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Bolivia

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Violent confrontation could erupt

Karl Debbaut, cwi

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**In November and December last year Bolivia was on the brink of civil war. The right-wing opposition of the gas-rich eastern provinces had declared autonomy in protest against the new constitution.**

They called a general strike, brought armed gangs on the street and threatened to break up the country. The Ponchos Rojos, an armed indigenous movement, came out in support of the government. Although since then the immediate threat of civil war has subsided, the failure of the Morales government to break with capitalism means the situation could still spiral out of control in the coming months.

On taking office last year, Evo Morales, the Bolivian president, promised to "refound" the country, taking up a long standing demand of the social and workers' movements, by rewriting the constitution.

In Bolivia, the poorest country in Latin America, the working class, the urban poor and the poor peasantry suffer even more extreme poverty and destitution than their brothers and sisters in the rest of the continent. While more than half of Bolivia's population are living below the poverty line, the richest 10% of the population take 40% of the country's income.

Recently, higher inflation, especially affecting food prices, has exacerbated poverty in the Andean region. Health officials state that 30% of Peruvian children suffer from chronic malnutrition. This figure rises to 90% in some of the villages, overwhelmingly inhabited by indigenous people, in Peru's Apurimac department. Children of four are almost a head shorter than they should be, in comparison to standard growth charts, at that age. The picture is similarly shocking in Ecuador and Bo-

livia.

The political developments in Bolivia, although they have not had the same international impact, are as important as those in Venezuela. The Bolivian independent workers organisations are, for historical reasons, more developed than in Venezuela. As a political force they are less influenced by reformist political parties such as the MAS (Movement for Socialism, founded in 1997) led by president Evo Morales.

The coming to power of Evo Morales last year, as the first ever president coming from an indigenous background in a country with an indigenous majority, has opened up dramatic developments. The great mass of the people looked for the Morales government to head for a decisive break with the capitalist system. The MAS government that came to power on the back of powerful mass movements, overthrowing several right wing presidents in the process, took up some of the demands of the working class and poor, and introduced some reforms.

The renegotiation of the gas contracts with the multinational companies, misleadingly named 'nationalisation', in May 2006 has been the most radical change introduced by the government. Morales, however, has hesitated and retreated before the main demand of the mass movement - for a decisive break with the capitalist system.

### Stalemate

The current stalemate over a new constitution proves that a policy that tries to placate the rich elite is extremely dangerous for the mass movement. The one step forward, two steps back policies of the government has allowed the opposition to reorganise while allowing the mobilisation and the energy of the

masses to temporarily evaporate. The weakness of the government has invited the aggression of the Bolivian ruling class and brought the country to the brink of civil war. The international press and commentators stress that the government has to negotiate and find an agreement with the right-wing opposition. They preach a status quo which is as unbearable for the masses as it is unacceptable for the ruling elite. The status quo of the Morales government means continued exploitation, poverty, and discrimination at the hands of the 'white' ruling elite for the mass of the population. For the elite, a 'status quo' represents a persistent challenge to their economic and political power and, with the mass organisations of the poor intact, an ongoing threat to their rule.

The MAS government of Evo Morales set up a constituent assembly on 6 August 2006 to write a new constitution. The right-wing opposition immediately used the government's concession - that any proposed constitution would have to be agreed by two thirds of the assembly - to sabotage proceedings.

After 16 months of work, the constitutional assembly, suspended for seven months during that period, did not succeed in agreeing on a single new article of the new constitution. The MAS government tried to reach agreement with the political representatives of the Bolivian elite, appealed to national unity, organised mass protest to put pressure on them, and saw the opposition growing stronger in the process.

With a 14 December 2006 deadline for the constitutional assembly looming, the MAS majority decided to re-open the session of the assembly at a military barracks near Sucre and approve a draft of the constitution. The opposition parties boycotted this meeting, claiming that the meeting was illegal. The MAS voted for the new constitution and it will be submitted to a referendum later this year.

### Civil war threat

On 15 December, two Bolivias took to the streets. The indigenous, poor and working

class Bolivia to support Evo Morales on the day the new constitution was proposed to parliament. The rich, landowning, "white" Bolivia marched on the streets of Santa Cruz to celebrate the declaration of autonomy by this state and three others (Pando, Tarija and Beni). These four states hold 80% of the country's gas and oil reserves. They were supported by the governors of Cochabamba and Chuquisaca.

The demand for autonomy or separatism from the rich elite in Bolivia has nothing to do with the right of self-determination as generally supported by Marxists for oppressed nations and minorities. This demand comes from the rich elite in an attempt to sabotage any attempt at social change in Bolivia. They threatened Morales to grant autonomy or, "face the reality that Bolivia will have new borders".

The right wing is using the question of autonomy of the richest part of Bolivia, as it has used the question of which city should be the capital, to expose the weakness of the Morales government and break the unity of the social movement. The opposition has already partially succeeded in playing the poor population of different states off against each other.

These six states had called a 'general strike' in November to protect their privileges and to protest against the new constitution. During the 'general strike' they mobilised semi-fascist and fascist gangs on to the streets ready to smash the social organisations and the political representatives of the workers and poor. It is clear that reaction is armed to the teeth and would plunge the country into the abyss of civil war if it is necessary to protect their privileges. In this a ferocious defence of self-interest - the interests of capitalism and landlordism - will come together with age-old racism and loathing of the indigenous peoples. The attitude of this oligarchy is summed up by an employer from Santa Cruz asking a Spanish journalist: "Come on, tell me,... how did you lot succeed in finishing the indigenous people off".

A victory of the right wing would amount to the imposition of a capitalist dictatorship. It sets the scene for a vicious counter-revolution that would attempt to smash not only the government party of Morales but all the social organisations of the workers, poor and peasants.

The elite is looking to bring their revenge down on the working class and poor for the water wars, the gas wars, the overthrowing of their presidents and the victory of Morales. If they succeed it would set the movement back for decades.

The armed reactionary youth gangs of Santa Cruz have to be confronted by the workers' movement and indigenous movement. We call for them to follow the example of 'La Coordinadora de Juventudes Anti-Fascista' (the Anti-Fascist Coordination) in Cochabamba, an initiative taken by the Bolivian section of the CWI.

The Coordinadora is a committee bringing together the different workers and social organisations to organise the defence of the social movement, its headquarters, neighbourhoods and its demonstrations. Committees such as these, with democratically elected representatives, need to be set up all over Bolivia.

The coordinadora showed what is possible. On 4 December they organised a well attended demonstration of 10,000 people in Cochabamba with the support of more than 15 organisations including trade unions, the land-workers' federation and different youth groups.

### Indigenous peoples

The recognition and the rights of the indigenous peoples is a central theme in Bolivia, as it is in many other Latin American countries. The indigenous majority - overwhelmingly poor and working class - has been brutalised and oppressed over centuries by imperialism, landlordism and capitalism.

When Bolivia proclaimed its independence and its first constitution in 1825 everybody acquired the right to vote. Everybody, except

the indigenous people who then accounted for approximately 90% of the population. The new constitution proposed by Evo Morales recognises for the first time the rights and the languages of the 36 indigenous peoples who live in Bolivia.

The determination of the indigenous peoples to fight for revolutionary change and the awareness of their importance was shown when Morales in February 2007 decided to bow to the pressure of the right-wing who demanded that the Ponchos Rojos give up their weapons. Felipe Quispe, an Aymará leader, defended the right to be armed, saying: "We are in danger. They are going to disarm us and it is a con. Thanks to our Mausers [rifles], Evo Morales is the president. Without our weapons we wouldn't have been able to fight the army in Warisata [during the 'water wars'] on 10 September 2003. With these weapons we have overthrown Gonzalez Sánchez de Losada [the ex-president who fled to the US in 2003]".

The new constitution also promised the "real and vigorous participation of the state and society in the economy"; it prohibits and punishes landlordism; it guarantees the "right to live, to food, education, health and decent and adequate housing". Furthermore it offers "the right to work for a just wage".

All these elements are positive but are, under the conditions of capitalism, unobtainable for the majority of the people. Nevertheless the CWI is calling for a 'yes' vote in the referendum over the new constitution. A victory for the constitution in the referendum will be another defeat for the right wing and give more confidence to the masses in their capacity to struggle.

However, the most important question will remain unsolved as the ruling class of Bolivia will keep the wealth, and the means to produce that wealth, concentrated in its own hands. Morales and the MAS government are leading the mass movement up the blind alley of trying to come to an agreement with the ruling class and building "Andean capitalism". This phrase was coined by Alvaro Garcia Lin-

era, the Bolivian vice-president, to mean a more equal and fair capitalism which would favour social development instead of production for the profit of a few. This utterly false idea is preparing a defeat more devastating than the recent defeat Chavez suffered in his own referendum about changes to the Venezuelan constitution. Resorting to half measures, failing to take economic and political power out of the hands of the capitalist ruling class and imperialism, is inviting counter-revolution and the defeat of the working class and poor.

Next year the Bolivian masses will be asked to vote not only on the constitution but also on other questions. Morales has launched the idea of a "recall referendum" for himself and the nine governors of the provinces. He hopes to be able to remove the pro-opposition governors through the ballot box or at least use the threat of a recall referendum to come to an agreement with the opposition about its demand for autonomy.

This is a dangerous strategy as it is counting on a quasi-permanent mobilisation of the masses, without delivering any radical change in their living and working conditions. It will also give the opposition different points to rally its forces around and enable it to fabricate and use the ensuing confusion to derail the social movement. All of this is taking place against the background of rising food prices, oil-shortages for the population, and economic sabotage by the ruling elite.

It seems that the Morales government and the governors of the departments have come to a temporary agreement to review the constitution and negotiate more autonomy for the regions. The immediate threat of civil war has receded. However, a violent confrontation could erupt later as there is no way out of the present stalemate either for the embattled masses or for the opposition.

## Revolution

The demand for a revolutionary constituent assembly needs to be raised in Bolivia. This should be convened through the organisation

of mass committees in the factories and workplaces, neighbourhoods and localities, from the organisations of the working class and the peasantry.

Representatives to the revolutionary constituent assembly should be elected by the workers and peasant masses, subject to recall and controlled by the committees who elected them. The assembly should pledge to carry through the complete nationalisation of large landholdings and the major industries and the introduction of a democratically planned economy. A revolutionary constituent assembly would take up the demand for a 'Workers' and Peasants' government', a historical demand of the Bolivian workers' movement.

Only such a bold revolutionary and socialist programme can succeed in decisively changing society and forcing through change in the interest of the mass of the population.