

# Bolivia: Foundation of a new Workers' Party

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The idea of an independent workers' party has existed within the Bolivian working class movement for a long time but it was finally given shape with the founding of the ?Partido de los Trabajadores? (PT, Workers' Party) at a Congress in Huanuni, Bolivia's ?Tin Capital?, on March 7 and 8 this year.

Why has a big part of the working class broken with the government of Evo Morales and turned towards building a party to the left of the ?Movimiento al Socialismo? (MAS, Movement towards Socialism)?

## Conflicts with the Morales Government

After his inauguration as President in 2006, Evo Morales presented himself as ?anti-imperialist? and ?multi-ethnic?. He benefited from his influence in the working class, which was gained through the participation and support of the MAS for the unlimited general strike of 2003, itself a response to the death of 7 demonstrators in the course of a struggle over Bolivian natural gas. From 2003 to 2005, the MAS, under Morales, led a mass movement against neo-liberalism, the imperialist looting of the country and in favour of the rights of the indigenous peoples. The movement used demonstrations and mass blockades to force the government of Mesa to resign and call new elections. In these, the MAS then gained an absolute majority of votes.

From the beginning of Morales' term of office, the internal contradictions of this populist movement and the politics of the president, whose ?socialism? only ever meant trying to find a balance between the interests of the employers, the workers and peasants, became obvious. For example, in April 2006, a strike at Lloyd Aereo Boliviano (LAB) was broken by the police and army ? but this did not immediately undermine the popularity of Morales among the masses.

In 2010, there were further workers' strikes against the government of Morales and this led to a proposal for a ?reform? that aimed to limit the right to strike. In response, there was important organised resistance against these increasing attacks on the working class. In December 2011, an increase in the price of gas, the ?Gazolinazo?, sparked more continued struggles, above all in La Paz and El Alto, which forced the government to withdraw the price increase.

In September 2011, there was another country wide movement, this time against the building of a motorway. A protest march by the affected indigenous population was brutally attacked by the government. In reaction to that repression, there were solidarity actions across the whole country, based on workers and the youth.

## Getting the ball rolling...

At its conference in September 2011, and in the light of the recent struggles with the government, the Bolivian miners' union (FSTMB) adopted a resolution which raised the question of an independent workers'

party. This resolution was also adopted by the conference of the COB (the main trade union confederation) in January 2012, and this sparked a discussion about an independent workers' party throughout the Bolivian trade union and working class movements.

Even that was not a completely new development in relations between the unions and Morales and his government. Already, in 2005, even before Morales got into power, as a revolutionary crisis was developing in Bolivia, the COB leadership had talked about the creation of a 'political instrument?'. On the one hand, this was to take into account the call for an independent workers' party and a left alternative to the MAS but, on the other, they were determined to keep it as vague as possible. Nothing developed out of the initiative and, in the years after 2005, the COB and FSTMB leadership subordinated themselves politically to the MAS and the Morales government.

The continued struggles since 2005, however, increased the pressure of the rank and file on the bureaucracy, which therefore had to resurrect the plan for building a workers' party. At the same time, the trade union leaderships saw the campaign as a means for increasing pressure on Morales to force him to make more concessions to them.

Under this pressure from the rank and file, the trade union bureaucracy had to organise the founding congress on 7th and 8th March in Huanuni. This has to be seen not only as a big success for the Bolivian working class but also as a first step in the breaking of a big section of organised workers from the MAS and the government of Morales.

? and hitting the target.

Some 1,300 delegates from 100 organisations attended the first congress. Besides the different trade unions of the COB and parts of the radical left, there were also delegations from rural organisations and the indigenous movements. However, the formation of the party under the leadership of the trade union bureaucracy inevitably brought with it the risk that this process could stop half way and end up in a reformist party or even in nothing at all.

This danger could already be seen at the first congress where the questions of class independence and internal democracy were discussed. The bureaucracy argued in favour of a pluralistic party with the Brazilian PT as a model. This would have meant the construction of an openly reformist workers' party, which would give the working class a voice within the political system but would ultimately act within the framework of bourgeois relations. On the question of internal democracy, they argued against the right to form tendencies and factions to ensure the power of the bureaucratic apparatus within the PT. Fortunately, the progressive forces were able to repel these first attacks, at least in part. The congress expressed itself in favour of class independence and against taking the Brazilian PT as a model. The right to form tendencies was also adopted, although the congress did not adopt the right to form a faction or a political current.

In short, the question of the direction in which the Bolivian PT will develop remained, and remains, open; will it degenerate into a reformist party under the pressure of the bureaucratic apparatus or will the rank and file be able to form it into a party of class struggle or even into a revolutionary party?

Programmatic cornerstones

Besides all the organisational questions, the question of what programme the party should offer the Bolivian working class is also posed. The programme adopted in Huanuni contains points and demands that address important current needs and tries to solve them in the interests of the working class. This is

particularly true of the demands for 'nationalisation of the banks without compensation', 'nationalisation of the mining industry and all natural resources' as well as 'expropriation of major land holdings'. These radical demands are linked to the demand for 'collective workers' control' and thus raise the question of power. This question is answered by the demand that the working class should not only take governmental office but also state power into its own hands.

### Perspectives for the PT

That a new party should not be judged solely in the light of its proclamations has been shown by developments since the first congress. Although that was a big success with its 1,300 delegates, the second congress, held in Oruro on 28th-29th June, was attended by only 300 delegates. The provisional leadership was rightly criticised for its bad preparation of the congress and, in particular, for its failure to intervene into on-going struggles to raise the PT's political profile and to gain more support. The 15 days of struggle in May, organised by the COB, would have been a good point for an intervention by the new party, but the opportunity was not taken. This shows that the 'provisional leadership', basically the trade union bureaucracy, wants to establish the PT just as a parliamentary arm for the COB that can give it more weight in relation to the government. The bureaucrats are clearly not interested in building the PT as an activist party of struggle that intervenes into class struggles with its own programme, independent of the COB-leadership.

### How to proceed?

None of this alters the fact that the foundation of the PT is a major step forward for the working class. However, it does show that the party can only become an instrument for the oppressed if a political struggle is fought against the trade union bureaucracy. At the same time, the criticisms of the second congress, and the large opposition against the attempts by the bureaucracy to pull the party to the right, show that progressive forces do exist within the party.

The struggle against the bureaucracy is, therefore, one of the main issues for revolutionaries within the PT. They need to fight against any rightward development of the party and to prepare the progressive forces for a betrayal by the bureaucracy and for a break from it. Besides that, revolutionaries need to argue for the highest forms of workers' democracy: absolute freedom for propaganda, the right for separate meetings of all socially oppressed groups (women, youth, indigenous peoples and national minorities), and for the full right to form tendencies or factions.

However, to make sure the building of the party does not stop halfway, to use the foundation of the PT for the creation of a revolutionary workers' party, a revolutionary action programme needs to be drawn up that can bring together all class-struggle forces and intervene in the political life of the country.

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