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Obituary

Hugo Gonzales Moscoso (1922-2010)

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With the death of Hugo Gonzales Moscoso, a historic leader of the POR (Workers' Revolutionary Party), the Bolivian section of the Fourth international, the revolutionary left in Latin America has lost one of its most captivating figures.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Hugo_Gonzalez_Moscoso.jpg]

Hugo Gonzalez Moscoso

Few people in the continent have embodied with such consistency the struggle for socialism, the uncompromising struggle against oligarchy, imperialism and capital. Without sectarianism or dogmatism, always willing for unity with other fighters, with other anti-imperialists, he never renounced the revolutionary programme, and never accepted making the slightest concession to the dominant classes. Neither defeat, prison, nor the setbacks of the movement could affect his obstinate commitment to the cause of the oppressed. As Guillermo Almeyra (editor of the Mexican newspaper "La Jornada"), who had known him since the 1950s, puts it: "Hugo González Moscoso was throughout his life an unshakable militant, consistent, honest, who always tried to convert into action his youthful anti-capitalist, anti-bureaucratic and libertarian ideas."

I met Hugo Gonzales for the first time in 1969, at the 9th World Congress of the Fourth international. Very big, with thick glasses, economical in his words, he could be also very warm. I had the opportunity to see him again a few years later, during the short time he spent in exile in Europe and to hear him speak a little about his life as a militant: an impressive succession of struggles, clandestine work, prisons, torture and exile - always ready to start again, to take up the thread of struggle interrupted by dictatorships and permanent coups.

He was still a high school student when he joined the POR; after studying law and establishing himself in La Paz as an employment lawyer, he soon became one of the main leaders, alongside Guillermo Lora, author of the famous "Pulacayo Theses" (1946) of the Bolivian miners' union in a perspective of permanent revolution. His baptism of fire came in 1949: a general strike, supported by the POR, crushed in blood by the oligarchic regime – known in Bolivia as the "Rosca", the alliance of tin mine owners and latifundistas. The main leaders of the strike – including Hugo Gonzales - were arrested, tortured, interned in a camp, but finally, thanks to a collective hunger strike, expelled to Chile. After having participated in the Third World Congress of the Fourth International in 1951, he returned illegally to Bolivia, to reorganize the POR.

Bolivian revolution exploded

In April 1952 the Bolivian revolution exploded, putting an end to the power of the "Rosca": Hugo Gonzalez was in the front line of the uprising and took part, with his comrades, in the seizure of the military arsenal and street fighting. A few days later, elected to the leadership of the COB, the Bolivian Workers' Trade Union Federation, he wrote its programme, which called for the formation of a workers and peasants' government and a socialist revolution: one of the most important documents in the history of the workers' movement in Latin America! Unfortunately, the revolution was confiscated by the MNR (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement) of Paz Estenssoro, which was nonetheless obliged, under the pressure of peasants and miners - armed with sticks of dynamite - to start an agrarian reform and nationalise the mines.

In the years that followed (1953-56) the POR experienced a serious crisis, leading to a split and a serious weakening. In June 1953, its Tenth Congress approved the Theses proposed by Guillermo Lora, with the following orientation: "Far from calling for the overthrow of the Paz Estenssoro regime, we support it insofar as it resists the offensive of

the Rosca, and we call on the international proletariat to defend unconditionally the Bolivian revolution and its transitional government. (...) The immediate task is not to cry "Down with the government", but to demand that it carry out the basic demands of the revolution". In addition, this document envisages a predominance of the left wing in the MNR as a possibility: "It is only in these conditions that the possibility of a coalition government of the POR and MNR which would be a form of realisation of the "workers and peasants government" formula could be raised, which, in turn, would constitute the transitional stage towards the dictatorship of the proletariat" (On this crisis, see the book by the left wing British historian, James Dunkerley, "Rebellion in the Veins - Political Struggle in Bolivia 1952-1982", Verso, London 1984).

Following these Theses, two factions were established in the POR: the Leninist Workers Faction (FOL) led by Lora and the trades unionist Erwin Moller, which defended this line and the Internationalist Proletarian Faction, led by Hugo Gonzales and Fernando Bravo, which rejected this orientation and proposed a break with the MNR and the formation of dual power on the basis of the COB. In 1954, a part of the FOL (without Lora) led by Erwin Moller decided to break with the POR to join the MNR. The tendency led by Gonzales became the majority and won support from the International Secretariat, but Lora did not accept his defeat and after some hesitation, provoked a split and set up his own POR around the newspaper "Masas". Weakened by these departures and by factional struggle, the POR only won 2,239 votes at the 1956 elections. To these internal problems we should add government repression, arrests and persecutions: along with other leaders, Hugo was imprisoned in the San Pedro jail in La Paz.

However, the POR-Combate – its new name - managed to survive, and attempted to organize resistance to the military dictatorship of Barrientos, which came to power in 1964. In May 1967, when the guerrilla forces led by Che Guevara conducted their first actions, Hugo Gonzales wrote a proclamation in support of this movement, to be adopted by the POR-Combate: "the cause of the guerrillas is the cause of all Bolivians". "The guerrillas are the armed wing of the people who must oppose those who oppress the masses, the assassins (...), those who sell and deliver the homeland to imperialist greed". At the same time, it called for the extension of the struggle to mass front: "It is necessary to organize and coordinate the support of the people. The best help is to develop the struggle of the urban masses, miners, workers, peasants, students for their own demands (...) "All revolutionaries must unite to strengthen a powerful left front".

After the death of Che, an alliance was constituted between the POR and the ELN (Army de National Liberation), led by one of the survivors of the guerrilla force, Inti Peredo. Gonzales travelled to Cuba early 1968 to seal this agreement, and organized military training for a contingent of POR militants; however, from 1968 to 1970, the military dictatorship succeeded in overcoming this new initiative. In 1970 -71, under the more progressive military government of Juan José Torres, Gonzales was actively involved in setting up a Popular Assembly, creating a situation of dual power, which ended with the bloody military coup of General Banzer in August 1971.

Exile in Chile

Exiled to Chile, Hugo Gonzales Moscoso and his Bolivian comrades received political asylum from the government of Salvador Allende, and organised a Revolutionary Anti-imperialist Front to return to the country and overthrow the dictatorship. Pinochet's military coup ended this attempt, forcing Hugo into exile, this time in Belgium, where he participated for a few years (1973-76) in the leadership of the Fourth International. Impatient to return to Latin America, he went to Peru 1976 in Peru and entered Bolivia illegally in 1978 to contribute to the reorganization of the POR. The new dictatorship of General Garcia Meza, based on the mafia and drugs, imprisoned him in Cochabamba and took him to La Paz, where he was subjected to torture. His health deteriorated dramatically. Thanks to an international campaign, the regime was obliged to expel him and he received asylum in Sweden.

Once a minimum of democracy was restored in Bolivia, Hugo Gonzales returned to his country. Based in

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Cochabamba in the 1990s, he helped the peasant movement in the region to organize and support the initiatives of a young local peasant leader, Evo Morales. After the latter's election victory in 2005, Gonzales gave him critical support, while calling for a deepening of the process of change in Bolivia. In an interview with Ernesto J Hidalgo in April 2009, he said: "I define the Evo Morales government as an expression of the indigenous peoples and social movements; a nationalist, democratic, anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist government." Calling for a "Yes" vote in the referendum on the new constitution, Hugo he stressed the need for the unity of the oppressed of the cities and the countryside to impose transitional measures towards the revolution and socialism.

Despite his age and declining health, Hugo never stopped fighting, thinking, writing, always with a view to the self-emancipation of the workers. His articles were still appearing in the most recent issues of the POR newspaper, "Combate". Only death has stilled his lucid and vigorous pen.

Compañero Hugo Gonzales Moscoso, hasta la victoria, siempre!