

# BOLIVIA'S NEW WAVE OF PROTEST



As opposed to the vertically integrated discipline of the old union movement, the new social protest is based in sectoral, geographically dispersed coalitions.

*Protesters gather in Cochabamba's Central Plaza on April 6, 2000 to hear Oscar Olivera speak. The banner reads "The water is ours damn it!"*

BY LINDA FARTHING AND BEN KOHL

**"F**or the first time in 15 years, this struggle has given people confidence in themselves," says Oscar Olivera, leader of the *Coordinadora* for the Defense of Water and Life, the movement that regained local control over the water supply in Cochabamba, Bolivia last year. "We managed to build a movement that doesn't have caudillos or untouchable leaders, doesn't have decisions

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made from above, but rather is transparent and honest. Most important, it empowered people."

Protesters took to the streets of the Bolivian city in the valleys east of the Andes last January, February and April when the new owners of the municipal water system sharply increased the rates. A number of activist groups held parallel protests, including the small-scale coca growers (*cocaleros*) around Cochabamba, highlands campesinos and teachers' unions. The combined impact rocked the country, forcing the government of President Hugo Banzer to declare a three-month state of siege.<sup>1</sup> By May, when the dust had settled, a social move-

ment which united urban and rural *Cochabambinos* had forced the government to return the water company to public control. The other protesters pressured Banzer into addressing land tenure laws, the installation of Chapare region military bases and teachers' salaries and working conditions.

A second round of conflicts—more intense and widespread—erupted in September, as *cocaleros*, angry at the lack of progress in negotiations with the government, again protested the proposed construction of three U.S.-financed military bases in the Chapare region and the government's decision to forcibly reduce coca production to only that needed for



domestic consumption. The protests, which lasted through October, were more violent than those earlier in the year, largely because of an increase in the government's use of repressive force.

The entire country ground to a halt for over three weeks because of blockades; private industry lost millions; schools were closed; and cities were crippled as food supplies steadily diminished. The informal alliance that spearheaded the protests forced the Banzer government to again make significant concessions, even on such "non-negotiable" issues as the military bases. Emboldened by their successes, the country's social movements have promised further actions if the government fails to carry out the agreements reached.

These successes mark a significant turning point for grassroots and popular organizations in Bolivia; they represent the first major victories against neoliberal economic policies after 15 years of continuous opposition. In fact, the application of neoliberalism in Bolivia had been considered so successful by international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that it had been widely touted and copied as a model for other low-income countries around the world.

The leading role of the Coordinadora and other social movements in the recent struggles also represents something new in Bolivia. Over the past 15 years, these movements have grown in large part due to changes in the economy, and they have assumed much of the role once held by the Central Bolivian Workers Organization (COB). In 1985, structural adjustment programs closed state mines and decimated the COB, which for 35 years had united popular opposition into what was arguably the strongest labor movement in Latin

America.<sup>2</sup> The COB demonstrated its greatest effectiveness during the almost continuous succession of military dictatorships between 1964 and 1982, when its enemy was far more clearly defined than in the neoliberal, "democratic" period after 1985. In its heyday the COB, which functioned as a national political actor as much as a labor confederation, prided itself on being one of the few indepen-

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dent worker organizations in the world that incorporated all sectors from campesinos to factory workers.

State mine closures in 1985 cut 23,000 jobs, leaving less than 7,000 union miners employed, and crippling the miners union—long the leading force in the COB. Political infighting further weakened the demoralized labor federation, and Bolivia's neoliberal governments, bolstered by their international allies, pressed every advantage they could to destroy the COB's power. Where the COB continued to lead resistance—in the ongoing battle of the teachers unions against the 1995 educational reform, for example—the struggles were isolated or focused on sectoral issues, and not on the society-wide distributional or political battles of the past. As a consequence, teachers and other groups made little headway. The pattern was seen during the mid-1990s resistance to the privatizing of the

railways, the oil and gas industry, the national airline and other industries. The apparently relentless privatization of the fruits of 50 years of labor struggle further demoralized the COB and called its legitimacy into question. In its last congress, the urban teachers union and other sectors of unionized workers refused to participate, and squabbles over control of ever-reduced power continued unabated. Even worse, the last two COB congresses, both held in 2000, had no quorum and therefore could elect no leadership.

**M**uch of the resistance of the 1990s has been led by the cococaleros from Cochabamba's Chapare region. Since the U.S. War on Drugs was instituted in 1989 by George Bush, coca producers have lived through escalating human rights abuses and unrealized promises of development. These two factors have led to enormous frustrations and have created an explosive situation. Conditions have been exacerbated in the last two years by forced eradication of coca, which has exacted a \$150-\$500 million price from the region's economy, and has been enormously costly for the 35,000 families who directly depend on the crop's cultivation. Eradication has coincided with the reduction of remittances in 1998 and 1999 from the approximately 1.5 million Bolivians who work in Argentina—nearly one Bolivian in six—as the effects of the downturn that began in Asia in 1997 rippled through South America.<sup>3</sup>

Early last year, the pressure was cranked up a notch. Residents of the arid city of Cochabamba started getting water bills from a new source: Aguas de Tunari, an international consortium led by the London-based International Water Limited, owned in turn by Edison of Italy and the U.S. Bechtel Corporation. Murmurs became





Police face off with Coordinadora protesters. After drawing protesters away, police encircled central Cochabamba on April 7, 2000.

cries when poor families, many of whom have access to water only two or three hours a day, saw rates increase by as much as 200%. Some found themselves paying 20% of their monthly income for water. Under the terms of its 40-year concession, the company gained control over all of urban and suburban Cochabamba's surface and subterranean water. This meant that the independent cooperatives that supply 25% of the local population lost the right to tap ground water. In the rural areas, where campesinos control water use, the company was given the right to charge them for water. This violated all traditional norms. As a Cochabamba woman told us, "If God gave us water, no human being should take it away."

Aguas de Tunari had taken over the \$200 million municipal water system with a mere \$15,635 in initial direct investment.<sup>4</sup> The deal was so blatantly unreasonable that even some normally conservative middle-class sectors supported the resistance to the privatization. The Prefect of the Department of Cochabamba was overheard by Coordinadora representatives

reporting by phone to the Bolivian President Hugo Banzer during the April crisis: "Mr. President, this is not some radical group, it is *all* of Cochabamba. I just saw my neighbors walking down to the protest in the central plaza."<sup>5</sup>

The Banzer government's inept responses to the protest fueled the fire, uniting the entire population. When asked by South African water activist Trevor Ngwane how the Coordinadora had managed to organize the entire population to resist, Olivera laughed and replied, "Oh, we didn't do that. The government did it for us."<sup>6</sup> The government, among its more egregious responses, jailed Coordinadora leaders during negotiations, provoking a five-day battle as citizens held the main plaza and demanded the release of their leaders as well as the return of their water rights.

The Coordinadora, on the other hand, demonstrated an excellent sense of timing combined with an ability to articulate and direct anger productively. An impressive level of self-discipline prevailed among the protesters even in the face of intense street fighting and the killing of a protester by police

sharpshooters. Not a single local store was looted during the uprising.

In the second round of protests, in October 2000, the coca growers won an important victory as the government conceded control of about \$80 million of development funds—part of the U.S. Plan Colombia budget—to the growers' unions. The unions have always been the representatives of the cocaleros, and they gained even greater legitimacy when they took advantage of national decentralization laws introduced by the 1994-1997 Sánchez de Lozada Administration to gain democratic control of Chapare municipal governments. Union leaders are now serving as mayors and council members at the municipal level and as deputies representing the region in the lower house of the national Congress. Whether the United States will finally recognize the legitimacy of coca union leaders, whom they have always considered to be drug traffickers, remains to be seen.

Far from the tropics, in the indigenous highlands, Aymara campesinos blockaded roads in



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September and October, shutting La Paz off from the rest of the country for three weeks. The action was carried out under the leadership of another charismatic indigenous separatist leader, Felipe Quispe, popularly known as Mall'ku. Mall'ku, whose name means condor in both Aymara and Quechua, has tapped into the strong currents of Aymara identity and resistance which have surfaced periodically since the group was first conquered by the Incas.<sup>7</sup>

The campesinos mobilized around two issues. First, they had been protesting the 1996 National Agrarian Reform Institute (INRA) Law. Called a new "land reform" by its authors, the law reversed the basic spirit of the 1953 agrarian reform, that "the land belongs to those who work it." Indigenous leaders complain that the recent law better serves the interests of large landowners who can now protect their holdings by paying minimal annual taxes.<sup>8</sup> These provisions of the INRA Law have led critics of the new Agrarian Reform to claim that the law's goal is to create land markets and guarantee that "the land belongs to those who pay taxes." In October negotiations, the government agreed to reconsider some of the fundamental attributes of the law.

Second, broad-based opposition developed in the highlands in response to a proposed national Water Law that would partially privatize the provision of water on a national level. Given the explosive results of the privatization in Cochabamba and because the Law was written with no input from highlands residents, resistance to it grew quickly. The popular response went far beyond anything that could have been predicted and leaders in the highlands aptly helped it grow. Mall'ku mobilized residents of the arid highlands as the Law came to symbolize all that is wrong with the neoliberal poli-

cies of the Banzer Administration. Protesters fought to protect access to water, "the vital resource for all life," which they held should be used to promote the broader social good, not sold to the highest bidder.

The new coalitions that have emerged in the past year represent a different kind of politics. As opposed to the vertically integrated, disciplined structure of the COB, these politics are based on sectoral, often geographically distinct coalitions. Olivera is clear that the Coordinadora is not just about water: "The message we bring is that resistance is possible, that victory is possible. Our work has given democracy new substance in our country." It is also noteworthy that last spring's victory was couched in language that reflects the continuity of resistance by Bolivia's opposition movements to the imposition of globalization and structural adjustment. "We are about to win our first victory against the neoliberal model," Olivera told over 50,000 cheering supporters at a Cochabamba outdoor rally in April.

The hole left by the COB, however, is keenly felt. In the final negotiations of the crisis that spanned September and October, the government managed to deal successfully with each sector separately, leaving the intransigent coca growers for last. This led to cries of betrayal and treachery by the cocaleros against those who

signed deals first. The tensions between regional rural populations is also complicated by the ambitions of competing campesino leaders. The coca producers, most of whom are from Quechua-speaking areas of the country, are aligned behind Evo Morales, while Aymara peasants follow Mall'ku, who has publicly feuded with Morales. Other strategic tensions exist between campesinos and city dwellers, as rural workers are not wage dependent and are therefore able to hold out far longer during strikes.

The success of the government in applying a sectoral negotiation strategy points to a considerable weakness in the current scenario. In the past, the COB negotiated from a position of power. Demands were presented as a unified bloc, with each sector maintaining solidarity until all issues were resolved, or at least until a mechanism had been set up to resolve them.

Yet the Coordinadora can also be seen as a successful example of coalition politics at the regional level. It has drawn its strength from having a clear enemy and an experienced leadership well-connected to the grassroots and open to working in coalitions. What happened in September and October demonstrates how hard it is to scale up from regional successes in a country of eight million that has a significant range of cultures, languages and issues. New spaces, actors and forms of organization have come to the fore over the last year in Bolivia, yet it remains to be seen if current leaders can effectively translate this success into a long-term alternative for the country. To do so will require that sectoral leaders recognize that they share overarching common interests in their struggle against the enormous social costs that accompany the growth of neoliberalism. ■



raised more awkward questions. Both were publicly funded art works that nevertheless challenged hegemonic discourse—both were deeply controversial. The Bolívar made transparent what had been hidden—the mestizo and the female—by the heroic masculine narrative. The glass house that was intended to show the disappearance of privacy in the modern world had the unintended but interesting effect of stripping not only the actress but the public as well.

The body, clothed or unclothed, is a site of cultural conflict that is nothing so simple as “good tradition” and “bad modernity” or vice versa. While on the one hand, identity is no longer imprisoned in a narrow definition of sexual difference, images of the body are

increasingly standardized according to global specifications. The Colombian soap opera, *Betty La Fea* (Ugly Betty), could not be more explicit in this regard, as Betty’s starchy petty bourgeois (and Catholic) family values are assaulted by the fashion industry for which she works. Will ugly Betty be made over to become a glamorous global sexpot or will she stubbornly hang on to her native modesty and her aversion to putting her body on display? The end is not yet in sight, but the popularity of the soap opera and its offshoots—“ugliness” contests—suggest that it touches a sensitive nerve of class and racial definitions of beauty and ugliness. The body, long unacknowledged in political thought, is now a major site of contention. ■

NOTES

**Bolivia's New Wave of Protest**

- Many thanks to Maria Lagos, Tom Kruse and Juan Arbona for their corrections and insightful comments on this article.
1. General Banzer was military dictator of Bolivia from 1971 to 1978, and then was democratically elected to head the government in 1997.
  2. See “Bolivia: The Poverty of Progress,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1991).
  3. See “Un millón y medio de bolivianos están olvidados,” *La Prensa* (La Paz), January 27, 1999, p. 5A.
  4. See *La Razon* (La Paz), January 6, 2000.
  5. Interview with Oscar Olivera, Ithaca, NY, October 24, 2000.
  6. Communicated to the authors by Tom Kruse, October 24, 2000.
  7. Interview with Xavier Albo, anthropologist, Centro de Investigación del Campesinado, La Paz, in Ithaca, NY, October 26, 2000.
  8. For example, owners of a 125,000-acre ranch could assess their own land at \$20,000 and therefore pay an annual tax of only \$200 to protect their title. See Pablo Solón, *¿Horizontes sin tierra? Análisis crítico de la Ley INRA* (La Paz: Centro de Documentación e Información, 1997), p. 19.

**Making Fantasies Real**

1. The research on which this article is based is part of a larger study of four maquilas done over 18 months in the early 1990s. I spent three of those months in Panoptimex. During that time, I spent every weekday wandering the shop floor, sitting in the personnel office or interviewing managers. Later, I interviewed ten workers I knew well in my home.
2. All the proper names used here are fictitious.
3. Donald Baerresen, *The Border Industrialization Program of Mexico* (Lexington, MA: Heath Lexington Books, 1971); also see Rachel Kamel, *The Global Factory: Analysis and Action for a New Economic Era* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1990); Norma Iglesias Prieto, *La flor mas bella de la maquiladora* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1987); Lourdes Benería and Martha Roldan, *The Crossroads of Class and Gender* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson, “Third World Manufacturing,” in *Feminist Review* (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 67–92; Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Women in the Global Factory* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).
4. Ruth Pearson, “Male Bias and Women's Work in Mexico's Border Industries,” in Diane Elson (ed.), *Male Bias in the Development Process* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 133–163; Altha Cravey, *Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).
5. For excellent histories of this labor market process, see Jorge Carrillo and Alberto Hernández, *Mujeres fronterizas en la industria maquiladora* (Mexico City: SEPCEFNOMEX, 1985), and Fernandez-

6. Kelly, *For We Are Sold*. For an overview of the varied ways in which gender has figured in contemporary transnational production, see Aihwa Ong, “The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, No. 20 (1991), pp. 279–309.
7. *El Fronterizo*, (Ciudad Juárez), March 16, 1981.
8. In the late 1980s, the percentage of men on maquila production lines stabilized at close to 45%. See *Avance de Información Económica*, (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática [INEGI], 1991). Since then, the percentage has remained roughly the same. See *Estadística de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación, 1990-1995*. (Mexico City: INEGI, 1996).
9. INEGI, 1996.
10. For a more complete discussion of these issues, see Leslie Salzinger, “From High Heels to Swathed Bodies: Gendered Meanings Under Production in Mexico's Export-Processing Industry,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1997), pp. 549–574; and Leslie Salzinger, *Gender Under Production: Making Subjects in Mexico's Global Factories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
11. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).
12. For further discussion of the role of sexuality in this process, see Salzinger, “Manufacturing Sexual Objects: ‘Harassment,’ Desire and Discipline on a Maquiladora Shop Floor,” *Ethnography*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2000), pp. 67–92.
13. See Salzinger, “From High Heels to Swathed Bodies,” for an analysis of other modes of coping with the disjuncture between expectation and reality, as the managerial rhetoric of femininity produces recalcitrant subjects in the hands of less consistent managers.
14. “Simulacra and Simulations,” in Mark Poster, (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 166–184.

**Colonization of the Cuban Body**

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes unattributed in the text are from male Cuban sex workers interviewed between July 1999 and July 2000 in Havana.
2. Ernesto Meléndez Bachs, “Presentation of a Law on Foreign Investment,” delivered to the National Assembly of People's Power, September 4, 1995.
3. Samuel Feijó, “Revolución y vicios,” *El Mundo*, April 15, 1965, p. 5, cited in Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford, 1996), pp. 172–173.
4. A university professor in Cuba, interviewed November 1999.
5. Ilán Stavans, “The Latin Phallus,” and Ricardo Pau-Llosa, “Romancing the Exiliado,” both in Ray Gonzales, (ed.), *Muy Macho: Latino Men Confront Their Manhood* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1996); Reynoldo Arenas, *The Assault* (New York: Penguin USA, 1995).
6. A university professor in Cuba, interviewed November 1999.

**Latin American Feminism**

1. Author's interview with Virginia Vargas, November 2000.