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Bolivia

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Bolivia is awash with rumours about an impending right-wing coup against the elected government of Evo Morales. The general idea being promoted is that in the run-up, or just after, the referendum on autonomy for Santa Cruz, to be held on 4 May, right-wing army officials would step in to unseat the Morales government and attempt to restore the rule of the oligarchy, mainly based in the East, over the whole country.

These rumours took on more importance as the Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez invited Evo Morales, president of Bolivia, Daniel Ortega, president of Nicaragua, and Carlos Lage, vice-president of Cuba to Caracas for a summit of ALBA (Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas). They discussed how to defend the Bolivian government in the event of a right-wing coup. The ALBA summit “declared its solidarity and support with Bolivia, the people of Bolivia and the comrade Evo Morales” and it’s readiness to intervene to prevent a ‘Balkanisation’ of Bolivia.

## Revolution or counter-revolution

If the ruling class, either through a military coup or an attempted secession of the East of the country, persist with their attempts to overthrow the Morales government, the country could be drawn into a civil war with devastating consequences. What is developing today in Bolivia is a struggle between revolution and counter-revolution. This poses the immediate question for the working class and poor of what measures are needed to avoid defeat. The

Morales government has been in power for just over two years. The Morales government has enjoyed popular support because of reforms, such as the nationalisation of the oil and gas reserves and the introduction of a pension, it has implemented. Nevertheless, it has not sought to organise the mass of the population and workers to implement a socialist programme. To avoid defeat, it is now urgent to cast aside the illusion that Bolivia can have socialism without touching the interests of private business. The illusion, that it is possible,

to use the words of vice-president Alvaro Garcia Linera, to build “Andean capitalism”, a more human kind of capitalism. Bolivia cannot permanently and fundamentally improve the lives and conditions of its population without overthrowing capitalism. The workers and poor can achieve a socialist revolution but need to build a powerful revolutionary party. The situation now unfolding in Bolivia calls for the immediate mobilisation and organisation of the working class to take the revolution forward. The Bolivian working class cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the Allende government in Chile which sought to avoid arming the workers in order not to provoke reaction.

## Autonomy referenda and the new constitution

The right-wing opposition and the Morales government are locked in a struggle over the future of Bolivia. Evo Morales, in power since just over two years and the first president seen as a representative of the indigenous peoples in the history of Bolivia, fulfilled his election promise to rewrite the country’s constitution and give more rights to the country’s indigenous majority, who throughout Bolivia’s history have been exploited and discriminated against by a minority claiming European ancestry. During the election, he talked about giving the different indigenous peoples more autonomy, self-determination and an equal place in Bolivian society. His government party, MAS (Movement towards Socialism), promised to nationalise the oil and gas industry of the country and implementation of far-reaching land-reform.

The road towards the acceptance of a new constitution, written by the delegates of an elected constitutional assembly, has repeatedly been postponed and sabotaged by the right-wing minority around the opposition party Podemos. Although the MAS has the majority in the Bolivian Chamber of Deputies with 72 seats against the 43 seats of Podemos and 15 seats for smaller parties. In the Senate, which is the least democratic of the two Chambers with only 27 elected representatives for the

whole of the country, Podemos holds the majority of 13 seats while MAS has 12 and two other parties have each one member. After a long struggle in the Senate, it finally approved the text of the constitution on 28 February 2008 to be put to a national referendum on 4 May. The response of the right wing in the states of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, Chuquisaca and Cochabamba was to announce simultaneous local referenda on departmental autonomy.

In this way, the ruling elite in the Eastern states, which still refuse to acknowledge the proposed draft constitution, are trying to split the country, provoke a political confrontation and prepare for violence including the possibility of civil war. What happened next was political vaudeville. The national electoral commission declared that it could not guarantee to organise a national referendum on the constitution by 4 May and that the autonomy referenda were illegal and should not go ahead. The MAS government abided by the ruling of the national electoral commission and called off the constitutional referendum. The department of Santa Cruz, the central focal point of the opposition to the MAS government, declared that it would go ahead with its referendum on autonomy supported by all the departmental political institutions, including the departmental electoral commission, which it controls.

The oligarchy is using the question of autonomy as a challenge to the government of the MAS and Morales. The government is trying to act as if nothing is happening and this challenge will disappear if they stick to legality. In the meantime, the right wing is breaking every law in the country to defend their property. The situation is such that it could lead to a split of the country and there are certainly sections of the bourgeoisie who would be prepared to push for independence of the East. However, with the opposition gaining the upper hand against a retreating MAS government, if they succeed in overthrowing the Morales government and reigning in the revolutionary movement it would not be necessary to split the country.

## Land and freedom?

If Bolivia was, and in spite of the coming to power of the Morales government, still to a certain extent is, a prison for its indigenous population, the situation in the Eastern states is worse still.

The Eastern lowlands are the where the bulk of Bolivia's oil and natural gas deposits are to be found. It is where most of the arable land is, divided between a small minority who own enormous landed estates. In Santa Cruz, 15 families control half a million hectares of land. In Beni 10 families have acquired illegal control of another half a million of hectares and in Pando

nine families control approximately 800,000 hectares. For the peasants working on these landholdings conditions have been the same for 200 years. The assembly of the Guaraní people, the organisation of one of the indigenous peoples in the East, reported that on the lowlands at least 500 families live in serfdom, are tied to the land and the landlord. This organisation has succeeded in freeing 80 families.

Wednesday 23 April, Carlos Hernandez, a local sugar harvester, denounced the situation in the Santa Cruz sugar plantations. He claims that in Santa Cruz more than 8,000 children, between the ages of 5 to 14, work on sugar plantations without receiving wages, education or health services. "They work shoulder to shoulder with their parents cutting the sugar cane who are in a state of servitude and do not receive wages either."

Part of the proposed constitutional referendum is to limit the size of the landed estates to 5,000 or 10,000 hectares (the maximum size will be subject to a separate referendum) and to give 'autonomy' to the indigenous people. Of course, the right wing in the East wants autonomy for itself, the autonomy to exploit the natural resources and the people, but has already declared that it reserves that right to the department (not to provinces, localities, indigenous groups). To provide further proof of what the intentions of the Eastern business people are, the president of the chamber of exporters of the East (Cámara de Exportadores del Oriente – Cadex) stated that, after the 4 May referendum, Santa Cruz and the country will "have a new economic model", meaning that all the advances made by the Morales government – like the pension or renta dignidad of \$220 a year to every person over 65 – will be overturned and the clock will be turned back to complete exploitation.

## Apartheid in Bolivia

The right wing in Santa Cruz and the East use racism and discrimination as a method to sustain their rule. The prefect of Santa Cruz, Rubén Costas, rants and rages on local television against the indigenous people using pejorative terms. Popular attitudes reveal ingrained racism. In 2004, the then Miss Bolivia, Gabriela Oviedo, made history in showing how nothing had changed in the mindset of the elite by declaring upon her victory that "people don't know much about Bolivia, they think that we are all Indians in the west of the country...it is the image of La Paz, the poor people of small stature and Indian. I am from the other side of the country, of the east...We are tall and white and we know English". To be white, tall and to be wealthy is to be first class in Santa Cruz. To be small, coloured and speak an indigenous language is to be second or third class and you get refused entry in some bars and hotels. This racism and discrimina-

tion against the indigenous people has been a central principle in Bolivia, as in most other countries in Latin America, from the time of the colonisation of Latin America by Spanish Imperialism. In Bolivia the indigenous people had to wait for the 1952 revolution to remove some of the discrimination against them. One of the achievements of the 1952 revolution was that for the first time they were allowed to enter the Plaza Murillo, La Paz's main square and the site of the cathedral, the presidential palace and the Congress.

## Armed repression in the East.

At the end of February the Vice-Minister of Land, the director of the institute of Land Reform and the leader of the Guaraní people were amongst a group whose vehicles were shot at on their way to visit a series of families held in virtual slavery by a local landowner, near Lagunillas, in the Cordillera region of Santa Cruz. They were held at gunpoint, 53 people were wounded and several people have been reported missing by government sources. These incidents are not exceptional. The landowners employ paramilitary forces to protect their holdings and to expand their lands illegally, evicting indigenous groups and subsistence farmers.

The Comité Pro-Santa Cruz, the campaigning organisation for autonomy for the east, is made up of the main business organisations in the department. Its spokesperson is Branco Marinkovik, one of the big landholders in the East. He owns more than 27,000 hectares and currently five court cases are running against him for illegally claiming land belonging to the state. The Comité Santa Cruz, together with the Juventud Crucenista and several semi-fascist organisations, are terrorising anyone who dares to challenge their authority. The houses of local trade union leaders have been fire-bombed and pro-MAS demonstrations are attacked by thugs. It is not that the MAS has no local support in Santa Cruz. The MAS was one of the most popular parties in this department both in the 2005 elections and in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. Support for MAS is concentrated in the low-income neighbourhoods of the city and in the rural areas of the department, home to large numbers of people who migrated from the highlands in the 1960s and 1970s. The key issue is that the MAS has not been able to undercut the social basis of the right wing, has stalled on landreform and has let itself be intimidated by the armed groups of the right wing.

## The national question

The national question and the question of autonomous rights for the indigenous communities are key in Bolivia, as indeed they are throughout Latin America. Marxists defend the national and democratic

rights of oppressed peoples, the right of self-determination up to and including the right of secession. This is a democratic right which the working class defends. However, it is subordinate to the rights of the working class and poor as a "part" is to the "whole". The elite in Santa Cruz and the eastern states speak about autonomy and their right to self-determination. This has got nothing to do with the rights of oppressed peoples or minorities within oppressive states to determine their own future as defended by Marxists. The big landlords, industrialists and those with ties to Imperialism wish to break up Bolivia to continue with their special regime of oppression and exploitation against the will of the central government or the majority of the population. Partly because of the weakness of the MAS government, they have succeeded in confusing the issue of autonomy and winning over some of the indigenous population of Santa Cruz and surrounding departments into supporting autonomy. It is not uncommon that the bourgeoisie, under pressure from a mass working class movement, take up demands of a minority to try and divide the movement. Suddenly they become champions of those peoples who they were repressing only yesterday. This is the case in Santa Cruz as indicated by the insistence of the ruling elite that autonomy would only apply for the department and not for the different peoples, with their own cultures and languages, who are part of it.

We support full rights for the indigenous peoples of Bolivia. They should have the right to preserve and promote their culture, be able to speak, be taught and teach in their languages and protect their community. The working class and poor stand shoulder to shoulder with them in their struggle to reclaim the lands stolen from them by landlords and multinationals. However, we will argue that 'indigenous autonomy', i.e. the right for indigenous communities to have complete freedom of decisions, including the right to self-determination, in today's Bolivia is only possible on the basis of breaking with capitalism and building a socialist society. The National Coordination for the Self-Determination of the Peoples, or Coordinadora Nacional Por la Autodeterminación de los Pueblos (CONAP), defends the idea of creating an extra department, splitting away territory from what is now part of Santa Cruz. The idea, which has arisen before, is to split away the provinces of O'Connor and Gran Chaco de Tarija, Luis Calvo and Hernando Siles de Sucre and Cordillera de Santa Cruz. This area is known as the Chaco and is one of the richest areas of the country with most of the gas reserves and several indigenous peoples like the Guaraníes, the Weenhayek, Tapieté, Ayoreode and Chaquenos, living on its territory. In these provinces wealth is to be found under the ground while the indigenous communities live in absolute destitution above it. There is no drinking water for the population, 80% of the peo-

ple have no access to sewers, 45% have no access to electricity and the same percentage has no access to gas. This would weaken the right wing, although they certainly would not let go without a fight, but would not solve any fundamental problems for the peoples of El Chaco. Unless a workers' and peasants' government breaks with capitalism and starts to implement a emergency programme of socialist measures, the workers and poor of El Chaco will remain in destitution.

## Weakness invites aggression

It is clear that the right-wing in Santa Cruz together with the elite which has plundered Bolivia in the interest of international capitalism for decades are not going to allow power to slip from their hands without a fight. They will defend their economic and political interests by any means necessary. The weakness of the Morales government has been that it has not used its majority in several elections or referenda to implement reforms and break the power of the right wing by overthrowing capitalism. The renegotiation of the hydrocarbon contracts with the multinationals was hailed by the majority of the Bolivians as a step in the right direction. Since then the illusion entertained by the government that it is possible to come to a compromise with the ruling class and build Andean capitalism has paralysed the government. Every time the opposition has confronted the Morales government – be it over autonomy, the constitution or the distribution of extra government income – it has seen the government backtrack looking for a compromise. The weakness of the Morales government and its refusal to build the MAS from a coalition of movements into a political party capable of leading a united struggle of the workers and poor has invited more right-wing aggression. In the East, the MAS forces have been practically forced underground because of the failure of the MAS to stand up to the right wing and protect its own forces. The government should nationalise the land, go ahead with landdistribution, organise the landless and the poor peasants to occupy and cultivate the land stolen from them and organise proper defence forces against the right-wing thugs and fascist groups.

## Organise against the coup, overthrow capitalism

A coup or a civil war would have devastating consequences for the country and for the workers, poor and indigenous people of Bolivia and would have repercussions throughout Latin America. Immediate measures must be taken to counter the threat of a coup from the armed forces as measures should be taken to organise in the West and East in the country to

defend and extend the revolution.

The working class should call for the formation of a defence organisation, bringing together the trade unions, social movements, indigenous federations, and all who are willing to defend the revolution. The aim should be to organise committees in every workplace, neighbourhood and community to debate the present situation and decide democratically on the course to follow to defeat the right wing. Measures should be taken immediately to organise propaganda amongst the army, organise the conscripts into committees for the defence of the revolution, to prepare to refuse to obey orders that are aimed against the government and to agitate in favour of the election of officers.

The threat of the counter-revolution is so great that as well as taking the above measures the workers and peasants should organise in militias immediately. The opposition is already armed. Every trade union should organise its militia of volunteers in defence of the revolution and organise armed training for the volunteers.

The elected committees in workplaces and in local communities should come together on a city, regional and national level, organise on a socialist programme and start taking over the daily running of society. This would be the embryo for organising a workers' and peasants' government, and a future workers' and peasants' state to start building a socialist society.

The CWI calls for an international campaign to be organised in defence of the Bolivian revolution.