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Bolivia

# Evismo - Reform? Revolution? Counter-Revolution?

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**Philip S. Goldberg, a career functionary of the United States foreign service whose most recent postings include Kosovo, Chile, and Colombia, is the new American ambassador to Bolivia, replacing David Greenlee. Upon Goldberg's arrival at the El Alto airport on Friday September 29, Bolivia's foreign minister David Choquehuanca told the press that his "central objective" was "to improve relations between both countries." [1]** The principal aim of Goldberg's mission, according to the ambassador himself, will be to enforce the war against "narco-trafficking." The "war on drugs," like the old "war against communists" and the new "war on terror," has for quite some time been a useful point of entry for the US to achieve its underlying imperial aims in Latin America, offering up a whole series of "enemies" who are labelled "narco-traffickers," a term whose definition is infinitely malleable and unverifiable.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/evismo1.jpg>]

In addition to the open arms extended to Goldberg by Choquehuanca, Minister of Government Alicia Muñoz emphasized on the occasion of Goldberg's arrival that the Bolivian government under Evo Morales is unswervingly devoted to a politics of "zero narco-trafficking" and urges the cooperation of the US in this valiant struggle [2].

All this could be dismissed as merely routine diplomacy. However, only a day prior to Goldberg's arrival the Bolivian government had boldly and bloodily conveyed its commitment to the "war on drugs" in deed in Parque Carrasco, approximately 258 kilometres from the city of Cochabamba. On the morning of September 29, the Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta (Joint Task Force, FTC), made up of Bolivian anti-narcotic police and military forces trained and funded by the US, killed cocaleros (coca growers) Celestino Ricaldo (23) and Rember Guzmán (24) during a coca eradication mission. Minister of Government Muñoz claimed that the two dead were "narco-traffickers" and illegal "colonizers" of a national park in which the production of coca is illegal.

Furthermore, the coca eradication forces were said to have been "ambushed" by the cocaleros and therefore responded in defence. Minister of Defence, Wálker San Miguel, concurred with this general depiction, denouncing the ambush of the FTC by "narco-traffickers," and announcing that the government would persist with its coca eradication work in Parque Carrasco where they say the production of coca is illegal according to Law 1008. In fact he went further, claiming that the FTC had been attacked by over 200 armed persons who opened fire on the FTC and set off charges of dynamite.

Against this official portrait of the day's events, cocalero leaders argue that the zone of Yungas de Vandiola, where the deaths occurred, is recognized by Law 1008 as a legal site for the growth of coca for traditional purposes. Moreover, the cocaleros deny resisting the FTC with anything other than wooden clubs. The President of the Bolivian Permanent Assembly of Human Rights, Guillermo Vilela, responded to concerns expressed by the cocaleros by writing a letter to Muñoz demanding that there be an investigation into the causes of the deaths and a determination of culpability concerning the forces involved. His letter reads: "This is to avoid the continuation of this type of situation that has resulted in the impunity of previous governments." [3]

To contextualize the Morales government's position it is useful to remind ourselves of the origins of Law 1008 and some basic facts of the US "drug war" in the Bolivian theatre. Seasoned analysts of coca production and US foreign policy in Bolivia, Linda Farthing and Kathryn Ledebur, remark, "In 1988, the Bolivian government passed Law 1008, a draconian anti-drug law developed by the U.S. government." They describe the basic human targets invoked by the law: "The implementation of the law has been especially harmful to coca growing families and those occupying the lower rungs of the cocaine industry, while having little lasting impact on high-level trafficking. Security forces often direct their actions at the easily accessible plots of vulnerable coca growing families, resulting in human rights abuses

and harassment.” Between 1998 and 2004 alone 33 coccaleros have been killed by the state, and 570 injured.

What's the US connection? Farthing and Ledebur note, “In the Chapare, the U.S. government trains, equips and funds all anti-drug units, providing even the salary bonuses for anti-narcotics police, military eradication officials and prosecutors. Since the implementation of Plan Dignidad, the U.S. government has paid for and supervised the construction and expansion of military and police installations throughout the region, despite an October 2000 agreement between the Bolivian government and coca growers prohibiting the building of new bases. U.S. government agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) of the embassy, share a base with local anti-drug forces in Chimore and closely supervise the Bolivian units' operations. Control is so tight that Bolivian eradication commanders must obtain embassy permission for each flight in helicopters donated and fuelled by the U.S. government.” [\[4\]](#)

In an astonishing and reprehensible development, this particular node of the US imperial network in Bolivia is being reawakened with a new boldness 8 months into the administration of Evo Morales. And the Morales government is deeply complicit. Despite the fact that the ruling party, the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Toward Socialism, MAS), has its origins in the heroic anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal coccalero movement of the 1990s (Evo Morales in fact remains the leader of the federation of coccalero peasant unions in the Chapare region in which the recent conflict took place!), the government is solidly behind the armed apparatus of the state when it comes to the killing of two coccaleros.

Recent statements by Minister of Defence, San Miguel, illustrate the cold rationale of this realpolitik. According to an article in the mainstream daily La Razón, San Miguel stated that the initiation of the eradication of coca in Parque Carrasco, which provoked the two deaths, opened up a path for the improvement of relations with the United States, which had deteriorated since the installation of the Morales government in January 2006. San Miguel stated clearly, “Without a doubt we have passed from words to actions; to speak of zero narco-trafficking of zero cocaine... necessarily implies actions... and this is a very definitive action,” referring to Parque Carrasco [\[5\]](#).

In an apparent nod to the Bolivian government's “goodwill” gesture, the US has only just now openly suggested that the two governments restart material cooperation in military training, in particular of the Bolivian Air Force (FAB), which was temporarily postponed due to the Bolivian government's recognition of article 98 of the International Penal Code which allows for the trial of American military personnel in the case of human rights abuses committed by them. Now, seemingly, the Bolivian government will enjoy the “benefits” of a select group of 20 countries who have not ratified article 98, recognizing the US state's inherent right to stand above international law.

The above discussion of US imperialism and the latest developments in the Bolivian front of the “war on drugs” is an appropriate window into the larger discussion I hope to begin in the remainder of this article. Is there a revolution afoot in Bolivia, as many seem to believe? If so, are the leaders of this revolution to be found in the MAS government? How, then, do we explain “anomalies” such as the killing of two coccaleros? Or are the deaths less anomalies than the logical outcome of capitulation to imperialist demands? What contradictions exist on the ground in Bolivia today, and what are the relevant signals of hope and, conversely, of danger that the Left ought to identify? What are the social forces that might contribute to a revolution from below that is both socialist and indigenous-liberationist?

The complexities of the Bolivian situation under the MAS government of Evo Morales have long outpaced facile celebrations and denunciations emanating from different sectors of the Bolivian, Latin American, and international Left, broadly conceived. The close of September, however, marked the end of 8 months of MAS rule and while the panorama of political and social life in the country undoubtedly remains complex, certain early characterizations of the MAS as a revolutionary party are now straightforwardly untenable, if they ever had any credibility. In September, the resignation of Hydrocarbons Minister Andrés Soliz Rada gave pause to some early radical supporters of Morales,

signalling as it did the continuous weakening of the position of the Bolivian government in relation to the interests of transnational petroleum companies, after MAS announced the “nationalization” of the industry on May 1, 2006 [6].

The following points of intervention attempt to clarify the terrain and character of the shifting balance of forces in the country in the present context, the weaknesses of some of the predominant theoretical positions now available from various intellectual figures on the Left, the current immobility of previously radicalized social movements, and at the same time the hopeful (if fragile) signs of new struggles from below. The story begins with the Constituent Assembly, which since the beginning of July has framed much of the battlefield between popular and reactionary forces, both within state institutions and, more importantly, in the streets.

### **The Staging Ground for the Constituent Assembly**

The short-term origins of the demand for a Constituent Assembly - to remake the Bolivian state in a way that would undo internal colonialism, challenge liberal democratic forms of representation, and fundamentally transform the economic and social foundations of the country's institutional framework - date back to the 1990 Indigenous March for Territory and Dignity, led by the indigenous peoples of the department of Beni, in the Northern Amazon.

The movement for a revolutionary Constituent Assembly gained important impetus, however, during the Cochabamba Water War of 2000 when the Coordinadora - the main social movement organization leading the rebellion - took up the cause. The Water War initiated a revolutionary cycle which from 2000 until 2005 saw near-continuous mobilizations, road blocks, street battles, strikes, marches, and so forth by left-indigenous movements throughout much of the country, leading to the overthrow of neoliberal presidents Gonzalo (Goni) Sánchez de Lozada and Carlos Mesa in October 2003 and June 2005 respectively.

Returning to the Constituent Assembly, a former shoe-factory worker, and the most prominent leader of the Water War, Oscar Olivera, put it this way: “The Constituent Assembly thus should be understood as a great sovereign meeting of citizen representatives elected by their neighbourhood organizations, their urban or rural associations, their unions, their communes. These citizen representatives would bring with them ideas and projects concerning how to organize the political life of the country. They would seek to define the best way of organizing and managing the common good, the institutions of society, and the means that could unite the different individual interests in order to form a great collective and national interest. They would decide upon the modes of political representation, social control, and self-government that we should give ourselves for the ensuing decades. And all of these agreed decisions would immediately be implemented.... Let us be clear: Neither the executive branch nor the legislative branch, not even the political parties, can convoke the Constituent Assembly. These institutions and their members all stand discredited for having plunged the country into disaster.” [7]

While the MAS government carried through on its promise to hold a Constituent Assembly, its form has been a distant cry from the sort of process envisioned by popular and indigenous forces [8]. Rather than an organic fluorescence of popular power from below, organized through the unions, neighbourhood assemblies, and indigenous organizations that led the insurrections between 2000 and 2005, the procedures established for the Constituent Assembly ensured the exclusive participation of recognized political parties and “citizen groups,” none of which were the groups that led the vast movements at the centre of the political stage in recent years. Participation through the MAS became - was designed to become - essentially the only viable channel through which popular organizations could participate in the assembly as constituents.

Complicating matters further, procedures for the Constituent Assembly elections on July 2, 2006 were designed in such a way that revolutionary change would be nearly impossible as protection of “minorities” (read the capitalist class primarily based in the eastern part of the country, and especially in the department of Santa Cruz) was

enshrined in the process. On this note, an important document published by Dunia Mokrani and Raquel Gutiérrez warrants quoting at some length:

“... the electoral terms established in the ‘Law to Convoke the Constituent Assembly’ last March stipulated that the assembly will be made up of 255 constituent deputies: 210 directly elected (the three top candidates for each of the 70 electoral districts) and 45 proportional representatives elected by relative majority (plurinomial) - five from each of the nine departments [provinces or states]. However, in each electoral district the party or organization that comprised the relative majority could only send two representatives, according to a curious ‘minority protection’ rule included in the Law to Convoke the Constituent Assembly. In accordance with this resolution, even if a party secures over 75% of the votes in its district, as long as one of the minority parties receives more than 5%, this latter party will get the ‘third’ minority representative. This clause assured not so much the ‘plurality’ proclaimed at the time, as a means to assure representation for a small minority of ad hoc right-wing organizations with some local clout. Without this clause, these groups would not attain representation in the Assembly.” [\[9\]](#)

The rules stipulated that after the July 2 constituent elections the assembly would then convene on August 6, 2006 in Sucre, for no less than six months and no more than one year. The new constitution arising from the Sucre process would require the support of two thirds of the 255 elected constituents. After this, it was stipulated that the constitution would face a referendum within the general Bolivian population, requiring 51% approval to pass. What is important to note with regard to the “minority protection” rule is that in practice it meant that even in the essentially impossible event that the MAS won a majority in every contested district it would come away with only 158 of the constituent representatives in the assembly, well short of the 170 needed for two-thirds control of the process over the right wing minority bloc.

### **July 2nd Constituent Assembly Results and the Polarization of the Country**

In their detailed dissection of the Constituent Assembly electoral results Mokrani and Gutiérrez suggest that what most obviously jumps off the page is “the electoral disaster suffered by Bolivia's right wing, although it was not completely wiped out as a political force.... The years of massive indigenous and popular organization in Bolivia between 2000 and 2005 managed to topple the monopoly over party and institutional representation held by economic and political elites.”

We can define the following political forces who ran in the Constituent Assembly elections, in descending order of importance, as the right: PODEMOS, Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR), National Unity (UN), Autonomies for Bolivia (APB), AYRA, Leftist Revolutionary Movement (MIR - which in spite its name is a right-wing party), and the Alliance Andrés Ibáñez (AAI). By this measure, according to Mokrani and Gutiérrez, “the right's political representation in the Assembly comes to 99 seats out of the 255 total, or 39% of the Assembly. This percentage is not enough to pass an article proposed for the new constitution, which requires two-thirds majority, but it is sufficient to veto the changes proposed by other factions, which requires only 33% of the vote.”

MAS won 50.7% of the popular vote in the July 2 elections, confirming their status as the most successful national party. However, another important facet of the results that stands out is the regional polarization of the right/left divide. The MAS won large majorities in the departments of Chuquisaca, La Paz, Cochabamba, Oruro, Potosí, all of which are located in the centre, western, and south-western zones of the country. Meanwhile, MAS lost in the more prosperous and resource-rich departments of Tarija and Santa Cruz, as well as in the Amazonian departments of Beni and Pando. These four departments are known popularly as “media luna,” or “half moon,” because their geographical positioning resembles a half moon shape, beginning in the north-western tip of the Pando and arching around east before returning to the south-centrally located Tarija. A situation of vicious right-wing populism and weak popular and indigenous forces abound in these provinces, as articulated in their collective fight for more “autonomy” - and even “separation” at times - for their departments in relation to the central Bolivian state; that is, more

autonomous control of the Bolivian capitalist class over key natural resources such as natural gas deposits and arable land which are most heavily abundant in Tarija and Santa Cruz.

This regionalization of right/left forces, while hardly new, was reinforced on 2 July. Apart from the assembly elections that day, voters were asked to respond “yes” or “no” to an obscurely rendered referendum question on autonomy, or a process of decentralizing power to the nine departments that make up Bolivia. At the national level, “no” won with 57.6% of the votes overall, but “yes” won handily in the “media luna” departments.

Mokrani and Gutiérrez worry that, “Although the majority of the citizens voted not to install a department-level autonomy regime in the country, votes in favour were high numbers in certain departments and provide a powerful weapon to regional elites to fight for their political proposal in the Assembly, backing themselves up with the defense of the ‘will of the people.’ It can be expected that the representatives of the right in the four states where ‘yes’ won, the petroleum producers Santa Cruz and Tarija, and the Amazon states of Beni and Pando, will demand a measure of autonomy for their regions, where their desire to secede has already been made known.”

In light of these electoral conclusions and the lingering, unfulfilled expectations of the popular indigenous majority since the electoral victory of the MAS, political tensions have mounted precipitously throughout the country, taking on newly vivid shades in the month of September, and are expressing themselves to a large degree in relation to the Constituent Assembly process.

The polarization began anew with a decision of MAS to enact an internal rule for the conduction of the assembly according to which the “two-thirds” rule would only have bearing over the final text of the new constitution, and therefore all procedural decisions as well as decisions concerning each specific article of the constitution as the process developed would be determined by simple majority. Obviously, MAS holds a simple majority in the assembly, and has been busily building allies with other parties in the assembly to construct an ever-larger front against the far right.

This move predictably galvanized a strong reaction by the far-right in the departments of the “media luna,” with proclamations coming forth daily regarding the anti-democratic nature of MAS governance and the hoax that is the Constituent Assembly. Many commentators have noted the similarities between the right’s charges of “authoritarianism” regarding the government, with the Venezuelan right’s strategies leading up to the 2002 failed coup attempt against Chávez. Of course, the Bolivian right wing discourse also mirrors precisely the “democracy promotion” agenda of the Bush administration in the US, with its most recent nuanced spin introduced by Condoleezza Rice: that democratically-elected governments had better start governing democratically. Or else! Rice’s thinly veiled targets include, among others, Hamas in Palestine, Chávez in Venezuela, and Morales in Bolivia. No doubt the parallels between Bolivia’s right wing discourse and the rhetoric of the US state are well understood by the Bolivian right.

When left-indigenous forces occupied the streets and were repeatedly beaten down and shot to death by the coercive forces of the state over the last six years, the traditional Bolivian right trotted out a multitude of charges daily in the mainstream press concerning the “undemocratic” propensity toward insurrection on the part of the dangerous classes, not to mention the uppity Indians. Of course, now, unhappy with their loss of direct control of the central government by liberal democratic means, the right quickly tossed aside their antiquated repugnance toward “extra-parliamentary” means of doing politics.

Beginning as early as mid-August, within and outside the assembly process, the right formed a regional bloc consisting of bourgeois forces in Santa Cruz, Tarija, Pando and Beni to confront the “hegemonic plan of the MAS.” On August 21, the Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee - the peak political expression of reactionary forces in that department - declared itself in a “state of emergency” in response to MAS plans to end the two-thirds rule for every

simple decision in the Constituent Assembly. They also opposed the basic conception of the Constituent Assembly process as one that could “re-found” the Bolivian constitution; rather, they preferred one that would only be permitted to enact small reforms to the existing constitution.

On August 24, the rhetoric of the right had escalated such that PODEMOS accused MAS of orchestrating an “autogolpe,” or a self-inflicted coup, a coup orchestrated against the democratic institutions through which one's own government came to power. “Autogolpe” in Latin America immediately brings to the foreground of peoples' minds the actions of right wing authoritarian Fujimori in Perú during the 1990s.

PODEMOS boycotted the assembly process, which consequently went into an indefinite recess, and on September 8, there was a large 24 hour right wing strike in the “media luna” departments against the constituent assembly, with apparently significant popular backing in that part of the country.

The reaction on the part of the government was mixed. On the one hand, MAS called for mass mobilizations to defend the revolutionary process. Vice-president García Linera, likely fearing military action by the right, called on the Bolivian masses to take up arms if necessary in defence of MAS, although he quickly back-tracked on these statements, apologizing profusely and uncharacteristically to the press.

Alicia Muñoz, Minister of Government, publicly denounced the right wing prefects of the “media luna” departments for organizing against the democratically elected MAS government. She signalled out the prefect of Pando, Leopoldo Fernández, who she charged was attempting to destabilize the country by forming paramilitary groups in his department.

The increasing temperature of the positions on all sides concerned the neighbouring Argentine government so much that the Argentine embassy in La Paz solicited a report on the Bolivian situation from the Grupo de Apoyo a las Colectividades Extranjeras. The report, published in the last half of September, argued that there was a 56% probability of imminent civil war in the country [10]. Of course, the statistical number is ludicrous, but the fact that the study was done, and that it argued that war was more likely than not, sheds a certain amount of light on the depth of the political uncertainty in the Bolivia at the present time.

The Morales government has been willing to call on the masses to mobilize when necessary, but under the strict parameters set by MAS. At the same time, popular and indigenous forces are undoubtedly willing and capable of confronting and mobilizing against the right, but the extent to which they are guided by the parameters of the government is difficult to gauge at this point. On September 30, 2006, for example, over thirty organizations gathered for an “assembly of social movements” in Cochabamba in response to a direct appeal of MAS. García Linera and Morales were in attendance. Vice-minister of agriculture, Alejandro Almaraz, excitedly declared to the roughly 5,000 people gathered that the way forward was through mobilization. Yet, a representative of indigenous peasants of the department of Santa Cruz who had collectively and autonomously mobilized against the actions of the right wing Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee the week before only to have vice-president García Linera insist that they demobilize, asked Almaraz from the crowd: “What kind of mobilizations do they [MAS] want? They should speak clearly.” His intervention was met with applause from the floor.

Similarly, while some organizations in attendance are evidently deeply incorporated into MAS, others such as the Federación de Juntas Vecinales de El Alto (Federation of United Neighbourhood Councils of El Alto, FEJUVE-El Alto) attended the gathering to defend the gains and demands of the October Agenda [11] - an authentic nationalization of gas, a transformative constituent assembly, and a trial of responsibilities for ex-president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada - against right wing assault. The extent to which their demands and motivations can be contained by MAS limitations is still being tested as the dynamic unfolds.

Subsequent to the hostilities of early- and mid-September, MAS repositioned itself in relation to the procedural question, offering instead of its simple majority rule for all but the final text, a “mixed voting system” whereby difficult, foundational issues of import addressed along the way will also warrant application of the “two-thirds” rule. All parties have agreed to this except PODEMOS, the largest of the right wing forces inside the assembly process. The extra-parliamentary right of the media-luna, however, remains unsatisfied and searching for other ways to definitively defeat MAS and the popular aims of the poor indigenous majority that have for the past six years in fact far exceeded the reformism of the governing party [12].

While polling results should always be reviewed with a skeptical eye, keenly skeptical given an outrageous history of polling in Bolivia, recent figures published by the polling firm Apoyo, Opinión y Mercado indicate that Morales' popularity has reached its nadir, after four consecutive months of decline. From a high of 80% popular support in June after the “nationalization” of gas in May, support for Morales currently rests at 52%. Support for the vice-president has also dropped. Fuelling the uncertainty of the conjuncture as well is the fact that popular support for the Constituent Assembly has also plummeted from a high of 69% in August to 45% in September [13].

### **Autonomism, Reformism, and Revolution**

Debate over the significance, depth, and character of the struggles over the last six years has elicited a number of different theoretical interventions by organic intellectuals of different left currents across Latin America and on into the international left. Here I care to deal only briefly with a certain string of autonomist critiques of the MAS, on the one hand, and reformist apologies for the Morales government on the other. I then offer a few words on revolutionary alternatives.

Perhaps the most eloquent defender of autonomism in the Bolivian context is, in fact, a Mexican: Raquel Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez has an intimate connection with Bolivian popular movements. She moved to Bolivia in the mid-1980s and became, later in that decade, a leading figure in the indigenist/Marxist guerrilla group, Ejército Guerrillero T'upaj Katari (Tupaj Katari Guerrilla Army, EGTK), alongside current vice-president Álvaro Garc'a Linera and leading Aymara indigenous radical Felipe Quispe, known as el mallku. She was captured by the Bolivian state and spent five years in jail (1992-1997), without charges being laid. Garc'a Linera and Quispe suffered similar fates. After her release from prison, Gutiérrez returned to Mexico. Recently, however, she returned to visit Bolivia and has begun again commenting on the character of the current conjuncture.

In a revealing interview with Verónica Gago in late September of this year, Gutiérrez developed a series of incisive criticisms of the MAS administration [14]. In the interview she argues that in the current environment the MAS government is not taking the social movements, which are responsible for Morales' rise to electoral power, into consideration as serious interlocutors, but rather is subordinating them to the interests of the party, or, when this is impossible, trying to isolate and weaken them. Fundamentally, there is a closing off of autonomous space for the continuing development of popular power from below.

Gutiérrez argues that there is a terrible seduction facing formerly robust social movements to enter into asymmetrical relations with the central government. Petty fighting erupts over tidbit handouts from the state. The Constituent Assembly has, in her view, become a mere replica of parliament rather than a sphere of revolutionary politics. The fundamental debate in the assembly is a procedural one, a technical debate, and a debate moreover which increasingly mirrors old battles between the traditional parties of the neoliberal period. What is so lamentable about the present scene, from Gutiérrez's perspective, is how the popular and indigenous movements between 2000 and 2005 had fundamentally ruptured the capacity of the liberal capitalist state to set the parameters of political activity and social action.

During these massive struggles, Gutiérrez, citing the work of Aymara sociologist Pablo Mamani, stresses the



tremendous strengths of the self-activity of the oppressed and exploited popular classes and indigenous nations, referencing, for example, the inspiring ambition of the “micro-governments” of the neighbourhood councils to self-govern, and self-regulate the proletarian, mainly Aymara indigenous mega-slum of El Alto during the mass insurrection of October 2003 (the “Gas War”). Finally, she abhors the vice-president's development of the concept of “evismo,” which she argues reverses the logic of the wave of popular movements in the last years; rather than Evo Morales' mandate being conceived as emanating from the social forces from below - that he should govern by obeying - Gutiérrez contends that the idea of “evismo” elevates Morales to the status of grand leader, in which he, rather than the movements, is the agent of revolutionary transformation.

While weak on specific empirical references, and assuming an intimate knowledge of the Bolivian situation, the interview with Gutiérrez is an important document, making in many ways a compelling case against features of the MAS administration, and relationship between the party and social movement and union bases. Nonetheless, there are limitations to her critique, limitations which have been subjected to attack by reformist supporters of the MAS administration in a quite wrong-headed fashion, to bolster their own cause.

The writings of Hervé Do Alto and Pablo Stefanoni are representative of such a stance. Recently, they've taken to the pejorative use of quotation marks to mock left critics of the MAS; thus, the latter are the “radical” left who exaggerate the “radical” nature of the social movements of the last six years. First, they charge autonomist critiques of MAS, such as those of Gutiérrez and Uruguayan Raúl Zibechi with ignoring the fact that John Holloway's famous theory of “changing the world without taking power,” never held sway at any time among social movements in Bolivia.

They are undoubtedly correct in a straightforward, limited sense, but they then leap to the radically unsubstantiated conclusion that, therefore, the alternative (the only one) was the creation of the reformist MAS to “take power” through elections. In the conclusion to their most recent essay, they argue that because MAS won the elections on December 18, 2005 with an ample majority on a reformist platform - to reclaim national sovereignty, reconstruct the state, and put an end to internal colonialism - failure or success of the current processes of change must be evaluated against these parameters! [15] These are the barriers set by realpolitik, be damned your socialist and indigenous-liberationist aspirations! [16]

This brings us to alternatives. My sense is that Do Alto and Stefanoni commit two egregious errors. First, they gravely underestimate the radical, revolutionary potential of mass mobilization between 2000 and 2005 in Bolivia. As evidence of their position that social movements were always reformist, they note how the “radical” (their quotation marks) movements in El Alto supported constitutional exits to the October 2003 and May-June 2005 crises, as well as voting for MAS on a reformist platform in December 2005 [17]. This is quintessentially tautological theorizing.

We are meant to believe that the crisis situations of October 2003 and May-June 2005 were reformist, whatever misleading appearances, because they ended in reformist exits to the crises. What - if not five years of massive, near-continuous, left-indigenous mobilizations, road blocks, marches, riots, street clashes, tropical cocalero resistance, general strikes, and the toppling in succession of two neoliberal presidents - would a “radical” situation look like? Do all revolutionary situations end in revolutions, or is it conceivable that these revolutionary situations were diverted into reformist paths of change? That revolutionary potential was in the air seems to me a sustainable position; that a revolutionary exit to the situation obviously was not inevitable is indicated today by the current MAS administration. But it might have been different, and we therefore need not submit to the parameters of “failure” and “success” provided to us by Do Alto and Stefanoni.

Do Alto and Stefanoni persuasively argue that the autonomists are unable to account for the limitations of the multifarious social movements, as well as the increasing aspirations of popular and indigenous forces to transcend localized autonomy and build on past gains, to conquer power. David McNally, referring to a more general discussion of anti-capitalist strategizing, puts it nicely: “Success inevitably creates new challenges... especially for

radical mass movements. Not only does the ruling class learn from its setbacks but, in addition, the movement's supporters expand their hopes and expectations. Consequently, the question of how to shift from the defensive - simply trying to block what the other side is doing - to the offensive - where we organize to construct a different kind of future - cannot be avoided. Moreover, those two stances, the defensive and the offensive, are integrally connected: where we would like to go decisively shapes the sort of movement-building strategies we ought to employ. [18]"

So, I concur with Do Alto and Stefanoni's critique of autonomist failure to contend effectively with power and the construction of a real alternative. Again, where they go desperately wrong, from my perspective, is in portraying MAS as that alternative (even while recognizing that it is reformist). Phil Hearse recently argues that, "The need for a strategy of conquering power, linked to that of class independence, is shown by the events ... in Argentina. Here a mass uprising overthrew the de la Rúa government in December 2001, unleashing a political crisis which saw huge sections of the poor and the middle classes mobilised in self-organised action committees and *piqateros* for more than a year.... But eventually this pre-revolutionary movement just petered out, precisely because there was no mass militant socialist party, capable of melding the rebellious forces in a coherent revolutionary national direction. [19]" The result was Kirchner, and not because the masses in the streets of Buenos Aires in December were incapable of imagining something better than Kirchner. Such was the situation in Bolivia in October 2003 and May-June 2005; in fact, prospects for revolutionary change were even deeper in the Bolivian case given the greater depth and breadth of self-organization.

Hearse argues persuasively that, "For the Left, the decisive issue is how to integrate all these questions - of democracy, land reform, the destruction of the oligarchy, an end to economic robbery of the elite and imperialism, the basics of life for the urban poor and liberation for indigenous people and women - into a coherent overarching strategy for the popular masses to conquer power." Two radical currents from below that may give some direction to such a coherent overarching strategy for the popular masses in Bolivia are the subject of the next two sections.

### **Aymara Nationalism**

While hardly exhausting the potential sources of resurgence in the dynamics of self-activity within popular and indigenous sectors of Bolivian society, I want to flag two areas of radicalism that have been side-lined from much of the discussion taking place on the left: (i) Aymara nationalism in the altiplano, or high plateau, with its epicentre in the community of Achacachi in the department of La Paz, but extending, as we've seen in the recent past, into the surrounding countryside as well as the urban slum areas of El Alto and working class neighbourhoods in La Paz; and (ii) a renewed intensity of conflict in the mines, especially in Huanuni.

As an anecdotal foray into the subject of Aymara nationalism, I'll review two recent interviews by prominent figures in the movement: Felipe Quispe (or *el mallku*) and Eugenio Rojas Apaza [20]. While the Cochabamba Water War of 2000 is internationally renowned (as it should be), it is often forgotten that during the same year an Aymara indigenous peasant revolt shut down most of the Western part of the country for over three weeks with a list of 72 demands, anti-capitalist and indigenous-liberationist in character. Led by *el mallku*, and organized through an eclectic mix of traditional *ayllu* indigenous community governance structures at the base level and union structures at the highest echelons of the central peasant union federation (CSUTCB) - which Quispe had led since 1998 shortly after his release from prison - this movement was the largest peasant revolt in Bolivia since the 1979 struggle for democracy. After 2000, these same indigenous peasants played an instrumental part in the revolts that led to the ousting of presidents Goni and Mesa. The extent to which the MAS government will be able to subordinate this movement to the party's interests is deeply questionable.

In the Quispe interview, the peasant leader lays out his understanding of the principal reasons for the struggle of recent years, which he reminds us, is a struggle linked to the traditions of the past, the traditions of massive anti-colonial, indigenous insurrections against the Spanish in the eighteenth century. For Quispe the ruling powers in the territory, beginning in the colonial era and continuing after the foundation of the Bolivian republic in 1825, have always been constituted by a tiny minority elite who have stolen natural resources and transferred wealth and power to transnational corporations, all the while building institutional, social, and cultural foundations of virulent racism against the majority indigenous population. Ideologically, there has been no acknowledgment of indigenous nations; rather, they are seen as simply a part of Bolivia. Racial discrimination, class struggle, and the struggle of asymmetrical nations within the Bolivian state are denied in official mythology.

These factors, in coalescence with neoliberal economic restructuring during the 1980s and 1990s, were the backdrop to the wave of insurrections in the 2000s according to Quispe. Lamentably, for the indigenous activist, despite the fact that MAS played a marginal role in the mass movements - choosing instead to work closely with liberal non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and going so far as to support the neoliberal government of Carlos Mesa in 2004 and part of 2005 - the MAS party was nonetheless able to harness the energy and creative capacities of the masses and channel those spirits into electoral, institutional politics.

In a fascinating passage on his relationship with the current vice-president Álvaro Garc a Linera, Quispe tears into the vice-president for having abandoned the revolutionary cause to which they had devoted so much of their lives. He described first meeting Garc a Linera in 1984 after Garc a Linera had returned as a young man from studying mathematics at the Universidad de M xico, UNAM. Quispe describes the Garc a Linera of that moment as "super revolutionary," coming to the indigenous communities of the western highlands, eating what the people ate, and living how the people lived. Apparently, Garc a Linera arrived with a US \$100 pair of shoes which he wore for the next three or four years, wearing the same dirty and rugged clothes, and rarely washing. He expressed a desire to work in the mines, prevented from doing so only because of the crash of the tin mining sector and the privatization of most of the sector in 1985.

The movement that Quispe and Garc a Linera were helping to build had two wings, according to Quispe, one left-wing Marxist and the other t pajkatarista, or indigenous liberationist, in the tradition of the anti-colonial hero of the 1781 insurrection against the Spaniards, T paj Katari. Garc a Linera was in the Marxist wing, while Quispe located himself in that of the t pajkataristas. In 1988, the group released a political communiqu  and ideological document proposing to move forward with an armed struggle in the form of the EGTK. According to Quispe, they believed, this was the only way forward in the struggle, effectively and definitively, against the "capitalist, colonialist, racist and imperialist system." The EGTK, never more than 200 members strong, started its activities in 1988.

Both Garc a Linera and Quispe were eventually imprisoned in 1992 and spent the following five years in jail. When they got out, Garc a Linera asked Quispe if he would continue with him in the struggle. According to Quispe, "I was very pleased to accept, because I suffer more from discrimination, I'm poorer than him. He is white, he could move freely in society.  varo was already working as a lecturer at UMSA [the main public university in La Paz]."

According to Quispe, they maintained EGTK clandestinely up until August 2005, keeping a public face in politics through the electoral political party Movimiento Ind gena Pachakuti (Pachakuti Indigenous Movement, MIP), and the rural union institutional structures of the CSUTCB in the western part of the country. Quispe and the movement asked Garc a Linera on several occasions to run for president as MIP's candidate, or at least for Congress, but he declined all such invitations. Thus, when Garc a Linera accepted MAS's invitation to run as their vice-presidential candidate in the December 2005 elections without consulting the bases of the movement from which he was departing Quispe rejected him then, and continues to do so, as a traitor.

For Quispe, "They [MAS] are social democrats. MAS is not a revolutionary party... above all, they're reformists.

Today, we have an indigenous president, but we are not receiving what we've waited for from our brother." For Quispe, there is the liberal "democratic" path, and there is the revolutionary path. Describing the latter he says, "There's another more honest, more revolutionary path. That is the communitarian path of struggle, the path chosen by our grand men and women like Tupaj Katari, Bartolina Sisa, Tupaj Amaru and others. They, already in their times, were proposing the overthrow of the colonial system." While it's important to maintain a democratic arm of the struggle, for Quispe, there will always be another arm under their ponchos.

Describing the current conjuncture, Quispe argues that this is hardly the time for mobilization. The MAS, in his words, has "mined" the leaders from all the relevant popular bases, in the indigenous organizations, the factories, the mines, the construction unions, and other unionist federations. "They are MAS militants," Quispe declares, "and as militants they are not able to rebel against their political boss. Therefore no mobilization is going to be successful."

For Quispe, it's time for the movement to return to the bases, and to build again for a longer struggle. "I don't think Morales is going to change anything," he says, "and therefore it is upon us to struggle for total transformation, so that there are no longer rich and poor in this country, so that we share equal living conditions, so that the people are happy and content. Because all of us have to receive equally, as we live in our communities.... That is the communitarian ayllu. That is the communitarian system, and that is what must be the model that we introduce in our country."

Quispe himself, however, says he's retiring from politics, having returned to his community near Achacachi to work the land. Whether or not his ostensible retreat from politics turns out to be real, in some ways at least, Eugenio Rojas Apaza, the mayor of Achacachi, is beginning to make an appearance as a new, prominent figure in the continuation of the struggle that Quispe described and helped to build. The veiled references in Quispe's interview to the present time being devoted to re-organizing the community bases of the indigenous peasantry in the western highlands (which are intimately connected to the histories of struggle in the urban slums, full of recent rural indigenous migrants), suggest that while there are no visible mobilizations at the moment, the power they've expressed in the past may very well be going through a period of merely relative dormancy, latent, barely beneath the surface in the western altiplano, and capable of re-emergence when a propitious moment arises.

Another possible reading of the situation in the western altiplano comes out of the Rojas Apaza interview: that the propitious moment may be nearer than it first appears. At 44 years, Eugenio Rojas Apaza's political history is reflective of a somewhat more general pattern of indigenous radicals trained intellectually in urban settings who then devote themselves to struggle, whether in the countryside or the cities. After abandoning a career as a mathematics teacher in the village of Warisata in the department of La Paz, Rojas Apaza studied sociology at UMSA where his professors included Álvaro Garc a Linera, Raquel Guti rrez, Ricardo and Eduardo Paz, and the radical anthropologist Silvia Rivera. He subsequently spent time as a union leader and then a school teacher, only to be banned from his teaching job by the minister of education under Gonzalo S nchez de Lozada's administration. He was accused of being a guerrilla.

Rojas Apaza speaks more directly than does Quispe about engagement in the struggle around the Constituent Assembly now. The struggle in this regard, according to Rojas Apaza, is to compel the assembly constituents to elaborate a constituent that reflects the "will of the bases, the communities and the people." He stresses that the Aymara struggle is not a parochial one, limited to the Western highlands. Rather, they are reaching out to movements at a national level, seeking alliances with indigenous radicals in other areas of the country.

For Rojas Apaza, the constituent assembly cannot be reduced to the work of the constituents alone, nor to a battle between political parties. Constituents need to be forced to consult the bases, to attend social movement assemblies, and community meetings and to subsequently reflect the decisions of the bases at the highest levels. At the moment, from his perspective, the assembly is turning into a dispute between officialism and the opposition, or

the MAS against PODEMOS. If it continues in this direction, Rojas Apaza argues, the assembly will become completely distorted, with no future.

For the moment, the communities in the highlands are holding assemblies and meetings and developing resolutions which they plan on taking to Sucre, in an effort to intervene in the assembly process. In the present situation, according to Rojas Apaza, they are not planning to block roads and battle head-on with the government. Instead, through dialogue and demands, they are going to attempt to influence the Constituent Assembly. However, he stresses that the bases in the rural areas of La Paz, so instrumental in earlier mobilizations, are always prepared for mass actions: "We are organized, the organizations are present, living. Therefore, it is as simple as coordinating a little more and working toward mobilizations," if necessary.

In a declaration of the militancy of this region, Rojas Apaza argues that if the Constituent Assembly fails to deliver what it was genuinely intended to do, "we will impose it through force; we have experience with change. The fact that Evo Morales is president is not because of democracy," but rather the elections should be understood simply as the end result of an extended process. "It was the social movements who demanded the changes, and it was through force: the massacre at Warisata [in which the military killed several people in September 2003, including a nine-year-old girl], the slaughter in El Alto [where most of the deaths of the 67 killed by the military in the 2003 Gas War occurred], the roadblocks, all of this was through force."

Because the mainstream press and much of the left do not consistently follow developments in the western highlands, it is difficult to gauge the current process in that region. The summaries of these two rare and insightful interviews are simply an attempt to make clear the complexity of the social movement-MAS relations in the current context and to remind us that, historically, the indigenous Aymara peasants of the altiplano have been critical factors in popular movements for radical change. This is unlikely to have changed dramatically with the assumption of electoral power by MAS.

### Revolutionary Miners

The Bolivian government recently released its National Plan for Development, a document which sets out in detail the parameters of the economic development model to be embraced by MAS for the next four years [\[21\]](#). Bolivian economist and sociologist Lorgio Orellana Aillón reviewed the document and arrived at the unpopular but compelling conclusion that the new development model fails to break with the inherited neoliberal one, which was first introduced in 1985 [\[22\]](#). The plan is predicated on the continuation of an export-led economy rooted in the exportation of non-value-added, primary natural resource commodities, most importantly hydrocarbons and various minerals already being mined. The state will have an extremely limited role to play, with financing coming from transnational corporations and external credit.

In order to ensure the "competitiveness" of the export sector, the basic foundations of the political economy will be oriented toward reducing aggregate domestic demand (or the capacity for consumption by the Bolivian population). This means measures to keep inflation low and with minimal fluctuation of prices, maintenance of the independence of the Central Bank which will continue enacting restrictive monetary policy, measures to put a tight lid on salaries of the working class, and all the while implementing a framework to ensure "attractive" conditions for private capital to invest in the export sectors. In other words, as Orellana argues, the government's plan posits a political economy based on "macro-economic stability" and the perpetuation of the superexploitation of the Bolivian labour force.

This approach is plainly evident in the mining sector, though, as we'll see, popular resistance to it is mounting. As is well known, the soaring price of oil (until it recently dipped below \$60 US) has resulted in record profits for multinational petroleum corporations. It is perhaps less well known how other corporations involved in the extraction of a whole series of other minerals - iron, magnesium, tin etc. - are also recording record profits, as demand soars

parallel to China's rapid growth [23]. This international context has caused a spike in mining activity in Bolivia, drawing the sector back into the heart of economy, though still some way behind natural gas.

The paradigmatic case of the MAS government's position on mining development is to be found in Mut n, the largest iron deposit in the world, located in the department of Santa Cruz. For decades the Mut n mining project lay dormant. Recently, however, spurred by the explosion of demand for iron in China and concomitantly high prices, transnational corporations made clear their interest in exploiting the huge deposits in Mut n. Recently, Jindal Steel & Power, an Indian multinational, was granted the license for exploiting Mut n by the Bolivian government. Mining is to begin on September 24, 2007.

The government argues that it is a tremendous deal which will result in \$200 million dollars annually in tax revenue. According to economists at the progressive think tank CEDLA in La Paz, however, of the 50 million tons of iron which Jindal will likely extract each year, 95% will leave the country in its raw form, with only 5% being industrialized in the country. Mut n is said to contain 40 billion tons of ore, valued at approximately US\$30 billion at today's prices [24]. According to James Petras, "Bolivia will receive an additional US\$0.50 a ton to an undisclosed 'but reasonable' amount (according to the multinational corporations). Bolivia will receive 10% and the Indian Corporation... will receive 90%)." [25] A number of progressive economists have pointed out that Mut n represents a failed opportunity of historic proportions. The MAS government could have used this window of opportunity to reconstruct the state mining enterprise, Corporaci n Minera de Bolivia (COMIBOL), such that it could once again play the protagonist in that sector of the country's economy. Not only would this have wrestled control from transnational corporate influence in Bolivia, it would have provided a basis for contributing to a socially just development model focused on meeting the needs of the impoverished population.

If we need to register developments in Mut n, in eastern Bolivia, as an historic loss for the Left, it is, fortunately, far too premature to say the same thing of the mining sector as a whole. Popular struggles in the mines of the western altiplano are once again erupting, with demands including the restoration of COMIBOL, the nationalization of the entire mining industry, and workers' control.

The mining industry is essentially divided into one set of workers, organized through the Federaci n Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia (Mining Workers Union Federation, FSTMB) and employed by the state mining company COMIBOL. The FSTMB was the heart of arguably the most militant and revolutionary trade union movement in Latin American for much of the twentieth century. The other set of workers is made up of self-employed cooperative miners organized through Federaci n Nacional de Cooperativas mineras de Bolivia (National Federation of Cooperative Miners of Bolivia, FENCOMIN).

Many of the cooperative miners barely subsist and engage in intense self-exploitation in order to survive, while a privileged sector of the cooperative miners does much better. Moreover, cooperative mining actually involves the class exploitation by some "cooperative" associates of others. Rather than hiring employees, some wealthier cooperative miners sign on "business associates" (other poorer cooperative members) to work for them. The workers in these relationships are not paid a salary, but instead are given a small chunk of whatever they are able to extract from the mines. Increasingly these workers are women and children. The workers in these situations, unlike the COMIBOL workers, therefore have no security, no fixed salaries, no benefits, and are not provided any protection from existing labour laws [26]. In the past, the national leadership of FENCOMIN formed alliances with neoliberal political actors, including mining magnate and reviled ex-president Gonzalo S nchez de Lozada [27].

It is the privileged layer of the cooperative miners which is represented by the MAS through the Ministry of Mining and Metallurgy. In a pre-electoral arrangement between FENCOMIN and MAS, cooperative miners pledged their support for the miners in exchange for their particular interests being represented in the government in the event of a MAS victory. The MAS certainly delivered, appointing the ministry to W lter Villarroel, a former leader of the

cooperativistas. More revealing still is the fact that Pascual Guarachi, the current president of FENCOMIN, recently confirmed that Villarroel is still a registered member of the cooperative "La Salvadora" of Huanuni. The privileged cooperative miners are attempting to influence the party into facilitating shared risk contracts between cooperativistas and transnational mining companies. They are also trying to expand their activities through the takeover of mines currently operated by COMIBOL, such as Huanuni, Caracollo, Barrosquira, Telamayu, and Colquiri. These takeovers and the politics of the cooperative miners are being resisted by the FSTMB miners who are demanding that COMIBOL be restored to its former, formidable status as an important state enterprise [28].

In late September, FSTMB miners radicalized their efforts to push Morales toward a socialization of the mining industry. Over 200 miners, with the support of almost a thousand indigenous peasants, blocked the highways connecting Oruro to Cochabamba and Potosí, cutting traffic flow to a large part of western Bolivia. The banner of their struggle was the nationalization of the mining sector, with the immediate demands that the state create 1,500 jobs and invest money in the refoundation of COMIBOL. The government initially responded to the miners and peasants with a lurid campaign of defamation, calling the protesters "provocateurs" and "Trotskyists." Eusebio Gironda, adviser to the president on mining affairs, reportedly told the representatives of the protesters that unless they abandoned their intransigent stance, no representative of the government would even bother negotiating them. This backfired wildly, as the miners and peasants fortified their positions and declared that they would now not even consider negotiations unless the vice-president or president came to Oruro. A pact was formalized between the unionized miners of Huanuni and the local affiliates of the central peasant federation, CSUTCB.

These developments are profoundly inspiring, putting into action the positions assumed at the general assembly of the FSTMB on July 4, 2006. In that assembly the miners agreed to struggle for the nationalization of the mines without compensation for the transnationals currently operating in the sector, the consolidation of COMIBOL as the sole enterprise with the right to exploit mineral resources in the country for the benefit of the people, and for the management of the company to be put under collective worker control [29]. In this emergent conflict, the legitimacy and leftist credentials of the government is being challenged squarely from below. While Evo Morales in various speeches earlier this year proclaimed that the government was theoretically behind re-nationalizing the mining industry, in practice every move of the government has been to support the cooperative miners and the attraction of transnational capital into the sector. During the height of the conflict Villarroel told La Razón that the protests were impeding the government's search for foreign investment to reactivate the mining sector: "The government guaranteed legal security for foreign companies to invest in mining," Villarroel lamented [30]. How this conflict plays out could be fundamental to determining the dynamics of the Bolivian process in the months and possibly years to come.

### **Postscript: The Bellicose Right and Tragedy in the Mines**

As I was finishing this article, events took a dramatic turn, demanding an immediate response here, even if the situation on the ground remains fluid and indeterminate. First, I deal with the tragedy of the mines, before closing with a warning about the escalating possibilities of a right wing military coup in Bolivia.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Bolivianminer2.jpg>]

The basic facts of the last week, insofar as there is clarity at this point in time, are as follows. On Thursday, October 5, cooperative miners stormed the Huanuni mine and attacked miners employed by COMIBOL, the state-owned mining enterprise. The COMIBOL miners fought back, and in two days of intense exchange of gunfire and dynamite between the two sides, between 11 and 21 people were left dead (there are wide variations in press reports), while between 60 and 80 people were injured, some of whom could presumably die in the coming days [31]. The mine is located in the mountain of Posokoni which contains the largest deposit of tin in South America, tin which is, furthermore, relatively pure and easily extractable. Huanuni is a town with 19,428 mostly indigenous inhabitants, located roughly 45 kilometres outside of the city of Oruro, in the province of Pantaleón Dalence, in the department of

Oruro. Mining is, by far and away, the principal economic activity in the area.

The battle started, by most accounts, early Thursday afternoon when the cooperative miners, who had assembled earlier to plan the invasion, exploded the compressor of the mine which provides oxygen to the miners inside. This was an effort to force the COMIBOL miners to exit the mines, such that the cooperativistas could take it over. While they say they aimed to take the mine peacefully, they launched the first dynamite, and could not have expected anything but a fierce response from the state-employed miners.

In the current situation, the better part of the Huanuni mine is worked by COMIBOL miners, unionized locally in the Sindicato Mixto de Trabajadores Mineros de Huanuni (SMTMH), which is affiliated with the national federation of miners FSTMB. For much of the twentieth century the Huanuni miners in particular, and the FSTMB more generally, were the pillar of Bolivia's revolutionary left. Their power was dramatically reduced in 1985 when the neoliberal (counter) revolution began with the privatization of most of the mines and the "relocation" throughout the country of almost 30,000 newly unemployed miners. Along with the SMTMH miners in the Huanuni mine, but in much fewer numbers, work the cooperative miners.

Witnesses agree that a large number of deaths occurred in a single blast, when a dynamite stick exploded in amongst the piles of dynamite situated near an entrance to the mine, piles the cooperativistas use daily to work the mines. The live stick of dynamite set off the rest in what one witness described as an "atomic" explosion. The fighting spread to the town and in addition to the central battles between male miners, women and children affiliated with both sides also engaged in battles both at the site of the mine and in town.

Houses were burnt to the ground, while others suffered lesser forms of damage. Despite the fact that both the FSTMB and the COB called for the government to send military troops into the area to protect the state miners from the attack initiated by the cooperativistas, the military was not sent in, and Evo Morales did not issue a public statement, allowing the vice-president Garc a Linera and the party's central spokesperson Alex Contreras to represent the government. 700 police were sent in, but were apparently incapable of stopping the events on Thursday during which time most of the blood was shed. The military was in a "state of alert," but were never given the go ahead by the executive. On Friday morning, according to Associated Press, "members of the mining cooperative rolled three tires packed with explosives down the side of the mountain toward town, causing an enormous explosion." [\[32\]](#)

A temporary truce agreement was agreed to by the two sides through the mediating efforts of the human rights ombudsman, Waldo Albarra n, and the Minister of the Presidency, Juan Ram n Quintana. There is little indication of how long the pact of truce will last, however, given that none of the underlying issues have been dealt with. The most significant development, and a precondition for the state miners to accept the peace accord, was the move by the government to replace W lter Villarroel with Guillermo Dalence Salinas as Minister of Mines, as well as replacing Antoni Rebollo with Hugo Miranda as president of COMIBOL.

In La Paz an emergency assembly of the Central Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Workers Central, COB) was held. Those assembled decided that an indefinite general strike is a genuine possibility in the coming week. Executive secretary of the COB, Pedro Montes, a Trotskyist militant who defeated his MAS opponent in the last general convention of the COB, declared himself to be on a hunger strike until the government had fully and competently committed itself to pacifying the situation at the Huanuni mine. A group of COB leaders who approached the presidential palace in La Paz to make their demands heard were met with tear gas, while one was struck by police.

Different social sectors affiliated with the COB have radicalized their positions in the last 48 hours, some of them now calling for the nationalization of all the mines in Bolivia. At the emergency COB meeting, it was a common demand shared by constituents that the mines must be returned to the public property of the state, including those mines



currently controlled by cooperativistas, and that all mines must be run under workers' control.

It is fundamental to situate this basic narrative of events in the broader context out of which it grew, otherwise the interests of the players involved and the role of the MAS government can easily be obscured and/or distorted. As was indicated in our discussion above, beginning as far back as 2002 the prices of various minerals mined in Bolivia were increasing substantially in reaction to accelerated growth in Asia, and especially in China. This fomented renewed disputes in western Bolivia as state-owned miners sought to re-embolden a workers struggle for the nationalization of the mines while cooperativistas attempted to make inroads into new mines, while shrinking the area of the mining sector controlled by the state, and therefore under the influence of the radical unions. Cooperativistas since 2002 have fought to make inroads in the Empresa Minera Huanuni (Oruro), and Caracoles, Colquiri and Viloco (La Paz).

The specific case of the Empresa Minera Huanuni has its own specificities, but needs also to be understood in this wider setting. We ought to remain ever aware of the intimate linkages between the cooperativistas and the mining ministry under the Morales government. The Empresa Minera Huanuni was privatized through a "shared risk" contract in 2000 during the Sánchez de Lozada presidency. The British transnational Allied Deals Minera Huanuni (ADMH) paid US\$501,123 and promised to invest 10.25 million dollars in the following two years, to enter into the shared risk contract.

Allied Deals has subsequently become RBG Resources and, according to many sources, having failed to fulfill its investment commitments, lost its shares in the Huanuni mine. On June 5, 2001, according to this understanding, the shares of RBG passed back into the hands of COMIBOL. Moreover, the FSTMB and the COB argue that irregardless of RBG's failure to fulfill its investment commitments, the "shared risk" contract was unconstitutional anyway, because the Bolivian constitution disallows the privatization of the mining sector in any situation, but certainly without the approval of Congress. As president, Sánchez de Lozada by-passed Congress in this deal just as he had when he privatized the hydrocarbons industry in 1996.

The cooperativistas, of course, hold a different view of the matter. They claim that they have bought shares from RBG and therefore have a right to administer the mines in their private interest. In amidst the muddiness of the legal waters, it seems quite clear that whatever shares the cooperative miners may have "bought" off RBG, they were not RBG's to sell [33].

Turning to the culpability of the MAS government, I think it is important to keep in mind the relationship between MAS and the cooperativistas, as well as the general political economic policies adopted by the government in the sector during its first 8 months in power. If we understand this, our measure of the government's responsibility for the deaths of the miners does not rest simply with the delayed and insufficient military and policing response to the attack orchestrated by the cooperativistas, as important as it is to unearth the still unclear internal governmental reasoning behind this.

The cooperative miners, given the close relationship they held with the Minister of Mining, were likely betting on the unwillingness of the government to intervene against them in this conflict. And, indeed, Villarroel clearly, passionately, and publicly aligned himself as minister of the state with the cooperative miners in the events of Thursday and Friday, before being dismissed from the position. All of this is all the more vital to consider given than prominent leftist intellectuals, such as Heinz Dieterich, have quickly apologized for the MAS's response and blamed COB and other representatives of the state-employed miners for intransigence, and, essentially an ultra-left position that is feeding the right-wing attempts to destabilize the country. I believe this to be an untenable socialist position if we review the relevant facts of the broader scenario [34].

Whether or not the protests and road blockades of late September by the state-employed miners for the

nationalization of the mines, and subsequently their armed stand-off against the provocative and violent incursions by the cooperativistas, has led the MAS government to shift its policy in mining in a more radical direction as of yet unclear. At one level, there has been at least symbolic change, evident, for example, in the alteration of the Minister of Mines and the presidency of COMIBOL. The new Minister of Mines, José Guillermo Dalence, is an ex-leader of the FSTMB. The new interim president of COMIBOL, Hugo Miranda Rendón, was until this appointment the representative of the workers in the directorship of COMIBOL.

Also, in a Saturday address to cocaleros president Morales had this to say, according to Dan Keane of Associated Press: “Mining concessions where there has not been investment must return to the hands of the government,” Morales told Indian coca farmers in the Central Chapare region on Saturday. He gave no further details about government plans for undeveloped mining concessions.” [35] While this falls short of the demands coming from the state-employed miners, and while Morales has often spoken of wanting to “nationalize” the mines even while his government makes this impossible, it is not impossible that there has been a change of direction as the country polarizes and the stakes become greater. In his first, long-awaited public declaration following the tragedy in the mines, Morales acknowledged, “Until now in the issue of mining we have not complied with the Bolivian people.” [36] For their part, the cooperativistas are worried about the seemingly altered direction of the government with regard to the mining industry. President of FENCOMIN, Pascual Guarachi, has bitterly announced that with his new attitude Morales has ruptured the alliance between the government and cooperativistas, not least because Guarachi feels Morales is placing blame for the mining deaths on the shoulders of the cooperativistas [37].

The situation in the mines has come to a fork in the road, as the editors of Econoticias have argued, and which path is chosen as an exit to this crisis is of monumental importance. Aloft in the air is the possibility of a move toward the nationalization of mines without compensation and the establishment of workers control, or, conversely, the advance of the cooperativistas together with the transnational mining companies who today control over two-thirds of mining production in the country. The overarching goal of the latter, of course, is the “privatization-cooperativization” of the remainder of Bolivia's mineral deposits.

Let me now turn to the second instrumental change in the political environment over the last days. The far-right currents leading the departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and Tarija have actually started planning and preparing a referendum against the decisions made by MAS and allied parties within the Constituent Assembly, especially the recent clear declaration that the assembly will be re-foundational and originario which would mean that the processes of building this new constitution stand above the existing three levels of state: the executive, legislature, and judiciary. It seems increasingly likely that the far-right has abandoned the process decisively and is therefore looking for any means necessary to implement its will (the will of the rich, light-skinned minority).

In an extremely threatening development, the position of the far-right was bolstered by the Supreme Court's rejection of the Constituent Assembly's re-foundational character, deeming the assembly to be of a derivative and reformist character at most, and arguing that the most robust reading of the two-thirds rule advanced by the far-right is in fact the correct reading of how procedures have to be followed within the assembly. In response, Morales denounced the Supreme Court as one of the sectors of the state diametrically opposed to change, calling it a residual artefact of the colonial state [38].

Ralph Miliband's famous thoughts on the state in capitalist society, if we were to add a dimension of racial privilege, are a particularly salient guide to understanding the Bolivian court's decision: “... the notion of judicial independence requires to be considered rather more broadly, for it tends in its restricted sense to obscure some major aspects of the judicial role in these systems.... One such aspect is that judges of the superior courts (and of the inferior courts as well for that matter) are by no means, and cannot be, independent of the multitude of influences, notably of class origin, education, class situation and professional tendency, which contribute as much to the formation of their view of the world as they do in the case of other men.” He continues, “We have, in this respect, already noted that the judicial elites, like other elites of the state system, are mainly drawn from the upper and middle layers of society: and

those judges who are not have clearly come to belong to these layers by the time they reach the bench. Moreover, the conservative bias which their class situation is thus likely to create is here strongly reinforced by the fact that judges are, in many of these systems, also recruited from the legal profession, whose ideological dispositions are traditionally cast in a highly conservative mould.”

It has also been reported that the prefects of the “media luna” departments, in what was intended to be a clandestine affair, recently visited Washington where they were encouraged to continue their destabilizing tactics. The private Bolivian media, much of which is owned by large capitalists with diversified interests and investments in areas such as agribusiness in eastern Bolivia, is playing its role in fostering destabilization of the MAS administration, aligning itself with the politics of the “media luna.” Meanwhile, reminiscent of their role in the Chilean coup of 1973, the often-reactionary transport truckers are planning to block roads in the coming week or so.

What is the most alarming development, portending the possibility of a right-wing military coup, is to be found in a new report by Heinz Dieterich. Dieterich writes that a few weeks ago officials in the Bolivian police approached generals in the Bolivian armed forces to measure the disposition of key elements of the armed forces toward a coup d'état orchestrated by a joint action of the coercive wings of the state apparatus. The scheme came to light because one of the “key elements” in the armed forces declined participation in the conspiracy and informed president Morales of the plot.

Such is a rough, impressionistic sketch of the contours of the state of affairs in Bolivia. As I have argued here, multiple exit routes to the current crisis are possible. Terrible counter-revolution and hopeful revolution from below are both on the table. Whether winds turn in a favourable direction over the short term will depend on the willingness and capacity of the radical social currents to stay alert and ready to mobilize, while inside the MAS the left currents of the party fight to turn around the lamentable character of the government in its first 8 months. Ideally, the far left and indigenous organizations - such as FEJUVE-EI Alto, COB, sectors within CSUTCB, the Coordinadora in Cochabamba, the Landless Movement (MST), radical indigenous movements in the east, the Aymara radical indigenous peasantry of the altiplano, among others movements throughout the country - would seek and call for expanded forms of grassroots popular power, such as those which were emergent in January-April 2000 (Cochabamba), September 2000 (major sectors of the altiplano), September-October 2003 and May-June 2005 (major areas throughout the country, but most dramatically in the mega-slum of proletarian indigenous inhabitants, EI Alto.) Such organs of popular demanding arms from the MAS government to protect it from the potentially imminent onslaught from the right, as well as efforts to dissuade important sectors of the military and police from taking part in any such coup attempt, could prove determining factors in circumventing counter-revolutionary advance, and, at the same time, open up further the possibility of forcing the Bolivian path into an increasingly revolutionary direction.

Unfortunately, such organs at the present time are not as visible as they once were, and left currents within MAS are not explicitly organized with coherent political programs, but rather more closely resemble loose coalitions orbiting around various prominent and less-prominent individuals in the party. Nevertheless, the levels of self-organization of the exploited and oppressed working classes and indigenous nations has been extraordinary in the country in recent years, and, paradoxically, even vice-president Álvaro García-Linera, the least radical important leader of the party, early this month signalled the possibility of having to call on the masses for armed defence against the right. Even if a coup attempt happens in the immediate future, as some are clearly predicting, and even if organized and radicalized sectors are not yet armed from below, it is possible that such a coup attempt might be disrupted and defeated, such as in April 2002 in Venezuela, by spontaneous unarmed uprisings in the urban slums - in Bolivia the countryside would also be key - and the defection from the would-be coup-making faction by factions loyal to the government (or simply to the poor indigenous majority of the population) within the armed forces.

[1] Thanks to Clarice Kuhling for sharing useful materials with me from her recent visit to Bolivia, and to David Camfield for comments on substance and style.

[2] "El Nuevo Embajador de EEUU llegará el viernes," La Razón 27 de septiembre de 2006; "Goldberg y el Canciller buscan una mejor relación," La Razón 30 de septiembre de 2006.

[3] "Dos muertos y tres heridos en erradicación de coca ilegal," La Prensa 30 de septiembre de 2006; "EEUU elogia el plan de coca en Carrasco," La Razón 5 de octubre de 2006; "Los coccaleros de Yungas de Vandiola se enfrentan a Morales," La Patria 5 de octubre de 2006; "Dirigencia coccalera dice que no iniciará el enfrentamiento," La Prensa 2 de octubre de 2006; "Un enfrentamiento entre policíes y coccaleros deja dos muertos," La Razón 29 de septiembre de 2006; "Evo se dobla ante EEUU: dos coccaleros muertos y varios heridos," [www.econoticiasbolivia.com](http://www.econoticiasbolivia.com) 29 de septiembre de 2006; "Gobierno acusa a coccaleros de narcotraficantes," [www.econoticiasbolivia.com](http://www.econoticiasbolivia.com) 29 de septiembre de 2006.

[4] Linda Farthing and Kathryn Ledebur (2004), "The Beat Goes On: The U.S. War on Coca," NACLA Report on the Americas 38,3 (Nov-Dec): 35,36; See also Lesley Gill (2004), The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas (Durham and London: Duke University Press).

[5] "EEUU elogia el plan de coca en Carrasco," La Razón 5 de octubre de 2006.

[6] "La confesión del ex ministro Soliz Rada," [www.econoticiasbolivia.com](http://www.econoticiasbolivia.com) 18 de septiembre de 2006; for a detailed analysis of the nationalization decree see Jeffery R. Webber (2006), "100 Days of Evo Morales: Image and Reality in Bolivia," Against the Current (July/August). Here is a concise statement on the matter issued recently by James Petras (2006): "By means of a none-too-clever linguistic sleight of hand, Morales claims that 'nationalization' does not correspond to the expropriation and transfer of property to the state. According to his 'new' definition, state ownership of shares, tax increases and promises to 'industrialize' the raw materials are all equivalent to nationalization," Journal of Peasant Studies 33,2 (April): 286.

[7] Oscar Olivera (with Tom Lewis), ¡Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press), 2004: 136-137, 139.

[8] For a detailed account see my (2006), "100 Days of Evo Morales: Image and Reality in Bolivia," Against the Current (July/August).

[9] Dunia Mokrani and Raquel Gutiérrez, "The Hidden Politics of Bolivia's Constituent Assembly," (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, September 5, 2006).

[10] The concern of the Kirchner's Argentine government was not altruistic, of course. Rather, the Argentine state was worried about an influx of refugees in the event of war. A huge number of illegal immigrants from Bolivia currently live in Argentina, mostly relegated to the most terrible jobs, some living in conditions of slavery.

[11] The "October Agenda" refers to the demands made by social movements during the October 2003 Gas War: nationalization of the hydrocarbons sector (gas and oil), constituent assembly, and a trial of responsibilities for ex-president Gonzalo (Goni) Sánchez de Lozada for his role in the deaths of at least 67 unarmed protesters in September-October 2003.

[12] This section relied on a number of sources. Among the more important are the following: "El gobierno no ve peligro de un enfrentamiento," La Razón 23 de septiembre de 2006; "Los sectores anuncian medidas para la defensa del Gobierno," La Razón 23 de septiembre de 2006; "Nace un posible acuerdo en la Constituyente," La Razón 23 de septiembre de 2003; "Evo instruye aprobar reglas de la Asamblea por mayoría absoluta," La Razón 24 de septiembre de 2003; "UN y MNR rescatan la convocatoria del MAS para dialogar," La Razón 24 de septiembre de 2006; "Santa Cruz propone 'un pacto de paz' al Gobierno," La Razón 24 de septiembre de 2006; "Gobierno, cívicos y partidos deciden por los asambleístas," La Razón 25 de septiembre de 2006; "La Constituyente corre para aplicar la fórmula mixta," La Razón 26 de septiembre de 2006; "El gobierno insiste con las movilizaciones," La Razón 26 de septiembre de 2006; "Los campesinos masificarán su vigilia a la Constituyente," La Razón 2 de octubre de 2006; "Constituyente: el vice se dobla ante la oligarquía," [www.econoticiasbolivia.com](http://www.econoticiasbolivia.com) 20 de septiembre de 2006.

[13] "La aceptación de la Constituyente bajó 24 puntos," La Razón 29 de septiembre de 2006; "La aprobación al Presidente baja al 52%," La Razón 29 de septiembre de 2006.

[14] Verónica Gago, "La seducción del chavismo: Entrevista a Raquel Gutiérrez, fundadora del Centro de Estudios Andinos y Mesoamericanos," Brecha September 28, 2006. Available online: [http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id\\_38194](http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id_38194).

[15] Hervé Do Alto and Pablo Stefanoni (2006), "La Asamblea Constituyente: entre la utopía y el desencanto," Viento Sur 88 (septiembre): 21-24. In an earlier article, Do Alto at least held out both higher hopes for the MAS as a potentially revolutionary force for change, and a wider birth for our measure of "success" or "failure" of the Bolivian process. See Do Alto (2006), "After the Electoral Triumph of the MAS," International Viewpoint 376 (March). The concluding phrases include this passage: "It is also by the modalities of the exercise of this power that will be adopted by this government [over time], in particular through the place that will be conceded to the social movements, that we will be able to judge and to describe this process as 'revolutionary'...or not."

[16] To quote their text precisely: "Leaving aside the analyses of a specific strand of the 'radical' Left, it is clear that the MAS won the December 18th elections by a wide margin with a reformist program. This program called for recovering national sovereignty, rebuilding the state and making internal colonialism a thing of the past. It is in relation to these objectives that one should gauge the success or failure of the experiment in change that Bolivia is currently living through." Thank you to Nathan Rao for making clearer my translation of this passage.

[17] "La Constituyente: entre la utopía y el desencanto."

[18] David McNally (2002), Another World is Possible: Globalization and Anti-Capitalism (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing): 230.

[19] Phil Hearse (2006), "Latin America: Resistance and Revolution," International Viewpoint 378 (June).

[20] Corporación Chile Ahora, " 'Mañana, nosotros nos autogobernaremos como nación indígena': Entrevista a Felipe Quispe, dirigente boliviano del Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti," [www.rebellion.org](http://www.rebellion.org), 25 de septiembre de 2006; and the interview with Rojas Apaza, "Si la Asamblea va mal, la forzaremos," La Razón 25 de septiembre de 2006.

[21] Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo (2006), Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2006-2010 (La Paz: MPD).

[22] Lorgio Orellana, "El Plan Nacional de Desarrollo no es nacionalista ni antineoliberal," CEDLA Noticias [www.cedla.org](http://www.cedla.org), 9 de septiembre de 2006.

[23] For numbers related to the soaring profits of Canadian resource firms, the pillars of Canadian imperialism, see Angela Barnes, "Resource Firms Lead Surge in Corporate Profit Parade," The Globe and Mail, Report on Business section, September 26, 2006.

[24] CEDLA (2006), "La entrega del Mún: ¿quién festejará?" alerta laboral (septiembre).

[25] " 'Centre-Left' Regimes in Latin America," 286.

[26] Osvaldo Guachalla (2006), "La batalla por Huanuni y el doble discurso del MAS," [www.econoticiasbolivia.com](http://www.econoticiasbolivia.com), 21 de septiembre de 2006.

[27] "Evo destituye a Villarroel y censura el egoísmo del cooperativismo minero," Bolpress, [www.bolpress.com](http://www.bolpress.com), 6 de octubre de 2006.

[28] "Cooperativistas y asalariados libran una batalla por Huanuni," La Razón, 7 de Mayo de 2006; and "Mineros y autoridades se reúnen para tratar problema de Huanuni," La Prensa, 10 de Mayo de 2006.

[29] "Mineros levantan la bandera de la nacionalización," [www.econoticias.com](http://www.econoticias.com) 1 de octubre de 2006.

[30] "La presión de los desocupados de Huanuni llega hoy a su fin," La Razón 29 de septiembre de 2006.

[31] Dan Keane, "Morales Fires 2 Bolivian mining officials," Associated Press, October 7, 2006.

[32] This section has drawn on the following: "El conflicto echo raíces desde hace siete meses," La Razón 6 de octubre de 2006; "La Guerra del estaño estalló en Huanuni; hay al menos 9 muertos," La Razón 6 de octubre de 2006; "Bolivia's president fires mining officials after clashes leave 16 dead," Associated Press, October 6, 2006; "El Defensor logra un pacto de paz y el diálogo se abre en Huanuni," La Razón 6 de octubre de 2006; "Aumentan a 16 los muertos en Huanuni," Bolpress ([www.bolpress.com](http://www.bolpress.com)) 6 de octubre de 2006; "Evo destituye a Villarroel y censura el egoísmo del cooperativismo minero," Bolpress 6 de octubre de 2006; "Huanuni: Todavía no hay acuerdo, una tregua para entrar los muertos," Bolpress 6 de octubre de 2006; "García Linera sigue apagando incendios," Bolpress 6 de octubre de 2006; "Algunos diputados del MAS proponent semi privatizar Huanuni," Bolpress 6 de octubre de 2006; "Quieren ahogar en sangre la nacionalización de minas," [www.econoticiasbolivia.com](http://www.econoticiasbolivia.com) 6 de octubre de 2006; "Evo echa a su ministro y pacifica Huanuni," [www.econoticiasbolivia.com](http://www.econoticiasbolivia.com) 6 de octubre de 2006; and "Los cooperativistas piden paz y los asalariados anuncian protestas," La Razón 6 de octubre de 2006.

[33] Heinz Dieterich (2006), "Preparativos de golpe de Estado en Bolivia," [www.rebellion.org](http://www.rebellion.org) 7 de octubre de 2006.

[34] Dan Keane, "Bolivia Hints at Expropriating Mines," Associated Press, October 7, 2006.

[35] "Vuelve con fuerza la confrontación política," La Razón 6 de octubre de 2006.

[36] Ralph Miliband (1969), *The State in Capitalist Society: The Analysis of the Western Power System* (London, Melbourne, New York: Quartet Books): 124.

[37] Roberto Aguirre, "Una historia que se repite: ¿Qué es lo que quiere la derecha en Bolivia?" APM, available on line at [http://www.prensamericosur.com.ar/apm/nota\\_print.php?idnota\\_2361](http://www.prensamericosur.com.ar/apm/nota_print.php?idnota_2361), 7 de octubre de 2006.

[38] Heinz Dieterich, "Preparativos de golpe de Estado en Bolivia," [www.rebellion.org](http://www.rebellion.org), 7 de octubre de 2006.