickers.”⁵

Therefore, the current Bolivian crisis should not be understood solely as an internal conflict. Resistance to economic adjustment, the social crisis, and the management of national resources are unfolding amid a growing inter-imperialist dispute over resources key to the global economy of the 21st century. Understanding the relationship between class struggle and the international order is essential to interpreting the historical significance of the current Bolivian rebellion.

BOLIVIA'S ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION (2003–2024): BOOM, CRISIS, AND RENEWED DEPENDENCY

To understand the current crisis, it is necessary to examine the transformations the Bolivian economy has undergone over the past two decades. The so-called “community-based productive socioeconomic model,” promoted by the MAS since 2006, rested on three pillars: the state's recovery of a significant share of hydrocarbon revenues, increased public spending, and a strong expansion of state investment. Boosted by the international commodities boom, Bolivia



experienced one of the longest periods of growth in its recent history. Between 2003 and 2024, nominal GDP rose from approximately \$10 billion to nearly \$47 billion, while GDP per capita increased from just over \$1,000 in 2005 to around \$3,800 in 2024. Extreme poverty fell from 38% to 15% during the same period.⁶

However, this growth, as in the rest of Latin America, has occurred as part of an adaptation to the international division of labor imposed by imperialism: essentially extractivist. The Bolivian case, which relied on tin for decades, now focuses on the production and export of natural gas (particularly to Brazil and Argentina), without developing the production chain. Rather than overcoming dependence, the commodities boom allowed it to

be managed under exceptionally favorable conditions.⁷

From the second half of the 2010s, clear signs emerged that the gas cycle was exhausting, due to the end of the commodities boom and the decline in exports to Brazil and Argentina (which began producing more themselves). International reserves, which reached nearly \$15 billion in 2014, fell to less than \$2 billion in 2025. The *Wall Street Journal* described this decline as “one of the region’s most severe liquidity crises.”⁸

In this context, lithium became the Bolivian government’s primary strategic focus. “White gold” was expected to replace gas as the engine of growth. However, the results fell far short of expectations. Despite having the largest theoretical lithium reserves,

Bolivia produced only 1,200 tons of lithium carbonate annually in 2024, compared with 200,000 tons in Chile and 150,000 tons in Argentina. After seventeen years of promises, the bumpy road to lithium industrialization has left Bolivia on the sidelines of the electromobility boom.⁹

At the same time, the structure of the country’s international economic relations underwent a transformation. In 2003, the United States was among Bolivia’s main trading partners. Two decades later, China had become Bolivia’s main trading partner and supplier, while the United States receded into the background. Chinese companies such as CAMC Engineering, Sinohydro, Huawei, TBEA Group, and the CBC consortium (CATL-Brunp-CMOC) became central players in

the Bolivian economy.¹⁰

Bolivia's dependence did not disappear but took on a more complex form. The profitability crisis in U.S. capitalism created an opportunity for the expansion of Chinese companies and financing. As documented in a thesis from the University of Barcelona (2024), Bolivia's dependence has shifted, but it has not been broken: it has moved from dependence on U.S. capital to dependence on Chinese capital.¹¹

THE LITHIUM TRIANGLE AND THE INTER-IMPERIALIST DISPUTE

Latin America has become a central battleground in the dispute between the United States and China. More than twenty countries in the region, including Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, have joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and cumulative Chinese investment has exceeded \$180 billion.¹²

In recent years, a significant shift has taken place. While Chinese investments initially focused on extracting raw materials, they now seek to control broader segments of the value chain. As noted by the Latin American Observatory on Mining Conflicts (OCMAL), China has shifted from flooding the lithium market to undermine the profitability of rival projects to securing long-term contracts with producers in Chile, Argentina, and Australia.¹³

Bolivia occupies a central position in this dispute. Together with Argentina and Chile, it forms the so-called Lithium Triangle, which holds about 60% of the world's lithium resources. According to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Bolivia has about 23 million tons of identified resources, Argentina 22 million, and Chile 11 million. However, the gap between geological potential

and production capacity is enormous. In 2024, Bolivia produced only 1,200 tons of lithium carbonate, compared with 200,000 in Chile and 150,000 in Argentina.¹⁴

Lithium is not valuable as a raw mineral. It is valuable for what it enables: batteries, electric cars, and technological dominance at a pivotal moment in the transformation of the energy production matrix and the integration of AI across all levels of industry. Whoever controls the technology for extraction, refining, and cathode production reaps the lion's share of the profits. Bolivia has the resource, but the revenue is generated in segments monopolized by a handful of transnational corporations.

China is today an "emerging imperialist power in conflict with the United States," following the same logic as the classical powers: securing raw materials, markets,



and investment to sustain its accumulation.¹⁸ Its major corporations—CATL, BYD, CMOC, Zijin Mining, Ganfeng Lithium—operate as global monopolies: they export capital, control strategic technologies, and organize production chains on a global scale.

According to the International Energy Agency's 2025 report, China controls 70% of global refining capacity for critical minerals and holds market shares of 80% or more across multiple segments of the battery supply chain, achieving a near-monopoly (over 95%) in materials such as lithium iron phosphate (LFP) cathodes. At the same time, the governments of Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile signed the Treaty on Lithium Cooperation and Integration in July 2025, seeking to increase their bargaining power against large corporations.¹⁵

While the United States and China vie for control of “white gold,” it is Bolivian workers—miners, peasants, factory workers, and transporters—who, with their bodies and struggles, uphold the possibility of a different path forward. The revenue from lithium does not reach their pockets. Yet their ability to bring the economy to a standstill and any government to its knees is the country's true strategic power.

This presence is most clearly evident in the Lithium Triangle. In Chile, the U.S.-based Albemarle remains a leading producer, while China's Tianqi Lithium acquired a stake in SQM. In Argentina, Ganfeng Lithium is involved in projects such as Cauchari-Olaroz. In Bolivia, the CBC consortium

became YLB's primary foreign partner. BYD, the electric car manufacturer that surpassed Tesla in global sales, submitted a proposal in May 2026 to build a battery plant in Bolivia.¹⁶

The dispute over lithium not only reshaped relations between Bolivia and the major powers but also reconfigured the Bolivian political system and accelerated the crisis within the MAS itself.

THE MAS AND CHINESE PENETRATION IN BOLIVIA

The Bolivian case illustrates the contradictions of so-called “21st-century socialism” in Latin America. After nearly two decades of MAS governments, Bolivia neither overcame its structural dependence nor developed its own technological base to industrialize its main resources. On the contrary, the depletion of the gas cycle and the bet on lithium deepened new forms of economic and technological subordination.¹⁷

The growing relationship between the MAS and China revealed a new configuration of class interests within the Bolivian bourgeoisie. While traditional business sectors maintained historical ties with the United States, MAS governments promoted the rise of new bureaucratic and technocratic sectors whose accumulation depended on state spending and coordination with new international partners. China offered financing and technology without demanding the reforms the IMF had historically imposed. This convergence facilitated the rapprochement between the MAS and Chinese capital.

During Evo Morales's

administration (2006–2019), the foundations of extractivist rent-seeking were laid. Lithium was declared a strategic resource not subject to concessions in the 2009 Constitution, and the state-owned company YLB was created in 2016. However, Morales's strategy, based on “evaporation ponds,” proved ineffective at the Salar de Uyuni because of the high magnesium concentration. After a contract with the German company ACI Systems failed (canceled in 2019), Morales turned to China and signed agreements with TBEA Group and CAMC Engineering.¹⁹

The government of Luis Arce (2020–2025) made a radical shift toward direct lithium extraction (DLE), a technology Bolivia lacks. In September 2024, a \$970 million contract was signed with the Russian Uranium One Group. In November 2024 and January 2025, contracts totaling \$1.03 billion were signed with the Chinese consortium CBC. The Minister of Energy justified the move: “Russia and China have the technology that we do not have.” However, a judge suspended the projects in August 2025 after complaints from indigenous communities about a lack of prior consultation. The Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), linked to the National Endowment for Democracy, described the contracts as a possible attempt at “authoritarian capture” of the lithium industry. Indigenous and civil society organizations questioned the agreements for their lack of transparency.²⁰

Arce's administration deepened the shift: foreign capital took control of the technology, the MAS's anti-imperialist rhetoric

was set aside, and the elimination of fuel subsidies—implemented through Supreme Decree No. 5503 of December 17, 2025—enacted the austerity measures that Sánchez de Lozada had attempted in 2003.²¹

THE SPLIT IN THE MAS

The internal conflict between “Evismo” and “Arcismo,” which intensified between 2024 and 2025, goes beyond a personal dispute. Its origin lies in the struggle for control of the state, natural resource revenues, and major lithium projects. The split in the MAS reflected the contradictions arising from Bolivia’s involvement in the dispute between the United States and China.²²

Arcism: The Chinese-Russian Bet. Arce bet on a strategic partnership with foreign capital capable of providing financing and technology, even if this entailed a strong dependency. This reflected the interests of officials and technocrats whose wealth accumulation depended on the continuity of these projects.

Evismo: opposition to the new power bloc. Morales became the leading critic of the agreements with China and Russia, denouncing their opacity and unfavorable terms. But these criticisms also reflected a political dispute: the success of Arce’s projects would consolidate a new power bloc within the MAS, thereby reducing Morales’s own influence.

Andrónico Rodríguez. The Senate president distanced himself from both parties and ran in the 2025 elections with his own party.

This fragmentation proved fatal: the MAS, which had won 55% of the vote in 2020, garnered only 3.16% in 2025, coming close to losing its legal status.²³

The historical limits of the MAS. For nearly two decades, it built a power bloc based on hydrocarbon revenues but failed to consolidate an autonomous base of accumulation. New bourgeois sectors began to form within the state apparatus, which split over control of lithium. When revenues declined, this weakness became an open political crisis. The lack of revolutionary leadership remains the weak point of the class struggle in Bolivia.²⁴

The vacuum left by the MAS was the ground on which the traditional bourgeoisie began to reorganize. The fragmentation of the ruling party created an opening for business and political sectors that had been sidelined for nearly two decades to rebuild a common alternative. That alternative found expression in Rodrigo Paz.²⁵

THE TRADITIONAL BOURGEOISIE AND THE RISE OF RODRIGO PAZ

Rodrigo Paz Pereira, son of former President Jaime Paz Zamora and a graduate of American University in Washington, D.C., won the 2025 election as part of the Alianza Patria coalition, which brings together Creemos (Camacho), Unidad Nacional (Doria Medina), SOL.bo (Revilla), and the MIR-Nueva Mayoría. It is a political front of the bourgeoisie, spanning the hard-line autonomist right to corporate neoliberalism.²⁶

Paz’s program, Agenda 50/50, calls for radical decentralization, the elimination of tariff barriers, and the criminalization of social protest. Although he has declared his opposition to the IMF, his project is a classic structural adjustment: the elimination of subsidies, deregulation, and total openness to foreign capital.²⁷

Paz’s government is the expression of a faction of the Bolivian bourgeoisie committed to reintegrating into the traditional circuit of accumulation: the United States, the IMF, and Western investors. They believe that by tying themselves once again to U.S. capital, they will secure greater income and stability. For workers, the difference is negligible: with one master or another, it is always they who pay the price for austerity.²⁸

THE CURRENT CRISIS: POPULAR UPRISING, RECESSION, AND FOREIGN INTERVENTION

The popular mobilizations that began in December 2025 and intensified in May and June 2026 expressed a profound rejection of deteriorating living conditions, rising fuel costs, austerity policies, and the perception that strategic resources remain subordinate to external interests. Peasant organizations, indigenous groups, unions, and neighborhood councils once again took center stage. The Alto region regained the prominence it had held in 2003 and 2005.²⁹

The government’s response has been repressive. The most significant feature, however, is the United States’ rapid intervention.

On June 4 and 5, 2026, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth announced the dispatch of “emergency assistance” to the Paz government under the Shield of the Americas. Rubio described the protests as “an attempted coup financed by drug trafficking,” while Hegseth denounced the alleged return to “narco-terrorist rule.” For the first time since 2006, the United States intervened so explicitly in a Bolivian political crisis.³⁰

While the United States openly backed Paz, China pursued a different strategy: avoiding direct intervention and focusing on ensuring the continuity of contracts. Through its embassy, it declared its “respect for Bolivia’s sovereignty” and its “confidence that the government will honor the contracts.” China does not need tanks to secure its access to Bolivian lithium: it has debts, contracts, and a network of intertwined economic interests.³¹

The strength of the workers’, peasant, and indigenous organizations contrasts with the absence of an independent, class-based political leadership. The COB, FEJUVE, and the peasant unions retain authority and the capacity to mobilize, but none has managed to articulate a common strategy to challenge for power. The fragmentation of the leadership of the masses—among Arcistas, Evistas, autonomists, and independents—is as real as that of the bourgeoisie.

THE REFORMIST POLITICS OF THE “CAMPS” ONCE AGAIN REVEALS ITS TRUE ESSENCE

Today, Bolivia is at the center

of the continent’s class struggle. Trump secured a political victory in Venezuela by seizing control of the oil and installing Delcy Rodríguez. He is seeking another victory in Bolivia. If, on the other hand, the Paz government falls under pressure from the mass movement, it will be a serious defeat for Trump.

The sharp social and political polarization on the continent could lead to a revolutionary upsurge similar to those in Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile between 2018 and 2020, which the reformist leaderships channeled toward bourgeois democracy. But that upsurge is clashing not only with the far right and Trump but also with bourgeois democracy. Lula’s support for the Paz government against the masses symbolizes that policy: reformism allies itself with the bourgeoisie and imperialism to maintain peace and bourgeois democracy.

NEITHER THE UNITED STATES NOR CHINA: FOR AN INDEPENDENT WORKING-CLASS SOLUTION

The Bolivian crisis reflects the convergence of three processes: the crisis of the international order following the capitalist restoration in the former USSR; the rise of China as a power capable of challenging the United States; and the crisis of the national-popular projects that sought to manage dependency without breaking with it.³²

The growing aggressiveness of U.S. policy toward Bolivia—the NSS, the Shield of the Americas, and direct support for Paz—evidences the United States’ loss of

influence over the past two decades. Regaining a presence in the Lithium Triangle is fundamental to its global strategy of competing with China. The competition for control of strategic minerals, supply chains, and investment opportunities is a concrete manifestation of the struggle for global accumulation. Within this framework, U.S. monopolies seek to regain ground amid the expansion of Chinese capital in Latin America, while the U.S. government serves as the primary political, diplomatic, and military instrument of those interests.

For nearly twenty years, the MAS did not alter Bolivia’s subordinate integration into the global economy. As CEDLA documents, the energy and fiscal crisis “is not temporary, but the result of an unsustainable model of production and consumption” based on extractive rents. The alliance with China and Russia prolonged the project’s viability, but when rents declined, the contradictions erupted. The traditional bourgeoisie took advantage of this collapse to regroup around Paz, backed by the United States.³³

The Bolivian masses have repeatedly shown they can topple governments (2003, 2005) and challenge established powers (2019, 2026). What they have lacked is not strength but political leadership capable of channeling that strength into a program of workers’ and peasants’ power. The COB, FEJUVE, and indigenous organizations possess moral authority and organizational capacity. What is lacking is the political will to break with

reformism and the illusion that capitalism can be managed with a “human face.”

The Bolivian experience shows that the strength of mass mobilizations, on its own, does not resolve the question of power. The building of a revolutionary party rooted in the working class, peasants, and indigenous peoples remains a strategic necessity.³⁴

Let us make no mistake. The inter-imperialist rivalry between Washington and Beijing alters the forms of that domination but does not eliminate its class content. The only path to national sovereignty and true independence is for the Bolivian working class, allied with indigenous communities, to take power, place the economy and land under workers’ control, genuinely nationalize production, and break dependence on both imperialist powers and their interests in the country. That is why, today more than ever, internationalist solidarity with the struggle of the Bolivian people is essential.

The 2026 mobilizations have once again brought to the forefront a key issue in Bolivia’s contemporary history. The roadblocks, the COB, the FEJUVE, and the peasant organizations demonstrate that social forces can challenge the state. In this context, the slogan “All power to the COB” sums up the need for the working class and popular sectors to act on their own program. The main task of the new rebellion remains to transform this demonstrated strength into an alternative to power that challenges the government and paves the way toward a socialist Bolivia, integrated into a socialist

federation of Latin America.

NOTES

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BOLIVIA: FROM THE REVOLUTIONARY CYCLE TO THE CONTAINMENT BY THE MAS

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2000 and 2005, Bolivia was a major battleground in the Latin American class struggle. While much of the global left proclaimed capitalism's definitive stability, the Bolivian masses led uprisings that challenged not only a government or an economic policy but the entire set of neoliberal policies that emerged after capitalist restoration. These policies reflected the imperialist offensive led by the United States through the IMF and the World Bank, via privatizations, structural adjustments, and the forced economic opening to Western imperialist capital.

The Cochabamba Water War, the coca growers' and peasant rebellions, the October 2003 insurrection, and the events of May–June 2005 marked one of the most profound upheavals in Latin America in the 21st century. In less than five years, several governments fell. Tens of thousands of peasants blocked roads, miners reentered the political scene, and El Alto emerged as the continent's main center of popular power.

In 2003, Bolivia had approximately 9 million inhabitants. The June 2005 protests, with 400,000 to 500,000 people in the streets of La Paz, involved about 5% of the population. The COB then represented approximately 500,000 unionized workers, about 22% of the economically active population.¹

At the height of this wave of struggles, embryonic elements of an alternative to state power emerged. The neighborhood councils of El Alto, the miners' unions, the COB, and various popular coordinating committees assumed functions beyond state control. In June 2005, when hundreds of thousands filled the streets of La Paz and a People's Assembly was

proposed, the question of power ceased to be a slogan and became a practical problem.²

Therein lay the strategic limit of the uprising: the masses failed to build revolutionary leadership capable of advancing the conquest of power. The Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) filled that void. Its historical role was not to lead the revolution but to channel the process toward an institutional solution within the framework of bourgeois democracy.³

The MAS's subsequent experience confirmed both the strength and the limits of those expectations. For more than a decade, the commodities boom enabled a combination of growth, social spending, and relative political stability. But the contradictions that gave rise to the revolutionary upsurge were never resolved. The 2019 crisis and the current disputes within the MAS itself are the result of a strategy that managed to contain a revolution but failed to resolve the causes that made it possible.

THE WATER WAR: THE BEGINNING OF THE UPRISING

The first major upheaval occurred in Cochabamba in 2000. The government's decision to privatize the drinking water service to Aguas del Tunari—a consortium dominated by the U.S.-based Bechtel—prompted an immediate backlash when it authorized rate hikes ranging from 35% to 400%.⁴ For thousands of working-class and peasant families, these hikes meant they could not access a basic resource.

The response quickly spilled into the streets. The people took to the streets, confronted the army, and established their own coordinating bodies through the Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Water and Life.⁵

Repression did not defeat the movement. It strengthened it. Ultimately, the government of Hugo Banzer was forced to cancel the contract with the multinational corporation.

The historical significance of Cochabamba went beyond the water issue. For the first time since the consolidation of the neoliberal model, a mass mobilization defeated one of the central policies promoted by imperialism and international financial institutions.⁶ The victory demonstrated that privatizations could be reversed through direct action and shifted the balance of power across the country.

The Water War thus ushered in a new era. What began as a struggle against the privatization of a public service became the first major challenge to the neoliberal order established in Bolivia since the mid-1980s.

PEASANT BLOCKADES AND THE REGIME'S CRISIS

In the years that followed, the uprising continued to grow. The Chapare coca growers and the CSUTCB, led by Felipe Quispe, brought major regions to a standstill through road blockades, the primary instrument of struggle for the rural masses.⁷ The crisis ceased to be a localized phenomenon and began to take on a national dimension. Peasants, indigenous people, and coca growers increasingly emerged as actors capable of directly challenging state authority.

Behind these struggles lay a growing rejection of two decades of privatizations, economic austerity, unemployment, and subordination to the United States and international financial institutions.

Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's assumption of the presidency in 2002 did not resolve the accumulated problems. On the contrary, it deepened social and political polarization. The struggles ceased to revolve exclusively around sectoral demands and began to openly question the country's general direction and the legitimacy of those who governed it.

OCTOBER 2003: THE UPRISING

The government's decision to export natural gas to the United States and Mexico through Chilean ports triggered a much deeper crisis. The project, promoted by the Pacific LNG consortium—comprising British Gas, Repsol-YPF, and Pan American Energy—planned to export vast gas reserves under terms highly favorable to the multinationals. For broad sectors of the population, the export of gas symbolized the continued plundering of natural resources by foreign companies.⁸

The Gas War crystallized demands that had been building for years: to regain national control over strategic resources and to end an economic model perceived as responsible for the impoverishment of the majority.

Military repression against the Aymara communities in Warisata ignited the situation. The center of gravity shifted to El Alto as roadblocks multiplied and government authority deteriorated at an accelerated pace. What appeared to be a conflict over gas became an open confrontation with the Sánchez de Lozada government.

October 2003 marked Bolivia's entry into a new phase. The accumulation of struggles that



began in Cochabamba gave way to an insurrectionary situation in which the question of power emerged ever more explicitly.

EL ALTO: THE HEART OF THE REVOLUTION

By the early 2000s, El Alto had become one of the largest concentrations of workers and the working class in Latin America. Emerging from rural migration and mining relocations following the workers' defeats of the 1980s, the city had a population of nearly 800,000 in 2005. There, former miners, informal workers, small merchants, factory and transport workers, unemployed youth, and urbanized indigenous communities were concentrated. The destruction of a significant portion of the mining proletariat had not eliminated the Bolivian working class; it had reconfigured it socially and territorially.⁹

Living conditions were extremely precarious: about 200,000 residents lacked regular access to drinking water; more than half the population lacked adequate basic services; and between 65% and 75% of the economically active population worked in the informal sector.¹⁰ Yet this poverty coexisted with a strong capacity for organization.

The approximately 600 neighborhood councils grouped under FEJUVE formed a powerful territorial network. During the insurrection, they organized blockades, supply chains, neighborhood watches, and mechanisms for collective deliberation that, in certain areas, began to partially replace state functions. Foley observed that these structures functioned as true neighborhood "micro-governments," reflecting a

situation in which state authority was beginning to be challenged by organizations that had emerged from direct mobilization.¹¹

FEJUVE had accumulated decades of struggle for basic services, housing, and urban infrastructure. Its leaders emerged from the neighborhood grassroots and were accountable to neighborhood assemblies, which granted them far greater legitimacy than traditional state institutions.

El Alto thus became the main political center of the national crisis. Its strategic location—controlling access to La Paz and the airport—gave it enormous leverage. Without a mobilized El Alto, supplying the capital became extremely difficult, and the government lost much of its capacity to govern.

During the uprising's climax, the city became the country's main laboratory for popular organization. There, one of the process's central contradictions was clearly expressed: the presence of powerful forms of self-organization capable of challenging the state, yet still unable to articulate themselves at the national level as a conscious alternative to power.

THE MINERS RETURN TO THE HISTORICAL STAGE

One of the most significant developments in October was the political resurgence of the mining proletariat. After the defeats of the 1980s, many analysts had declared the end of the Bolivian working class's political centrality. The 2003 insurrection proved the opposite.¹²

Columns from Huanuni and other mining districts marched toward La Paz, armed with dynamite, and joined the popular

uprising. Their presence carried enormous political and symbolic significance. For broad sectors of the masses, it evoked the revolutionary traditions of 1952, the great mining strikes, and the historical role of the COB as the leadership of the Bolivian labor movement.

The COB called for an indefinite general strike and coordinated actions with peasant, neighborhood, and student organizations.¹³ Teachers, state workers, and urban working-class sectors joined the mobilization *en masse*.

The convergence of the El Alto uprising, the peasant blockades, and the miners' return recreated, under new historical conditions, the prospect of a worker-peasant alliance capable of challenging the state.

However, this potential clashed with a problem that ran through the entire revolutionary cycle: the masses demonstrated an enormous capacity for struggle and organization, yet they continued to lack revolutionary leadership capable of centralizing mobilization on a national scale and transforming it into a conscious struggle for power.

THE FALL OF SÁNCHEZ DE LOZADA

The government's response amounted to state terrorism. After enacting Supreme Decree 27209, the army occupied El Alto and deployed tanks, armored vehicles, helicopters, and troops armed with assault rifles to ensure fuel was transported to La Paz. Between September and October 2003, the repression left at least 67 people dead and more than 400 wounded, the vast majority of whom were civilians. Soldiers fired on

roadblocks, marches, and working-class neighborhoods, while human rights organizations documented extrajudicial executions, indiscriminate use of force, and serious human rights violations.¹⁴

The massacre did not defeat the uprising. It radicalized it. Slogans quickly shifted from opposing gas exports to demanding the immediate ouster of Sánchez de Lozada. Between October 11 and 17, Bolivia experienced a pre-revolutionary situation.¹⁵ The government was rapidly losing authority and territorial control. El Alto remained mobilized, peasant blockades spread, the COB pushed for a general strike, and miners converged on La Paz. Even sectors of the ruling classes began to fear the regime's complete collapse.¹⁶

Finally, on October 17, 2003, Sánchez de Lozada fled to the United States. For the first time since the defeat of the labor movement in the 1980s, a mass mobilization had toppled the main representative of neoliberalism through direct action. But the victory left the decisive question open: who would fill the political vacuum created by the insurrection?

THE QUESTION OF POWER

The fall of Sánchez de Lozada triggered a genuine crisis of power. Traditional institutions had been discredited, and broad sectors of the population placed greater trust in their own organizations—. In El Alto, neighborhood councils had acquired political authority that surpassed that of many official institutions. The miners' unions regained national prominence, and the COB reemerged as a point of reference for broad sectors of

workers and peasants.¹⁷

The problem was no longer merely to overthrow a government. It was to decide who should govern Bolivia. In certain parts of the country, effective authority rested more with the organizations that had emerged from the mobilization than with the institutions inherited from the neoliberal regime. Neighborhood councils organized supply chains and blockades, unions led national strikes, and peasant organizations brought entire regions to a standstill.¹⁸

However, none of the leaders with mass influence promoted a strategy to transform that situation into a conscious struggle for power. The COB oscillated between radical rhetoric and negotiation. Felipe Quispe maintained a perspective centered on the Aymara movement. The MAS systematically bet on an electoral solution, renewing the illusion that the system could be reformed from within.¹⁹

The crisis was not defeated militarily. It was deflected politically. Carlos Mesa's inauguration enabled a partial restoration of state authority and served as a dam to contain the revolutionary process. The fall of Sánchez de Lozada allowed the bourgeoisie to sacrifice the figure most closely associated with repression without altering the regime's fundamental structures. Mesa adopted a conciliatory tone, promising dialogue, referenda, and institutional reforms, and managed to temporarily shift the crisis from the streets to the political-parliamentary arena. None of the central demands of October were resolved, but the new government managed to buy time and prevent Goni's fall from

immediately triggering an open power struggle.

JUNE 2005: THE DRESS REHEARSAL FOR REVOLUTION

Mesa tried to buy time, but the demands of October remained unchanged: nationalization of hydrocarbons, punishment for those responsible for the massacre, and transformation of the regime. In 2005, the mobilization intensified. El Alto returned to center stage, and more than 60% of the national highways were blocked. Congress could not function normally, and La Paz was partially besieged.²⁰

Mesa realized he could not rely on the widespread repression of 2003. The October massacre had deeply discredited the Armed Forces, and a new military intervention could trigger an even deeper crisis. The government's response was state terrorism. After enacting Supreme Decree 27209, the army occupied El Alto and deployed tanks, armored vehicles, helicopters, and troops armed with assault rifles to ensure the transport of fuel to La Paz. Between September and October 2003, the repression left at least 67 people dead and more than 400 wounded, the vast majority of whom were civilians. Soldiers fired on roadblocks, marches, and working-class neighborhoods.²¹ This time, far from intimidating the protests, the repression multiplied them and gave them greater strength, drawing in new sectors radicalized by state violence. On June 6, between 400,000 and 500,000 people filled the streets of La Paz in one of the largest mobilizations in Bolivian history.²² In this context, the COB, FEJUVE, and mining

organizations began calling for a Popular Assembly and a government based on mass organizations. For the first time, mass organizations explicitly raised the question of who should govern the country.²³

Meanwhile, Congress was forced to leave La Paz and hold sessions in Sucre. The bourgeoisie was divided between those pushing for a repressive solution and those seeking a compromise to avoid direct confrontation with the masses. Bolivia was approaching an open revolutionary situation.²⁴

However, the popular organizations continued to lack revolutionary leadership. As the mobilization peaked, Morales insisted on an electoral solution. The crisis was ultimately resolved by calling new elections and by Eduardo Rodríguez's temporary assumption of office.²⁵

The election of Evo Morales in December 2005, with 1.54 million votes and 53.7% of the vote, was the political expression of this new balance of power. For the first time since the return to democracy, a candidate won an absolute majority, supported by broad sectors of workers, peasants, and indigenous people who identified the MAS with the aspirations that had emerged in October 2003 and June 2005.²⁶

THE MAS ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The MAS campaign captured much of the aspirations that had emerged during the cycle of mobilizations. Morales promised to nationalize hydrocarbons, convene a Constituent Assembly, reclaim national sovereignty in the face of neoliberalism, and fully incorporate indigenous peoples into the country's political life. For

millions of workers, peasants, and indigenous people, the MAS appeared to be the electoral expression of the demands that emerged in October 2003 and June 2005.

However, its project did not seek to replace bourgeois democracy with organs of power for workers and peasants. The central proposal was the refoundation of Bolivia through a Constituent Assembly capable of rebuilding the legitimacy of a deeply discredited state and reorganizing the political regime on new social foundations. Expanding democratic rights and including indigenous peoples were part of a new national pact aimed at stabilizing the country after the days of insurrection, not a break with Bolivian capitalism.

In this sense, the MAS sought to partially displace the traditional oligarchy and expand participation by new business sectors, the urban middle classes, state bureaucracies, and peasant and indigenous leaderships integrated into the state apparatus. While the most radicalized sectors of the popular movement began to discuss their own forms of power, the MAS proposed resolving the crisis by building a new governance bloc within the limits of the existing state.

The acronym Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) did not originally express a socialist programmatic definition. It was adopted when the coca growers' movement needed a legally registered electoral vehicle and used the legal status of an existing organization.²⁷ More important than the name was the political content Morales and his top leaders attributed to the term "socialism," which differed from

classical Marxist socialism. Morales used the term broadly to refer to "community socialism," inspired by Andean indigenous traditions of reciprocity, solidarity, and communal life. In a 2003 interview, he stated: "Fundamentally, there is socialism in peasant communities (...) an economic model based on solidarity, reciprocity, community, and consensus."²⁸ This definition was not centered on the abolition of private property or the construction of a workers' state, but rather on the recovery of communal values considered characteristic of Andean indigenous traditions.

Álvaro García Linera articulated this perspective more clearly. Before taking office, he argued that Bolivia must pass through a stage of "Andean-Amazonian capitalism," marked by the expansion of the domestic market, a greater role for the state, and the strengthening of a national bourgeoisie, before any eventual transition to socialism, adopting the typical stage-by-stage conception of Stalinism and popular frontism in semi-colonial countries.²⁹ From this perspective, the immediate goal was not to overcome Bolivian capitalism but to reorganize it on new social and political foundations.

For this reason, although it used socialist and anti-imperialist language, the MAS differed profoundly from the tradition represented by the *Pulacayo Thesis* and revolutionary mining unionism, which did indeed propose a break with capitalism and the construction of a government of workers and peasants.

A PARTY BORN OF THE

UPRISING, BUT NOT TO SEE IT THROUGH TO THE END

The MAS was neither a traditional bourgeois party nor a revolutionary workers' party. Its leadership core came from the coca growers' federations of the Chapare and from peasant and indigenous sectors radicalized by struggles against neoliberalism.³⁰

Unlike traditional parties, it did not appear as an organization alien to the popular movement. It had emerged from struggles against coca eradication, privatizations, and neoliberal policies. But precisely because it aspired to govern all of society, it built a broad alliance that brought together poor peasants, indigenous organizations, small producers, the urban middle class, nationalist intellectuals, state officials, and even business sectors interested in renegotiating Bolivia's place in the global market.³¹

This breadth was a source of political strength, but it also set clear limits on its historical project. The MAS did not propose to expropriate the bourgeoisie or destroy the state apparatus, but rather to build a national capitalism with greater state intervention, partial redistribution of extractive income, and expanded political participation for historically excluded sectors.³²

Its social base included poor peasants, indigenous people, coca growers, small producers, informal workers, and a segment of the working class. However, its leadership served as a moderating force, disciplining the rank and file, channeling demands to the state, and preventing the mobilization from challenging private property or the bourgeoisie's real power. While sectors of the COB, FEJUVE, and

the miners debated creating their own organs of power, the MAS worked to redirect the process toward the electoral arena.

NATIONALIZATION AND ITS LIMITS

The most emblematic measure was the nationalization of hydrocarbons (May 1, 2006). For millions, it seemed to be the fulfillment of one of the main demands of the Gas War.³³ Yet its substance was far more limited than its public presentation. The major foreign companies—Petrobras, Repsol, Total, and British Gas—continued to operate. There was no general expropriation, no workers' control, and no effective state monopoly. What fundamentally changed was the state's share of the revenue.³⁴

Far from the image of revolutionary expropriation, the government of Evo Morales negotiated and paid generous compensation. In the hydrocarbons sector alone, the Bolivian state committed to paying at least \$383 million to the affected companies. This included \$112 million for Petrobras, \$240 million for Transredes, and about \$30 million for Repsol, British Gas, and other companies.³⁵ In addition, compensation was paid in the telecommunications and electricity sectors to avoid international litigation.³⁶

A truly socialist government would not have limited nationalizations to increased state participation in revenue, nor would it have paid millions in compensation to transnational corporations. It would have expropriated strategic sectors of the economy under the democratic control of workers' and community organizations and

used those resources to drive the country's industrialization.

FOREIGN DEBT: WHO SHOULD PAY IT?

Bolivia's foreign debt did not begin with the MAS. It dates back to the 1970s, when military dictatorships borrowed from the IMF and the World Bank to finance projects that primarily benefited construction companies and privileged sectors.³⁷

The MAS government did not repudiate that debt. It renegotiated it and continued to pay. In 2007, Bolivia paid \$328 million in foreign debt service alone.³⁸ Taking advantage of the favorable international price cycle, it qualified for debt relief programs. However, the foreign debt did not disappear. After the debt forgiveness granted in the early years of the MAS government, it began to grow steadily again. Various statistical series place Bolivia's external debt at around \$7 billion in the mid-2000s and above \$16 billion in 2023, with a shift in the composition of creditors and an increased share held by China, multilateral organizations, and private banks.³⁹

If the MAS had truly wanted to lay the foundations for genuine national sovereignty, it would have launched a continental campaign to oppose the repayment of foreign debt incurred by dictatorships and governments serving international finance capital, on the grounds that it is illegitimate and exploitative. National self-determination cannot be achieved by renegotiating the relationship with imperialism or by replacing some trading partners with others, but rather by moving toward an effective break with the mechanisms of economic

dependence that subordinate the country's development to the needs of foreign capital.

THE ECONOMIC BOOM AND NEW LEGITIMACY

The consolidation of the MAS cannot be understood without the international context. Between 2004 and 2014, Latin America experienced an exceptional growth cycle driven by high commodity prices and the expansion of China's economy.⁴⁰ Bolivia was among the countries that benefited the most.

Exports of natural gas, minerals, and soybeans accounted for more than 80% of the country's foreign sales. Revenues from hydrocarbons increased dramatically; international reserves reached historic levels, and the state significantly expanded its capacity for economic intervention.⁴¹

This expansion enabled funding for redistributive policies such as the Juancito Pinto Bonus, the Renta Dignidad, and the Juana Azurduy Bonus.⁴² Between 2005 and 2014, poverty and extreme poverty declined significantly, and millions of people gained access for the first time to goods and services previously out of reach. Large segments of the indigenous and working-class populations recognized themselves for the first time as integral to the Bolivian state.⁴³

The MAS thus emerged as the force that had defeated neoliberalism, reclaimed a portion of national sovereignty, and expanded the rights of historically excluded sectors. That legitimacy was real. However, it rested on structurally fragile foundations: the economy continued to depend on the export of raw materials,

informal employment remained dominant, and the country's integration into the global economy was subject to fluctuations in world markets.⁴⁴

The MAS did not eliminate this dependence; it managed it under favorable conditions. As the cycle of high prices began to run out, the structural contradictions reemerged with greater intensity.

THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY, THE PACT WITH THE EASTERN BOURGEOISIE, AND U.S. INTERVENTION

The Constituent Assembly revealed the strategic limits of the process. For millions of workers, peasants, and indigenous people, it seemed to offer the possibility of long-awaited transformations: agrarian reform, the recovery of natural resources, the expansion of collective rights, and the democratization of the state.

In Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni, and Pando, the agrarian oligarchy launched a powerful autonomist offensive to preserve its economic and political privileges. Opposition prefects pushed for autonomy referenda, occupied public buildings, and built their own power structures.⁴⁵

Various studies identify the Unión Juvenil Cruceñista (UJC) as the main shock group of the Santa Cruz oligarchy and the operational arm of the Comité Pro Santa Cruz, and it played a central role in the escalation of violence. Its close ties to business leaders, including Branko Marinkovic, were widely documented, as were its attacks on peasants and indigenous people aligned with the MAS.⁴⁶ Its most brutal manifestation was the Porvenir (Pando) massacre, in which at least 15 peasants were killed by armed groups linked to

the political network of Prefect Leopoldo Fernández.⁴⁷

Various studies, official documents, and diplomatic cables indicate that these sectors also received political and institutional backing from the United States. Through USAID and the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), Washington funded decentralization and institutional strengthening programs for years that benefited prefectures and departmental governments linked to the autonomy movement. Likewise, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) funded civil society organizations, foundations, and business entities opposed to the Movement for Socialism (MAS). Between 2016 and 2019, the NED allocated more than \$1.3 million to projects in Bolivia, including \$118,000 for initiatives related to so-called "electoral integrity."⁴⁸

When polarization peaked, the government opted for negotiation. The October 2008 agreement between the MAS and opposition sectors modified more than a hundred articles of the originally approved constitutional text. Limits on large rural landholdings were not applied retroactively, and transnational corporations continued to operate while the banking sector remained in private hands.⁴⁹

The promised refoundation



ultimately became a profound reform of the regime rather than a social revolution. From a Marxist perspective, the Constituent Assembly definitively closed the possibility that the upsurge between 2000 and 2005 would lead to an anti-capitalist rupture.⁵⁰

THE INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS INTO THE STATE

The MAS's main political operation was not economic but state-centered. During the revolutionary cycle, much of the popular movement's strength lay in the autonomy of its organizations: the COB, the FEJUVE, the miners' unions, the peasant organizations, and various territorial coordinating bodies acted as independent of the state and, at certain moments, as embryos of alternative power.⁵¹

Unlike neoliberal governments, the MAS did not attempt to defeat these organizations head-on but instead integrated them into the state apparatus. Numerous peasant, union, indigenous, and neighborhood leaders were incorporated into Parliament, ministries, and public agencies. The most emblematic case was Abel Mamani, leader of the FEJUVE in El Alto and a figure in the struggle against water privatization, who later headed the Ministry of Water.⁵²

The major peasant organizations—CSUTCB, Bartolinas, and coca growers' federations—played a central role in the new ruling bloc. The COB became a battleground where the MAS promoted like-minded leaders to expand its influence.⁵³

The result was a growing subordination of social leaderships to state mechanisms for mediation,

negotiation, and management, which partially reduced the autonomy that had characterized the revolutionary rise.⁵⁴

THE DISCIPLINING OF THE COB AND THE FRACTURE OF THE INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT

Integration into the state was neither peaceful nor voluntary for everyone. The COB, which between 2003 and 2005 had been one of the pillars of the insurrection, maintained a fluctuating relationship with the government. In May 2013, a six-day general strike demanding that pensions be increased to 100% of the salary was met by Morales with an ultimatum. The president labeled the protest a "right-wing conspiracy" and a "coup attempt," and accused COB leaders of being "tools of the empire."⁵⁵

The most significant conflict occurred in June 2016. The COB called a general strike against the closure of the state-owned textile company Enatex, which left more than 800 workers unemployed. The government declared the strike illegal, threatened sanctions, and refused to reinstate the laid-off workers.⁵⁶ The crackdown left at least nine people injured and 29 detained, and the COB denounced police brutality.⁵⁷

The COB was not defeated militarily, as it had been in the 1980s. First, the MAS government attempted to co-opt it, divide it, and, when it rebelled, to criminalize it. A government guided by workers' interests would have responded to the closure of Enatex through worker-control and management mechanisms. By contrast, the MAS acted within the confines of the capitalist logic it claimed to challenge.

The indigenous movement also fractured. While the coca growers' federations and the CSUTCB joined the ruling bloc, organizations such as CONAMAQ maintained their independence and denounced the government's extractivist project.

The 2009 Constitution was a historic achievement, recognizing the Bolivian state's plurinational character. Yet this recognition coexisted with the expansion of extractive projects, territorial conflicts, and concessions to mining and energy companies. The Tipnis conflict (2011–2012), in which the government pushed for a highway through an indigenous reserve without prior consultation, clearly exposed these contradictions. Indigenous protests were suppressed, and their leaders were accused of acting on behalf of the right wing.⁵⁸

THE 2019 COUP

The 2008 autonomy crisis foreshadowed many of the elements that would resurface during the 2019 coup d'état. The opposition in the Media Luna region served the interests of the agrarian and business oligarchies of eastern Bolivia, but it also received political and institutional backing from the United States. According to research by Jeremy Bigwood, Eva Golinger, and various subsequent studies, USAID invested more than \$97 million in decentralization and regional autonomy programs since 2002, in addition to another \$13.3 million administered by the OTI. These resource institutions strengthened the departmental governments that led the autonomy offensive against the central government.⁴⁸

U.S. intervention did not take

the form of direct leadership of the opposition, but it did strengthen, in the political and institutional spheres, sectors seeking to limit the government's reforms. Tensions reached their peak with the expulsion of U.S. Ambassador Philip Goldberg in September 2008. Official documents published by the Bolivian government also denounced the existence of U.S.-funded intelligence networks within the police and espionage activities carried out by the DEA.⁵⁹

However, the government's main weakness lay not solely in the pressure from the right or from imperialism, but in how it chose to confront them. Although it managed to defeat the most aggressive sectors of the Media Luna politically, the MAS refrained from promoting permanent organizations of self-defense and popular power. Workers', peasant, and indigenous organizations were mobilized to support the government, but not to build an independent force capable of confronting the reaction.

This orientation resurfaced during the 2019 coup, which initially succeeded but failed to stabilize the regime and was ultimately defeated. Faced with police riots, pressure from the Armed Forces, and Camacho's offensive, Morales once again placed his trust in state institutions and political negotiation. As the IWL-FI noted, there was a broad social base for resistance, but mobilizing and arming workers and peasants would have been required, which was incompatible with the MAS's entire strategy. The government leadership chose to avoid an open confrontation with the state apparatus and ultimately accepted a solution that facilitated

the coup's immediate triumph.⁶⁰

The 2019 crisis thus revealed the limits of a strategy that sought to contain the reaction without breaking with the fundamental institutions of the bourgeois state. The coup succeeded in overthrowing the Morales government and imposing a reactionary regime, supported by the Armed Forces and the police. However, that victory was partial and temporary. Popular resistance, the blockades, and the right's electoral defeat in 2020 prevented the new regime from strategically consolidating itself.⁶¹

LITHIUM: BETWEEN INDUSTRIAL PROMISE AND NEW DEPENDENCY

The starkest contradiction was revealed in the lithium policy. Bolivia possesses around 21 million tons of lithium resources, according to USGS estimates, but the MAS failed to industrialize them in a sovereign manner.⁶²

The first major agreement came in February 2019, when Evo Morales signed a deal with the Chinese consortium Xinjiang TBEA Group-Baocheng to develop the Coipasa and Pastos Grandes salt flats, with a projected

investment of \$2.39 billion. Russian, Chinese, and European companies responded to the call for bids, and the Chinese firms were selected.⁶³

The government of Luis Arce deepened this approach. In January 2023, YLB signed an agreement with the Chinese consortium CBC, led by CATL, the world's largest lithium manufacturer, to invest more than \$1 billion in the Uyuni and Coipasa salt flats.⁶⁴

The backdrop is the growing rivalry between China and the United States. The so-called lithium triangle—Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile—holds more than half of the world's reserves. As China aggressively expanded its presence in the region, strategic sectors in the United States began to express concern about losing influence over a resource considered essential to the energy transition.⁶⁵

The result has not been sovereign industrialization but a new form of dependency. The Bolivian state provides the natural resources, while foreign companies control the technology, financing, and a significant share of the value



chains. Lithium encapsulates one of the central contradictions of the process: the MAS did not break with dependency but renegotiated it on new terms.

CONCLUSION: THE STRATEGIC LESSONS OF THE BOLIVIAN EXPERIENCE

Between 2000 and 2005, workers, peasants, and indigenous people led a revolutionary upsurge that called into question the continuity of the neoliberal regime and triggered a genuine crisis of power. The process ran up against a decisive limit: the lack of revolutionary leadership capable of centralizing the mobilization and transforming it into a conscious struggle for power.

The MAS filled that void. The main political force to emerge from the popular uprising became the primary mechanism for adapting that uprising to the bourgeois state. Born of popular struggles, it expressed the legitimate aspirations of millions of workers, peasants, and indigenous people. But its project did not consist of developing the revolution but rather of channeling it into bourgeois institutions and restoring the regime's stability.

Morales's arrival made it possible to stabilize a situation the bourgeoisie could no longer control on its own. The new regime incorporated historically neglected democratic demands, expanded rights, and improved the living conditions of broad sectors of the populace, thereby earning it genuine legitimacy. Precisely for this reason, it was able to perform a function the old neoliberal parties were no longer in a position to fulfill: restoring state authority and reorganizing the ruling classes' domination on new social

foundations.

The Bolivian bourgeoisie failed to defeat the insurrection through a classic counterrevolution. It resorted to a political solution and found in the MAS an effective instrument for diverting and containing the popular uprising. As would become evident again in 2019, the MAS's strategy relied on the masses without developing independent organs of power and self-defense capable of confronting the state when it turned against the government itself.

The Bolivian revolution was not defeated solely by the strength of its adversaries. It also reached its limits due to a reformist leadership that systematically rejected a revolutionary break with capitalism. This is the main strategic lesson of that period.

Recognizing the limits of reformism does not mean denying the partial gains achieved during the years of the MAS. It means understanding that, without independent leadership by the working class, those gains remain subordinate to the system's needs for reproduction and can be reversed. The Bolivian experience thus demonstrates not the limits of the revolution, but the historical limits of adapting to the bourgeois state.

The pending question is not to explain why the Bolivian revolution failed, but how to build the political leadership capable of carrying through to the end the processes that may reopen in the future. The objective conditions for revolutionary transformation emerged strongly between 2000 and 2005. What was missing was a strategy and leadership capable of turning those conditions into a conscious alternative for power. ■

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BOLIVIA, AN ONGOING WORKERS' AND SOCIALIST REVOLUTION (2003)

**CORREO INTERNACIONAL,
102, OCTOBER 2003**

On Friday, October 17, after nearly three weeks of the indefinite general strike called by the Bolivian Workers' Union (COB) and with more than 80 dead and 400 wounded due to military repression, finally, around 4:00 p.m., Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (Goni) officially announced his resignation as president of Bolivia, and then fled the country for Miami. In this way, Bolivian workers unleashed a triumphant insurrection, dealing a new and resounding defeat to imperialism by overthrowing a government that implemented its policies.

The Bolivian working masses defeated imperialism's plans to plunder the continent's largest natural gas reserves. Sánchez de Lozada had agreed to sell the gas to U.S. transnational corporations for export through Chilean ports to the U.S. The working people's initial demand to nationalize the gas from the transnationals eventually turned into a call for Goni's head, as they realized within days that the gas could not be recovered under a government subservient to the transnationals. What happened in Bolivia shows that imperialism's plundering plans, such as the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas), can be defeated and that this struggle is inextricably linked to the struggle to overthrow the governments implementing the IMF's policy of recolonization. The triumphant Bolivian insurrection shares the same cause and substance as the revolutions unleashed in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Argentina: the struggle to defeat the plunder and looting of imperialist recolonization on our continent.

The Bolivian revolution responded with concrete actions to a series of debates within the Latin American and global vanguard: the role of the working class as the social subject of the struggle

against capitalist barbarism; the need to fight for power and to build revolutionary leadership; and the real possibility of defeating imperialism through mass mobilization.

However, since the start of the general strike and following Goni's fall, the international press and the conciliatory leaderships have sought to obscure the reality behind a veil of confusion, arguing that this insurrection had an indigenous, peasant, and popular character, in which the working class played a secondary role; that no organs of workers' power emerged; and even going so far as to claim that, in reality, there is not and has not been a revolution underway in Bolivia, and that it was merely a national mobilization against the sale of gas to Chile. All these arguments seek to deny that the conditions in Bolivia to challenge the bourgeoisie for power were not and are not present.

That is why it is essential to thoroughly examine the facts revealed by the Bolivian revolution and, based on them, draw conclusions about the urgent tasks that will enable the masses to advance toward a definitive victory—one capable of radically changing their current state of misery and altering the history of the entire Latin American continent.

THE WORKERS' CHARACTER OF THE BOLIVIAN REVOLUTION

It is true that Bolivia is a predominantly peasant country, with nearly 50% of the population living in rural areas; that there are more than 30 indigenous peoples, of whom the Quechua and Aymara constitute the national majority; and that their demands and struggles are a fundamental component of the revolution. But what actually happened in September–October was not an indigenous and



peasant uprising, but above all a workers', peasant, and popular revolution, in which all impoverished sectors (peasants, students, the unemployed, the middle classes) actively participated. The vanguard and leadership of this process were the working class, which participated under the leadership of its historic Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB), around which the most militant sectors—such as the neighborhood committees of the city of El Alto—gathered. But in addition to El Alto, the working class led the process with its detachments of miners, who arrived in La Paz armed with dynamite. In La Paz and throughout the rest of the country (especially Oruro, Potosí, and Cochabamba), wage-earning workers, through their Departmental Workers' Unions (COD), intensified the General Strike during the final week.

The leading role of workers in the Bolivian process did not fall

from the sky; it is the continuation of a formidable revolutionary upsurge that began in Bolivia in April 2000. Although after the miners' defeat in 1985 the peasant movement—and particularly the coca growers of the Chapare—led the struggles, the working class signaled its entry into the fray during the Cochabamba uprising that ousted a transnational water company in April 2000. In Cochabamba, urban and rural mobilizations were unified under the leadership of “the water coordinating committee,” composed of the Departmental Workers' Union, factory unions, and agricultural unions.

From that point on, the situation in Bolivia was never the same; the masses had ushered in a revolutionary phase through the convergence of workers' and peasants' struggles. The labor movement, despite its leadership, took an increasingly active role and linked its struggles with those of the peasants. First came the

retirees, who wrested a 100% increase in their pensions from Banzer; then the teachers and healthcare workers, who halted attempts to privatize these services and secured wage increases; and the most decisive victory was that of the Huanuni miners, who, in the midst of the 2002 election campaign, achieved the renationalization of their company—which had been privatized by Banzer—through a forceful mobilization.

This dynamic did not stop; rather, it found electoral expression on June 30, 2002, in the vote for Evo Morales' Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) and Felipe Quispe's Pachakutec Indigenous Movement (MIP), which was not only a peasant movement but also had a significant urban component. Later, despite the truce granted to the Goni government by the leadership in the first months of his administration, the situation led to a first triumphant urban insurrection on February 12 and 13, which dealt a fatal blow to the government.

By February, the conditions for bringing down the government had intensified, and in the process, the working class had undertaken the task of reclaiming the COB from the pro-government leadership—a task crystallized at the COB's 13th Congress in August of this year, a decisive step that ensured the union would fulfill the centralizing and unifying leadership role in the insurrectionary struggles of October.

And it was this body, meeting at a national plenary session, that

called for the Indefinite General Strike, with the central demand of Sánchez de Lozada's resignation from the government.

WHY DIDN'T WORKERS TAKE POWER?

On the evening of October 17, as the COB's national executive committee debated its position in response to Sánchez de Lozada's official resignation, the COB's chief executive, Jaime Solares, announced to the plenary that he had received a call from then-Vice President Carlos Mesa, asking him to instruct his supporters around Plaza Murillo and the government palace to withdraw so Mesa could enter Congress to be sworn in as president. This event illustrates the power concentrated among the struggling masses led by the COB. The question that arises is: why, with such strength, did the workers not end up in power?

At that expanded meeting and again when the General Strike was called off, the leaders primarily claimed they lacked weapons. But they did not mention the fundamental flaw—namely, that at the start of the strike and throughout its duration, not a single leader proposed that the objective was the seizure of power. Right from the start of the mobilization, when the COB leadership correctly raised the slogan demanding Goni's resignation, the strike was directed against the alternative of a workers' and peasants' government, arguing that after Goni the new government must emerge within the framework of the bourgeois constitution. Even more regrettable was the role of the MAS leadership and Evo, who at first did not decisively join the conflict,



believing that the political demand put democracy at risk, and then, when he yielded to the pressure of the mobilization, was the first to propose constitutional continuity with Carlos Mesa as president. Equally disastrous was the role of the POR (Guillermo Lora's Revolutionary Workers' Party), which—through the La Paz teachers' federation, where it holds leadership positions—did not even consider the question of power, but instead suspended the teachers' strike just two days after it began.

So, if the workers did not seize power, it was not due to a lack of militancy or organization—which they demonstrated in abundance—but rather to the political orientation of the main

leaders who handed power over to the bourgeoisie and imperialism.

THE COB: AN ORGAN OF POWER

The Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB), which emerged with the 1952 revolution, brings together not only wage-earning workers but also peasants, students, small merchants, artisans, artists, and many other popular sectors. It is often described as a "people's confederation." Since 1952, the COB has played a dual-power role in various periods of struggle, including 1971 under the Torres government; it was a central actor in the overthrow of the dictatorships, and between 1982 and 1985, it served as the dual

power opposing the Popular Front government of Hernán Siles Zuazo.

The character of the COB as an organ of workers' power was continuously denied and concealed for decades by the leadership of Lechín, the Communist Party, and Lora's Revolutionary Workers' Party (POR), who argued that a union cannot take power without recognizing that the COB is more than a union. With that orientation, they paved the way for the defeat of the miners and the Bolivian revolution in 1985, and for the bourgeoisie and imperialism to launch a recolonization offensive against the masses, implemented through neoliberal policies throughout the 1990s, which led to the dismissal of more than 30,000 miners and widespread privatizations.

During the years of the neoliberal offensive, the COB was taken over by pro-bourgeois leaderships, which set about destroying it to the point of nearly making it disappear from the scene. But the entry of the urban working class, amid the rise of the struggles, objectively paved the way for its recovery. After February 12 and 13, a process of leadership renewal began within the trade union organizations, initiated in March by the miners, who removed their pro-government leaders; a similar approach was followed by the industrial workers in their national confederation, a process that culminated in the COB Congress in Oruro in July–August of this year, when the leaders linked to the government were defeated, marking the beginning of the COB's recovery of

its historic role.

And just as workers, through great effort, have made progress in reclaiming their COB, the Lechines of the past are reemerging, using one argument after another to deny that the COB can be an instrument for seizing power. It was the COB that called the General Strike for the fall of Goni, and in response to that call, even sectors not affiliated with the COB mobilized, such as neighborhood councils, which, at the last national plenary meeting, requested to jo.

Various organizations insist on claiming that the Bolivian October Revolution did not produce organs of power because Soviets did not emerge. We believe this is a serious mistake, as they fail to understand that in Bolivia—unlike in other revolutions—the organ of power is a Workers' Central that unifies all sectors in struggle.

It is true that the COB needs to continue strengthening itself, but that does not negate the fact that it is today the organ of dual power established by the Bolivian revolution.

CARLOS MESA: A WEAK GOVERNMENT PROPPED BY MOVEMENT LEADERSHIPS

The government of Carlos Mesa is the product of a victorious insurrection and is therefore weaker than the previous one. It is a Kerenksist government. It is also a consequence of the policy of constitutional succession put forward by the main movement leaderships. In this vein, it is understandable that their initial attitude was to grant him a respite and support, as expressed in

statements such as those by Evo Morales, who “trusted that the new president would break with neoliberalism and amend several laws that underpin the model,” or those by MIP deputy Juan Gabriel Bautista, who declared, “This is not the time for threats or for setting deadlines for President Carlos Mesa, because the country needs a breather, it needs time (...) Let's let him work; I would say that all parliamentarians, all leaders, have an obligation to lend a hand, to give a helping hand” (*Econoticias*, 10/24/03). Meanwhile, the COB leadership decided to retreat strategically to begin negotiating the workers' list of demands.

These attitudes do nothing but throw a lifeline to a government that, despite its weakness, remains faithful to the designs of imperialism. It has already declared that “it will not deviate even a millimeter from the line of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and will continue the economic and fiscal policies undertaken by its predecessor” (*Econoticias*, 10/21/03). That is why it is wrong for the union and social movement leaders to grant it a truce, much less pin hopes on a pro-imperialist bourgeois government. On the contrary, this government must be given no trust or support!

THE TRAP OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

The central concern of the bourgeoisie and imperialism is how to dismantle the revolutionary process and rebuild bourgeois power and the regime, which today lies in ruins. To this end, the Mesa government is attempting to appeal to what we call “democratic reaction” by convening a

Constituent Assembly. That is, to pull Bolivian workers away from their struggle and mobilization for fundamental change and lure them into the trap of bourgeois electoral mechanisms and institutions, under the pretense that everything will be discussed there. Already at the so-called Alternative Social Summit held recently in Santa Cruz, in response to the demand from broad sectors of the people gathered there that the government repeal sellout laws such as the hydrocarbons law and the privatization laws, the government categorically replied that this would be discussed in that bourgeois democratic forum.

The serious problem is that this approach is strongly supported by Evo Morales, a leading political figure among the Bolivian people. Unfortunately, this same policy is defended by almost all Latin American currents that claim to be Trotskyist and revolutionary. All of them argue that, in the face of the crisis of bourgeois institutions, the main task is to call for a vote on a Constituent Assembly, which some dress up with labels like "revolutionary" or "popular."

All of them argue that, in the face of the crisis of bourgeois institutions, the main task is to call for a vote on a Constituent Assembly. The Bolivian revolution, like the Argentine one before it, again reveals the programmatic decline into which many organizations claiming to be Trotskyist have fallen. Amid profound revolutionary processes, they see solutions only within the framework of the bourgeois democratic regime.

We, on the contrary, believe

that the opposite must be done. The solution to the country's crisis does not lie within the framework of bourgeois democracy but in the consistent struggle for a workers', peasants', and people's alternative. The revolution has demonstrated this by creating a situation of dual power with the COB at the forefront. For this reason, the central task is to strengthen this organization so that it can truly oppose the bourgeois Constituent Assembly and make the triumph of workers' power possible.

FOR GAS, JOBS AND LAND! COB MUST PREPARE TO TAKE POWER!

With the fall of Goni, a new phase of the Bolivian revolution has begun: the struggle for workers', peasants', and people's power and for socialism. Despite the leaders' conciliatory policy and the 90-day truce they granted to Mesa, the new government cannot, and will not be able to, resolve any of the workers' demands. Neither the Tax Code law nor the public safety law—which undermines the struggles—has been repealed. Not even the families of the dead and wounded are being compensated. In contrast, the masses feel victorious. In the countryside, even against their leaderships, they have begun to seize land from the estates; in the cities and mines, people are beginning to discuss taking over Goni's mines and intervening in the electricity and water utilities to finally resolve their problems. And it is highly likely that, in the short term, there will be renewed violent clashes. ■

BOLIVIA, APRIL 1952: THE WORKERS' REVOLUTION THAT COULD HAVE CHANGED LATIN AMERICA

(AND THE POLITICAL LESSONS OF A MISSED HISTORICAL OPPORTUNITY)

FLORENCE OPPEN

WHY DID THE REVOLUTION BREAK OUT IN BOLIVIA?

THE COMBINATION OF FACTORS THAT MADE THE UPRISING POSSIBLE

The April 9, 1952 uprising was a mass revolution led by miners, factory workers, and impoverished urban sectors. The movement dismantled the army, organized its own militias, and established de facto workers' power. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, it is the closest example of a classic proletarian uprising in the hemisphere. The comparison with Russia rests on similar class dynamics, unequal and combined development, and the presence of a revolutionary party—the Revolutionary Workers' Party (POR)—with influence among the industrial proletariat. Bolivia was no exception in Latin America; Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution held that the conditions for a proletarian revolution could arise in various "backward" countries on the continent. However, in Bolivia—before anywhere else—specific factors aligned to make it possible. What were they?

A CONCENTRATED MINING PROLETARIAT

The historical importance of the mining proletariat lay not in its numerical size but in its strategic position. As historian Sándor John emphasizes, tin mining occupied a central place in the national economy and gave the workers a "specific weight" far greater than their numbers¹. Compared to a backward and dispersed peasant mass (72% of the working population), the mining proletariat was

minuscule: barely 50,000 workers, 2% of the labor force, and 1.8% of the total population². Yet this minority was concentrated in the large mining complexes of Siglo XX, Catavi, and Huanuni; it handled the dynamite, controlled 80% of exports, and produced 25% of GDP³. In a society where the entire economic life depended on mineral exports, the ability to paralyze production made the miners a decisive political force. Their living conditions were hellish: they worked in the tunnels using dry drilling, filling their lungs with silica dust and condemning themselves to an early death. As one miner testified, "It was very rare for a miner to live past 40 or 45 years of age." The workdays were grueling, workplace safety was nonexistent, and housing in the mining camps lacked even the most basic amenities⁴.

THE FORMATION OF A REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS' TRADITION

The Uncía Massacre of June 1923 was a watershed moment in Bolivian workers' memory. The army, acting on orders from the Patiño company, massacred miners who had declared a general strike demanding better working conditions and the abolition of forced labor. The company paid for the troops' mobilization and feeding, and the massacre failed to break the workers' spirit: it became a symbol of employer brutality and a milestone in class memory, passed down from generation to generation⁵.

The radicalization of the mining proletariat stemmed from decades of confrontations with the state and the companies. From the first strikes at the

beginning of the 20th century to the massacres of Uncía (1923) and Catavi (1942), workers built a powerful collective memory of struggle that became central to their political identity. The Chaco War (1932–1935) was a hell that radicalized an entire generation. Of the approximately 400,000 soldiers mobilized, 250,000 from Bolivia and 150,000 from Paraguay, some 100,000 died—57,000 Bolivians and 43,000 Paraguayans—representing a mortality rate of 25% and, respectively, nearly 2% and 4% of each country's total population. Bolivia's defeat delegitimized the old mining oligarchy, and the war's survivors returned to the mining centers with a new political consciousness. Many of the future leaders of the labor movement, including the Trotskyists, were forged in the Chaco⁶.

THE ABSENCE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE RISE OF TROTSKYISM

Unlike Argentina or Chile, Bolivia lacked a structured Communist Party with mass influence, a condition Sándor John considers key to the emergence of Bolivian Trotskyism⁷. By the time the Revolutionary Left Party (PIR) was founded in 1940, it was already too late. Its collaboration with the “pro-Allied oligarchy” during World War II discredited it in the eyes of the miners, who regarded the POR's Trotskyists as a credible revolutionary voice⁸.

The Revolutionary Workers' Party traces its origins to 1935, when a group of Bolivian exiles in Argentina—including José Aguirre Gainsborg, Tristán Marof, and Alipio Valencia Vega—held a unification congress that

proclaimed the party's creation. However, as Sándor John notes, the first POR was “hastily organized” and suffered from “political confusion” that brought it closer to radical nationalist populism than to consistent Trotskyism.

It was not until its refounding in Cochabamba in 1938 and its subsequent shift toward the mines in the 1940s that the party began to forge a solid working-class base and develop a coherent revolutionary program, crystallized in the Pulacayo Theses⁹.

IMPERIALIST DOMINATION

The industry was dominated by three families known as the “Tin Barons”: Patiño, Hochschild, and Aramayo. They controlled 75% to 80% of national exports.¹⁰ Imperialist domination over Bolivia was not limited to control of tin prices. The three major mining companies were cosmopolitan, not national, capital entities. Patiño Mines Enterprises was controlled from Paris; Mauricio Hochschild's company operated through financial centers in New York and London; and Carlos Víctor Aramayo's mines maintained close ties to British capital. These companies repatriated most of their profits, reinvested very little in the Bolivian economy, and functioned as extractive enclaves serving international finance capital. As Sándor John points out, the country retained only a minuscule fraction of the wealth generated from its natural resources.¹¹

THE INDIGENOUS COMPOSITION OF THE PROLETARIAT

One of Bolivia's most distinctive characteristics was the indigenous composition of its proletariat. Mining workers were recruited en masse from Quechua and Aymara communities; they spoke these languages at home, maintained family ties to the countryside, and preserved pre-Columbian cultural practices, such as offerings to the Tío de la Mina, an underground deity inherited from Andean cultures.¹² Proletarianization did not completely sever ties with their communities of origin. Many miners continued to speak Quechua or Aymara, maintained ties to the countryside, and returned periodically to their communities.

THE POSTWAR CRISIS AND THE RISE OF THE MNR

The rise of the MNR must be understood in the context of a prolonged political crisis triggered by the Chaco War. Between 1936 and 1952, Bolivia underwent a succession of nationalist, military, and reformist experiments that failed to stabilize the country. The governments of Toro, Busch, and Villarreal sought to construct new forms of state legitimacy, while the old mining oligarchy progressively lost political authority.¹³

The MNR emerged as an expression of this historical exhaustion. Founded in 1941 by young intellectuals and professionals who had fought in the Chaco War, it was not a class-based party but rather a heterogeneous coalition of nationalist sectors dissatisfied with the old regime. Its origins were contradictory: it presented itself as anti-imperialist and nationalist, but its newspaper, *La Calle*,



received German subsidies and propagated a strongly anti-Semitic ideology. A 1944 U.S. State Department report labeled it a “pro-fascist party.” However, after 1945, it gradually abandoned that orientation to adopt a left-wing nationalist discourse.¹⁴

The Catavi Massacre (December 1942), in which the army murdered more than a hundred unarmed miners, greatly boosted the party’s political growth. Víctor Paz Estenssoro’s parliamentary interpellation denouncing the massacre made him a national opposition figure. The miners sought a voice in parliament to denounce the repression; the MNR needed the miners’ social clout to consolidate its power. Through this convergence, the party capitalized on a significant share of popular discontent.

THE QUALITATIVE FACTOR: THE EMERGENCE OF THE COB

THE APRIL UPRISING

On April 9, 1952, an armed uprising by the MNR against the Ballivián dictatorship began. But the reality was different. When loyalist military forces resisted, the people of La Paz took to the streets. Factory workers, recalling the 1950 Villa Victoria massacre, took up arms. Miners from Milluni, Catavi, and Siglo XX descended from the hills with dynamite and old rifles from the Chaco War. What had begun as a coup became a **mass popular uprising**. The workers completely defeated seven regiments and seized all their weapons. The humiliated officers were paraded through the streets

of the capital in their underwear, escorted by the miners’ militias.

In Potosí, the miners gathered in the central square, their faces still blackened by dust from the mine shafts. Union leader Nicolás Bernal asked them, “Who is going to take political power?” The response was a roar: “The miners!” Not the MNR. Not Paz Estenssoro. The miners. That revolutionary energy would find expression a few days later in the founding of the COB (Bolivian Workers’ Confederation)—a national confederation that brought together not only miners but also all the country’s workers and served as **an organ of dual power**, offering a political alternative to the bourgeois state.

But the MNR knew how to position itself as the beneficiary of the uprising. Paz Estenssoro

returned from exile. Siles Zuazo, the MNR's national leader, was handed the presidential palace by the workers. Lechín, the miners' leader, became a minister. Why? Because the union leaderships—including that of the POR—surrendered power. As Sándor John points out, when the Potosí miners took over the city, it was “a major political mistake” to allow MNR spokespeople to occupy key positions.

This situation lies at the heart of the Bolivian tragedy: the mass movement, led by the working class, fully commits itself and destabilizes the bourgeois regime, creating alternative organizations with real power. However, due to the leadership's responsibility—which ultimately sides with sections of the ruling class—the opportunity is lost.

THE FOUNDING OF THE COB

The Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB) was founded on April 16, 1952, just one week after the uprising. Unlike the FSTMB, which brought together only miners, the **COB** was a national confederation that **united all sectors in struggle**: miners, factory workers, peasants, teachers, public employees, and railroad workers. It also brought together all the militias and Bolivia's workers' and peasants' organizations. The fundamental difference between an ordinary union and an organ of dual power lies in the development of a real alternative to political power based on the self-organization of sectors of the class engaged in struggle. In that sense, the workers' militias were not merely a formality: they were the material guarantee that the COB's power was not a fiction.

According to our current documents, citing General Gay Prado Salmón, the militias numbered between 50,000 and 100,000 armed men, while the Armed Forces were in the midst of a profound process of disintegration. The anti-communist general himself confirmed the magnitude of the defeat: “The sense of defeat grew worse when we learned the details of what had happened during the three days of fighting, which confirmed that the army had been defeated on all fronts. The High Command's flight made the officers feel even more abandoned. A number of them deserted their units without delay... A few remained in the barracks, attempting to regroup their units¹⁵.”

THE COMPARISON WITH THE SOVIETS

In practice, the COB exercised governmental functions: it resolved territorial disputes, administered food distribution, organized the armed defense of neighborhoods and mines, and controlled workplaces through the loyalty of organized miners and peasants. It was, in effect, the only center of real power. Guillermo Lora, a leader of the POR, acknowledged that “the COB was the master of the country and, in reality, for a certain period it was the only center of power worthy of the name” and that “for the majority of the masses, the COB was their only leader and their only government¹⁶.” Trotskyists held key positions in its leadership: Miguel Alandia Pantoja, the muralist, was the first editor of *Rebelión*, the COB's newspaper; Edwin Möller served as secretary of organization; and José Zegada

served as secretary of minutes. The COB formally adopted the Pulacayo Theses. In practice, it had the power to overthrow the MNR government and establish a workers' state.

When Trotsky analyzed the months between the February Revolution and the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October 1917, he identified a unique political situation: the coexistence of two antagonistic powers. On the one hand, the Provisional Government, which had a legal facade but lacked real power. On the other hand, the Soviets, which held the weapons, control of the barracks, and the loyalty of the masses, but whose leadership refused to assume full power. Trotsky wrote:

“The duality of power means, in essence, the coexistence within the same state of two antagonistic power centers. Legally, power rests with the Provisional Government. In reality, the Soviets possess the real force. But the Soviets—or, more precisely, their leadership—do not want to take power into their own hands. They fear isolating themselves from the bourgeoisie; they fear being left alone to face the counterrevolution; they fear not knowing how to govern.”¹⁷



This was exactly the situation in Bolivia after April 9, 1952. The COB held de facto power. What was lacking was the political will to transform it into de jure power. The leadership crisis in a situation of dual power. If the COB was so powerful, if the militias were armed, if the *Pulacayo Theses* offered a revolutionary program, why was power not seized? The answer lies not in the weakness of the enemy—the army had been defeated—but in the crisis of revolutionary leadership.

THE HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY: THE COB AS THE REAL POWER

The situation in Bolivia after April 9, 1952, was, in its essential features, similar to that of Russia after the February Revolution of 1917. Two powers coexisted in the country: a weak bourgeois government, the MNR, which had received the presidential palace from the workers but lacked its own strength; and the COB, which, with its armed militias, control of the workplaces, and the loyalty of organized miners and peasants, was, in fact, the only center of real power in the country. As our current point out, “the stronger force, the one with a mass character, was that of the popular and workers’ organizations. The seizure of power by the Soviets and the COB could have taken place peacefully. The old military apparatus had already collapsed. The path was open for workers’ power, which had its own weapons and the people behind it and could have achieved total power. The only obstacle was their leadership’s insistence on rescuing the bourgeoisie. In Russia, that obstacle was overcome, and the

workers seized power. In Bolivia, it was not”¹⁸.

THE PROBLEM OF LEADERSHIP: LECHÍN AND THE TRAP OF CO- GOVERNMENT

Juan Lechín Oquendo was a decisive figure in the Bolivian revolution. A leader of the FSTMB and, later, of the COB, he combined radical rhetoric with a systematic practice of interclass collaboration. Sándor John documents that Lechín was a member of the MNR and never broke with the party.¹⁹

Although the POR drafted much of his speeches and resolutions, Lechín did not represent Trotskyist politics. His main role was to mediate between the labor movement and the nationalist government, using his prestige to moderate the revolution's most radical tendencies. In this sense, he acted as a restraining force in the revolutionary process.

At the decisive moment in April 1952, when the miners were armed and could effectively challenge for power, Lechín handed the palace over to Siles Zuazo. As a peasant leader quoted by Sándor John recalls, he told them: “We have already taken the government; Siles-Zuazo is there now, but you should go rest.” That “go rest” encapsulated an entire political orientation and marked the beginning of the revolution’s defeat.²⁰

The COB leadership opted for a coalition government with the MNR. Workers’ ministers would join Paz Estenssoro’s cabinet, while the trade union federation would

grant them a so-called “imperative mandate.” It was a fiction: no minister in a bourgeois government ultimately ceases to serve that government’s interests. The *Pulacayo Theses* had explicitly warned against such a policy. However, those who had defended them ultimately subordinated themselves to it.

Lechín was one of the most skilled union leaders in the Bolivian labor movement, and he used his authority to prevent the workers from carrying the logic of their own revolution to its conclusion.

THE MISSING SLOGAN: ALL POWER TO THE COB!

The existence of dual power did not automatically lead to a revolutionary solution. The decisive question was political: what orientation should a revolutionary party take?

For our current, the answer was clear. If the COB constituted the true power of the country, the task was to fight for it to fully assume the government. The corresponding slogan was: “All power to the COB!” It was not a matter of strengthening the unions’ influence over the MNR government. It was a matter of replacing the bourgeois government with one based on the COB—not as a trade union federation, but as an organ of popular power—on the workers’ militias, and on the peasant organizations.

Let us clarify the slogan’s meaning. “**All power to the COB!**” did not mean supporting Lechín’s bureaucratic leadership. It was exactly the opposite. Just as in

Russia, where “All power to the Soviets!” did not mean supporting the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries who controlled them, but rather fighting for the Soviets to break with the bourgeois government, oust those conciliatory leaderships, and take power into their own hands, in Bolivia the slogan implied that the workers organized in the COB—miners, factory workers, and peasants—should exert pressure from the grassroots for the labor federation to take over the government, oust Lechín if necessary, and implement the *Pulacayo Theses*.

At the strategic level, the slogan “All power to the COB!” aimed to form a “workers’ and peasants’ government.” It sought to raise—in the same vein as the Bolsheviks after the February Revolution—the need for the Soviets to step forward and confront and replace Kerensky’s vacillating provisional government. Along with the slogan “All power to the Soviets,” the Bolsheviks did not demand “a government of Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, without capitalists” and agitated for the slogan “Down with the 10 capitalist ministers.” As the *Transitional Program* states, “the Bolsheviks demanded that the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks break their ties with the liberal bourgeoisie and take power into their own hands,” promising, if that were to happen, “their revolutionary aid against the bourgeoisie, while categorically refusing, however, to enter the government or assume any political responsibility on their behalf.”²¹ The objective was “to accelerate and facilitate the

establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat,” and to use slogans with educational value to unmask the reformist sectors leading revolutionary processes. In Spain in 1931, and later in France and Spain in 1936, Trotsky again raised the need for these slogans of power, even though the development of the class struggle was less advanced than in Russia in 1917, since there were no consolidated dual-power organizations. Nevertheless, Trotsky argued that “the masses, even the most trusting, always feel an instinctive distrust of the bourgeoisie, the exploiters, the capitalists”; therefore, “the communists must guide the workers’ thinking precisely in this direction: to demand everything from the government, since our leaders are in it”; moreover, we must tell the masses: “If you trust your leaders, force them to take power” (June 24, 1931)²².

That was exactly what “All Power to the COB!” meant in Bolivia, in a context where dual-power structures were far more advanced than in Spain and France in the 1930s, and with the industrial working class at the forefront: that the COB should take over the government, despite its reformist leadership, and demand that it implement the *Pulacayo Theses* and break with the MNR—without deluding itself that this was already socialism, but resolutely supporting its anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist measures.

CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE STALLING OF AGRARIAN REFORM

When the Paz Estenssoro government announced the

creation of a commission to study agrarian reform, the POR responded skeptically but agreed to send a delegate. It demanded “the nationalization of land without compensation and its transfer to peasant organizations.”²³

The law was imposed through the revolutionary mobilization of the masses, but from the outset the MNR sought to limit its scope. Large-scale landholdings were legalized under the guise of “Agricultural Enterprises.” Many large estates simply changed their names. The reform proved insufficient: between 1954 and 1968, only eight of 36 million hectares of arable land changed hands.²⁴

Kevin Young argues that this ambiguity was part of a deliberate containment strategy. Agrarian reform was a popular victory, but it also served to pacify the countryside and create a class of small landowners who would later serve as a bulwark against labor radicalism.²⁵

The central contradiction lay in the fact that the very measure that represented a victory for the masses could also become an instrument for stabilizing the new regime. The dismantling of large sections of the latifundia was a genuine achievement of the revolution. However, the MNR sought to channel that energy toward consolidating a class of small rural landowners integrated into the new state.

The epicenter of the peasant upsurge was Cochabamba. The peasant Poristas, led by Quechua militants such as Modesto Sejas,



proposed a radical “agrarian revolution”: the socialization of land under the unions’ collective administration rather than land division. They defeated Lechín in a debate in early 1953.

The political significance of Cochabamba went far beyond the agrarian debate. It gave rise to one of the few instances in which significant sectors of the peasant movement sought to develop an orientation independent of both the MNR and the traditional state apparatuses. The conflict revealed a tension that ran through the entire revolution: while broad sectors of the rank and file were moving toward increasingly radical positions, the national leadership of the POR continued to subordinate its policy to the

perspective of critical support for the nationalist government.

However, this militancy clashed with the POR’s national leadership. A letter to the International Secretariat revealed that “two factions” were at odds within the party: one with “capitulationist positions toward the MNR” and another that risked “adventures in mobilizing the peasants.” The national leadership intervened to rein in the radicals in Cochabamba.²⁶

On the second anniversary of the revolution, the POR Local Committee of Ucucreña issued a leaflet challenging the official line: “The current government is capitalist in character. We, peasants and workers, have

nothing to do with this government, because our government will be the Workers’ and Peasants’ Government.”²⁷

TWO TROTSKYIST POLICIES

Within international Trotskyism, there was no single line on the Bolivian revolution. There were two clearly distinct currents.

On the one hand, the leadership of the International Secretariat, headed by Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel (Germain), and Pierre Frank, advocated critical support for the MNR. The Third World Congress of the Fourth International (1951) had resolved: “In the event of a mass mobilization under the

predominant influence of the MNR, our Bolivian section must support the movement with all its might, including up to the point where the MNR seizes power."²⁸ This orientation reflected a growing adaptation to petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships, considered capable of being pushed toward revolutionary positions under the pressure of events.

By contrast, the current led by Nahuel Moreno maintained an opposing orientation from the outset. In May 1952, *Frente Proletario* warned that the Bolivian revolution faced a decisive crossroads: to advance "toward genuine workers' power" or to lose its way "on the path of conciliation."²⁹ In January 1953, it explicitly formulated the slogan that encapsulated this orientation: "All power to the COB!"³⁰ The slogan aimed at the formation of a workers' and peasants' government.

Two decades later, Moreno summarized the contrast between the two policies: "While we argued that in Bolivia the slogan was 'All power to the COB and the armed militias!', *Quatrième Internationale* comrades Frank and Germain defended critical support for the MNR government."³¹

The scope of this difference was neither tactical nor secondary. It expressed two opposing strategies in the face of a revolutionary situation. While Pabloism held that the task was to critically support the MNR's nationalist government, the Morenoist current maintained that the existence of the COB, the workers' militias, and the

destruction of the old military apparatus made it possible to fight directly for the seizure of power by workers' and peasants' organizations. The orientation followed by the POR was therefore not inevitable: two opposing conceptions coexisted in the face of the same reality.

This controversy was not limited to 1952. Eighteen years later, during the Torres administration and the Popular Assembly, Moreno once again confronted the Pabloist majority, which failed to distinguish between a weak bourgeois nationalist government and a fascist dictatorship: "It is one thing not to trust or support any bourgeois government, even if it is 'left-wing' or 'nationalist'; it is quite another not to distinguish them from ultra-reactionary governments. Not supporting Torres is correct. Not distinguishing him from Banzer is suicidal."³² In the face of the majority's "armament for its own

sake" policy, Moreno argued for a workers' united front against the coup: "When the danger of a 'fascist' coup is detected, the first priority is to fight the coup through a united front with the reformist organizations. Telling the miners to arm themselves to join the guerrilla movement rather than to confront the coup was to break with every anti-coup worker. Our policy should have been one of a united front, not of guerrilla warfare."³³

Our current has pointed out that in Bolivia there were exceptional conditions for applying the orientation defended by Lenin in the *April Theses*. Faced with a situation of dual power, the task was not to support the bourgeois government, even critically, but to convince the majority of workers organized in the COB and the militias that the Paz Estenssoro government was not their government and that only the seizure of power by their own organizations would allow them to



fulfill their aspirations for national independence, land, work, and bread.³⁴

From this perspective, the fundamental difference between Bolshevik policy and that of the POR did not lie in tactical nuances but in the attitude toward the bourgeois government. As our current has pointed out: "The major difference lay in how the revolutionary party acted. The Bolsheviks demanded that the soviets break with the bourgeois provisional government and seize power by their own means as the only way to achieve peace, bread, and land. Meanwhile, the POR called for defending the bourgeois government so that it could fulfill the most deeply felt aspirations of the workers and peasants."³⁵

For this reason, the assessment prepared by our current concludes that the revolutionary opportunity was thwarted in the worst possible way: not because the masses were militarily defeated, nor because there was a lack of alternative organs of power, but because the revolutionary party shirked the political responsibilities arising from the April insurrection.

Sam Ryan, a leader of the U.S. Socialist Workers Party, held an intermediate position that was, though critically valuable, still intermediate. Ryan warned early on that the MNR was a bourgeois party and that a policy of critical support could lead to strategic defeat. The following year, he compared the POR's orientation to the policies of the Mensheviks in Russia and to Stalinism in China.³⁶

The POR leadership ignored these warnings. It was not until

1956 that it belatedly raised the slogan "All power to the COB!"³⁷ In 1963, Guillermo Lora acknowledged that failing to promote that orientation at decisive moments had been the party's most serious mistake.³⁸

THE INTERRUPTED REVOLUTION, TIME AND AGAIN

What happened in Bolivia after 1952 was no accident. It was part of a historical pattern. The decisive aspect of the subsequent episodes does not lie solely in their magnitude. Each reproduced, under different conditions, a tension already present in April 1952: the existence of mass organizations capable of challenging the state and the absence of a revolutionary leadership willing to carry that confrontation to its ultimate consequences.

In 1971, under Juan José Torres's government, the COB once again became the center of a dual-power situation. The Popular Assembly was presented by numerous activists as a reenactment, under different conditions, of the experience that began in 1952. However, the most influential Trotskyist sector once again placed its hopes in the military sectors considered progressive. Banzer's coup d'état put an end to that experiment and ushered in a new cycle of defeats.

In 1985, miners occupied La Paz for seventeen days. Twelve thousand workers brought the capital to a standstill. "Workers to power!" could once again be heard in the streets. However, the COB leadership, once again headed by

Lechín, held back the movement and called off the struggle. Shortly thereafter, Paz Estenssoro enacted Decree 21060, which dismantled state-owned mining and delivered the Bolivian labor movement its most crushing defeat since the revolution.

In 2003 and 2005, during the Gas Wars, miners once again took a leading role in the popular uprisings. However, the union and political leaderships again steered the process toward an institutional solution that allowed the regime to stabilize in new forms.

Revolutionary opportunities arose at various stages. However, the revolutionary sectors, increasingly weakened, continued to align with nationalist or reformist currents. The repetition of these defeats demonstrates that the central problem was not a lack of militancy among the masses but the persistence of a crisis in revolutionary leadership.

Our political current maintains that the possibility of a victorious struggle for workers' power was thwarted not by the adversary's superiority but by the revolutionary party's limitations.

THE CRISIS OF REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP

The Bolivian Revolution of 1952 was defeated because of the POR's failure as revolutionary leadership. The objective conditions for revolutionary transformation were exceptional. The army had been destroyed. The workers' militias were armed. The COB wielded greater authority than the government itself. The

masses had shown an extraordinary willingness to fight.

Precisely for this reason, the Bolivian Revolution occupies such a unique place in Latin American history: it demonstrates with exceptional clarity the decisive role of political leadership at the culminating moments of the class struggle. Rarely has a current identified with Trotskyism simultaneously possessed real influence within the workers' movement, an advanced revolutionary program, and such a favorable objective situation for the struggle for power.

Why did this happen? Because the POR leadership never fully broke with the illusion that the national bourgeoisie—or its trade union representatives—could be pushed toward revolutionary positions. This illusion had a concrete political expression: Pabloism. Michel Pablo theorized that the pressure of the world situation would push nationalist and bureaucratic sectors beyond their historical limits. The Bolivian experience demonstrated the results of that orientation when applied to a real revolutionary situation.

Pierre Broué offered a precise historical assessment: “Thirty-one years after the April 9 Revolution, there has been no ‘Bolivian October.’ That is indisputable. However, the April 9 Revolution has endured in the consciousness of the masses in Bolivia and South America.”³⁹

The lesson of April 1952 is not that the masses were incapable of seizing power. It is exactly the opposite: they demonstrated that

they could do so. They destroyed the army, built their own militias, established organs of dual power, and had an advanced revolutionary program. The problem was that the leadership they had built actively thwarted their own revolution, betraying the struggle of the Bolivian working class and peasantry.

The memory of those days—the armed miners, the militias in the streets, the COB as the effective center of power, and the *Pulacayo Theses* as the program—lives on. Every new rebellion has been an attempt to pick up that broken thread. And every new rebellion has run into the same obstacle: the absence of leadership capable of transforming the masses' social power into the actual seizure of power.

Today, the task remains to build revolutionary leadership that does not repeat these mistakes and understands that power is not attained by delegation or by critical support for bourgeois governments, but through the independent action of the organized working class.

The Bolivian miners promised: “We will return.” In 2003 and 2005, they kept that promise. Next time, they could have the leadership they deserve. Building that leadership is our responsibility. ■

NOTES

¹ S. Sándor John, **Permanent Revolution in the Altiplano: Bolivian Trotskyism** (La Paz:

Plural, 2016), pp. 12–13.

² John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 31.

³ John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 32.

⁴ John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 30.

⁵ John, **Permanent Revolution**, pp. 32–33.

⁶ John, **Permanent Revolution**, pp. 32–33; James Dunkerley, **Rebellion in the Veins: Political Struggle in Bolivia, 1952–1982** (London: Verso, 1984), pp. 13, 28–42.

⁷ John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 38.

⁸ John, **Permanent Revolution**, pp. 38, 114.

⁹ John, **Permanent Revolution**, pp. 38, 67–73.

¹⁰ John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 31; Herbert S. Klein, **Bolivia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 145.

¹¹ John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 31; Dunkerley, **Rebellion in the Veins**, p. 13.

¹² John, **Permanent Revolution**, pp. 22–23, 32.

¹³ Dunkerley, **Rebellion in the Veins**, chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁴ Dunkerley, **Rebellion in the Veins**, p. 28; John, **Permanent**

Revolution, p. 114; Klein, **Bolivia**, p. 189.

¹⁵ General Gay Prado Salmón, **Power and the Armed Forces, 1919–1982** (Cochabamba, 1984), quoted in Alicia Sagra, “Bolivia: 50 Years on the Brink of Seizing Power,” **Marxismo Vivo** No. 8, 2004.

¹⁶ Guillermo Lora, **History of the Bolivian Labor Movement**, cited in Sagra, “Bolivia: 50 Years on the Brink of Seizing Power.”

¹⁷ Leon Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution**, chapter “The Duality of Power,” pp. 157–163.

¹⁸ Sagra, “Bolivia: 50 Years on the Brink of Seizing Power.”

¹⁹ John, **Permanent Revolution**, pp. 120–122.

²⁰ John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 165.

²¹ Trotsky, **The Transitional Program** (1938).

²² Trotsky, “For the Break with the Bourgeois Coalition.” Letter to the International Secretariat, June 24, 1931. See also Nahuel Moreno and Miguel Romero, “On the Workers’ and Peasants’ Government (A letter from December 1985 to Hardy, leader of the French Trotskyist organization Lutte Ouvrière),” 1985.

²³ John, **Permanent Revolution**,

p. 196.

²⁴ Dunkerley, **Rebellion in the Veins**, p. 73, quoted by Sagra.

²⁵ Kevin Young, **Blood of the Earth: Resource Nationalism, Revolution, and Empire in Bolivia** (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), pp. 54–55.

²⁶ John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 200.

²⁷ John, **Permanent Revolution**, p. 200.

²⁸ Resolution of the Third World Congress of the Fourth International (1951), cited in Sagra, “Bolivia: 50 Years on the Brink of Seizing Power.”

²⁹ **Frente Proletario** (newspaper of the Argentine POR, Nahuel Moreno’s faction), May 29, 1952, cited in Sagra.

³⁰ **Frente Proletario**, January 15, 1953, cited in Sagra.

³¹ Nahuel Moreno, **The Party and the Revolution** (1973). The text revisits and expands upon the debate initiated in “A Scandalous Document” (a response to Ernest Mandel), Chapter I, “Are All Governments the Same?”

³² Moreno, **The Party and the Revolution**.

³³ Moreno, **The Party and the Revolution**.

³⁴ Sagra, “Bolivia: 50 Years on the Brink of Seizing Power.”

³⁵ Sagra, “Bolivia: 50 Years on the Brink of Seizing Power.”

³⁶ Sam Ryan, “A Letter on the Bolivian Revolution,” **Socialist Workers Party Internal Bulletin**, June 1952; Sam Ryan, “The Bolivian Revolution and the Fight Against Revisionism,” **SWP Discussion Bulletin**, October 1954.

³⁷ Resolution of the Executive Committee of the Bolivian POR, May 1956, cited in Sagra, “Bolivia: 50 Years on the Brink of Seizing Power.”

³⁸ Guillermo Lora, **The Bolivian Revolution (A Critical Analysis)** (La Paz: Difusión s.r.l., 1964), quoted in Sagra, “Bolivia: 50 Years on the Brink of Seizing Power.”

³⁹ Pierre Broué, “Bolivia, April 9, 1952: A Forgotten ‘February Revolution’?,” **Revolutionary History**, vol. 4, no. 3, Summer 1992.

BOLIVIA – THE UPRISING BETRAYED (1985)

**EUGENIO GRACO, CORREO INTERNACIONAL,
NO. 15. 12/1985. ABRIDGED VERSION.**

In March 1985, Bolivian workers confronted the government of Hernán Siles Suazo in a 16-day general strike. During the strike, ten thousand miners armed with dynamite occupied the capital, La Paz, while the army remained divided and hesitant, failing to launch a crackdown. In Oruro, a key city because of the concentration of the country's most important mines nearby, workers deposed the prefect and took control of the government, eventually handing it over voluntarily to the local police. Meanwhile, peasants supported the workers' movement by blocking roads. The population of La Paz showed solidarity with the miners in various ways, and the student movement fought side by side with the workers.

This immense revolutionary mobilization was organized by the Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB). The miners who occupied La Paz did so under the banners of their union, the Bolivian Federation of Mining Workers (FSTMB), which is part of the COB and serves as its backbone. The workers who took over the government in Oruro marched under the leadership of the Departmental Workers' Confederation (COD), the local branch of the COB. The peasants blocking the roads were from the Single Trade Union Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB), an ally of the COB, in which the CSUTCB is represented.

The student organizations that mobilized are also represented in the COB. All the workers in the country, who unanimously launched the general strike, did so while organized in their unions, which are part of the COB.

Despite having everything in its favor, the general strike failed. The economic demands that sparked it went unmet. The revolutionary movement retreated. The bourgeoisie set up an electoral trap that, through fraud, handed the government to the notorious reactionary Víctor Paz Estenssoro. He immediately launched a new attack on the Bolivian masses,

following the same IMF line as his predecessor but far more violently. A new general strike was organized in September, but this time it was decisively defeated.

In retrospect, this second general strike was already a defensive battle in the rear. Its fate was largely determined by the previous strike: the March retreat explains the defeat in September. That is why drawing the full conclusions from the March strike is absolutely necessary to politically arm the Bolivian workers' movement, the revolutionaries of the Altiplano, and the entire world. Not only to find the reasons for the defeat, but also, and primarily, to understand why the Bolivian working class, once



again, let a victory slip through its fingers that was within its grasp.

TWO BETRAYALS

In our view, the March strike failed for one reason: the recognized leadership of the Bolivian workers' movement—primarily Juan Lechín and, to a lesser extent, the Communist Party and the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR)—betrayed it. That general strike could succeed only if it became an insurrection,

overthrew the government by force, and placed power in the hands of the working class and the people—that is, in the hands of the COB. That is what the leadership of the Bolivian workers and people failed to do.

This was to be expected, since a non-proletarian leadership never brings workers to power on its own. Neither Lechín nor the PCB nor the MIR is a proletarian leadership. The first two are anti-worker bureaucracies, in their nationalist (Lechín) and Russian (the PCB) forms. The MIR is a petty-bourgeois leadership.

But most serious is that many of those who call themselves revolutionaries and Trotskyists had no strategy for carrying out the revolution, for driving the masses toward insurrection, and, at some point in that struggle, for replacing the treacherous leaderships. That is why the focus of this debate is to highlight the enormous theoretical and political errors of those who, once again, betrayed the Bolivian revolution in the most despicable way: by hiding behind the revolutionary banners of Trotskyism. We will conduct this debate based on the positions of the only current that developed a revolutionary policy for Bolivia: the International Workers' League.

The main participants in this debate are as follows:

The International Workers' League – Fourth International (LIT-CI), its Bolivian party, the Socialist Workers' Party (PST), and the LIT's sympathizing organization in Argentina, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS).

The United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USEC) and its Bolivian section, the United Revolutionary Workers' Party

(POR-U).

Two national Trotskyist groups, loosely associated with the so-called Fourth Internationalist Tendency (FIT): the Revolutionary Workers' Party of Bolivia, led by Lora (POR-Lora), and the Workers' Party (PO) of Argentina.

THE GENERAL STRIKE AND THE QUESTION OF POWER

The March general strike was a revolutionary mass struggle against the government and the bourgeois regime, challenging Bolivia's semicolonial capitalist system. Everyone understood it that way. The terrified bourgeoisie denounced it. Lechín acknowledged that, obviously, the working class could not triumph because it was unarmed.

The organizations we debated with also described the situation in the same way. André Dubois, a journalist for the USEC, said that "from the outset of this strike... the most immediate demand puts a sociopolitical confrontation on the agenda and, in fact, raises the question of power"².

The FIT, through the newspaper *Masas*, the organ of the POR-Lora, asserted that "the strike, from the moment it broke out, raises in unequivocal terms the problem of power"³. And the PO reported on the "revolutionary fraternization" in the streets of La Paz among miners, factory workers, teachers, and students; the reduction of the government to a "powerless mask"; and the "legitimate fear that the armed forces would disintegrate" if they were deployed to repress the strike⁴.

The LIT and the Bolivian PST, for their part, had been asserting for more than two years that the power problem was on the table in

Bolivia and that the March general strike was making it a burning issue. We can say, then, that all the tendencies claiming to be Trotskyist correctly described the situation as revolutionary and the general strike as a political strike that raised "the problem of power."

So far, we all agree with our teachers, who have always attributed this character to general strikes. Lenin, for example, said that "the truly advanced class role... that raises the masses for the revolution... is played by the industrial proletariat, which fulfills this task through its revolutionary strikes."⁵

Trotsky asserted that "every general strike, whatever slogans it may have arisen under, has an internal tendency to transform itself into an open revolutionary conflict, into a direct struggle for power... By paralyzing factories, transportation, all means of communication, power plants, etc., the proletariat thus paralyzes not only production but also the government. State power is left hanging in the air... The general strike inevitably poses the question to all classes of the nation: 'Who is going to be the master of the house?'"⁶.

REVOLUTIONARY CRISIS AND THE QUESTION OF POWER

The March general strike was not, however, a bolt from the blue. It was the culmination of a prolonged revolutionary crisis, which began in 1982 with the fall of the García Meza military dictatorship, subsided with the masses' expectations in the new Siles Suazo government, and resurfaced three months after Siles Suazo took office. From then on, a sequence of work stoppages, several general strikes,

demonstrations, factory occupations, road blockades, and thousands of other forms of mass struggle constantly challenged the government and the bourgeois state. Without leading to a clear insurrection, this prelude to the March strike constituted a chronic dual-power situation—we might say, a pre-insurrectional one—that lasted for more than two years.

This situation fits Lenin's description: "The working class gives the enemy no respite, disrupts the normal course of industrial life, constantly paralyzes the machinery of local administration, and creates a state of alarm throughout the country, mobilizing new and new forces for the struggle. No state can withstand such an onslaught for long..."⁷.

If this were the case, the revolutionaries were obliged to propose to the mass movement, in their propaganda and agitation, that it take the government into its own hands not only during the March strike but also throughout the entire period of revolutionary crisis that preceded it. In situations like this, the slogan of power is the most important; it is the linchpin of the revolutionary program.

However, this is not enough. It is necessary to show the working class and the mass movement how the "dictatorship of the proletariat" (Lora's favorite expression) or the "workers' government" (the POR-U's slogan)⁸ is realized. It is necessary to explain which institutions and organizations enable the working class and the people to take power, destroy the bourgeois state, and begin to govern the country.

WITH THE COB AND AGAINST THE COB

This debate has persisted in Bolivia for over 30 years. It has been on the table since the 1952 revolution, when the Bolivian workers' movement, allied with the peasant movement, crushed the bourgeois army, formed its own union and peasant militias, and, as a result of this great triumph, built the COB.

From that point on, the Trotskyist current, now organized as the LIT, proposed that the COB take power to establish a workers' and peasants' government and, consequently, raised this slogan whenever the class struggle permitted it. But for more than 30 years now, Lechín, along with the USEC, Lora, and company, have opposed the COB's governance of Bolivia.

The leader of the POR-U, Antonio Moreno, asserts that the COB "is the only institution that has proposed an alternative solution to the crisis..."⁹. André Dubois also maintains that the COB "poorly reflected the real dynamics of the social movement.."

Lora theorizes: "More than theory, long theoretical experience (sic) has shown that, by their very nature, trade union organizations are prevented..."¹⁰. Following Lora, PO leader Roberto Gramar asserts that the COB "is not a mechanism for the insurrectionary seizure of political power..."¹¹.

THE COB IS MUCH MORE THAN A UNION

Antonio Moreno, Dubois, Lora, and Gramar make the same mistake: identifying the COB with its bureaucratic leadership. It is indisputable that there is a Lechinist bureaucracy within the COB and that it must be fought by measures that impose workers'

democracy within its leadership. But what they propose is not this. Rather, they argue that the COB is useless for seizing power and that other organizations must be built for that purpose.

Another argument they make is that the COB is a trade union. Lora states this clearly, and the USEC implies it by pointing to the need for a broader, more representative instrument. This reasoning clashes with the historical and current reality of the COB.

Although its basic structure is composed of unions, the COB is much more than a trade union federation. The COB of 1952 built workers' militias, which, together with the peasant militias, became the country's sole armed force until the bourgeoisie, due to the betrayal of its leadership, managed to rebuild its army. The current COB includes, in addition to trade unions, peasant, student, and women's organizations, among others. Its leadership would have had to call on soldiers and police to organize from the rank and file, and they would have automatically joined it.

When Lora asserts that the COB cannot take power because it is limited by the "very nature" of any "trade union organization," he is merely spouting nonsense devoid of real substance. We



challenge Lora to explain, in his own terms, how the practice of forming militias and rallying peasants and other exploited sectors of the population fits into the “very nature” of a trade union.

ORGANIZATIONS OF DUAL POWER AND SOVIET FETISHISM

To claim that the COB is not a body capable of exercising power because it is structured around a specific organizational form—the unions—reveals a profound historical and theoretical ignorance of institutions of power. Both historical experience and the theorizing of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky affirm that the organs of power of the proletariat and the revolutionary masses do not conform to any rigid organizational formula but rather take on the most varied forms, as the masses themselves construct them in situations of revolutionary crisis.

Marx, Engels, and Lenin argued that the Commune was a workers’ government, while Trotsky maintained that it was a *bourgeois-democratic* municipality. But they all agreed that the first workers’ body of power in history, which led the insurrection and acted as a government, was the Central Committee of the National Guard. This should serve as a wake-up call for all those who believe that a body of power must follow certain organizational formulas to be such and, consequently, deny that character to the Bolivian COB because it is based on the unions.

Following the triumph of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the word “soviet” became synonymous with a body of working-class power. The soviets were very

different from trade unions. They emerged as workers’ committees to organize strikes during the 1905 Revolution.

Lenin defined the soviets as “organs of the direct struggle of the masses. They arose as organs of the strike struggle. Under the pressure of necessity, they rapidly transformed into organs of the general revolutionary struggle against the government”¹³. These “new organs of revolutionary power... were created exclusively by the revolutionary strata of the population... by their political-social character, this was, in its embryonic form, the dictatorship of the revolutionary elements of the people”¹⁴.

However, at the same time, Lenin was already warning that “the role of the soviets... has surrounded these organizations with an aura that sometimes leads them to be regarded with a certain fetishism. It is believed that these organs are always and under all circumstances ‘necessary and sufficient’ organs for the mass movement”¹⁴.

In short, for both Lenin and Trotsky, what defined the soviets as organs of power was not their organizational form but their “political character” and “class content.” Hence, Trotsky’s more general definition does not refer to a specific organizational form but to class character and the tasks at hand: “The soviet is the highest form of the united front at the stage when the proletariat is fighting for power”¹⁵. This is exactly the same definition as Lenin’s: an organ of “general revolutionary struggle” by the “revolutionary strata of the population” to seize power.

For those who question the

COB’s ability to seize power because of its trade-union character, let us recall that Trotsky asserted that “the English trade unions can be a powerful lever of the proletarian revolution; indeed, under certain conditions and for a certain period, they can replace the workers’ soviets”¹². Let us recap: the Central Committee of the National Guard in the Paris Commune, the soviets and factory committees in the Russian Revolution, the Popular Front action committees in France, the grassroots committees in Germany, the trade unions in England, and the guerrilla army-parties in China, Vietnam, and Cuba: all of them were, in reality or in potential, organs of power. No one with even a basic knowledge of history and revolutionary Marxist theory can seriously argue that the COB is incapable of seizing power because it is based on the unions.

THE “IDEOLOGICAL HETEROGENEITY” OF THE COB

Another argument against the COB as an organization for the struggle for power is the one Lora raises, namely that he dismisses it for its “ideological heterogeneity.” On the contrary, according to him, an organization that aims to seize power must be ideologically homogeneous. Conclusion: Lora has not the slightest idea of the difference between a mass organization and a revolutionary party.

Every mass organization, from a union to a soviet, is ideologically heterogeneous because it brings together all workers and sectors of the population who are fighting. A party is ideologically homogeneous because it brings together all those who share its

program. If a mass organization were not ideologically and politically heterogeneous, it would not be a mass organization, since it would exclude those who, even if they wanted to fight, do not share the ideology of its leadership. That is why Lenin defined the future “revolutionary provisional government” as a “common organization... non-partisan or inter-party”¹⁶.

Could there be greater “ideological heterogeneity” than this, which includes the “rotten parties” in the organ of the struggle for power? Precisely because it is a united-front body of the proletariat and the exploited masses, every organ of power necessarily relies on the presence within it of the broad majority of the mass movement, with its reformist, centrist, and revolutionary ideologies and parties. The revolutionary party fights for leadership of the mass organization against the other parties. It seeks to impose its program and policies. But if it achieves this, it does not expel the other currents; it never demands ideological homogeneity from a mass organization, as the ultra-sectarian Lora does.

CAPITULATION TO LECHÍN

Consequently, with its slogan of “power to the COB,” the PST formulated it under the demand that Lechín assume the government of the country in the name of the COB and be subject to its discipline. Neither the USEC nor the FIT raised that slogan. For Lora, a COB government would be “nothing more than a variant of bourgeois governments” if the Lechínist bureaucracy continued at its head. Gramar said exactly the same thing. Dubois and Antonio

Moreno do not even mention this problem.

Both the USEC and the FIT demonstrate a complete lack of policy in the face of Lechín’s bureaucratic leadership, which amounts to a total capitulation to him, disguised in ultra-leftist language. By failing to demand that Lechín, the COB leadership, seize power and govern under the discipline of the COB, the USEC and the FIT not only ignore the most urgent need of the Bolivian proletariat—to seize power with the leadership and organization it currently has—but they also fail to hold the bureaucrat accountable before the masses for betraying them. Finally, they do not present themselves as an alternative leadership that proposes to do what the situation demands—seizing power with the COB—since Lechín refuses to do so.

Lora attacks the PST’s demand that Lechín either become president by seizing power with the COB or, failing that, resign from his leadership, arguing that this implies the seizure of power “is the task of a few union leaders, and not of the masses.” It seems Lora did not read Lenin and Trotsky—or did not understand what he read—since this tactic was not invented by the PST or the LIT but by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution.

When the conciliatory leadership of the soviets was bogging down the revolution, Lenin proposed the “formation of a government composed of Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, accountable to the soviets.”¹⁷ If they accepted, the Bolsheviks “would immediately renounce the demand for the transfer of power to the proletariat and the poor peasants and the



revolutionary methods of struggle in favor of that demand.”

Trotsky summarized this brilliant tactic: “the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries rejected this compromise... In the hands of the Bolsheviks, this refusal became the most powerful weapon for preparing the armed insurrection, which, seven weeks later, swept away the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries”¹⁸.

Abandoning the demand that Lechín take power and govern in the name of the COB and be accountable to it simply means capitulating to Lechín. It is refusing to use the “most powerful weapon” to “sweep him away” from the leadership of the Bolivian mass movement.

INVENTING COSTS NOTHING

Having ruled out the COB as an organ of power, the USEC and the FIT devote themselves to inventing “mass” organizations to carry out the revolution. Thus, the USEC and the FIT act in a manner opposite to that of Marxists. Instead of asking themselves which organizations were built by the masses and proposing that they use them to seize power, they devote themselves to extracting a series of un d organizational recipes from their fevered intellects. Anything but acknowledging that the organization the masses have to

fight is the COB.

Trotsky recommended the opposite: do not invent anything; discover which organizations of power were built by the masses themselves.

It was not difficult to identify those “forms and methods of organization” in Bolivia, given the precedent of the triumphant 1952 insurrection, carried out by the unions with their militias. Only a deep loathing for the working class, its methods, and its organizations—typical of hopeless petty-bourgeois—can explain why the leaders of the USEC and the FIT did not see the COB as the revolutionary organization of the Bolivian masses. Worse still, they opposed this federation with organizations that existed only in their heads, substituting—as Trotsky would say—“revolutionary action for the most disastrous of games, that which consists of distracting oneself, in the realm of organization, with childish trifles.”

GENERAL STRIKE AND INSURRECTION

“All power to the COB!” was, therefore, the only truly revolutionary slogan during the period from the first struggles against Siles to the general strike in March. However, revolutionary strategy is not exhausted by the slogan, which points to the movement’s objective but not to the means for its realization.



Gramar correctly asserts that one must not confuse a revolutionary situation with an insurrection. Indeed, neither a revolutionary situation nor a general strike is sufficient for the seizure of power: an insurrection is necessary.

What is notable is that none of the currents with which we debated called on the workers to launch an insurrection or to organize and arm themselves for it. In his polemic with the MAS, Gramar argues that, in Bolivia, there was not even a close approach to an insurrection, since the “insurrection has not taken root among the masses.” Lora asserts, during the general strike, that “one cannot say that we have entered the insurrectionary stage.” The SU does not speak of insurrection.

The USEC and the FIT are ignorant of the most basic tenets of revolutionary Marxist theory, since, for Lenin and Trotsky, the general strike always tended toward insurrection. Trotsky asserted that “the general strike does not resolve the problem of power; it merely raises it. To seize power, it is necessary, relying on the general strike, to organize the insurrection”¹⁹. In 1920, referring to the lessons of the 1905 revolution, Lenin said that “the revolutionary struggle reached such a level of development and such power that the armed insurrection coincided with the mass strike.” He added: “This experience has global significance for all proletarian revolutions”²⁰.

In the Bolivian month of March, the tendency toward insurrection was thus expressed in the simple fact of a general strike. But reality surpassed this theoretical truth.

We have already seen the example of Oruro, where the workers took the government into their own hands for a day. But the best example is that of La Paz. What does the occupation of the country’s capital by ten thousand miners armed with dynamite mean, who do as they please there while the bourgeoisie hides under the bed, the well-to-do petty bourgeoisie trembles in panic, the working class and the poor people support them, and the army proves incapable of intervening?

If you don’t want to call this a semi-insurrection, the beginning of an insurrection, or a “tendency toward insurrection,” we don’t know what other name to give it. Does it seem right to the USEC and the FIT to call it an “armed demonstration”? But it was not an armed demonstration; it is clearly an insurrection in progress. Lenin identified this dynamic as early as 1905: “the strike turned into a general strike and led to a massive demonstration... The insurrection began.”²¹

The blindness of the USEC and the FIT, which prevented them from recognizing that they were facing the onset of an insurrection, ultimately stems from their blindness regarding the COB: if the workers and the Bolivian people had not built an organization for the insurrection and for governing... the insurrection would not have existed.

THE SOCIAL INSURRECTION AND INSURRECTION “AS AN ART”

Gramar makes a correct distinction when he says that there is a “massive and unstoppable” insurrection and another insurrection that, “as conscious political action, is an art.” The first

is carried out by the struggling masses, who go so far as to contest control of the streets with the bourgeois regime; the one that, as we have already seen, Lenin defines as the transition from the general strike to demonstrations. The second is the concrete action of the armed detachments of those masses in struggle to seize political power.

The difference between us and Gramar is that, for us, the “massive and unstoppable” insurrection was already underway in Bolivia in March: a general strike, the miners’ armed occupation of La Paz, support from peasants and the poor, a complete crisis of the bourgeoisie, and the army’s paralysis and vacillation.

What was missing was carrying out the insurrection as a “conscious political action.” Specifically, this meant that the miners go to the barracks to win over a large part of the army’s rank and file to the revolutionary side; that, in this way, they improve their armament by adding rifles to the dynamite; that they reach out to factory workers, public employees, and students to arm small combat detachments together with them; and that, finally, they occupy the seat of government and the nerve centers of transport and communication.

“The soviets,” says Lenin, are necessary “to rally the masses and forge a fighting unity, but they are insufficient to directly organize the fighting forces”²². At the same time, it is necessary to have a military organization, “a direct organization of the forces,” “a combat organization... in the form of armed workers’ detachments.”

Returning to Bolivia, we must state clearly that the ten thousand armed miners who occupied La

Paz were already a military force for the insurrection, or at least an embryo of such a force. To them, the proposal should be made to move forward toward the seizure of power by force, toward the insurrection. That force should be strengthened, extended to the entire proletariat and the barracks, a concrete plan for the insurrection drawn up, and executed.

All of this, of course, without waiting a single minute for Lechín to change his position and declare himself in favor of the insurrection. The insurrection would take place even if the COB did not officially call for it. And then? Then, possibly, almost certainly, the insurgents would hand power over to the COB. To paraphrase Lenin: even though Lechín and company, who led the COB, were against the insurrection, if the armed workers seized power, they would do so “not against the COB, but for it.”

THE PROBLEM OF ARMAMENT

It was not for nothing that Lechín placed himself, for decades, at the head of the great revolutionary movements of the Bolivian proletariat in order to better hand them over to the class enemy. The old bureaucrat saw that an insurrection was brewing, said it was necessary... and that it could not be carried out because there were no weapons. Gramar shares Lechín’s view: for him, dynamite is merely “a tool of labor,” and “it was not dynamite that decided the situation in 1952, but an unstoppable insurrection.” Dubois said the same: “The Bolivian people are not armed.”

We agree with Lechín: no insurrection can succeed if the

issue of arming workers is not resolved. But we disagree with Gramar’s somewhat bureaucratic view of dynamite. If dynamite is used to extract ore, it is a “tool of labor”; if it is used to kill fascists and the bourgeoisie’s military, it is a weapon.

The miners with dynamite who occupied La Paz had already begun to arm themselves. This political and military fact is fundamental.

Even without dynamite and without anything else, it would have been enough for them to have begun organizing for physical struggle in the streets, and the insurrection would already be underway. Because, contrary to what Lechín said, armament is a product of the military organization of the insurrection and not a prerequisite.

Lenin recommended organizing the insurrection militarily by creating “volunteer groups of ten, five, and even three members... party members and non-party members, all linked by a common revolutionary task: the insurrection against the government... before obtaining weapons, regardless of the issue of arms”²³.

MILITIA AND ARMY

Regarding the other aspect of armament—the question of the army—Lenin and Trotsky subordinated it to the military organization of the insurrection. Lenin stated that “every truly popular movement inevitably produces... wavering among the troops,” but that their “switching sides” is not “a simple act, but the result of a genuine struggle to win over the army”²⁴. That struggle is impossible, according to Trotsky, without “the workers’ militia,” which, “with the support of the

entire class... must defeat, disarm, and terrorize the reactionary bandits and open the way for the workers to revolutionary fraternization with the army”²⁵.

In short, the rank and file of the army are not won over to the revolution solely or primarily by propaganda, but by the arming of the workers’ militia.

In Bolivia, revolutionary policy was framed in the same concrete, material way. It was necessary to develop the embryonic armed organization formed by the miners with their dynamite, extend it to factory workers and revolutionary students, occupy the streets, and march to the barracks to win over the soldiers.

Both the USEC and the FIT spoke in a propagandistic and superficial manner about arming the workers and the need for soldiers to join the revolutionary cause. But by failing to propose even concrete, practical measures to militarily organize the insurrection, they did nothing to arm the proletariat or win over the rank and file of the army.

HOW A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY IS FORGED

There is a controversy, sometimes explicit and almost always tacit, between two conceptions of how to forge a revolutionary party. One of them, which we might call “possibilist,” holds that the party is built by doing what is possible—that is, what its development and influence within the mass movement allow. Given the global situation, in which, for historical reasons, Trotskyist parties are

marginal and have no mass influence in any country, what is “possible” is engaging in trade unionism, commenting on and criticizing the opportunist mass parties, etc. But the course of events is fatally determined by “objective factors”—among which is the domination of the masses by bureaucratic apparatuses—and the small, marginal Trotskyist party can do nothing to change it.

This conception gives rise to serious distortions, both political and practical. In the political sphere, it leads to a situation in which, although it is sometimes possible to make accurate descriptions of a situation, those descriptions are not organized into clear, concrete, forceful, and precise slogans to act upon that reality and change it in favor of the revolution. In practice, the leaders and members of that party, having been taught that they can do nothing to change history, lack the boldness necessary to act on those rare occasions when they can do so—that is, during revolutionary crises.

The other view is the opposite: revolutionaries intervene in the class struggle as best they can to influence it and lead the proletariat to victory. It does not matter whether we already have the influence over the masses that allows us to change history or whether we do not yet have it. In all circumstances, we propose revolutionary, practical, and concrete lines of action to the working class and its vanguard.

We know that when the class struggle is not acute, we cannot impose our policies; they are “impossible.” We also know that,

even in revolutionary crises, for our policies to prevail, a minimum level of strength and organization is necessary; otherwise, they are “impossible.” Yet we follow Marx’s example, who, from the outside, proposed clear and concrete policies and measures to the revolutionaries of the Paris Commune without a single organized militant in Paris.

This conception of how to build a revolutionary party forges parties, leaders, and militants for revolutionary action, convinced that they can change history without limiting themselves to merely observing and commenting, as others do... or do not.

“Possibilism” is a cancer that prevents revolutionary intervention in any class struggle, even in the most defensive strike in the most stable country. But this cancer is deadly in acute revolutionary situations, where the “subjective factor” carries decisive weight. When the masses launch an assault against the old system and it teeters in its death throes, the action of a small revolutionary organization can take on objective significance by defining the situation as a revolutionary triumph.

POSSIBILISM AND BOLSHEVISM IN BOLIVIA

The Bolivian revolution lays bare the pernicious nature of the “possibilist” conception. Ultimately, both the USEC and the FIT acted on the conviction that the revolution’s victory was impossible, or at the very least that it did not depend on them. It was impossible for the only existing and recognized workers’ and mass organization to take power... because Lechín led it, because it

was a union and not a soviet, because the “left” did not unite in a front, because the masses were not armed... for whatever reason, but it was impossible. What was to be done? Wait... for the Trotskyist party to grow and win over the masses, for the left to unite, for soviets or something similar to emerge, for the masses to break with Lechín.

The working class and the masses had gone as far as they could on their own: they had completed 90% of the preparation for the insurrection. But our “possibilists” chanted in unison that an insurrection was not on the agenda... we had to wait.

They did not consider themselves capable of taking advantage of the exceptional circumstances of the revolution to act and change Bolivia's history.

However, in Bolivia, only 200 or 300 determined and daring revolutionary militants, through years of work, would have had to win over 50 to 100 mining activists to the correct revolutionary policy for the insurrection to unfold and triumph. For those 50 miners to tell the 10,000 occupying La Paz: “We must overthrow the government! Those who want to do so, form combat groups and start getting weapons! Let’s go to the barracks to win over the soldiers! Let’s go to the factories, the universities, and the neighborhoods to organize more combat groups! Let’s send a delegation to Oruro to tell the workers not to leave the government headquarters because, in La Paz, we’re going to do the same with the Palacio Quemado!” Only then was it possible—not certain, but very possible—for the Bolivian revolution to triumph. A party schooled in revolutionary

action could have done it. ■

NOTES

² **INPRECOR**, 4/15/85, pp. 3–7.

³ **Masas**, 3/21/85.

⁴ **Prensa Obrera**, 3/20/85.

⁵ Lenin, **Collected Works**, (Spanish edition) Vol. XIX, p. 220.

⁶ Trotsky, **Whither France?** (Spanish edition) Pluma, Buenos Aires, 1974, pp. 79–80 and 86.

⁷ Lenin, **Collected Works**, (Spanish edition) Vol. IX, p. 341.

⁸ See the POR-U Manifesto published in **INPRECOR** No. 194 and **Masas**, March 20, 1985.

⁹ **Intercontinental Press**, April 15, 1985.

¹⁰ **Masas**, March 17, 1985.

¹¹ **Prensa Obrera**, April 18, 1985.

¹² Trotsky, **The Crisis of the French Section**, Pathfinder, New York, 1977, p. 111.

¹³ Lenin, **Collected Works**, (Spanish edition) Vol. XI, p. 118.

¹⁴ Lenin, **Collected Works**, (Spanish edition) Vol. X, p. 237.

¹⁵ Trotsky, **The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany**,

(Spanish edition) Pluma, Buenos Aires, 1973, Vol. I, p. 41.

¹⁶ Lenin, **Collected Works**, (Spanish edition) Vol. XV, p. 343.

¹⁷ Lenin, **Collected Works**, (Spanish edition) Vol. XXV, pp. 297–298.

¹⁸ Trotsky, **The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany**, (Spanish edition) Vol. I, p. 139.

¹⁹ Trotsky, **Stalin: The Great Organizer of Defeats**, (Spanish edition) Distribuidora Baires, Buenos Aires, 1974, p. 198.

²⁰ Lenin, **Collected Works**, (Spanish edition) Vol. XXXI, p. 326.

²¹ Lenin, **Collected Works**, (Spanish edition) Vol. VIII, p. 67.

²² Lenin, **Collected Works**, Vol. XI, pp. 118–120.

²³ Trotsky, **Stalin**, Yunque, Buenos Aires, (Spanish edition) 1975, Vol. II, p. 63.

²⁴ Lenin, **Collected Works**, Vol. XI, p. 167.

²⁵ Trotsky, **Whither France?** p. 34.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION IN BOLIVIA

EDU ALMEDIA,
PSTU, LIT-CI

1952 — Miners, armed with dynamite, defeat the Bolivian army and overthrow the military and pro-imperialist government of Hugo Ballivián.

Without a revolutionary party, the working class does not seize power, and the government is assumed by the MNR (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement), a petty-bourgeois movement that, under Paz Estenssoro, Hernán Siles, and Juan Lechín Oquendo, manages to restore the army and the rest of the



bourgeois institutions. Over three consecutive governments, the MNR opened the doors to the imperialist recolonization of Bolivia, gave free rein to the bureaucratization of the COB and the unions, curtailed democratic freedoms, and massacred workers' and popular mobilizations.

1964 — The Armed Forces stage a preemptive coup d'état to prevent another popular uprising. In the crisis, the MNR is unable to control the situation. A

military junta led by General René Barrientos and Alfredo Ovando then takes power. Barrientos, vice president of the last government of Paz Estenssoro, was trained by the U.S. government in Panama, marking the beginning of one of the worst periods in the history of the Bolivian masses.

1965 — The COB called a general strike in protest against the expulsion from Lechín and restrictions on trade union freedoms, which led to the army's intervention in the mines, resulting in the arrest and expulsion of leaders. Thousands of workers were fired, and wages were frozen despite the rising cost of living. Barrientos signed a pact with the peasants, which earned him strong support from them.

1967 — Barrientos orchestrated the massacre of miners who resisted his government and suppressed university protests. Under orders from the U.S. embassy and at the hands of Barrientos, Che Guevara was executed.

1969 — Barrientos dies in an accident, and, in accordance with the constitution, Vice President Adolfo Siles Salinas takes office, only to be immediately overthrown in a coup d'état led by General Alfredo Ovando, who attempts to establish a populist government with a policy of national development and relative independence from imperialism. During his administration, oil is nationalized. The brutal colonization by U.S. imperialism, on the one hand, and the rise of the working class and the people, on the other, force Ovando to shift from a reactionary Bonapartist government with fascist tendencies (he was an accomplice to the crimes committed by Barrientos, including the massacre of the miners and the death of Che Guevara) to a sui generis Bonapartist government, in the sense given to it by Trotsky: "In

industrially backward countries, foreign capital plays a decisive role. Hence, the relative weakness of the national bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the national proletariat. This gives rise to special conditions of state power." The government oscillates between foreign and national capital, between the weak national bourgeoisie and the relatively powerful proletariat. This confers on the government a sui generis Bonapartist character, a distinct character. It rises, so to speak, above the classes. In fact, it can govern, at times as an instrument of foreign capital, controlling the proletariat with the chains of a police dictatorship, and at other times maneuvering with the proletariat and even going so far as to make concessions to it, thereby gaining the possibility of a certain independence from foreign capital. (Writings on Latin America, 1938)

1970 — The U.S. embassy attempts to defeat the revolutionary upsurge by fomenting a coup against Ovando, led by General Miranda. However, a powerful strike led by the COB thwarts the coup plans and ends it within 48 hours. A Kerenskyist government emerges, led by General Juan José Tórrez. A revolutionary stage begins.

The Fourth Congress of the COB adopts a resolution that states, in summary: *"We, the miners, declare that our historic mission today is to defeat imperialism and its native lackeys. We declare that our mission is to fight for socialism. We declare that we, the miners, are the revolutionary vanguard of the Bolivian working class. We assume the leading role in the revolution as the authentic representatives of national interests. The alliance of workers and peasants with the*

urban poor and all anti-imperialist forces is the guarantee of victory." At the conclusion of the Theses, the miners state: *"We, the mining workers, call for strengthening the unity of Latin American workers to build a better world. We call on the workers of our sister countries on the continent to unite around an independent workers' policy against imperialism and oligarchic reaction. This is the best guarantee for achieving the great Latin American homeland of which Martí and Bolívar dreamed. Today, as yesterday, our motto is: The emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves."*

1971 — On May 1, the "People's Assembly" was formed, organized by the COB and chaired by Juan Lechín. It was established with 223 delegates, representing the country's productive sectors and the working class (132 miners). The COB established itself as a real organ of power and a mechanism for taking over the government. It operated from the premises of the Legislative Branch. Tórrez offered the COB 50% of the government, a proposal that was rejected. However, the main leadership developed a strategy of power in favor of the working class. The U.S. embassy and business leaders planned a reactionary coup, and Tórrez, loyal to his class and the army, refused to hand over weapons to the COB to repel it.

On August 21, the military coup led by Colonel Hugo Bánzer is consolidated, bringing the revolutionary phase to a close. Miners and university students are massacred, and all political and union freedoms are restricted.

The country sinks into an ever-deepening recolonization; industry, agriculture, and other

sectors fail to develop despite the exceptional prices of tin and hydrocarbons—the basis of the national economy—due to intensified imperialist plunder, reflected in the colossal increase in foreign debt.

1976 — Workers' and popular resistance to Bánzer's plans takes hold, sparking a wave of strikes demanding an end to the dictatorship. In January, a strike begins at the MANACO shoe factory in Cochabamba, and despite solidarity from students and the working class, the dismissal of 900 workers cannot be prevented.

Just three days before the end of the year, four women miners, accompanied by their 14 children, arrived in La Paz. They were Domitila Chungara, Aurora de Lora, Angélica Flores, and Luzmila de Pimentel, the wives of mining activists who had been fired during the earlier strike. They began a hunger strike that spread across the country, demanding a general amnesty, the reinstatement of miners and other workers fired for political and union-related reasons, the recognition of unions, and the withdrawal of the army from mining centers.

1977 — The struggle culminates in a great victory: the dictatorship is defeated, yielding to all the demands made by the workers. The initiative passes into the hands of the working class.

1978 — Bánzer is forced to call elections, which are annulled due to a scandalous fraud. The ruling party's candidate, Pereda Asbún, refuses to resign and stages a military coup against Bánzer. The crisis worsens.

1979 — For a time, the bourgeoisie finds a way out by forming a civilian government

headed by Guevara Arce. However, in November, Natash Bush stages a bloody coup that is defeated by a massive 15-day general strike by the COB, and the president of the Senate, Lidia Gueiler, assumes power.

The COB holds its Fifth Congress. The peasant movement organizes itself outside the state's control, and the powerful Peasant Confederation, the CSUTCB, emerges and joins the COB for the first time.

1980 — New elections are held. The Popular Front (Democratic and Popular Unity – UDP), led by Siles Suazo (MNRI) and Jaime Paz Zamora (MIR), and the Communist Party emerged victorious. There was also strong support for Quiroga Santa Cruz's Socialist Party. However, the military prevents their election to Congress through a bloody coup d'état. The government of García Mesa and Arce Gómez is formed, with strong support from bourgeois drug-trafficking sectors and the Argentine dictatorship, though without the full backing of the U.S. embassy. It assassinates Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz and others. It imprisons and exiles Lechín, as well as political and union leaders. The historic COB headquarters is destroyed

1982 — Pressure from the working class made itself felt. In what became known as "Red September," a wave of strikes and demonstrations brought down the military dictatorship, which had passed from Mesa to Torrelio and, finally, to Vildoso. The mining district of Huanuni launched an indefinite general strike that quickly spread throughout the country. The miners were followed by workers in Cochabamba, La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí. A new

revolutionary phase began, and in October a power vacuum emerged. Power was within the workers' grasp, but the bourgeoisie, with the collaboration of the main leaders of the COB and the UDP, convened the Congress that elected Siles Suazo as president and Jaime Paz Zamora as vice president.

1983 — A Kerenskyist government emerges, unable to resolve the country's problems due to its commitment to imperialism. Strikes and road blockades paralyze the government. The COB becomes a dual power body that centralizes all struggles.

1984 — The 6th COB Congress is held; despite formally ratifying the socialist theses of 1971, the majority declaration comes out "in favor of defending and preserving the democratic situation," thus refusing to take up the working class and peasantry's struggle for power.

1985 — A 16-day general strike organized by the COB puts the government of Siles Suazo on the ropes. Ten thousand miners armed with dynamite occupy the capital, La Paz, while the army, divided and hesitant, does not dare to repress them. Once again, power is within the workers' grasp.

But the bourgeoisie manages to defeat the movement through an electoral trap. Neither Lechín, the historic leader of the COB, nor the Communist Party, nor the POR, nor any other working-class political force represented in the COB wanted to lead the overthrow of Siles and impose a workers' government, which would be centered on the power of the COB. Disoriented, the masses turned to the elections and voted overwhelmingly for the bourgeois parties. Through blatant fraud, the reactionary government of Víctor

Paz Estenssoro came to power, supported by the bourgeoisie as a whole (including the MIR) and by imperialism.

1986 — Paz Estenssoro launched the worst contemporary recolonization attack against Bolivia and its working-class gains, and succeeded in bringing the revolutionary period to a close. He implemented a savage economic plan (Supreme Decree 21060). In addition to increasing the foreign debt, subjugation was intensified through the privatization of state-owned enterprises.

His success lay in the dismissal of 30,000 mining workers, 18,000 factory workers, 2,000 bank employees, and tens of thousands of state employees.

1987 — In the midst of the reactionary period, the 7th Congress of the COB is held. The once-powerful COB is going through the worst of its crises; however, in its weakness, it settles scores with Lechín, whom it expels. Reyes, of the Communist Party, takes over the leadership.

1989 — In the national elections, the three parties representing neoliberalism vie for the top spots: MNR, ADN, and MIR. In Congress, with Bánzer's support, Jaime Paz Zamora is elected president. The policy of recolonization continues. The 8th COB Congress expels the communists and the historic leadership of the peasant union movement, headed by Genaro Flores.

1990 — The resistance of the workers' and popular movement becomes fragmented. Nevertheless, it manages to halt the handover of the Uyuni salt flats to transnational corporations. However, the setback in the class struggle leaves its mark on the

COB leadership, which increasingly shifts to the right.

1993 — New national elections: Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (known as Goni), leader of the MNR, wins amid allegations of corruption and fraud. Elected president by Congress, he launches a new offensive against workers, fires two thousand railway workers, implements reforms to social security, education, and “popular participation,” and, before leaving office, passes the Hydrocarbons Law, which legitimizes the theft of the country’s vast gas wealth in favor of transnational corporations.

1994 — Goni, a direct agent of the U.S. Embassy, launches an attack on the coca growers with his “New Dawn” plan. Peasant resistance erupts from the struggle of coca-growing peasants in the Chapare region. This resistance is led by coca grower leader Evo Morales, who was arrested for these actions. Resistance also arises against the sale of gas and against transportation companies, and these movements are defeated.

1997 — Goni’s term ends with a bloody massacre of miners in Amaya Pampa and Capasirca, near Potosí. In the national elections, running on an anti-previous-government platform, Hugo Bánzer wins. He is elected to Congress with the support of Jaime Paz Zamora and populist parties. However, the new government’s strategy is to destroy the coca growers’ movement, which is confronting the imperialists’ bloody plans for coca eradication. The peasant party, the MAS, led by Evo Morales, gains strength and already has four members of parliament.

2000 — In April, a victorious uprising erupts in Cochabamba

against the presence of the transnational corporation Bechtel, which sought to privatize water. The reactionary phase ends, and the revolutionary phase clearly begins. The state’s crisis deepens; the police mutiny; the state of siege is defeated. Once again, the question of power takes center stage in the class struggle. However, the 12th COB Congress does not reflect this change, as it retains the pro-government leadership. In September, new mobilizations erupted, mainly in the rural Chapare region and the Altiplano, led by Felipe Quispe (Mallku).

2001 — New strikes exacerbate the government’s crisis and push it to the brink of collapse. Bánzer, gravely ill, hands over power to Tuto Quiroga, the vice president. Quiroga manages to resolve the crisis through open collaboration with the leaderships of the COB and the CSUTCB, including Morales and Quispe, thereby making an electoral solution viable.

2002 — National elections, victory for Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. The rise of the masses is reflected, albeit distorted, in the massive vote for the MAS, which only failed to win the elections due to scandalous fraud. Congress elects Goni as president, against Evo.

2003 — Year of the most important revolutions: in February, following a police mutiny, the masses defeat a government “tax.” The regime leaves more than thirty people dead. Goni is a political corpse. The masses take the political initiative, launching strikes and blockades. The urban working class enters the scene.

The 13th COB Congress, in

August, concludes its proceedings with a victory after defeating the pro-government leadership. Jaime Solares is elected and leads mobilizations against the sale of gas and against the FTAA.

In September, the struggle intensifies; massacres occur in Warisata, prompting an expanded plenary session of the COB that declares a general strike under the slogan “Out with Goni.”

In October, the great uprising took place, overthrowing the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. The question of power arises clearly; once again, the COB regains its influence as the organ of power for the masses. The toll is 80 dead and more than 400 wounded. The epicenter of the struggle is the city of El Alto.

The bourgeoisie and imperialism, with the support of the majority leaderships of the mass movement, diverted the course of the ongoing workers’ and socialist revolution toward a constitutional solution, with Carlos Mesa assuming the vice presidency.

In 2005, a new wave of protests against Carlos Mesa (who refused to nationalize hydrocarbons) also forced his resignation.

2005 — The revolutionary energy that threatened to dissolve the bourgeois state was channeled through the electoral route. The Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), led by coca grower leader Evo Morales, presented itself as the only viable institutional alternative to pacify the country. In the December 2005 elections, Morales capitalized on the discontent and won with a historic 53.7% of the vote. This electoral victory served as a diversion from the insurrectionary process: the struggle for power in the streets

was transformed into the management of the existing bourgeois state apparatus.

As a result of this rise, channeled toward bourgeois democracy, Evo had the longest-lasting government of all the class-conciliation governments in Latin America, serving three consecutive terms (2005–2019).

Under the pressure of that rise, the mines were renationalized, and a Constituent Assembly was established, which, among other achievements, decreed a plurinational state in the country, a long-standing aspiration of the indigenous peoples.

However, like other class-conciliation governments, Evo's government governed for the bourgeoisie and multinationals, making some concessions to the masses.

He took advantage of the commodities boom to make some concessions to the mass movement, such as the Juancito Pinto Bonus (to reduce school dropout rates), the Juana Azurduy Bonus (for pregnant women), and the Renta Dignidad (an old-age pension), which reduced poverty and stimulated the domestic market.

At the same time, Evo guaranteed huge profits for multinational corporations. He didn't just govern in tandem with U.S. multinationals. He also facilitated the entry of Chinese imperialism into Bolivia, handing over Bolivia's lithium reserves to a Chinese multinational.

With the end of the commodities boom, Bolivia entered an economic decline, and the erosion of Evo's government intensified. He attempted to cling to power, even going so far as to refuse to accept the result of a 2016

referendum that barred him from reelection.

2019: In the 2019 elections, there were numerous allegations of fraud. Taking advantage of the political crisis, a right-wing coup overthrew Evo Morales and ushered in the interim government of Jeanine Áñez, who later attempted to cling to power.

2020 – A massive mobilization defeated the coup in August 2020; through a roadblock that paralyzed the country, the government was forced to set a date for elections.

In October 2020, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) returned to power through the ballot box. Luis Arce Catacora, former Minister of Economy under Evo Morales's administration, won the election with 55.1% of the vote, underscoring the population's rejection of the right-wing coup.

But the economic decline worsened, and the Arce administration quickly lost support due to new neoliberal policies. A split emerged within the MAS, with a fierce confrontation between Evo and Arce over who would be the candidate in the upcoming elections. This ultimately led to the MAS's split.

2025—In the 2025 elections, Arce received 2.48% of the vote, and Evo was unable to run, resulting in low voter turnout. The winner was Rodrigo Paz, who campaigned on a platform of “reconciliation” between Arce's candidacy and that of the far right, led by former President Jorge Quiroga.

Paz took office in November 2025. In December, he implemented a neoliberal mega-decree (5503) that eliminated fuel subsidies (with an 86% increase in gasoline prices and a 160%

increase in diesel prices), froze public-sector wages, cut government spending, and deregulated the economy to open strategic resources to multinational capital (including the contested lithium).

2026: A massive mobilization of over 500,000 people, called by the COB, forced the government to back down, inflicting its first defeat.

In March, Paz attended a meeting in Miami with Trump and the far-right governments of Latin America (including Milei, Bukele, Noboa, Kast, and others) that formed the “Shield of the Americas,” a military alliance enabling U.S. intervention to “combat narco-terrorism” in Latin America.

The government continued to attack workers and provoke increasingly large sectoral mobilizations. On May 1, the COB convened a cabildo (popular assembly), which declared an indefinite general strike and called for peasant roadblockades. ■

BOLIVIA: COB LEADERSHIP NEGOTIATES AND BETRAYS MOVEMENT; GOVERNMENT DECLARES STATE OF EMERGENCY

AUTOR DO TEXTO
9 DE JUNHO, 2026

After 49 days of one of the largest mobilizations in recent years, the Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB) leadership participated in a roundtable discussion with Rodrigo Paz's government on June 18. They abandoned the demand for Paz's resignation, which had been approved at previous national plenary sessions. The COB presented itself as the representative of all the mobilized sectors and made the release of those detained a condition for continuing the negotiations. However, just one day later, on June 19, the COB leadership signed an agreement with the government that did not guarantee the release of those detained.

This decision lacked the mandate and approval of the rank-and-file members who have sustained the struggle. In fact, COB rank-and-file workers and miners had already significantly reduced their participation in the protests. Meanwhile, peasant and indigenous organizations have continued to carry out most of the roadblocks and maintain pressure on the government. Neither the Tupac Katari Federation nor the Single Trade Union Confederation of Bolivian Peasant Workers (CSUTCB) participated at the negotiating table. Both organizations denounced the lack of consultation and maintained their pressure tactics. The COB leadership made the decision to negotiate, disregarding the sacrifices of thousands of protesters and arrogating to itself a right to represent them that it no longer exercised in practice. This political shift undermined the struggle at a critical moment when the government was facing its greatest crisis. It fostered division within the movement and

opened the door to a new repressive offensive against the popular movement.

PRELIMINARY AGREEMENTS WITH THE MINERS

The COB leadership and the state-owned mining sector leaders reached agreements with the government before the peasant and indigenous organizations could discuss the direction of the mobilization collectively. On June 17 and 18, the miners of Colquiri and Huanuni—who constitute the most important sector of the working class and hold significant influence in the COB's decision-making bodies—reached agreements with the executive branch before the labor federation signed the general agreement and officially called for the lifting of the blockades. In other words, the COB leadership clearly created conditions to ensure there would be no challenges from its main base.

For weeks, workers, popular sectors, peasants, and indigenous people have maintained road blockades and held demonstrations. They have faced repression, shortages, and enormous economic sacrifices. The rank and file's strength had put the government on the ropes. However, while the peasant and indigenous sectors maintained most of the blockades and demanded a collective discussion of next steps, the COB leadership failed to expand the movement. They made no attempt to unite the factory, mining, and teaching sectors with the popular, indigenous, and peasant movements. Instead, they chose to channel the strength of the roadblocks toward negotiation and demobilization. They prioritized the agreements

reached by their main working-class base and acted without a mandate from the mobilized sectors as a whole.

THE COB'S AGREEMENT WITH THE GOVERNMENT DOES NOT GUARANTEE THE RELEASE OF PRISONERS OR ADDRESS ANY IMMEDIATE DEMANDS. IT MERELY GRANTS THE GOVERNMENT A 90-DAY DEADLINE

The agreement's terms reveal the true nature of the negotiations. The extent of the COB leadership's capitulation was made clear in its handling of the detainees. Just two days before the signing, the union federation had affirmed that the release of the prisoners was a prerequisite for moving forward with the dialogue. The federation stated that without this "first step" by the government, any agreement would be viewed as a betrayal by the rank and file. However, the final document does not guarantee the release of any detainees, set deadlines, or provide for the withdrawal of charges or closure of legal proceedings. Instead, the agreement establishes a commission composed of the government, the COB, and the Public Prosecutor's Office to "facilitate the release" and review cases individually.

None of the main demands of the mobilization received an immediate response. The government was granted 90 days to study the demands and draft proposals without committing to resolving the economic crisis or addressing demands regarding wages, food supplies, employment, and living conditions.

Essentially, the COB leadership gave the government time to reorganize politically and

regain the initiative.

PEASANT AND INDIGENOUS GRASSROOTS GROUPS REJECT THE AGREEMENT

The agreement was rejected by numerous peasant and Indigenous groups, who criticized the COB leadership's decision as a betrayal of the movement and denounced not having been consulted. Grassroots organizations argue that abandoning pressure tactics disregards the sacrifices of thousands of protesters and breaks the unity agreement forged during nearly seven weeks of struggle.

Peasant and Indigenous organizations were among the main driving forces behind the national mobilization. Their participation in roadblocks, marches, and clashes with repressive forces was crucial to sustaining the movement. Therefore, excluding these sectors from strategic decisions reflects a profound crisis of representation within the COB leadership.

The resistance of the rank and file shows that the struggle is not over. The issue is the leadership's decision to negotiate without a mandate from the people who kept the mobilization going in the streets and on the highways.

THE GOVERNMENT EXPLOITED THE DIVISION CAUSED BY THE COB AND DECLARED A STATE OF EMERGENCY

The COB's decision to demobilize and divide the movement was immediately exploited by the government. As soon as the executive branch regained political maneuvering room, it declared a state of emergency, expanding the state's repressive powers and enabling

greater restrictions on democratic freedoms.

The government intends to use the state of emergency to reestablish state authority, contain new protests, and discipline sectors that remain mobilized. This offensive confirms that the COB's negotiations did not lead to a favorable outcome for workers and rural communities. On the contrary, the demobilization has weakened their capacity to resist and has facilitated the executive branch's repressive measures.

Even before the state of emergency is brought before the assembly for approval, news reports indicate that military forces are being deployed to various regions of the country, specifically to roadblocks. There is also a report of the persecution and attempted capture of movement leaders.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY IS NOW MORE NECESSARY THAN EVER

The government of Rodrigo Paz's declaration of a state of emergency marks a new escalation in the repressive offensive against the popular movement. Through this measure, the government seeks to grant itself greater power to dismantle mobilizations, criminalize protests, and ensure the intervention of repressive forces against peasants and indigenous peoples who continue to fight and maintain roadblocks. Meanwhile, the COB leadership's betrayal—abandoning the demand for the government's resignation, sitting down to negotiate, and calling for an end to pressure tactics—weakens the resistance and leaves mobilized sectors more vulnerable to state attacks.

Under these conditions,

international solidarity is essential. Workers', popular, peasant, Indigenous, student, and human rights organizations throughout Latin America and the world must speak out against the state of emergency, denounce any attempt at repression, and actively support the Bolivian people's struggle. In the face of the isolation that the government and conciliatory leadership seek to impose, we must strengthen a broad international campaign of solidarity with those confronting austerity policies and hunger.

WE MUST BUILD AN ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP

These 49 days of struggle have demonstrated an enormous fighting spirit among workers, peasants, and Indigenous peoples. They have also exposed the limitations of a leadership that, when the government was at its weakest, chose to prop it up through negotiations and concessions.

This experience teaches a fundamental lesson: no favorable outcome for the exploited and oppressed can depend on leadership that subordinates the struggle to agreements with governments in power. However, due to its historical and social composition, the Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB) remains a potential space where the organized strength of the country's working class, peasants, and popular masses is expressed. Therefore, it can serve as a basis for an alternative power structure for the oppressed majorities. However, this potential can only be realized under conditions of workers' democracy and genuine grassroots control over its leadership.

As long as the COB leadership

remains detached from collective decision-making and lacks effective oversight from those sustaining the mobilizations, it will continue to play a mediating and containment role, even during critical moments.

Thus, changing the leadership's names is not enough; a new leadership must be built that is truly democratic, revolutionary, socialist, and independent of the government and business sectors. This new leadership must answer exclusively to the sovereign decisions of the mobilized rank-and-file.

The immediate task is to reorganize the resistance, strengthen coordination among workers, peasants, and indigenous peoples, and establish new forums for deliberation from the grassroots up. The strength demonstrated by the national mobilization still exists. What is needed is consistent leadership willing to carry the struggle through to the end and forge a path forward for Bolivian workers and peoples.



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