Bolivian Revolution of 1952 - polemic with the POR

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by Stuart King

Roberto Gramar complains in his reply that the impact of the degeneration of the Fourth International ?does not even figure? in our analysis of the POR. He goes on to say that the POR was far from being a united party in April 1952 implying that any ?mistakes? of the POR could be put down to the evil influence of the ?Pabloites”. If the comrade had read our theses in ?The Death Agony of the Fourth International? dealing with the POR in 1952, he would have seen that we indeed set the positions and mistakes of the POR within the context of the triumph of Pablo?s perspectives within the International Secretariat.

To say this however, does not absolve the POR?s leadership, and Guillermo Lora as one of its principal leaders, from their responsibility. Firstly, there is no evidence, and Gramar provides us with none, that Lora disagreed with or opposed the line of the International, even partially, until the end of 1953. Indeed, most of the quotes demonstrating the POR?s opportunistic positions on the MNR, worker ministers etc, come from the POR?s 10th Congress in June 1953, the positions that Lora defended against the Pabloites? demand for further liquidation. Secondly, if these mistakes, committed by a young party, under the influence of a centrist International leadership, had been corrected or criticised by Lora or the POR in retrospect, this would be one thing. But we are talking of positions which were repeated in 1970-1 with equally disastrous results, and are defended by the POR Masas (and the European representatives of the FIT) - today.

All the evidence points to the POR, even before 1952, as failing to distinguish itself clearly from, and intransigent opposition to, the bourgeois nationalist MNR, and in particular, from its left wing. It certainly did not organise itself in terms of membership or structure as a democratic centralist combat party. Referring to 1950, Lora describes the POR as existing ?more as a set of ideas than as a tightly knit organisation”1, yet it is precisely in the successful use of the united front tactic with other parties, that a politically homogenous and centralised party is essential. From the ?Theses of Pulacayo? on, Lora demonstrates a chronic ?processism? in his approach to the winning of the masses to a revolutionary perspective. The theses, themselves unclear on the question of government, which were adopted by the miners union at its 1946 Congress, are endowed with virtually magical properties in maintaining and embodying the ?revolutionary consciousness? of the miners.

Indeed, the very idea of concentrating upon getting trade union bodies to adopt general programmatic theses is a very curious one indeed. The task of strike and factory committees, unions, union federations and in the whole first phase of their existence, soviets, are as combat organs of the proletariat. In this period they have the character of a united front - agreed unity in action, freedom and diversity of political discussion within them. For this reason revolutionaries try to win them to concrete actions or plans of action, and in that process seek to maximise the party?s representation in these bodies. This is a struggle for leadership. It is or should be no surprise that winning the Bolivian miners union to the Pulacayo theses was an ephemeral gain if the POR did not win a commensurate leadership role in the union. The Pulacayo theses might have been the best programme in the world, but a trade union or even a soviet is not the instrument for fighting for a programme (i.e. a prolonged and complex strategy). For this task there is only one instrument - the party!

For Lora, however, this failure to organise the POR as a party fighting for its programme appears to have little
detrimental effect, for he tells us: "However, our work did in fact have enormous importance for it enabled PORista ideology to penetrate the social and intellectual life of the country to the extent that after the insurrection of April 1952 the ideas contained in the Pulacayo theses became the predominant political tendency." 2.

The idea that the revolutionary programme can penetrate or permeate the working class, not only separate from, but apparently in inverse proportion to, the development of the revolutionary party as its vanguard, is either chronic self-delusion, or pure syndicalism. Of course, the dominant political tendency within the Bolivian working class after 1952 was not revolutionary communism, but the petit-bourgeois nationalism of the MNR, and the failure of the POR to distinguish itself from this current explains why "the masses confused the nationalism of the MNR with the programme they adopted at Pulacayo? (Gramar). Here we, unlike comrade Gramar, do not blame the confusion of the masses, but the wrong politics of the POR.

Despite the ringing declarations of Pulacayo in favour of the dictatorship of the proletariat, against class collaboration, against worker ministers as merely puppets of the bourgeoisie, the practice and tactics of the POR were very different.

In 1947, Lora entered the Bolivian congress at the head of a political bloc between the POR and the leaders of the FSTMB - the Frente Unico Proletario (known as the Bloque Minero Parlamentario). The opportunist labour leaders such as Lechin - made use of this bloc with the revolutionaries to further their left image, but almost immediately proceeded to use their positions to attack the POR in the unions. By June 1948, the Lechin group had made a deal with the PUR?s (party of Rosca), to purge the POR from the FSTMB and dump the Pulacayo programme. This political accommodation to the labour leaders, who ideologically and in the political practice were unreconstructed MNRers, was even reflected in unclear boundaries of POR membership. The wide interpretation of the term "PORista? reflects the amorphousness of the Party. Incredible as it may seem, Juan Lechin, who as Lora himself points out, never broke from his MNR politics, was considered a "PORista? or "affiliated to POR? between 1946-52, before he rejoined the MNR prior to the April 1952 revolution. 3

Given this record it is clear why the POR?s "political physiognomy before the masses was diluted? in 1952 (Gramar). The Fourth International?s Third World Congress summed up the POR?s record as follows: "In Bolivia, our past inadequacy in distinguishing ourselves from the political tendencies in the country which exploit the mass movement, sometimes the lack of clarity in our objectives and in our tactics, the loose organisational structure as well as the absence of patient, systematic work in working class circles, has caused a certain decline in our influence and an organisational crisis". 4

Having quite accurately diagnosed the poison, the leadership of the FI promptly prescribed as an antidote... a larger dose of the poison! "In the event of the mobilisation of the masses under the preponderant impulsion, or influence of the MNR, our section should support the movement with all its strength, should not abstain, but on the contrary, intervene energetically in it with the aim of pushing it as far as possible up to the seizure of power by the MNR on the basis of a progressive program of anti-imperialist united front.

On the contrary, if in the course of these mass mobilisations, our section proves to be in a position to share influence over the revolutionary masses with the MNR, it will advance the slogan of a workers and peasants government of the two parties on the basis, however, of the same programme, a government based on committees of workers, peasants and revolutionary elements of the urban petit-bourgeoisie". 5

So the Pablo-led IS was proposing the POR enter an MNR government - i.e. a popular front with a bourgeois party ?on a progressive programme. All in the name of the anti-imperialist united front and the workers? and peasants? government! Although Lora was prevented from attending the 1951 Congress, by imprisonment, there is no evidence that he disagreed with its decisions. The positions that the POR took following April 1952, which Lora subscribes to, clearly follow the line laid down by the IS, while the 10th Congress theses (which Roberto Gramar thinks rearmed the party) merely enshrine the 1951 theses.

The characterisation of the MNR and the question of support
"We are told, instead that it (the POR) supported the MNR government, that it favoured the entrance of workers? ministers into it. Lastly, it refused to fight for a workers? and peasants? government, and for arming the masses. We will demonstrate at once that the accusations of Workers Power are simple slanders? (Gramar)

We are slanderers, according to Gramar, for saying the POR gave critical support to the MNR government. Why then did the POR raise as its central slogan in April 1952 ?'Restoration of the constitution of the country through the formation of an MNR government which obtained a majority in the 1951 elections'? Why did the POR support the MNR?s presidential candidate (Paz Estenssoro) in those elections? Why does Lora state: "Today far from succumbing to the hysteria of a struggle against the MNR, whom the pro-imperialists have described as fascists, we are marching with the masses to make the April 9th movement the prelude to the triumph of the workers? and peasants? government".6

Lora himself explains the POR?s notion of critical support:

"The POR began by justifiably granting critical support to the MNR government. That is, it desisted from issuing the slogan ?down with the government?; it gave the government critical support against the attacks of imperialism and reaction, and it supported all progressive measures.

But at the same time it avoided any expression whatever of confidence in this government. On the contrary it propelled the revolutionary activity of independent organisations of the masses as much as it could. The POR limits its support and sharpens its criticism insofar (!) as the government proves itself incapable of fulfilling the national democratic programme of the revolution, insofar (!) as it hesitates, capitulates, indirectly plays the game of imperialism and reaction.7

So we (workers power) are slanderers when we say that the POR gave critical support to the MNR government.

Does refusing to support such a government, to be in favour of struggling against it, to be in favour of its overthrow, mean, as Lora?s justification of critical support implies, that we would have been in favour in 1952 of raising the slogan ?Down with the MNR government??

No it does not. It is one thing to be in favour of overthrowing a government, and quite a separate thing to make this a slogan of the day - i.e. an agitational slogan. Without having won the majority of the proletariat, the army etc, such a slogan would indeed be adventurist. But not to raise the slogan does not necessitate critical support for such a government. Gramar, following Lora, deliberately confuses these questions in order to provide an alibi for Lora?s ?critical support?. Then he turns on a straw man position that he labels ours, exclaiming that it: ?Doesn?t take into consideration the state of mind of the masses, their political evolution, and the place of each slogan. Everything is so simple one must call for the overthrow of the government and power to the soviets? (Gramar)

Carried away by his own polemic, Gramar finds himself completely at odds with the Bolsheviks of 1917. What was Lenin?s position in April 1917 when the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks had to pull up its left wing for raising the slogan ?Down with the provisional government? on an armed demonstration of 25-30,000 workers and soldiers? "Should the provisional government be overthrown immediately? My answer is 1) That it should be overthrown, for it is an oligarchic bourgeois, and not a people?s movement; 2) It cannot be overthrown just now, for it is being kept in power by a direct and indirect, a formal actual agreement with the Soviets of Workers? Deputies.? And who was it who consistently opposed this position? It was none other than Kamenev and Co., who consistently adapted towards the Mensheviks and towards a position of giving critical support to the provisional government.

What does the POR?s position of critical support lead to? The POR ?avoids any expression... of confidence" Implacable criticism? Constant warnings to the masses of its bourgeois nature; of its deals with imperialism? No -criticism insofar as it is incapable of fulfilling the national democratic tasks, insofar as it plays the game of imperialism and reaction. Here you have the fatal errors of critical support, the failure to raise warnings, to conduct an implacable struggle against a bourgeois government in which the masses have enormous illusions.
Lora and the POR refused to characterise the MNR government as one which defended capitalism and was therefore a bourgeois government. Indeed, Gramar feels the necessity to put inverted commas around 'capitalist' when he refers to the MNR government of 1952. The extensive quote which Gramar gives sums up succinctly the thoroughly centrist politics of Guillermo Lora: 'The necessity in which the Paz Estenssoro regime finds itself of keeping itself in power either utilising the pressure of imperialism against the masses, imparts its bonapartist sui generis character, just as Trotsky indicated when he analysed the nature of the Cardenas government in Mexico. The extreme weakness of the bourgeoisie and national capital do not permit the petit-bourgeois government the development of an independent policy in the face of imperialism, and oblige it to continually capitulate.'

A 'petit-bourgeois government'??! What Marxists, apart from the 'Marxists' of the international Spartacist tendency, have ever heard of such a phenomenon? It is merely a centrist convenience to avoid saying what property relations the MNR government actually defended - i.e. bourgeois property. The same goes for the term 'Bonapartism sui generis'. It comes from the same stable, and has the same purpose, as the term 'Entryism sui generis' (or for that matter, 'centrism sui generis'), coined by Michel Pablo.

This 'special kind' of bonapartism, appears to have the great advantage, for those who want to extend 'critical support' to it, of defending neither bourgeois nor proletarian property forms; of being a 'petit-bourgeois' or 'transitional' government (transitional to what?).

This characterisation of the MNR in power flows naturally enough from Lora's characterisation of the MNR itself: 'The MNR is a mass party, the majority of its leadership is petit bourgeois but fringed (!) with a few (!) conscious representatives of the nascent industrial bourgeoisie, one of whom is very probably (!!) Paz Estenssoro himself. Its ideology, its confused programme, is a mixture of revolutionary aspirations and phrases with opportunist and in the last analysis (!!!) capitulatory practices.'

Imagine this being said of Peronism in 1946, or of Mugabe's ZANU! Paz Estenssoro was a bourgeois, nationalist politician with a long history. He had been in charge of the Mining Bank under the regime of German Busch (1937-9), and was a founder member of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), founded in 1941. This was a nationalist party, which originally leaned towards the Axis powers; in which anti-imperialism and anti-communism coexisted side by side with a virulent anti-semitism (one of the largest tin-mine owners in Bolivia was Mauricio Hochschild - a German Jew). The MNR linked up with a group of fascist inclined officers (Radepa) and took part in a coup which brought Major Caulbarto Villarroel to power in 1943, with Victor Paz Estenssoro as Treasurer, the most important figure in the government which was overthrown for trying to seek a degree of independence from US imperialism and its direct agents the Rosca (the mine owners).

Such parties and governments were nothing new or special. Neither do they pose 'a series of totally new problems' (Gramar). They had already been comprehensively analysed by Trotsky. He pointed out many times the similarities between the Kuomintang, the Mexican PRM and the Peruvian APRA. The contrast between Trotsky's and Lora's analyses could not be more striking. On the APRA: 'It (APRA) is a people's front party. A peoples' front is included in the party, as in every combination of such a nature. Direction is in the hands of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie fears its own workers'. And on the Cardenas government in Mexico, which Trotsky is supposed (by Lora) to have indicated as having a 'bonapartist sui generis' nature: 'In Mexico the power is in the hands of the national bourgeoisie and we can conquer power only by conquering the majority of the workers and a great part of the peasantry, and then overthrowing the bourgeoisie. There is no other possibility.'

Trotsky's analysis was clear about the nature of the regimes like Cardenas in the semi-colonial countries, regimes which leaned on the workers and peasants in their attempts to lessen the weight of imperialism on their countries. They were bourgeois regimes to which revolutionaries could give no political support whatsoever! Such regimes set out not to break the hold of imperialism, but to negotiate a better deal for their own stunted national bourgeoisie. Such a course necessitated agrarian reforms, essential to providing their own bourgeoisie with an internal market, as well as tying the peasantry to the bourgeoisie and using its weight to discipline the workers.
It also however, and this is what (according to Trotsky) gave this type of Bonapartism its ?distinctive character?, meant taking various measures to reduce and restrict the power of imperialist or imperialist-linked capital; measures which necessitated, to one degree or another, seeking the support of the workers against the fierce resistance put up by the imperialists and their agents. But of course such regimes, ever-conscious of the mortal threat posed to bourgeois property by a mobilised working class, attempted to carefully control such mobilisations. Thus state capitalist nationalisations were favoured because the workers apparently face not their own rapacious bourgeoisie, but a neutral, anti-imperialist state as employer. Another necessary characteristic of this form of bonapartism is the fostering and support given to the trade union bureaucracy and its integration as far as possible into the state bureaucracy, often via forms of participation and co-management. These are the classic features of state capitalist bonapartist regimes (often using an alliance with the Soviet Union as an additional base of support against imperialism), which are in power in numerous semi-colonial countries - Algeria, Libya, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Nicaragua to name but a few. In Bolivia the regimes of Paz Estenssoro and later General Torres were archetypal of such governments, as was the government of Peron in Argentina.

Would we give support to such governments under the direct threat of imperialist-backed intervention? For Gramar the answer is obvious - ?Yes". He accuses us of ?political fraud? for not making clear that a statement by the POR on its support for the government was made after the attempted coup of June 1953, which involved prominent MNR members and sections of the Army and police. The POR said at this time, June 1953: ?At the present moment, our tactic consists in grouping our forces, to unit the proletariat and the peasants in a single bloc to defend a government which is not ours and to which we apply implacable criticism in the face of imminent threat of latifundist and imperialist reaction. Far from advancing the slogan of the overthrow of the Paz Estenssoro regime, we support it in order that it resists the offensive of (La Rosca) and we call on the international proletariat to defend unconditionally the Bolivian revolution and its transitional government". 12

Firstly, we have already demonstrated that the POR had a position of critical support right from the beginning of the regime, not as Gramar implies, in response to an attempted coup. Secondly, revolutionaries do not change their position of refusing to support bourgeois governments, even ?anti-imperialist? ones, under the threat of counter revolutionary coup d'?tats. Lenin lambasted the Bolshevik compromisers who fell into such opportunism at the time of the Kornilov coup against Kerensky: ?It is my conviction that those who become unprincipled are people who (like Volodarsky) slide into defencism or (like other Bolsheviks) into a bloc with the SRs, into supporting the Provisional government. Their attitude is absolutely wrong and unprincipled. We shall become defencists only after the transfer of power to the proletariat. . . Even now we must not support Kerensky?s government. This is unprincipled. We may be asked aren?t we going to fight against Kornilov? Of course we must! But this is not the same thing; there is a dividing line here, which is being stepped over by some Bolsheviks who fall into compromise and allow themselves to be carried away by the course of events? 13 Gramar does not even have the excuse of being ?carried away by the course of events?: he is defending this unprincipled position some 20 years later!

A revolutionary position following January 1953 would have had nothing to do with giving one iota of support to the Paz Estenssoro government. It would have aimed at mobilising the armed workers and peasants against the coup. It would have exposed the government?s vacillations by raising a series of demands, directed not so much at the MNR government, but at the rank and file of the army and the workers and peasants, to immediately implement a radical agrarian reform ? ?land to the tiller? (the government commission had spent, by this time, months dragging its feet on the agrarian law). These tactics, the revolutionary rather than the opportunist use of the united front tactic, have nothing in common with offering ?critical support? or defence to the MNR government. Revolutionaries would have certainly defended the gains that the masses, through their own struggles, had won in April 1952, but that has nothing in common with defending the government as such - a bourgeois government - which had every intention of clawing back those gains the moment it had demobilised the masses. To do so could only reinforce the illusions of the masses that such a government was ?supportable?, ?theirs?, etc.

Entry into a bourgeois government and workers ministers
"We say right now that the POR was opposed to ?co-government? in 1952, and to the Commando Político naming worker ministers for the Torres government in 1970. WP lies shamelessly about these two episodes? (Gramar).

In Gramar?s justification of the POR?s unprincipled record with regard to worker ministers, two related arguments coexist side by side. The first argument that he uses is that the POR opposed worker ministers or co-government right from the start of the two revolutionary situations of 1952 and 1970, but that once worker ministers were installed, the POR developed tactics equivalent to those developed by the Bolsheviks to expose the nature of that participation. This argument is simply untrue. But secondly, and more importantly, there is lurking in Gramar?s polemic, a position which argues that in the early period of the 1952 revolution, the entry (or imposition as he likes to call it) of worker ministers into the MNR government was not the same as co-government.

Gramar tells us once again that the MNR in 1952 was not the ?case of a normal capitalist government?. Such a ?normal? capitalist government would seek to resolve the dual power in its favour by the incorporation of the reformist leaders into the government, using them to subordinate the workers? organisations to the bourgeois regime. ?For that, it is necessary that the participation verifies itself in very precise conditions, as a simple annexe of the government, as a guarantee of its acts and decisions".

So were the worker ministers, or were they not, initially a ?simple annexe of the government?? Apparently not, for then we are told: ?The left wing of the MNR, with Lechin at its head, launched the formula of co-government in order to institutionalise the collaboration with Paz Estensorro, subject the COB to the government, and castrate its soviet type development. The POR systematically criticised the co-government.? (Gramar). This is in fact a shamefaced attempt to make a distinction between Lechin?s institutionalised co-government and the imposition of genuine worker ministers.

While Gramar never brings this argument fully out into the open, its originator, Guillermo Lora, is much more brazen about his opportunism and explains in various writings why it was possible to support worker ministers in 1952, and why this is different to the ?non-supportable? concept of ?co-government?: ?Immediately after the April revolution, Labour leaders occupied these ministries. This fact has given rise to considerable misinterpretation. Some people have argued horn it that during the first stage of the revolution there was a period of co-government, but this is an extremely superficial conclusion?In fact the first worker ministers were real representatives of the workers engaged in imposing the COB?s decisions on the government. It was therefore vital that ministers should be accountable to the COB assembly and should keep it constantly informed about their work", 14

No wonder the POR could give its support to the entry of worker ministers if they thought they were the ?real representatives of the workers? imposing ?the COB?s decisions on the government?.

How would a party hope to break the miners away from their massive illusions in Lechin, a labour bureaucrat with a proven collaborationist record, if they were arguing that these ministers and Lechin himself were ?real representatives of the workers?. Lora goes on to explain how these ?real representatives of the workers? gradually became the opposite: ?Later the role and function of the worker ministers changed radically and they came to act as a petit bourgeois fifth column in the labour movement merely representing the wishes of the government?. 15

A fifth column, one might add, whose credentials as ?real representatives of the workers?, the POR vouched for from the beginning. The POR?s schema is thus fairly easily summarised. The MNR government is not a ?normal? capitalist government, it is ?bonapartism sui generis?, it can be pressurised by both the workers and the imperialists, and it is more over, a ?transitional? regime. The workers, who have ?imposed? their ministers and their policies on it, are dominant as long as workers keep up the pressure on the government. Therefore it is possible to give it ?critical support?, to be in favour of ?worker ministers?.

As long as the workers maintained their pressure on the ?transitional government? it moved leftward. Right wing elements would leave and then either there will be a left MNR government or even a POR/MNR ?workers? and peasants? government?, all the things that communists should have done, is ?ultra leftist", is being ?pedantic", and is being ?out of touch with the masses". Such ?ultra-leftism? would spoil the whole ?transitional? schema. Such is the POR?s Marxism.
But Gramar is not finished with his apologetics for Guillermo Lora's position on worker ministers. To back up his argument he brings in - the Bolsheviks! The comrade explains to us that: ?The content which the masses gave to the presence of worker ministers? (their illusions - SK) was in contradiction with the political objective of the MNR and of Lechin, and it was this contradiction which had to break out, making both elements clash."

Precisely: the question was how to break the workers? illusions in Lechin and Co, and win them to a revolutionary programme and party. Leaving aside for the moment the fact that the POR helped peddle these illusions with its claptrap about Lechin and Co being real representatives of the workers, how did the POR set about this task and how does this compare to the methods the Bolsheviks used in relation to the ?Soviet ministers? in the Provisional government? Lora tells us: ?When the struggle within the cabinet between right and left movementista tendencies. . . broke out, the POR launched the slogan of more worker ministers and therefore (!) the expulsion from the government of the right, a demand which remained beyond Lechin and company".16

Did the POR address demands to the COB and the ?worker ministers? to break with the bourgeoisie? Did they raise the slogans Down with the capitalist ministers, Down with Estensorro etc? No. They raised the slogan ?More worker ministers?, and ?therefore?, the expulsion of the right. Why ?therefore?? ?Therefore? has nothing to do with it. It was precisely the expulsion of all the capitalist ministers that was not called for! More ?worker ministers? of Lechin?s stripe would have happily coexisted with the Estensorro?s of the MNR. This is a centrist evasion, a cover up for the fact that the POR precisely did not raise the equivalent of the Bol?shevik slogan ?down with the capitalist ministers?. And why didn?t they? Because of course, they were against the MNR government?s overthrow, they gave it ?critical support?. Their perspective was not one involving a sharp struggle with the MNR, of placing a series of demands on Lechin and Co, which would either force them to break with Estensorro or expose them as class collaborators before the masses. It was a perspective of pushing the government leftwards, of achieving ?more worker ministers?. This is why they raised the slogan for ?complete control of the government by the left? i.e. the left MNR.

Gramar even tries to drag in Trotsky to defend Lora. He asks, didn?t Trotsky call for more worker ministers, for more Peshekonovs in 1917? Gramar forgets one thing. As Trotsky says, ?a central place was occupied by the slogan Down with the ten capitalist ministers?. The Bolsheviks refused to give critical support to the coalition government. They opposed vigorously the entry into the provisional government of worker ministers despite them being responsible directly to the soviets. They were not in favour of more worker ministers, they were in favour of kicking all the capitalist ministers out. Trotsky?s position was a million miles away from that of Lora?s on the question of worker ministers: ?The masses, in so far as they were not yet for the Bolsheviks, stood solid for the entry of the socialists into the government. If it?s a good thing to have Kerensky as minister, then so much the better six Kerensky?s. The masses did not know that this was called coalition with the bourgeoisie, and that the bourgeoisie wanted to use these socialists as a cover for their activities against the people? 17

So what the Russian masses didn?t know in April 1917, the POR, the claimed leadership of the Bolivian workers and peasants, didn?t know in April 1952, and again in 1970. Moreover, the Bolsheviks were not afraid of giving expression to this opposition to coalitionism: whatever the momentary illusions of the proletariat that worker ministers in a capitalist government amounted to soviet control of the latter: ?One 1st May the Executive Committee (of the Soviet - SK), having passed through all the stages of vacillation known to nature, decided by a majority of 41 votes against 18 with three abstaining, to enter into a coalition government. Only the Bolsheviks and a small group of Menshevik Internationalists voted against it.? 18

Soviets and workers? and peasants? government

Was the COB a soviet, as Lora and Gramar claim, or was it in fact only the embryo of a soviet, retaining many of the features of its origins as a trade union confederation, and rapidly being turned into a popular power adjunct of the MNR government? We would argue that it was the latter. Comrades may consider this distinction ?pedantic?. Yet a doctor or midwife that could not distinguish between an embryo and a baby - let alone a mature human being, would find themselves in very severe practical difficulties. Our contention is that the COB had not in 1952-3, and did not
after, give birth to soviets. This fact should have determined the slogans and tactics necessary to help the masses bring this about. Lora and the POR (and Gramar?)s method is completely different.

The soviet for them is a hollow-sounding title to be awarded to any convenient existing workers? organisation. Of course, soviets do not fall from the stars, they have to be created - often out of existing workers? organisations: strike committees, factory committees, united front committees, peasant unions or soldiers? rank and file organisations. But to do this requires a vigorous struggle for ?sovietising? these bodies, in revolutionary struggle against the government, the employers, the imperialists and therefore against the union bureaucracy and the petit-bourgeois nationalist or imperialist currents. Why? Because even fully-formed soviets - under Menshevik leadership - can become instruments of class collaboration, subordinating and ultimately conceding their own liquidation. The Russian and German experiences of 1917 - 19 demonstrate this - positively and negatively. The 1960s and 1970s in Latin America have shown countless examples under the rubric of ?peoples? power".

The COB in fact had many of the characteristics of its predecessor the CON (Central Obrera Nacional), a trade union federation of miners, flour workers, print workers and joined the COB through their TU leaderships who, apart from their various political tendencies, brought along very different forms of organisation. The founders of the COB appealed to the old leaders and not to the democratically elected rank and file delegates. This organisational mistake carried within it the seeds of the weakness which facilitated its bureaucratisation and its isolation in relation to the masses and its artificial control by the government.? 21

Is this the description of a soviet - one that workers join through their trade union leaderships? A soviet where Juan Lechin, was elected by these leaderships, at the first meeting, as Executive Secretary for life!? A national soviet where local affiliates had to elect as their representatives people resident in the capital? A national soviet the first congress of which was delayed until October 1954!

By this time, the MNR had achieved almost complete control of the delegates. Within two or three months of the setting up of the COB, its headquarters was based in the Presidential Palace. POR members were, at the instigation of Lechin and the MNR leadership, being expelled from the unions and blocked from being delegates. Artificial organisations were being created by the government to pack the COB, and public employees along with paid TU officials were being drafted in as delegates. Lora recounts how the secretary of Press and Propaganda in the MNR government sat as a delegate representing his employees! When and in what way, Comrade Gramar, did the COB develop a soviet character? Aren?t we absolutely right when we describe the COB as an embryo or proto soviet which could have developed into a full soviet only through a political struggle against the bonapartist project of the MNR? This would have involved concentrating on building Soviets both in and outside of La Paz, drawing in and organising peasant syndicatos in the localities, calling for the construction of rank and file soldiers? committees in the army, drawing their delegates into the soviets, strengthening and placing under soviet discipline the militias, and ensuring that all delegates were elected by rank and file factory and workplace committees subject to immediate recall.

Every one of these measures would have been fought against by the MNR, particularly its left wing, but their achievement offered the only possibility of establishing a real dual power situation, and opening the road to a workers? and peasants government. As Trotsky pointed out in Spain: three conditions were necessary to fulfil these tasks: ?A party: once more a party: again a party?.

The POR in its unwillingness to distinguish itself politically and organisationally from the left of the MNR, failed all three conditions!

We have already dealt thoroughly with why the Popular Assembly of 1971 was only a proto-soviet in our previous article.12 Gramar?s reply only exposes all the weaknesses and contradictions of his position. He tells us that we cannot make a comparison with the soviets in Russia in 1917 by using the equivalent of ?All Power to the Soviets? in relation to the Popular Assembly. Why? Because this was not the situation of the Popular Assembly, it had precisely to develop its material force.? (Gramar). Gramar cannot have it both ways. Either the Popular Assembly was a ?soviet?, an organ because it embraces the mass of the workers and peasants in a country, has a gigantic ?material? force behind it, or it does not and is therefore not a soviet, but only represents the potential development of dual power. The fact that
the popular assembly declared itself for ?The installation of a workers government and socialism? and defined itself as
?an organ of the power of the masses", initiation a period of dual power (Gramar) is neither here nor there in
determining whether it represents a real soviet. Revolutionaries as opposed to centrists and demagogues, have never
taken such rhetoric for reality. They look at the actual class forces and policies that organisations represent.

We note that Comrade Gramar is unable to answer any of our points about the failure of POR-Masas to fight to turn the
assembly into a real soviet. In particular its failure to raise factory workers of Oruro. Indeed, Lora argues: ?The COB
was a revival of the CON both in terms of its ideology and its personnel, and like its predecessor, it was organised by
the FSTMB? 19

Or to be more accurate, by the leadership of the FSTMB. Of course, the circumstances in which the COB came into
existence, a revolutionary situation, made it potentially a very different type of organ. But was it a soviet ?an organ of
struggle embracing the vast mass of workers, peasants (and soldiers) through their directly elected and recallable
delegates? Did it represent a leading soviet, in direct relation to local soviets and peasant committees? Clearly it was
neither of these. The COB never reached this stage of development, becoming rapidly bureaucratised, which is why we
describe it in April 1952 as an ?embryo soviet?. 20

From the point of view of both the centre and the left of the MNR, the COB was seen as a means of leaning on the
workers and peasants organisations. Neither wing had any real intention of allowing the COB to develop in the
direction of a real soviet organ, establishing a dual power with the MNR government. While Lechin and Butrow, as
labour leaders, also wished to use the power of the workers? organisations in their struggle with the right of the MNR,
they showed themselves absolutely as one with Estensorro in taking measures to stifle the development of the COB in
the direction of a soviet.

How does Lora himself describe the organisation of the COB and its political characteristics? As follows: ?Perhaps one
of the most serious mistakes in organising the COB was that it was created from the TU leaders who very quickly gave
their allegiance to the petit-bourgeois government, and that it became crystallised in the middle level leadership
cadre?it would have been correct to have proceeded in opposite manner, from the bottom upwards. The workers
political slogans in relation to breaking up the army (because of its reliance instead on Torres and the Left officers to
arm the workers) beyond asserting that they did so. Bring forward the quotes comrade, the slogans raised, the concrete
practice of the party! We know you cannot without proving us correct. Gramar?s support of the POR?s refusal to raise
the slogan ?All power to the Popular Assembly? in 1971 proves that he, like Lora, fails to understand the transitional
nature of the demand for a Workers and Peasants government, only seeing its concrete posing as an insurrectional
slogan. The opportunist kernel to this apparently ?left? position is revealed when we look at the POR?s use of the

As important as the fight for soviets was, the question of the masses relation to the government and the slogans
necessary to pose the question of a government which really stood for the interests of the workers and peasants was of
equal importance for a revolutionary party in Bolivia. Comrade Gramar claims that the POR raised as a governmental
slogan ?All Power to the COB". We can find no evidence that the POR itself raised this slogan - certainly not between
April 1952 and June 1953. But no doubt comrade Gramar will be able to tell us where and when the POR raised this
slogan. Certainly we know that the POR was raising the slogan for ?complete control of the Cabinet by the left? during
this period, a position completely in line with the FI?s and the POR?s perspective of pushing the MNR leftwards. In
one of Guillermo Lora?s few (partial) self-criticisms he reveals the disastrous consequences of this slogan: ?This slogan
could be justified (!) at a stretch as a pedagogical (!!) measure intended to show the masses, who had been blinded by
passion for the MNR, that the left of the MNR was in no way capable of taking power against imperialism. However
the demand revealed in reality an enormous principled mistake, to believe that the workers would come to power
through Lechinism. It would have been more correct to have channelled the mass mobilisation through the slogan ?All
power to the COB".23

All power to the COB

We have already shown the bankruptcy of the position of calling for ?more worker ministers", of ?complete control of
the cabinet by the left", but what about the slogan ?All Power to the COB? in the circumstances in 1952? How does this slogan relate to the question of a workers and peasants government and the Bolshevik slogan ?All power to the soviets"? Given that the COB formed in April 1952 was not a soviet such a slogan could only have been correct if it was launched in the context of the fight to turn the COB into a real soviet body - a body representing the workers? organisations nationally, as well as the peasant committees and syndicatos. Such a slogan would have to have been linked to demands on the ?worker ministers? to break with the bourgeoisie, to base themselves on the workers and peasants organisations, to enter onto the road of struggle for a workers? and peasants? government. The masses would have to have been organised around a series of demands - a programme of action - placed on these labour leaders. Central to these would have been the immediate nationalisation of the mines, without compensation and under workers control, land to the tillers, arm the workers and dissolve the army into the workers militia. A programme of action not just left at the level of ?demands on leaders? but fought for through occupations of the mines, land seizures, revolutionary fraternisation with the troops etc. In such circumstances the slogan ?All Power to the COB? would have had the same meaning as the Bolshevik slogan ?All Power to the Soviets", where the soviets were under the control of the Mensheviks and SRs, it would have been a demand on the workers and peasants leaders to break with the bourgeoisie and take the power.

As with the Bolshevik use of the slogan ?All Power to the Soviets? - a transitional slogan - it would have had a powerful use in exposing the weakness and vacillations of the ?left? of the MNR and winning its base to revolutionary communism. If under the pressure of the masses Lechin and his allies had entered this road of struggle, such would have been the opposition from the imperialists and their agents, amounting to all out civil war, that such a government, supported by communists, could have only survived as a short transitional government to the full dictatorship of the proletariat. If, as was more likely to have been the case, Lechin and Co refused to enter on this path, then the possibility existed for breaking up the MNR, winning its working class base for communism and potentially splitting it in the same way as the Bolsheviks split the SRs. That is, bringing over a section of its most revolutionary elements to an alliance with the communists.

In the later period, given the growing bureaucratisation of the COB, the expulsion of POR members from the unions and the consolidation of the bonapartist regime with the full restoration of its standing army, revolutionaries would have brought to the fore the demand for immediate elections to a constituent assembly - organised on the most democratic basis e.g. votes to all over 16 years irrespective of literacy. Such an assembly should be convened and overseen by the workers and peasants organisations once again organised around the above action programme this time directed at the assembly.

Gramar fulminates at us for suggesting that the POR failed to pose the question of the workers and peasants government in this way. He declares ?It (the POR) opposed to the MNR government, the slogan of the workers and peasants government.? So it did, but there are, as any Trotskyist should know, workers? governments and workers? governments. The POR?s use of the slogan was totally devoid of its transitional content. Either it used it simply as a pseudonym for the dictatorship of the proletariat and therefore only to be raised as an agitational slogan on the eve of the insurrection, or it used it in a thoroughly opportunist manner as designation for a government of the left (and not so left) MNR, perhaps including the POR.

In both cases the governmental slogan - the keystone of the transitional programme as Trotsky called it - is pulled out of its place at the head of an action programme of inter?linked demands. The revolutionary party stands helpless, while the revolutionary process sweeps the masses forward. Look at how Lora uses the slogan as a pseudonym for the dictatorship of the proletariat: ?The subsequent evolution that we indicate for the COB, where the creation of new rank and file organs, parallel to it or even independent, under the pressure of the masses in struggle, constantly broadening their field of intervention to all domains of the life of the exploited, will lead us to the workers and peasants government. In the culminating point of that process, it will be necessary to launch the slogan of All power to the workers organisations.? 24

Comrade Gramar tells us he could take up whole pages with such quotes. Wisely for him, he does not. But if the reader
will bear with us, let us give a couple more examples of this combination of chronic processism combined with emptying the slogan of its transitional content. From One Year of the Bolivian Revolution: ?Moving toward the final aim of the struggle, the formation of a genuine workers and peasants government. This government will not arise mechanically, but dialectically basing itself on the organism of dual power created by the mass movement?The workers and peasants government will appear tomorrow as the natural (!) emanation (!!) of all these organisations on which it will base itself.? 25

Another example is in the Programme of the POR-Masas: ?The POR uses the slogan workers and peasants government in the same way as did the Bolsheviks, as a popular expression for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.? 26

Thus the slogan is relegated as something to be raised only on the eve of the insurrection or only as abstract propaganda for the dictatorship of the proletariat. But of course the vacuum left by a missing governmental slogan has to be filled with something, thus the demand is given a totally opportunist agitational use. In June 1953 at the 10th Congress, the congress at which Lora re-armed the party, the workers and peasants government was raised in the following fashion. Speculating on a possible split by the right wing, the Theses argue: ?The total predominance of this sector (the left) could profoundly effect the nature of the MNR and would enable it to greatly come closer to the POR. It is only in these conditions that we can raise the possibility of a coalition government of the POR and the MNR which would be a way of realising the formula of a workers and peasants government which in its turn would constitute the transitional stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat.? 27

Here we can see the impact of the schemas of the 1951 world congress of the FI adopted and implemented by the POR. A strategy of pushing the MNR leftwards, ?complete control of the cabinet by the left? of dubbing it a ?workers and peasants government", meriting communist support and participation in. In this way the POR?s positions in 1952 were neither better nor worse than the SWP?s positions on the Nicaraguan government today. Their common thread is the fundamental agreement with the 1951 congress positions of Pablo.

Who the right was the POR?s theses never tell us, deliberately so because to name names would be to give up on centre figures like Paz Estenssoro, who might after all remain with the left in such a government. And the programme that such a government would have to carry out to be a ?workers and peasants government"? We are not told, but presumably the progressive programme of the 1951 congress resolution.

This was the programme and record of the POR in Bolivia, on which in all its fundamentals Lora defends to this day. There was complete agreement within the POR on this programme, apart from the section, which in 1952 took the conclusions of the POR?s failure to distinguish itself from the left MNR and joined it. It was only at the end of 1953 when Pablo and his Latin American bureau decided to speed up the liquidation of the POR (arguing that such was the speed with which the masses were heading for power under the leadership of the left MNR that the POR?s main task was to immerse itself in the left) that Lora opposed the tactical implications of the International?s line. It was only in 1956 that a small group around Lora and the paper Masas finally broke from the then dominant Moscoso International Secretariat Faction.

Finally, we would emphasise that the issues raised in the Bolivian revolutionary upsurges of 1952 and 1970-1 are of vital importance for revolutionaries today. A correct assessment of the failure of the POR to pursue a truly communist policy in Bolivia is crucial in a period in which degenerate ?Trotskyism? has distorted and trampled on Trotsky?s programme for the semi-colonial countries. Perhaps more than any other tactic the ?Anti-Imperialist United Front? has been perverted to allow so-called revolutionaries to capitulate before petit-bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism and betray the workers and peasants of whole continents. Ernest Mandel and Jack Barnes tread the same well-worn path in Nicaragua today. It is up to revolutionary communists, Trotskyists, to rescue this tactic and turn it once more into a real weapon of the enslaved masses of the imperialised world. We make this contribution on the Bolivian revolution as part of this struggle.

Footnotes
2. ibid p276.
3. See Lora's account of Lechin's role in ibid p243.
5. ibid p212.
11. ibid p793.
18. ibid p339.
19. From History of the Bolivian Labour Movement p281. 20. In much the same way, and originating out of similar circumstances, the Nicaraguan Civil Defence Committees (CDC's) which sprang up during the insurrection against Somoza, took on many of the forms of Soviet organs ?organising armed actions, food supplies, health, transport, etc- during this period, but were rapidly bureaucratised and turned into the ?popular power? organs of Sandinista bonapartism, becoming the present ?Sandinista Defence Committees?.
23. G. Lora La Revolucion... op cit p267.
26. The Programmatic Basis of the POR p58. Translation by British Section OCRFI.
27. Tenth Congress Theses Bolivie de la naissance . . . p43.