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Bolivia

# Nationalization! The First Two Days of Bolivia's Second Gas War

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**Monday morning (May 23 May) marked the end of the almost two hundred kilometre, four-day march of around six thousand peasants, coca growers, and others from Caracollo to El Alto. This march was led by the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party, under the leadership of Evo Morales. MAS, and ostensibly all the groups involved in the march, are demanding an increase in royalties paid by transnational petroleum companies to the Bolivian state for natural gas exploitation from eighteen to fifty percent. The demand was provoked by President Carlos Mesa Gisbert's promulgation of a new hydrocarbons law which dictates only eighteen percent royalties with a thirty-two percent tax that critics say will be easy to avoid paying.**

While the march was met with something like a spirit of solidarity in El Alto, the radicalized population of this mostly indigenous, massive shantytown let the MAS-led marchers know that they were demanding, "neither thirty percent, nor fifty percent royalties - nationalization!"

The Federation of United Neighbours of El Alto (FEJUVE-El Alto) timed the beginning of an indefinite general strike for Monday to coincide with the arrival of the MAS marchers. The first day of the strike was not as effective as many had hoped. Mobilizations were limited, the transportation union failed to participate, and all blockades were lifted when night fell.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bol05a.jpg>]  
MAS peasants arrive in La Paz

Busses travelling to other departments of the country from La Paz were able to leave without obstacles. Nonetheless, despite the fact that El Alto's strikers were unable to shutdown the international airport located in their shantytown, American Airlines cancelled all flights to La Paz and other airlines cancelled flights selectively. Meanwhile, some travellers were forced to walk part of the way into El Alto to find transportation to neighbouring La Paz.

At 2:00pm, after the marchers and various sectors of El Alto had wound their way down the mountainside to the centre of La Paz, an open meeting was held in the Plaza of Heroes. About thirty thousand people were in attendance, shutting down all traffic in the centre of the city.

The divisions in the crowd and between Morales and the other speakers were palpable, however. Participants included the Departmental Federation of Peasant Workers of La Paz, the Federation of Peasant Women "Bartolina Sisa," the National Council of Ayllus and Marcas, the Federation of Colonizers of La Paz, representatives of the indigenous people of the departments of Beni and Santa Cruz, the Federation of Petroleum Workers of Bolivia, the Landless Movement of Bolivia, and the Bolivian Workers Central, among others.

Of the sixteen core speakers, Morales was the only one who refused to call for the nationalization of gas, instead focusing on demands for a Constituent Assembly, and denouncing right-wing demands for "autonomy" from the oligarchy of the department of Santa Cruz.

While Morales was speaking, the crowd of miners and affiliates of the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) around me were consistently trying to drown him out with calls for "Nationalization!" and "Close the Parliament!"

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Jaime Solares, leader of the COB, called for nationalization, the closing of the Parliament, and the resignation of Carlos Mesa. He also called on the examples of Venezuela and Cuba to inspire the crowd. When he asked, "Who is the President of Venezuela?" thirty thousand protesters yelled back, "Chávez!"

In contrast, Morales asserted, "We are not asking for the closing of the Congress of the Republic because it is the symbol of Bolivian democracy." Román Loayza, leader of the central peasant organization of Bolivia (CSUTCB), and (dissident) senator of the MAS called for the nationalization of gas in solidarity with the bases of the social movements of the mainly Aymara high plateau (altiplano), and the city of El Alto, both comprising the key elements of the historic "Gas War" of September-October 2003.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bol05b.jpg>]

Teachers' union joins the march

He announced in the open assembly that the protesters would wait for four days for the government to invoke a Constituent Assembly, and if did not happen by then, "We will take power." The crowd dispersed after the speakers, and what would follow in the coming days was unclear to everyone.

On Monday evening groups of Aymara peasants from the twenty provinces of the department of La Paz started arriving in El Alto and bedding down for the night with relatives and friends. They share with the rebellious alteños (residents of El Alto) the demand for the nationalization of natural gas. Gumucio Gutiérrez, agrarian leader of the province of Omasuyos, informed La Razon that they would be marching on Tuesday morning from El Alto with the intention of entering the Plaza Murillo, which hosts the Presidential Palace.

I returned home from the open assembly in the Plaza of Heroes not knowing what to expect of Tuesday. Morales was completely uninspiring. But the crowd seemed of a different mood. The first day of the general strike in El Alto was weaker than we hoped, but I thought back to the second mobilization related to the Water War of March 2005 in El Alto. The first day of that strike had been weak as well, but was followed by two days in which the city was effectively paralyzed and exit routes from La Paz to other parts of the country blocked.

### **Tuesday, May 24, 2005**

At 9:30 Tuesday morning over ten thousand mainly Aymara peasants descended from El Alto and made their way to the Plaza Murillo in La Paz. There they encountered metal barricades with a hoard of police behind them. At approximately noon, the peasants tried to enter the plaza, only to be temporarily dispersed with tear gas and rubber bullets. In other confrontations near the plaza, however, cooperative miners - with the assistance of dynamite - were able to repel the police. The miners entered the plaza, followed by the peasants and a small group of coca growers from the Chapare region (near the city of Cochabamba). They were quickly sent running with more tear gas and rubber bullets. At least six people were injured by rubber bullets. Apparently, a peasant protester was also hit in the eye by a tear gas canister fired by the police. Arrests were made, among them that of Roberto de la Cruz, a key alteño protagonist of the insurrection of October 2003.

In El Alto, the second day of the general strike was much stronger than the first. Also, highways connecting La Paz to much of the rest of the country, as well as the borders of Chile and Peru, were blockaded. While the strikers were unable to close the international airport for the second-day running, airport workers have announced a twenty-four hour strike to begin Wednesday in support of the nationalization of natural gas. The airport will thus be shutdown if all goes as planned.

On Tuesday afternoon, an emergency assembly was held in FEJUVE-El Alto for all presidents of each of the neighbourhood zones, from each of the nine districts of the city. The press were locked out while the first two hours

of intense discussion and debate took place.

Entering the assembly room when they called in the press, I was hit with the intense heat of five hundred bodies cramped into a room that normally holds three hundred. The temperature perhaps best reflects the sentiments of the neighbours gathered there. The memory of the dead and injured of October 2003 was evident in the speeches of each of the presidents of the nine districts.

The demands of the various districts, many with near-unanimous support: radicalization of mobilization measures starting Wednesday; intensification of the general strike; marches to La Paz; nationalization of gas; a trial of responsibilities for ex-President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada for his crimes of October 2003; the resignation of Mesa; and the closing of the Parliament.

Invoking the memory of the dead of October, Carlos Barrerra, president of District eight, proclaimed, "We have an enormous responsibility. On our backs are the thousands and thousands of the poor. We need to proceed as in October (2003). All the movements in the streets need to unite for the one hundred percent recuperation of our natural resources!"

A host of measures, including marches on La Paz, are scheduled to begin at 8:00 Wednesday morning. Meanwhile, President Mesa declared from the city of Sucre that he will neither resign nor change the election date, presently set for 2007. Given the number of mobilizations that are set to take place on Wednesday, Mesa's repeated public declarations that he will not kill a single Bolivian during his reign, will be put to the test.

*With archives from LuÃ-s Gómez at [Narco News](#). Thanks to Susan Spronk for helpful editorial comments. This article first appeared at [ZNet](#). Photos on this page by Indymedia Bolivia. [Read Jeffery Webber's fascinating interview with Nemecia Achacollo on women in Bolivia.](#)*