

# Seventy Years of Bolivian Radicalism

July 30, 2012

THIS REMARKABLE PIECE OF MILITANT history, based on interviews, as well as leaflets, letters, manifestos, dug out of public archives and private collections, from the heights of La Paz to the outskirts of Paris, deals with the Bolivian labor movement, the most persistent and combative in the Western Hemisphere. Bolivia is one of the very poorest countries of the Americas, and also the most Indian: 2/3 of the population describes itself as indigenous. It is also one of the few countries in the world where the Trotskyist organizations exercised long-lasting effects by producing ideas that helped forge the identity of radical miners, peasants, and intellectuals. Seventy years before Evo Morales, the founders of the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR)—Worker's Revolutionary Party—proudly proclaimed the Andean, indigenous, pre-Columbian, Inca roots of the Bolivian people.

The POR was founded in 1935 in a meeting of exiled Bolivian revolutionaries in Cordoba. The two leading figures in this historical event were José Aguirre Gainsborg, who discovered Trotskyism during his years of exile in Chile, and Tristan Maroff, the pen name of the writer Gustavo Navarro, an adventurous romantic novelist whose "Manifiesto for Inca Justice" called for "the land to the Indians, the mines to the state"—a "magic formula" for many Bolivians. Maroff met the great Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariategui in 1927 and began to write in his Journal *Amauta*; both spoke of the Inca Empire's communism, an argument that Sandor John rejects as idealization of the pre-Columbian past and as a form of utopian socialism. I beg to disagree: Rosa Luxemburg, who was not a Bolivian or Peruvian romantic dreamer, also spoke of Inca communism in her *Introduction to Political Economy*.

A few years later Aguirre—who will soon die in an accident—and Maroff leave the POR and get mixed in various confused political projects leading nowhere. But two young POR activists, organizers of the first indigenous school in Bolivia, Eduardo Arze and Alipio Valencia attend the First International Indigenist Congress in Mexico (1940) and take the opportunity to visit Leon Trotsky in Coyoacan, a few months before his assassination.

The POR is refounded in 1938 and a new generation of leaders emerges: Hugo Gonzalez Moscoso, Oscar Barrientos, Guillermo Lora. In 1946, the POR builds an alliance—which will last many years—with Juan Lechin, an activist of the left wing of the nationalist (bourgeois) party, the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), and the main leader of the FSTMB, the powerful Bolivian miners' union. In November 1946 at a national conference of the FSTMB in the miner's town of Pulacayo, a programmatic document—written by Guillermo Lora with the help of other POR leaders—is approved, directly inspired by Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and the Transitional Program. Known as the "Theses of Pulacayo," this document will inspire the radical wing of the Bolivian labor movement for decades. Enrique Herzog, the President of Bolivia, denounced it in 1947 as "a crime against the social order," and the Stalinist PIR (Party of the Revolutionary Left) complained of the "demagogic maneuvers of the professional Trotskyite agitators."

The Fourth International followed with attention the developments in Bolivia and in 1951, for the first time, a Bolivian delegate, Hugo Gonzalez Moscoso, attended a World Congress of the movement. Soon afterwards, Sherry Mangan, an American journalist and SWP (Socialist Worker's Party) cadre, came to Bolivia with his wife and stayed for two years. He began to write a novel called *Catavi, Mountain of Death*, on the heroic, and often defeated, struggle of the Bolivian miners, but after the death of his wife became depressed and abandoned the project.

In May 1951, the MNR won the elections but a military coup prevented it from governing. Less than a year later, in April 1952, a mass upheaval toppled the dictatorship and started the Bolivian National Revolution, a movement that transformed the political landscape, demolished the old regime's military apparatus, carried out an Agrarian Reform, enfranchised the indigenous majority, and, above all, nationalized the largest tin companies—the hated "tin barons" Patiño, Aramayo, and Hochschild, who ruled the country. The miners—armed with dynamite—and factory workers' militias under the leadership of Lechin and with the help of the POR, were the main force in the uprising. Together they created the powerful Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), Central Workers Union, which was invited by the MNR leaders—Victor Paz Estenssoro, Hernan Siles Suazo—to join them in the government. Marcel Niedergang, the French specialist on Latin America, wrote in the daily *Le Monde* an article under the title "Bolivian Revolution between Wall Street and Trotsky." Meanwhile, the POR had developed a large following among the peasantry in the Cochabamba area, who promoted land occupations and expropriations "from below," forcing the government, in August 1953, to proclaim the Agrarian Reform. Guillermo Lora and other POR leaders were worried that there were "too many peasants" in the Party, and that their movement was "disproportionately advanced in relation to the rest of the country."

The main orientation of the POR during those key years of the Bolivian Revolution (1952-54) was to support Lechin and the MNR-Left, while criticizing the MNR right wing for its pro-imperialist policies. Sandor insists, and he is probably right, that this orientation was mistaken, and led the POR into a trap. But the worst was to come: at the XIth Conference of the POR, in April 1954, Guillermo Lora and his followers proposed to join the MNR, while Gonzalez Moscoso and others rejected this as a capitulation. The factional struggle coincided in time with the international split in the FI, but there was no direct connection between both events. A few months later, the POR split and most of Lora's friends—but not himself!—joined the MNR, in a major blow for the Trotskyist movement in Bolivia. The author's scrupulous analysis of these events is a model of historical accuracy, and stands in stark contrast with the various factional narratives, and in particular those of Guillermo Lora, an expert in writing and rewriting the history of the POR. Among other interesting discoveries, Sandor John unearthed the existence of a third current in the POR, the leaders of the peasant movement in Cochabamba—left out in most "official" histories of the Party—who radically opposed any alliance with the MNR, which they defined as the "Bolivian Kuomintang."

The Bolivian Revolution sadly ended with the restoration of the Army by the MNR government—an Army that was able, a few years later, to topple down the elected government and establish a military dictatorship. It is against this dictatorship that Che Guevara organized his ill-fated attempt at guerilla warfare in Bolivia in 1967. Guevara's tactics were mistaken, but I'm afraid I can't agree with the author's somewhat dismissive assessment of his struggle and of the attempts, by both factions of the POR, Moscoso and Lora, to support him—or (for Moscoso and his friends) to link with his followers in the early 1970s.

After other revolutionary attempts—such as the Popular Assembly in May 1971, described by some enthusiasts as "the First Soviet of the Americas"—followed by military dictatorships and, later, reactionary "democratic" neoliberal governments, things began to change once more in Bolivia with the election of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia in 2005. While Sandor is skeptical about Evo Morales and his government, he shows that there is a historical continuity in Bolivian radicalism: after the mines were closed by neoliberal "structural adjustments," many miners went to the Chapare province to grow coca leaves, helping to build the peasant unions whose leader was the young Evo Morales; others established themselves at El Alto, the popular neighborhood at the heights of La Paz, which played such a key role in bringing down various neo-liberal presidents in the years 2000. Not to mention that Evo's political mentor was Filemon Escobar, a former miner unionist and Trotskyist leader—converted to Indianism—who helped to found the new political party,

the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). It is too soon to predict what will happen, but this is certainly a new chapter in the history of the Bolivian radical tradition.