

## **The Bolivian Revolution of 1952**

### **Editor**

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Note: The basis of this article was an outline for a documentary on the Bolivian Revolution, if you'd prefer to watch a video please check it out here produced by the channel of one of our editors, Sin Patron.

### **Introduction:**

The first proletarian revolution of the Americas remains almost unknown to the majority of the anglophone left, yet it had a decisive impact on Latin American History and the future of the revolutionary left. In 1952 miners rose up alongside the working class and urban masses, overthrowing the bourgeois government of Bolivia. Many of these miners had found an expression of their revolutionary interests in the ideas of the incipient but influential Bolivian Trotskyist movement. How this revolution was ultimately undermined, disarmed and betrayed is a vital story in the history of the left and of the Americas. Although the context has changed drastically since, the lessons to be drawn from this experience remain essential to our efforts to reconstruct a revolutionary alternative.

### **Context**

Bolivia was long dominated by what was known as the "Rosca", an aristocratic elite which monopolized political and economic power in the cities and countryside. The global demand created by World War One saw the growth of the mining industry and the emergence of individual oligarchs who held far more power than the state. The government took on massive debt while making huge concessions to foreign capital. As an example: Rockefeller's Standard Oil found itself with 7 million hectares of Bolivian land by 1926.

The real power in Bolivia came from Tin and the greatest Tin Baron was Simon Patino. He was known as the Andean Rockefeller and emerged as one of the 5 richest men in the world. Patino alone had more revenue than the entire Bolivian state, and there were two other smaller Tin barons who held vast influence.

Although there was immense wealth in the tin, much like the famed silver of Potosi none of the wealth remained for Bolivia. Enough tin was exported in half a century to build a bridge circling the planet four and a half times. This Tin fed the industrial accomplishments and war machines of the world's great capitalist powers; yet only the starvation wages paid to the miners remained in Bolivia.

The miners were a youthful, and inexperienced working class because the miserable rate of life expectancy and deadly conditions left few opportunities for veterans. Shifts in the mines were generally from 9 to 11 hours, but there were some cases where shifts could be as long as 36 hours. A 1948 study showed that 97% of Miners who worked within the mines had Tuberculosis. The average

miner lived in a hut; no bed, no windows, 5 or more family members cramped together. Even as late as 1961, the average lifespan was 25 and infant mortality was at 60%

In the countryside, the indigenous majority lived under conditions of poverty and oppression with 6% of property owners controlling 92% of the land. This process of accumulation in the hands of a few was accelerating, further empowering the rural aristocracy which had remained a constant force in Bolivian politics since the establishment of the republic.

## **The Chaco War**

The Great Depression presented one of the first major threats to the ruling class in Bolivia. A dramatic fall in the price of tin brought on economic crisis and the start of political instability. The ruling elite attempted to resolve this contradiction - as ruling elites across the world did in this period - through war.

The Chaco war was fought with Paraguay for control of disputed territory in Northern Chaco. It was driven by the crisis and desires of the national bourgeoisie, yet one in which the interests of multinational corporations also played a key role. Chaco was thought to be an excellent site for oil exploitation and access to the Paraguay River would allow new routes towards the Atlantic. Rockefeller's Standard Oil backed Bolivia while Royal Dutch Shell supported Paraguay.

The horrors of World War One trench warfare were unleashed in South America in inhospitable and hard to supply terrain. Over almost 3 years, Bolivia lost 60 thousand men, 2% of its population. Paraguay lost 35 thousand men, 3% of its population. Paraguay edged out a narrow but significant victory thanks to its mobilization for total war. Bolivia by contrast had a poorly supplied army conscripted from an indigenous population which did not even have the right to vote. After the war however many of these conscripts and mid-ranking officers came back questioning the government which sent them there. Military disaster set the stage for a period of political instability and the entrance of the masses into history.

Military officers unleashed a wave of coups even before peace was signed, many of whom proclaimed an adherence to "military socialism"—a combination of popular appeals to socialism with anti-communist repression and threats. Standard Oil was nationalized, new sets of labor laws and institutions were called and partially implemented. Yet the new governments lacked a solid foundation and took no concrete steps to challenge the power of the Oligarchy. The bourgeoisie united behind a 'Party of Order' which attempted to restore bourgeois normalcy.

Communism, while weak, had begun to emerge as a political current in Bolivian life in the 1930s. Trotskyism was the first current to constitute a real, modern political party with the formation of the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR), in 1935. While the official communists would form an influential popular front organization, the PIR, the Bolivian Communist Party did not exist until 1950.

The working class was young, physically and ideologically. The threat it inspired in the ruling class was not yet for the strength of its organizations, but a recognition on the part of the ruling class of the bourgeoisie's own inability to rule effectively. Having passed through the Chaco war, the masses gained an understanding of modern warfare and the use of weapons. Meanwhile the desperate condition and overwhelming oppression of the Bolivian working class propelled it onwards to the extreme left.

A stark example of this oppression was given by the brutal massacre of the miners of Catavi. While the government had agreed to sell tin at artificially low prices to show its support for the allies in WW2, conditions for the miners remained abysmal. Martial law was declared in the mining regions. In the middle of a major strike, the army shot dead a group of women who were searching for food supplies in the mines. When the entire town and local working class marched in protest, two hundred soldiers opened fire with machine guns. As many as four hundred workers and their family members were killed.

The popular outrage produced by this atrocity was widespread, and was notably channeled by the parliamentary group of the MNR, the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, which had begun to gain influence especially among middle class sectors. The general instability and outrage produced the conditions for yet another left military coup.

The general Villarroel took power and formed a coalition with the MNR. He was inspired by his predecessors in Bolivia and the government of Peron in Argentina. He passed a series of important labor reforms and held the first indigenous conference of the Americas. He proclaimed that he was "not an enemy of the rich, but more of a friend to the poor." However the conditions of the crisis did not allow for a third way and the rich certainly considered him their enemy. In 1946, the oligarchy with help of the Bolivian Communists (who labeled Villarroel a Nazi sympathizer) organized a revolt against Villarroel which lynched him and some of his close collaborators. While Villarroel himself offered no real path forward for the working class, the Communist Party became tarred with the infamy of providing a left cover to the oligarchy's return to power. The MNR was tarred with having been his collaborator, and having responsibility for many of the unpopular dictatorial measures he took alongside his moves to the left.

The political field for leadership of the working class and oppressed was open. Into this breach stepped the Partido Obrero Revolucionario and one of its leading cadre, Guillermo Lora. Trotskyism had gained influence among a broad set of political and left figures who claimed sympathy to its ideas in Bolivia. The POR was the first organized political party in Bolivia and had been active since 1935. However it was small, and was inconsequential in many of the urban centers. It had however built up influence among Tin Miners. The miners had benefited marginally from the Villarroel government and in response to the crisis provoked by his overthrow, they called a trade union congress in the city of Pulacayo.

### **The Thesis of Pulacayo**

The Thesis of Pulacayo is probably the most important Trotskyist document since the death of Trotsky, and one of the most important Marxist documents of the 20th century. It represents the adoption of a revolutionary program, inspired in the Transitional Program, by a mass workers organization in a period of ferocious social struggles and revolutionary opportunity.

It openly proclaims that the proletariat is the revolutionary class and the unique force capable of solving the tasks facing Bolivia. The Bolivian working class, precisely for its youthfulness, is well positioned to be at the vanguard of the international struggle.

*“The Bolivian proletariat, for its extreme youth and incomparable energy, for being almost a political virgin, for not having traditions of parliamentarianism or class collaboration, and above all, for acting in a country in which the class struggle has become extremely intense, for all of this the Bolivian Proletariat has been able to convert itself into one of the most radical. We respond to the reformists and those who have sold out to the oligarchy that a proletariat of such quality calls for revolutionary demands and audacity in the struggle.”*

The thesis also clearly lays out a perspective which is consistent with the theory and practice of permanent revolution.

*“The workers, once in power, will not be able to maintain themselves indefinitely within bourgeois-democratic limits and will be compelled, every day in greater measure, to make deeper cuts in the regime of private property, in this manner the revolution will acquire a permanent character.”*

Importantly it guards against concessions to reformists or compromises with the bourgeoisie. It rejects worker participation in bourgeois governments, rejects, reformist politics and any attempts to disguise continued oppression and exploitation in the name of the nation.

*“It is a central task to struggle against and smash the reformists that trumpet class collaboration, those who advise us to tighten our belts in the name of so called national salvation. When there is hunger and oppression for the workers, there can be no national greatness.”*

The thesis identifies the threat of fascism and the constant recourse of any bourgeois government to violence.

*“It is of little importance which political party has to use fascist methods to better serve imperialist interests. If they continue to maintain capitalist oppression, their destiny is already written: violence against the workers”.*

The document rejects all alliances with the bourgeoisie, proposes a “United Proletarian Front”, the occupation of the mines and lays down a clear path to a workers revolution. Alliances are to be built with the peasants and other sectors such as students. Yet these are alliances in which the Proletariat must be in the commanding position, must be bringing these forces in behind it. These are not alliances to tail behind the allies.

These statements seem not at all original or ground-breaking coming from a small Trotskyist organization, yet this was not the congress of any communist organization. This was the Bolivian equivalent of the adoption of the Transitional Program by the congress of the United Mineworkers, it was even more important considering the outsized role and power of the mining industry within Bolivia.

As a historical example it is a testament to the influence and power that the right program can have when it speaks to the necessities of the oppressed and the organized power of a workers movement. Where a gap in political organization exists, there is an opportunity to skip directly to a program of the radical left.

In the 1947 Election two candidates stood who both represented the oligarchy, both candidates were even photographed publicly with Carlos Aramayo, one of the Tin Barons. The PIR, communist led forces, supported one of them who ultimately triumphed. As the ruling elite continue to hold power, the only independent opposition to the Rosca came from the Trotskyist POR and the remnants of the MNR. The MNR itself was weak after having only won 10k votes in the election.

Yet precisely in this period, the MNR began to recompose itself. Juan Lechin, a union bureaucrat and leader among the miners who would play an important role throughout, upheld the Thesis of Pulacayo and sought to use it - and some of the politics of the POR - as a base to recompose the MNR. Meanwhile the government, which was supported by the PIR, launched new waves of violent repression against peasants and miners.

The Trotskyist POR, while it had established itself as the main opposition force, suffered from a number of weaknesses. Above all, a lack of clear and disciplined organization. The organization had great individuals like Lora, dispersed and important leaders, but it lacked a strong organization and the direction and consistency which were needed. It did not stick to a clear line on the MNR, which meant a number of important cadre flirted with the MNR and at later decisive moments, even cast over to join the MNR.

The organization was lost without a clear direction. While this hardly meant it was in a worse position than most of the other parties, riven by internal divisions and contradictory ideas, it is far easier to sustain the old order than it is to construct a new one. The MNR adopted left political slogans to recompose it's mass base. Both the MNR and the POR were repressed heavily by the government in power, yet the MNR which was untethered by the need to fight for something truly new was able to do without the consistency of principles or vision which the POR needed.

A combination of the MNR's left posturing, and the inability of the POR as an organization to counter-pose itself effectively, allowed the MNR to become the main opposition. In 1951, the MNR candidate Victor Paz Estenssor triumphed in the elections. The party in power responded by declaring a state of emergency and forming a military junta. The stage was set for a popular uprising.

The leadership of the MNR wanted to take power, yet they did not have a popular uprising in mind. In April 1952 they set in motion plan for a traditional military coup which would resolve the question without having to involve the masses. The General Antonio Seleme was to become president with the support of the MNR after a swift palace coup.

Before dawn, April 9th 1952, cadre of the MNR and the police who were loyal to General Seleme took up positions at major public buildings. At 6am they proclaimed through the radio the triumph of their revolution. It was a premature declaration.

At 8am the military leaders successfully organized themselves and brought out almost the entirety of their troops. What was planned to be a swift, easy coup turned into a bloody struggle. The masses of La Paz came out in force, robbing a military arsenal and arming themselves with whatever was available. Barricades came out in the streets and fierce, defensive struggles were waged.

By nightfall, despite the heroic resistance of the people, the original leaders of the coup judged that it had failed. General Seleme sought protection in the Chilean consulate. The leaders of the MNR attempted to negotiate a surrender, which was rejected.

However while the leaders were ready to surrender, the masses of La Paz were not. On April 10th the military attempted to force its way into the center of the city, but were beaten back by the ferocious resistance of the armed masses. Factory workers, artisans, the unemployed threw everything into the barricades and held off the offensive. With perfect timing, four hundred tin miners from a nearby mining town arrived armed with dynamite and striking at the enemies rear.

Where the leaders had abandoned the struggle, the workers militias held off and defeated the army in a decisive engagement. Reinforced by more militia members and above all by more miners armed with dynamite, they passed to the offensive and succeeding in capturing the airforce base and then the military headquarters. After a ferocious struggle led by workers militias and the armed masses, the Bolivian military was disarmed. Not the quick change of a palace coup, this was a revolutionary uprising of the masses which placed armed workers as the decisive social force in command of Bolivia.

The army was forced to surrender to the armed workers militias. It was abolished, temporarily, as a force. Power, the monopoly of armed force, at this point lay completely in the hands of the workers.

*"The Proletariat of the Altiplano, headed by the Miners, the ruins left from the Inca Empire of Tahuantinsuyu, the serfs of the colonies, the beasts of burden of the republic, for the first time in the history of our continent, as the vanguard of the proletariat of Latin America, had taken power and placed themselves ideologically at the vanguard of the world proletariat!"-Liborio Justo, a historian of the Bolivian revolution*

Yet, as in the case of the February Revolution in Russia, there is a wide gap between the spontaneous overthrow of the government and the conscious, self

directed taking of power by the working class. Workers militias had defeated and abolished the old army, yet there was no clear political direction towards constructing a workers government.

Much as in the February revolution the Soviets (councils) did not take power but instead supported the provisional government, the workers militias and workers organizations in Bolivia propped up a new MNR government under the leadership of Victor Paz Estenssoro, the “constitutional president” who returned from exile to Bolivia.

Workers organized themselves in the COB, the Workers Confederation of Bolivia, an organization encompassing all the major labor unions. The COB was referred to as a “Co-Government”, a second power which effectively held veto power over the policies of the government. A power which held the loyalty of the workers militias who were the only real armed force in the aftermath of the revolution.

The leadership of the COB, much like the initial leadership of the Soviets, supported and participated in the new government. Despite holding all the keys to power it willingly conceded those to the new government.

However there was no opposition which called for the COB to take power itself. The Trotskyist POR alongside the Stalinist PIR offered critical support to the MNR government- waiting for a more revolutionary situation to advance a workers revolution.

The central political perspective of the Thesis of Pulacayo—political independence from the bosses, no ministers in bourgeois governments, the fight for a workers government—was abandoned, including by the party which authored it. The POR, rather than calling for “All Power to the COB”, effectively supported the participation of workers ministers. They tacitly approved the support of the COB for the new government. This political perspective didn't just come from Bolivia, but was actually the line laid out by the Fourth International in Paris. The POR was under orders to support the MNR.

Had there been a political force capable of demanding “All Power to the COB”, this would not in and of itself have resolved the issue or ensured a revolution. In comparison with say, the provisional government in Russia during 1917, the MNR was far more capable of answering core, popular demands. There was no ongoing war for example. The government acceded to demands from peasants and the rural masses to establish land reform. The government also, at least in form, acceded to the nationalization of the tin mining industry.

However it is important to emphasize that in the aftermath of the revolution, the provisional government could do nothing that wasn't approved by the COB. Real power lay in the hands of the workers, even if the bureaucrats leading the COB were happy to surrender that power to the MNR. The potential was there for the COB to take power into its own hands if there was a political force to fight for it.

The MNR in practice recognized in law what has already been decided by force: agrarian reform in the countryside, nationalization of the mines, the adoption of a

Universal vote. The universal vote itself was mainly an essential tool to help it reclaim legitimacy and power.

Workers and peasants had already conquered with arms in hand everything that the MNR delivered as a reward. The Peasants had risen up and divided the land themselves. The mines were already occupied and run by workers militias. Nationalizing them, and placing them under state control, due to the way it was implemented was in fact a set back. It did not preserve workers control of the mines, something which in the years to come led to increasing state pressure to break the power of the unions and exploit the workers more effectively.

The worst aspect however, was the massive payout given to the mining corporations. The Bolivian government took on huge debt to pay out the full estimated value of the assets rather than seizing and expropriating them. This began a cycle of massive debt, one which restrained the ability of the government to provide social benefits, and which was rewarded by the US with economic and military aid to the “anti-imperialist” government.

Without a coherent opposition to the MNR government, one with a perspective of power for the working class, the historical moment was lost and the state was able to recompose itself. The hated army was re-established in 1953, and was built over the years into a formidable force. While the government posed as anti-imperialist, it worked hand in hand with the US State Department. The officers of the new military were trained in the School of the Americas. The armaments that would later be used to massacre the Miners by a new military dictatorship were brought in from the US by the “anti-imperialist” government of the MNR. The army remained a tool for tightening conditions of exploitation and ultimately laid the groundwork for the replacement of the MNR by a new, right wing military coup in 1964

What are the lessons to be drawn from this experience in Bolivia?

### **1—Trotskyism in the Americas**

The first lesson is both a positive and negative balance of the role of Trotskyism. Bolivia, alongside Vietnam and Sri Lanka, is one of the countries in which Trotskyism attained major political influence. It is the one historical case in which a Trotskyist party had a decisive political role in a situation of dual power. It is a clear counter to accusations of Trotskyism and Marxism being the ideologies of dead white men.

However while it stands as a counter to accusations of eurocentrism among Trotskyism and Revolutionary Marxism in general, the ignorance and lack of attention paid to this example by the European and American left is an indictment of their eurocentrism. In Latin America and among the Latin American currents this history is vitally important, differing interpretations of the history lay the foundation for substantial political differences. This is the first case of a proletarian revolution in the Americas - one which was defeated - but which nevertheless was a workers revolution which saw proletarian power. It deserves



study, debate, and to be in the political education of every cadre member from Tierra Del Fuego to Alaska.

If Trotskyism can take root among the most oppressed workers in the Americas, the young, indigenous, discriminated against, often illiterate tin miners of Bolivia. If Trotskyism can bring them to the precipice of power, there is nothing about it alien to this continent or the tasks facing the oppressed peoples of the Americas.

Yet the history shows that adherence to Trotskyism alone is far from enough. The POR, at the most vital moments of the revolutionary process, failed to advance an independent political line. It failed to fight for the workers movement to follow in the footsteps of the Thesis of Pulacayo. It wavered, and saw parts of its own base disintegrate into the MNR as a consequence of that wavering. The remaining leadership of the Fourth International didn't help at all, advising them to support the MNR.

In the US or Western Europe it's easy for political differences among groups which claim a common tradition such as Trotskyism to seem irrelevant. Yet when the class struggle intensifies these differences can be the decisive factor between victory or defeat, life or death for the workers movement.

## **2—Dual Power Can Take Many Forms**

If the Bolivian Revolution had clearly replicated the form of Soviets in Russia, it likely would've been far easier to recognize the revolutionary situation and the tasks facing the party. Yet a major difficulty is that the COB, the Central Obrero Boliviano, was not a “traditional” soviet, or council based organization. The demand for the COB to take power was basically a demand for the unions to take power. It appears almost like an ideological return to Anarcho-Syndicalism.

Yet while the form was not quite that of councils and soviets, the essence of dual power was clearly there. Even more so, since in practice at the moment of the revolution the COB was the ONLY armed power, the workers possessed the state's monopoly on force.

We cannot predict exactly what organizational forms will be thrown up in the future by the working class, especially as these are built on vastly different social foundations and technological possibilities. They will be radically different from past forms. What we must do is always look to the foundation of power.

## **3—Left Nationalism is a Dead End**

The MNR endlessly proclaimed its anti-imperialism and talked of the “National Revolution”. While it passed significant reforms at the beginning, in practice this meant legalizing and recognizing rights which workers and peasants had already won through force.

Once in power it ensured those reforms were achieved within the acceptable limits imposed by capital. It sold the country's future through taking on massive debt. It accepted aid from the United States, the chief imperialist power, and

allowed the US to help rebuild Bolivia's army. It worked to disarm the workers militias, subdue alternative power and restore the conditions for capitalist hegemony. Although it maintained itself in power for an exceptionally long period, as soon as the economic crisis began to tighten and its use to Washington and the Bolivian Oligarchy had been played out, it was cast aside. The very army it reconstructed turned on it and inaugurated a brutal military dictatorship.

As the thesis of Pulacayo stated:

*"It is of little importance which political party has to use fascist methods to better serve imperialist interests. If they continue to maintain capitalist oppression, their destiny is already written: violence against the workers"*

If a left nationalist government is unwilling, or unable to carry out the violence against workers which Capital demands, it will be swept aside. This was the case in Bolivia then and is the case across Latin America today.

It's a familiar pattern. Reforms won in the streets are legalized by a left nationalist government, hegemony and the state apparatus are restored and relegitimized. Then this government is tossed aside to make room for the next brutal cycle of capitalist accumulation.

The left must build itself independently of these forces. Above all it must return again and again to the question of power. How to build it, how to recognize it and how to organize the class to take it when crisis brings opportunity.

#### **4 - The Most Oppressed Can be the Most Powerful**

There has been no more revolutionary working class in the Americas than the miners of Bolivia. You'll also be hard pressed to find any which was more consistently and miserably oppressed. A life expectancy in the twenties, massive infant mortality, horrifying conditions of work and life. Mostly illiterate, and discriminated against by a racist, anti-indigenous government.

Yet they were the most revolutionary, the most class conscious sector of workers which we have seen in the history of the Americas. The combination of power (from their central relation to production) and necessity (emerging from the horrible conditions) propelled them past ideologies which sought to compromise their struggle. They skipped directly to the extreme left.

Particularly in the United States, but hardly limited to it, you often find left organizations excusing themselves from representing the most oppressed by saying it's just too difficult. It's too hard. The most oppressed sections have lots of problems and so are rarely able to take part in the responsibilities of being an active socialist. This is complete bullshit and the example of the Bolivian miners, like many other heroic examples of oppressed working people, is a clear contrast to this.

At the intersection of power and oppression is the seed of a revolutionary class leadership. It takes work to reach it, and it takes a program which offers a real

alternative. It may require radical changes from organizations which have been comfortably irrelevant. But it is the only foundation upon which a truly revolutionary alternative can be built.