

Theses on Latin America: a continent in crisis

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A Continent in Crisis

In recent years, Latin America has joined the key crisis zones of global politics. Political instability has wracked the entire continent as country after country has entered into acute political, social and economic crisis; Puerto Rico, Haiti, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia and Brazil. Some of these involved the fall of governments and regimes regarded as part of the 'Pink Tide', that is, left populist or neo-socialist governments in Brazil, Ecuador and Bolivia. In others, it is right wing governments that are under pressure, notably Argentina, Chile and Ecuador, where they had replaced populist or social democratic ones.

In Venezuela, the birthplace of '21st Century Socialism', a deep economic crisis, including hyperinflation, has undone the effects of the reforms of Hugo Chávez. Nonetheless, the regime he bequeathed to his successor, Nicolás Maduro, has thus far resisted the combined attempts of the old oligarchy and Trump to unseat him and unleash a full-scale counterrevolution.

Both counterrevolutionary and pre-revolutionary situations are emerging, posing the alternatives of a spreading of right wing regimes, like those in Brazil or Bolivia, or mass revolts with the potential not just for a revival of democratic and reformist governments, but for social revolution. Examples of the former are plain enough; in the 'constitutional coups' against the PT's Dilma Rouseff and the subsequent election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Likewise, we see it in the early 2019 attempt to oust President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and the November 10 right wing coup in Bolivia, against Evo Morales.

The alternative can be seen in mass popular mobilisations in Ecuador and Chile and, in Argentina, the electoral downfall after only one term of the neoliberal reformer Mauricio Macri and the return of the Peronists under Alberto Fernández with former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as vice president. Even before that, in December 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) of MORENA, a left populist/social democrat, was elected president of Mexico.

Both of these victories testify to a counter flow to the ebb of the Pink Tide. This proves that the progressive forces, especially the unemployed and youth in insecure employment, as well as students, the working class and the indigenist movements, are far from exhausted and can return to the mass struggles of the early 2000s which led to the radical and reformist Bolivarian regimes.

Latin America has a long and impressive history of mass movements of workers and the oppressed; women, youth and indigenous peoples. These have included extremely militant forms of struggles; powerful general strikes, occupations of roads and city centres, popular insurrections. This tradition also encompasses the emergence of forms of co-ordination that, if strengthened and generalised, could become the embryos of workers' and popular council power.

Unfortunately, however, these movements have been hampered by a major crisis of leadership, which has allowed counterrevolutionary forces, too, to advance. This is in part due to the failures of governments

associated with the Pink Tide; Morales, Maduro, Kirchner, Dilma, etc., which had created mass illusions in a reformist populism that crumbled when high raw material and hydrocarbon prices collapsed in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

The new social movements, although mass-based, have generally been led by petit bourgeois forces. Thus, when the question of power, of replacing the neoliberal austerity inflicting incumbents, was posed, these movements reverted to a policy of class collaboration with the supposed 'democratic' or 'anti-neoliberal' sections of the ruling class, or even 'alternative' imperialist powers.

Economic Roots of the current crisis

If Latin America is a powder keg, despite obvious national differences, there are three common causes that trigger political crises.

First of these is the growing crisis of global capitalism, which, this time round, has started in the weaker economies of the semi-colonial states even before it fully hits the imperialist centres. In 2007/2008, the crisis erupted first in the heartlands of 'Western' imperialism, most importantly in the USA. This time it has affected the semi-colonial world first, and Latin America in particular. The expansionary phase of the first five years of the new millennium, especially in China, fuelled a boom in the markets for raw materials that led to a substantial recovery phase in Latin America, after the lost decades of the "Washington Consensus".

On the basis of this windfall, the significant social reforms of Hugo Chávez, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), Evo Morales and Rafael Correa, were possible, without seriously touching the ownership of foreign or domestic big capital. But, with the Great Recession and the subsequent period of stagnation stretching well into the 2010s, this boom in the commodity markets finally came to an end and all the conditions of the previous decade, that had been so favourable to the reformists, turned into their opposites.

According to IMF figures, for about two decades, average growth figures on the continent were below the average of the 'emerging markets and developing countries'. This reflected its declining economic importance and dynamism in comparison with the East Asian countries. It was also a product of the continued semi-colonial structure of the economies, including dependence on the export of raw materials and agrarian products.

In the years 2014 - 16, economic difficulties on the continent started to increase, though with great differences between countries. Some of the key economies, such as Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, have been in stagnation or recession over the last 5 years. Growth forecasts are slim. According to the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, most rating agencies expected that the Argentine economy would continue to shrink, by 2.4 percent in 2019 and, according to JP Morgan, by 1.6 percent in 2020. Argentina's exports declined by 40 percent in 2018. Estimates of GDP growth for Brazil are around 1 percent in 2019 and 2020, and these are the most 'optimistic' examples: figures for Mexico range around 0.5 percent for 2019 and 1.3 percent in 2020.

For 2020, the IMF and other economic institutions have repeatedly reduced the economic forecast, now down to 0.6 percent for the whole continent (compared to 3.0 percent for the global economy). It may well be that even this forecast will need to be reduced in the coming months, given the economic instability and the accumulated problems of all the countries. In addition, the international financial institutions have begun to demand budget cuts and austerity.

The 'best' forecasts are for a number of Caribbean countries and, more importantly, for Peru, Colombia and Chile (around 3 percent) as a result of continued, if declining, demand for raw materials, notably for

lithium-ion batteries in electric vehicles. Heavily hit by declining demand and prices for raw materials and agrarian products, country after country has seen growing state debt, demands for austerity from the IMF and other imperialist lenders. Argentina, once again hit particularly hard, is close to bankruptcy.

A third major element is that the social and political crisis has led to a massive upsurge of the class struggle, usually in the form of a response to further attacks on the masses' living conditions by bourgeois governments. A number of these defensive struggles have already turned into general political confrontations, as in Haiti and Chile, which raise the need for revolutionary change. Whilst a number of these movements may appear as sudden eruptions, the economic decline of the continent has created two important, interrelated and longer term factors.

Firstly, the living conditions of the masses across the whole of the continent have declined. From 2014 to 2019 per capita income shrank by 4 percent. In the same period, official unemployment went up, reaching 8 percent in 2018 and 8.2 percent in 2019. All in all, 25.2 million are 'officially' registered as unemployed, the millions of people on short term and casual work not included. According to data from the State Institute of Statistics, the Argentine economy will have shrunk by 3.1 percent in 2019, inflation is around 55 percent, poverty around 40 percent, unemployment is 10.4 percent and currency devaluation is almost 40 percent.

In Chile, according to the government's own data, the economy was expected to grow between 2 and 2.2 percent in 2019, lower than the initial forecast of 2.6 percent. According to World Bank data, Chile's Gini coefficient in 2017 was 0.466. This indicator, which measures inequality, varies between 0 and 1, the higher the figure, the higher the inequality recorded. In Germany, for comparison, the Gini index for 2015 was 0.317.

Secondly, economic development has been undermining the bourgeois constitutional forms of rule. This is reflected in increased corruption and nepotism on the one hand, and attacks on democratic rights and more severe forms of repression, on the other. In the most extreme cases, this has taken the form of coups or coup attempts. It is also reflected in the rising political importance of the armed forces and growing tendencies towards authoritarianism and Bonapartism, including the rise and growth of right wing populist movements with a petit-bourgeois mass base, some even of a semi-fascist or fascist character.

The disappointments with the "progressive" governments of the previous decade and the betrayal of the class struggle wave by the "left" leaderships, is the basis of extreme right radicalisation among the more desperate parts of the middle classes, taking the form of racism against black and indigenous people, homophobia, anti-feminism, anti-communism, anti-intellectualism, all of which could evolve into outright fascism. This danger will become ever greater if the left proves unable to give the current mass movements an alternative, socialist, perspective for the solution of the crisis across Latin America.

That the economic crisis has been caused by the decline of demand from the imperialist countries, especially China, and the indebtedness of the states to the financiers of North America and Europe, emphasises the semi-colonial, dependent character of the continent. It reveals all too clearly the illusory nature of the hopes that the rise of China would enable it to escape its bondage to the economic and military goliath to the north.

The struggle between the imperialist powers, old and new

A major factor in the present crisis is that the continent has become an arena for the struggle for the re-division of the world between the imperialist powers; with the US and China as principal antagonists, but with the European powers also playing a part.

America is attempting to regain the hegemony, established after winning the Cold War, that seemed unchallengeable in the 1990s but then was lost in the 2000s. Trump blames his Republican predecessor, George W Bush as well as Barack Obama for having 'lost' Latin America. Thus, he has supported the ousting of left-populist governments in Bolivia and Ecuador and intensified the economic blockade with which he hopes to overthrow the Bolivarian regime in Venezuela. At the same time, he has abandoned the detente with Cuba. We could also observe this policy at play in the ousting of the PT-led government in Brazil.

Whether these coups have been 'constitutional', that is, led by the parties of the elite and the judiciary, or military, by local graduates of the infamous US army's School of the Americas (now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) they have been combined with populist demagoguery playing on and mobilising widespread discontent, based on economic decline, corruption or nepotism.

Clearly, the US aims to reassert itself as the dominant imperialist power in Latin America, but it has to do so against newly powerful rivals. Venezuela and Cuba have become largely dependent on Chinese and Russian support. Even so, if China were to draw other states into its embrace, this would only make them Beijing's semi-colonies, swapping one master for another.

The European Union is also looking for its slice of the pie with the EU-Mercosur Pact. This does indeed signify an important success for the European imperialist powers, creating a large free trade zone straddling the two continents. Whilst some of the Latin American regimes may have seen the growing conflict between imperialist powers as potentially advantageous to them, it clearly turned out to be a destabilising factor once America roused itself to claim back exclusive control of its 'backyard'. Indeed, the current rivalry will increase the political instability, especially if other 'left' governments come to power.

The IMF is already demanding harsh budgetary measures from the new Peronist government in Argentina, hoping to force it into humiliating concessions like the Troika did to Syriza in Greece. The new government has already shown a willingness to follow that road and its 'left' rhetoric merely serves as a cover to pacify the masses. The struggle for control over the massive lithium reserves found in Bolivia no doubt contributed to the ousting of Morales, to allow US-capital to exploit them, not China or the EU, as Morales was planning. Nonetheless, while US-imperialism appears once more to be the main imposer of semi-colonial subjugation in Latin America, there can be no doubt that it is now a hegemon in decline with much less economic and political strength than in its former interventions. At the same time, its imperialist rivals, the EU, China and Russia, cannot be seen as forms of more "progressive" imperialism. As can be seen in Venezuela, China is acting as one of the main imposers of neoliberal "reforms" and authoritarian politics to guarantee their investments.

The indigenous peoples

The 2010 census data revealed 45 million indigenous people in Latin America, making up nearly 8 percent of the total population but with great unevenness; in Bolivia, 41 percent, Guatemala, 60 percent, Peru, 26 percent and Mexico, 15 percent. Whilst many still live in culturally distinct rural communities, nearly half now live in urban areas, albeit in the poorest housing, with poor sanitation, water and power supplies, and more prone to natural/climate change disasters. Since the colonial era, indigenous people in Latin American countries have been systemically oppressed and suffered persistent discrimination based on the assertion of racial superiority by white colonisers and their descendants and excluded from the political sphere, often by Spanish literacy tests.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, however, there has been a rise in organisations reasserting their languages, Quechua, Aymara and Guarani and many others, their social structures, art and music and rejecting forced assimilation to 'Western' culture. From the emergence of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the gas and water

wars waged by largely indigenous people in Bolivia, the indigenous peoples of the Amazon or the Mapuche in Chile, they have become major actors against neoliberalism, capitalist globalisation and the destruction of the natural environment.

Yet the parties that have represented them have not, and could not have, avoided the questions of class and political leadership. In Ecuador, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, CONAIE, which had taken the lead alongside the trade unions in the struggle against the austerity measures of Lenín Moreno, demobilised the movement and entered negotiations with the government rather than driving it from power and installing a workers' and peasants' government based on the mass organisations of the struggle.

In Bolivia, the Movement for Socialism, MAS, took over, bureaucratised and split the indigenous organisations whose mass struggles between 2000 and 2003 drove two presidents from the neoliberal oligarchy from office. This shows that an alliance between the landless and communal majority of the indigenous population and the workers is critical to avoid such leadership betrayals and the eventual racist counterrevolution now underway in Bolivia that is overturning the political and cultural gains made in the last two decades.

Panorama of developments

Over the last year, we have seen mass popular mobilisations by workers, students, youth, women, peasants and indigenous movements. First, there was the continued resistance against both the election of right wing governments, as in Colombia and Ecuador, and against the coups in Brazil and Bolivia, although these struggles have been limited and hampered by the electoralist and conciliatory policies pursued by the CONAIE and the Ecuadorian United Workers' Front, FUT, and by the MAS and PT leaderships. Then there were spontaneous mass mobilisations against long standing neo-liberal regimes, which have taken even pre-revolutionary dimensions, as in Chile. In other countries, for example, Argentina, the impressive mobilisations of the women's movement contributed to the unpopularity of Macri and the election of a new Peronist government.

The heaviest pressure from US imperialism, and its agents within the capitalist oligarchies and the military hierarchies, has been directed against the radical Bolivarian regimes in Venezuela and Bolivia, those which proclaimed a 'Socialism of the 21st Century'.

Venezuela

In Venezuela, the US-sponsored coup attempt against the Bolivarian regime of President Nicolás Maduro to replace him with Juan Guaidó, who heads an opposition coalition of right wing political forces, led to massive clashes with many deaths, arrests and worsening economic conditions. After the coup failed, for the time being at least, an agreement was struck between the government and sections of the right-wing opposition. However, this will only be a temporary pause, since both the US and the right are determined to overthrow the Bolivarian regime. The sanctions and economic blockade imposed by the US under Barack Obama in 2015, and intensified under Donald Trump, have added to the economic hardships faced by Venezuelans, including hyperinflation and widespread hunger causing over three million to emigrate to neighbouring countries.

The United States has also seized billions of dollars of Venezuela's foreign assets, with the help of institutions like the Bank of England, including much of Venezuela's \$6.6 billion in foreign gold reserves. Real GDP fell roughly 37.4 percent in 2019. Even if the threats of a direct US military intervention or a right-wing coup have receded for the moment, the international working class opposition to these imperialist sanctions, feeble though they be, need to be intensified, whatever criticisms need to be made of Maduro.

Pro and anti-government marches clashed in the cities of Caracas and Maracaibo on October 24, 2019. The United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV, Maduro's party, demonstrated against the International Monetary Fund, against imperialism, against foreign interference in the internal affairs of peoples and in favour of sovereignty and independence. However, nobody should be blinded to the fact that the economic policy of the Bolivarian regime shares an important measure of blame for the harsh conditions of the masses and demands ever more sacrifices and hardship for the poor. Most economists estimate that hyperinflation reached 130,000 percent in 2018 after averaging 863 per cent in 2017.

A United Nations report in March 2019 indicated that 60 percent of the Venezuelan population were living in extreme poverty, with 3.7 million people suffering from undernourishment and 22 percent of children experiencing chronic malnutrition. The health system, which saw real improvements under Chavez, has deteriorated hugely with a return of preventable diseases like tuberculosis, diphtheria, measles and malaria due to lack of access to medicines. Twenty-two thousand doctors, a third of the country's total, have left the country. The Financial Times reports that migrant outflows from Venezuela will reach 6.5 million by the end of 2020. At the same time, government policy spares the fortunes of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie, and aims at attracting economic support from Chinese and Russian imperialism.

It also covers up corruption within the regime itself. Last, but not least, Maduro has used repression against those workers and their leaders who fight back against their harsh conditions. Only the facts that a substantial section of the masses fear things would get worse for them if the right were to win power and the integration of the military and police into a system of privilege and corruption, have enabled Maduro to survive. But Venezuela, from being a beacon of hope for popular forces across the continent, and beyond, has become a dire warning propagated by the right and the US media as to what happens to those who try to make a revolution or introduce socialism.

Bolivia

In Bolivia, Evo Morales was elected president for a fourth term. The Bolivian right rallied their fascistic youth movement under the leader of the Santa Cruz Committee, Luis Fernando Camacho, plus certain disaffected forces from within the social movements, accusing Morales of electoral fraud and claiming that his victory was illegitimate, effectively aiming to overthrow him. The police joined, rather than suppressed, the right wing demonstrators committing outrages on elected MAS leaders. Morales repeatedly tried to appease the right, offering to let the OAS investigate the electoral results and even to re-run them. However, no concession appeased the right. Meanwhile, he left his mass supporters in El Alto and Cochabamba leaderless. The decisive moment came when the army chief he had appointed, General Williams Kaliman, called on him to resign. Under threat from right wing mobs, he and Vice President Álvaro García Linera resigned and fled the country and the MAS ministers resigned, opening the way for the white supremacist and catholic bigot Jeanine Añez Chavez, to declare herself acting president.

Elections have been called for May, but any real opponents of the coup will face major obstacles. The police and military have declared open season on those fighting back, 30 of whom have been killed since the coup. Symbolically, the government has closed Juan José Torres Anti-Imperialist Command School founded by Morales as a futile attempt to change the culture of the military. Instead, it has opened the 'Heroes of Ñancahuazú' military school, named after the killers of Che Guevara. Williams Kaliman was removed only days after he betrayed Morales.

Clearly, these events are a more violent version of those which overthrew the PT president, Dilma Rousseff, in Brazil. Whilst the conservative and right wing opposition, headed by Carlos Mesa, president from 2003 to 2005, demand more privatisations, more openings to neo-liberalism and the scrapping of social reforms introduced by the governing MAS, one reason why the right wing could also win former

supporters of Morales, including the main trade union confederation, COB, to accede to the coup is that he had started to open the economy and its mineral resources to foreign investors in the past years and himself turned against sections of the masses. Just like the Bolivarian government in Venezuela, Morales attacked important sections of his social basis and turned towards a more authoritarian and Bonapartist form of rule. Unlike in Venezuela, the right was able not only to present itself as a fake expression of 'democracy', but also to win over the High Command and police for an effective coup.

Chile

Chile is experiencing a great revolt that began with students fighting against the increase in fares on public transport. By the time the government decided to back down and repeal the decree that readjusted tariffs, it was too late. The movement had already spread, linking up different sectors of the oppressed raising social and economic demands for a break with the legacy of neo-liberalism. The government responded by enacting a curfew, based on the laws that were established during the rule of the dictator Pinochet. But the masses have shown their courage and determination on the streets, facing armoured vehicles, batons, tear gas bombs and all other crackdowns and demanding the departure of President Sebastián Piñera.

31 demonstrators have been killed in clashes with the repressive forces since October, thousands have been injured and more than 6,000 arrested. But this could not break the spirit of the movement, calling for general strikes, creating embryonic forms of workers' and popular councils and self-defence groups. The leadership of the movement, however, the Chilean Communist Party, the Broad Front, Frente Amplio, and the union bureaucracy tried to limit the struggle to political and social reforms, rather than arguing for an all-out indefinite general strike to overthrow the government and establish a workers' government based on councils and the armed masses.

However, the demand for a constituent assembly does have huge support, because the insurgent youth want to sweep away all the remnants of the authoritarian constitution inherited from Pinochet. The critical questions are whether it will be truly sovereign, whether elections will be transparent and whether its agenda will include bringing the murderers of the people, old and new, to justice. Will it sweep away all the neoliberal institutions? Will it meet the needs of the indigenous people and address the glaring inequality which marks the country out in a continent of inequality? To achieve this, the youth, the workers, the Mapuche movement, must establish a majority in the assembly and defend it whenever it takes radical or, indeed, revolutionary measures.

Brazil

In Brazil, despite the apparent apathy, the situation of workers is getting ever more serious: high unemployment, loss of political rights, environmental crimes that affect the population, a declining economy and now the dismantling of public and social security. Leftist organisations like the main trade union federation the CUT and the Workers' Party, PT, are not fulfilling their duty to mobilise and organise the working class. Instead, they are pinning their hopes on the divisions amongst ruling class politicians that some of the actions of the Bolsonaro government have opened up. We can hope that the wave of rebellions sweeping across Latin America will serve as an incentive for the Brazilian working class and its organisations to overcome this paralysis and either compel the leadership to carry out their duties by retaking the streets of the country or by the rank and file militants forming co-ordinations for action themselves.

Argentina

In Argentina, Mauricio Macri has been defeated in the presidential elections by Alberto Fernández and his running mate, the former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The Peronists are now celebrating their victory and have promised the end of Macri's austerity policies. After several general strikes that took

over the country's streets and made the Argentine capital tremble, the size of the popular vote for Fernández and Kirchner reflects a shift to the left. But the new Peronist government faces a country in severe economic crises, a crumbling currency and an increasing outflow of capital.

By now, the crisis has already led to impoverishment for millions and it is clear that the new government has no programme which could solve these problems. It is trying to manoeuvre between imperialism and its institutions, like the IMF, the Argentine bourgeoisie and the pressure from the masses. In this situation, social explosions are likely. The vote of 2.18 percent for Nicolás del Caño of the Workers' and Left Front, FIT Unidad, shows that there exists real potential for the development of an alternative working class leadership, providing it can lead and break the masses and unions from Peronism.

Uruguay

In Uruguay, the first round of presidential elections took place on October 27 and the second on November 24. In the first round, Daniel Martínez of the centre left Broad Front, Frente Amplio, gained the highest vote, but in the second round, the right wing candidate, Luis Lacalle Pou, won a majority. Now the right wing controls both the parliament and presidency. This will pave the way for major attacks such as the Congressional Constitutional Reform that aims to increase prison sentences for serious crimes, including the adoption of "life imprisonment", the establishment of a police force with military personnel, the permission for night detentions with judicial authorisation and the effective enforcement of convictions. Many Uruguayans understand very well what this means, the path to a dictatorship. It is the right, in the service of US imperialism, trying to dominate all of Latin America. Precisely for this reason, the streets of Montevideo, the Uruguayan capital, were occupied by huge masses of protesters earlier this year. Now with the new president, decisive struggles lie ahead.

Haiti, Honduras, Colombia

Haiti is experiencing a major crisis caused by fuel shortages and institutionalised corruption. Spontaneous outbursts of discontent block the roads with rocks and burning tyres. In addition to the metropolitan region, total blockages have been reported in the city of Arcahaie in the Artibonite region, Mirebalis in the central region, the northern Haitian cape and various points in the south of the country. The country is, like Chile, facing a social crisis and an escalating class struggle that poses the question of socialist revolution

In Honduras, thousands took to the streets of the capital, demanding the resignation of President Juan Orlando Hernández, for allegations that link him to drug trafficking. Protest days included roadblocks, barricades on boulevards, and student protests. Hernández came to power in 2014 and since then has had the support of the Armed Forces, the National Police and the Supreme Court.

In Colombia, thousands of students took to the streets, occupying the streets of Bogota on October 10. The population is disgusted by the austerity policies that suffocate the people, and the imperialist plundering freely promoted and liberated by their governments, as happens in Brazil. This type of policy leads to destruction in the educational system, public policy and democratic freedoms. We can say that Colombia is another pressure cooker about to explode.

Crisis of ?democratic rule?

The economic crisis and the struggle between the imperialist powers, in particular the US-attempt to turn the continent into its backyard once again, has led to an undermining of ?constitutional? or relatively stable forms of parliamentary democratic rule. This clearly contrasts with the imposition of neo-liberalism in the late 80s and early 1990s, when the economic agenda of globalisation was imposed together with the establishment of relatively stable forms of democratic rule.

However, this has come to an end over recent decades. Left populist regimes like the Venezuelan or the

Bolivian, or led by reformists like the PT in Brazil, came to power on the basis of mass mobilisations and democratic elections, but have disappointed growing sections of their supporters, despite significant, albeit limited, reforms. They have also been integrated into bourgeois forms for government on behalf of capitalism, even if large sections of the bourgeoisies and US imperialism and its allies always wanted to remove them. Their compromises with capital, which eventually undermined their 'reform' projects, have actually paved the way for the growth of the right and successful coups, just as the Peronists under the Kirchners had to give way to Macri. The attacks by the Bolivarian governments against their own social bases, also presented the right wingers with the opportunity to present themselves as defenders of democracy.

The coups against Dilma/Lula and Morales, the coup attempts in Venezuela, the intransigence of the Colombian right wing, all demonstrate that an increasing number of Latin American capitalist classes are prepared and willing to utilise anti-democratic, anti-constitutional means, up to army rebellions and the use of right wing or even fascist gangs and murder.

The bourgeois class and also US imperialism have recognised that, faced with the current crisis, they cannot rely on 'respectable' openly bourgeois parties and parliamentarism to impose their programmes over a longer period of time. In Brazil, the coup that overthrew Dilma Rousseff still needs to be completed and the Bolsonaro government may well turn out to be only a transitory step, which might lead to a military coup, backed by organised racist and even fascist mobilisations. This is also a result of the fact that many of the 'traditional' bourgeois parties themselves only have weak support amongst the masses.

For the ruling classes in Latin America, there are, in the current situation, two principal forms of government/rule that might provide a way out of the current crisis. Either they resort to forms of Bonapartism or to the popular front, that is, a government combining both working class parties/organisations and those of the bourgeoisie/petit-bourgeois. The growing tendency towards Bonapartist forms of rule clearly has support amongst the military and the state apparatus as well as amongst large scale capital and imperialist powers and investors, as can be seen from the support for Bolsonaro by various western business associations and companies.

In a number of countries, the right wing presents itself as a 'popular' force, more precisely as a populist force. In this way, it tries to rally support from the petit-bourgeoisie and 'middle class' and even some sections of the working class. It combines a call for law and order and a 'strong state' that will purge society of the corrupt 'left', 'liberal', feminist, 'parasites', who prevent 'the country', by which they mean the bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie, from being successful. They aim to combine an aggressive neo-liberal agenda with close relations to business and the military on the one hand and an ultra-reactionary policy against national and racial minorities, indigenous people, women and LGBTQ+ people, peasants and homeless workers as well the students. The evangelical churches often act as suppliers of this reactionary ideology and assist the organisation of a mass base.

While there are reasons to characterise some of these political forces as "fascist", one should be careful with the use of this term in regard to current right wing governments such as that of Bolsonaro. Fascist rule is based on a scale of reactionary mass mobilisations that atomises every kind of opposition but, in particular, working class organisations, and makes reactionary, pogrom-like mobilisations permanent. There can be no doubt that the right wing is preparing for such a kind of rule, for example, the number of lethal police and militia atrocities in Brazil and the formation of a proto-fascist party directed by an all-powerful leader. On the other hand, the reformist left is generally using the threat of fascism to argue for compromises with the "lesser evil" of "democratic" sections of the bourgeoisie.

These illusions in bourgeois democracy and class conciliation led the PT and the CUT to adopt a less than

combative posture when confronting the reform of the social security system, by not calling for an indefinite general strike and instead claiming "if we bring Brazil to an election we will stop them?". It is plain that the PT leadership's strategy is to wait for the government to wear down its support with corruption scandals and unpopular austerity measures so that, at the next election, in a new coalition with bourgeois parties, it can appear as a moderate alternative to Bolsonaro.

The right wing regimes like those of Añez or Bolsonaro that have come to power with an overtly racist and sexist agenda, have not yet succeeded in fully carrying out their reactionary programmes. In order to destroy the gains of the working class, peasants, racially oppressed, women, the poor and sexually oppressed, they must first exhaust and demoralise the latter's movements, indeed atomise them. To achieve this means the present form of their rule, which is Bonapartist but retains some parliamentary and judicial elements, may have only a transitional character to be replaced by more overtly dictatorial forms with greater reliance on the military and imperialism and more openly fascist movements to terrorise resistance.

As long as such forces are not strong enough to defeat the working class decisively, or if open bourgeois governments as in Chile are faced with mass movements, general strikes or popular uprisings, the ruling class may be forced to resort to the other means of containing the mass movement; a government of the "popular front" or the "Frente Amplio" as it is often called in Latin America. Historically, the popular front in Spain, France or Chile were the means to protect capitalism in revolutionary or pre-revolutionary crises.

In many countries in Latin America, the "left" parties themselves take the form of a popular front, like the left-populist parties of Bolivarian origin (PSUV, MAS) or, historically, Peronism, thus confirming the analysis Trotsky made in the 1930s of the APRA or the PRI. The Frente Amplio in Chile today has similar features, even though it is more of an alliance than a party. The working class parties within most countries have an electoralist strategy, aiming to form parliamentary and even governmental alliances with openly bourgeois parties. Most of the trade unions advocate a similar strategy, which leads ultimately to subordination to a reformist or populist agenda and thereby to the ruling class.

The programmes of reformism and left-populism do not offer any political solution to the current crisis. On the contrary, they will lead to defeat and concessions to the right wing, like the collaboration of the Frente Amplio with Sebastián Piñera in Chile. In Bolivia, the MAS backed down from mobilising against the ousting of Morales and abandoned the more radical sections of the movement in El Alto to repression by the coup makers. The aim of these forces ultimately and explicitly is the creation of a "bourgeois reform government", bringing neo-liberalism to a halt. The Frente Amplio quite explicitly points to Salvador Allende's Popular Unity as a "model" for the future even though, in reality, this example demonstrates that a government that wants to compromise with the "democratic" sections of the ruling class and, therefore, limits the struggle to constitutional means and peaceful reforms, will prove itself not only unable to carry through its promises but unable to prevent the forces of counter-revolution imposing their programme.

Tactics and Strategy

It is vitally important that revolutionaries fight alongside the reformist mass organisations, the trade unions and the rank and file of the populist parties. It is necessary to systematically apply united front tactics in order to rally the masses against the bourgeoisie and to break the mass base from left-populism and reformism. We need to call on their leaders to mobilise the working class independently of all bourgeois parties and, if elected, to form working class governments, which break with the bourgeoisie and mobilise the mass organisations of the workers, the peasants and the poor to take power into the hands of their councils and militia.

As we have said, in Argentina, the key is to fight for the trade unions to break with Peronism, calling on them to create a mass working class party. Argentina is one of the few countries where Trotskyist organisations have made a significant impact in national elections. The Workers? Left Front-Unity, FIT-U, is an alliance centred on the two largest Trotskyist groups, the Socialist Workers Party, PTS, and the Workers? Party, PO. Although FIT-U stood on a platform of class independence, this cannot be achieved simply by standing in elections or supporting militant groups of workers, important as both of these tactics are.

Since the Second World War, Peronism, a conservative bourgeois populism, has maintained a tight grip on the main trade unions; in particular, the largest federation, the General Confederation of Labour, CGT. To break this hold, it is necessary to agitate in all the federations for the unions to break from populism, and from liberalism too, and to create an independent workers? party. Forces like the FIT-U could have a significant impact if they did this but, despite their claims to Trotskyism and Leninism, they ignore the examples of Lenin and Trotsky on the tactic of fighting for labour parties in countries where mass workers? parties have never come into being. In such a party, revolutionaries would need from the outset to fight for a revolutionary anti-capitalist programme.

In most countries in Latin America, the call for a constituent assembly has come to the fore time and again. This reflects, on the one hand, the increasing attacks on democratic rights, but it also reflects the populist and reformist limitations of the leaderships of the movements.

A constituent assembly convoked by the leaders of the oppositional movements, together with representatives of the state apparatus or the existing regime, can only be a deception, intended to divide and demobilise the masses during a ?transition? period. This can be seen from the experience of the Bolivian CA in 2006-07. The mass movements of workers, poor peasants and indigenist groups had called for this since 2000. Their aim was to install a popular democracy based on the communal organisations and trade unions. This would nationalise the country?s oil, gas and mineral reserves and seize the latifundia from the big landowners. However, the masses were cheated by the MAS under Evo Morales. Despite calling the country a ?plurinational republic?, the MAS preserved intact, the army, the police, parliament and the judiciary albeit with the Wiphala (the flag of Bolivia?s indigenous peoples) on their uniforms and flying from public buildings. The coup of 2019 showed that, unless the masses smash this bourgeois state machine, any new constitution will simply be a façade behind which the counterrevolution hides till the time is right to strike.

In a number of countries, the call for the convocation of a free and sovereign constituent assembly could be an important means to address the bourgeois-democratic needs, and shed the illusions, of millions. But it is also clear that even the most democratic constituent assembly would still be a bourgeois institution, a terrain for struggle, rather than its solution. Therefore, we must not fetishise this demand, but rather use it correctly. Whilst it is important in a number of countries, it must not be seen as a panacea in any country. Where it is raised and where it is necessary, we need to do so in a revolutionary fashion, fighting for elections to such an assembly being controlled by working class and poor peasant organisations, by councils of action and defended by a workers? and popular militia.

The only real way out for the working class, indigenous people and the mass of the population, is the overthrow of pro-imperialist governments and their replacement by workers? and peasants? governments. To leave the armed forces, the police and the security services in the hands of their commanders and their US backers is to hang a sword of Damocles over such government as events in Chile in 1973 and in Bolivia in 2019 showed only too clearly.

The ultimate goal must be governments, based on the workers? and popular councils, breaking up all the

forces of bourgeois repression and imperialist intervention and replacing them with armed militias, arising from workers? and popular organs of self-defence and drawing in those soldiers who side with the movement of the masses. This would be a big step towards reversing the reactionary tide that appeared to be sweeping all before it in recent years, and could lead to the creation of the United Socialist Republics of Latin America.

In order to achieve this goal, however, we need to overcome the acute crisis of working class leadership on the continent. The predominant forces in the emerging and developing social struggles are still left-populist or reform socialist in character. In order to prevent those leaderships misleading the movements yet again, the working class needs to build its own revolutionary parties, so it can actually give a lead to the popular masses, the peasants and landless, the urban petit-bourgeoisie, the indigenous communities and the different social movements and rally them behind an action programme of transitional demands that lead to the socialist revolution and the transformation of the entire continent.

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