Bolivia: revolution and the shadow of civil war

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Bolivia is in revolutionary situation. Strikes, blockades shutdowns by workers and peasants, right wing threats of civil war and of the secession of whole provinces all bear witness to this. So too does over two months of paralysis of the Constituent Assembly ? a sovereign body elected to redraft the country?s constitution and decide issues such as the ownership of the land and Bolivia?s rich oil and gas reserves. This turmoil, where the forces of counter-revolution are mobilising, is a sign of increasing class polarisation. The question for the working class and poor in town and countryside is how to break the logjam; how to decisively shift the balance of forces against the right; how to take power. The reformist policy of Evo Morales and his government of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) is being pulled apart by the real forces of class power and class struggle. The central policies of Morales ? land reform and the oil and gas nationalisations, both to be legislated through a Constituent Assembly (CA) ? are in serious trouble.

The CA was convened on 6 August in the old capital of Sucre. Morales had already conceded to the right that all measures had to be passed by a two-thirds majority ? a grossly undemocratic measure, aimed at thwarting the will of the workers, poor peasants and indigenous communities, who look to it to meet their demands for fundamental change. However, at the beginning of September the voting system was changed to a simple majority, with the proviso that the final draft of the constitution still had to be approved by a two-thirds majority. The debate in the CA on the issue left one activist from the social movements in a coma after fighting with right wing delegates.

The result was a walkout of the Assembly by the right. Recent concessions to them, such as reinstating the two-thirds majority rule for votes on regional autonomy, have come to nothing. At the end of September the right also objected to the CA taking powers over the government and courts ? a move backed by Morales. This led to more walkouts and fistfights.

The landed and financial oligarchs based in the four richest provinces of Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni and Pando responded on 8 September with their own road blockades and business strike. In Santa Cruz city centre this was total but in the shantytowns and the countryside the masses defied the oligarchs. The right wing also deployed the armed thugs of the Crucenista Youth Union, which has a history of racist provocations against indigenous people, and clearly has a proto-fascist character. But they were met by armed supporters of Morales and the MAS.

Further polarisation in the rich provinces has taken place with parallel civic committees to those of the Santa Cruz ? or Cruzeño ? bourgeoisie being set up by MAS supporters. Two weeks after the shutdown, pro-MAS forces blockaded the roads to Santa Cruz in revenge for the oligarchs? blockage of the land reform bill.
The right’s provocations are definitely aimed at preparing the overthrow of the government. It was reported that after Morales’ election the military high command met with top civil servants, businessmen and leaders of the Podemos party to work out a new constitution for when Morales fell, which they expected within a few months. Podemos (Poder Democratico y Social) is a right wing party, formally known as Acción Democrática Nacionalista, founded by former president and dictator Hugo Banzer. Jorge Quiroga, whom Morales defeated for the presidency in 2005, now leads it. No doubt more such meetings have occurred since.

But rather than resolutely exposing and mobilising against the plotting and sabotage of the right, the government of Morales and the MAS have been indecisive and conciliatory. The nationalisation of the gas and oil industry, announced in May, has fallen far short of full nationalisation. The measure simply increased taxation on the oil companies and allowed for the state oil company to buy a 51% share in the foreign ones. It is now entangled in negotiations, legal challenges and repeated postponements.

The Brazilian government of Lula, who Morales fawningly refers to as his ?big brother?, has blocked the takeover of the Bolivian refineries owned by Petrobras (the Brazilian state oil company) and curtly rejected Bolivia’s request for a fairer price for its gas. Again Morales caved in.

As a result his radical energy minister Andres Soliz ? who wanted to take greater control of the industry ? found himself blocked by Morales and the vice president Álvaro García Linera and was forced to resign. Soliz denounced ?a sector of the government? that did not want things to get done. Unfortunately this ?sector? included the president, Evo Morales.

Morales has also faced down strikes from transport workers over fuel hikes, miners fighting for state investment in the mines and teachers demanding better pay and conditions. Education minister Felix Patzi denounced a recent teachers? strike in La Paz, and supported parents marching on strikers? houses. He also attacked the teachers for being politically motivated ? in their leadership were some left wing critics of Morales.

Over the summer, the government sent in police to attack peasants in the Movement without Roofs and Movement of the Landless (MST) who had taken over land, not waiting for Morales? land decree ? a pathetic half-measure that will not meet the burning needs of the rural poor. It calls only for nationalising land not presently being used by the big land owners ? the latifundista ? rather than seizing all the estates and ranches and giving them to the peasants and agricultural labourers.

Most recently bloody clashes, with nine dead and over 40 injured, have taken place at the big Huanuni mine near Oruro, between ?cooperative? miners, trying to take over the richer seams from miners employed by state-company Comibol. The cooperativistas have a powerful ally in the Minister of Mines, Walter Villarroel. The state miners? union, FSTMB, and the Bolivian trades union confederation, COB, have complained about the delays in the promised development of the mines.

There is still hostility and obstruction from parts of the government towards Morales, to the extent that he continues to base himself on the popular movements and talks about handing Bolivia back to the masses and the indigenous people. Linera is seen as more of a gradualist social democrat but even he made a speech in September calling on the masses to arm themselves and defend the government against the oligarchs.

The government party, the MAS, is composed of many social movements from the town and the country, indigenous, peasant, worker and intellectual. The multi-class nature of the MAS, which makes it a more of a coalition than a party, has led to its members denouncing each other in the press. In La Paz recently
there was even a fight among members at a meeting where the police had to be called. In this it has similarities with Venezuela, where the Bolivarian movement is composed of revolutionaries, radicals and people who want to create a modern capitalist economy.

Meanwhile, the trade union federation, the COB, seems to have swung more in Morales? favour at its conference in June. It replaced its left wing leader Jaime Solares, who earlier in the year had denounced Morales as a traitor and tried to organise a general strike against him.

All of this shows that the populist government of Evo Morales is caught between the plots and threats of the right and the masses? demands for radical change. The right is preparing an offensive, either the secession of the four richest states ? taking with them nearly all the country?s oil and gas reserves ? or even a military coup against the government. Indeed one could lead to the other ? with the military intervening to ?protect the unity of the country?.

The workers and peasants must be prepared to fight for their own interests and not rely on the misleadership of Morales and the MAS. Given their record of self-organisation, in popular assembles, in bodies like the Federation of Neighborhood Councils (Fejuve) and the Regional Workers Central (COR) in El Alto this is a real possibility. The burning issue is one of revolutionary leadership.

Morales acts as a bonapartist figure, focusing the aspiration of the masses on himself, delaying and demobilising the masses. If he gets away with this and the mass movement declines, then the right will move. The alternative is to launch a mass offensive to force the measures that can meet the needs of the workers and poor, expropriate and disarm the right and open the road to a workers? and peasants? government. Burning issues in this mobilisation can be summed up in a programme of action:

* The masses who elected their delegates to the CA must now ensure that it becomes a weapon of social revolution, not a blocking mechanism for the right. The workers and peasants should demand that all decisions be passed by simple majority ? no more two-thirds rule ? and that the CA be sovereign over the government, senate and courts.

* Demand Morales carries out the total nationalisation of the gas and oil industry with no compensation and put it under the control of the workers. Other industries such as mining should also be nationalised under workers? control.

* Land to the peasants now. All the estates, ranches and agribusinesses must be expropriated. The movements of poor peasants and landless should be supported in their occupations and takeovers of the land.

* Last year?s revolutionary offensive was led by the El Alto Fejuve, a soviet-type body; this must be relaunched and similar delegate councils be set up around the country to coordinate the various mass movements of the workers and peasants. These councils must exercise control over the delegates to the CA, including recalling and replacing them immediately if they fail to support revolutionary measures or conciliate to the right. The councils can also become an alternative centre of power and government, one that can form the basis of a new type of state ? a workers? state.

* Arm the masses in workers? and popular militias and win over the rank and file of the army. Such militias need to be built to defend workers and peasants against the attacks of right wing thugs, such as the Crucenista Youth Union, the police and the army. Furthermore, appeals must be made to sections of the army to take the side of the masses and remove their officers and the high command ? nest of a future coup.
* The workers need their own party, not a populist amalgam like the MAS. The COB, which debated the idea of a party again at this year’s conference, should immediately convene a congress to launch a party. It should have a revolutionary socialist programme and draw its support from the unions, the poor peasants and the social movements.

* Such a party needs to organise for power – a mass armed insurrection – to install a workers' and poor peasants' government. This government should rest upon councils of workers and peasants.

Bolivia is in the midst of a revolutionary situation but this cannot last for ever. Morales is making concessions now to the right, now to the masses. The right is preparing to bring down the government and crush the struggles of the masses. The only way to defeat this is for the workers to overthrow capitalism and start the revolutionary socialist transformation of Bolivia, spreading the revolution on a continental scale and creating a federation of workers' states in Latin America.

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