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Bolivia

“The people are active” – interview with Bolivian miners’ leader Orlando Gutiérrez

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Orlando Gutiérrez spent fifteen years working in the depths of the mines of Colquiri, in the province of Inquisivi, in the department of La Paz. Today he is the highest reference point of the mineworkers’ union, the Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia (FSTMB). He is a key figure in the union’s support for Luis Arce Catacora, the economist (and former minister of the economy who, on 6 September, 2020 – on condition the elections take place – will be the presidential candidate for the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) led by Evo Morales. He was interviewed by Gustavo Veiga for the Argentine daily newspaper *Página 12*. The interview took place before the interim government installed by the coup decided to postpone the presidential elections to 18 October, 2020.

On 10 July we marked eight months of the civil-military coup d’état. What do you make of what has happened so far in Bolivia?

It has been disastrous for our history. But at the same time it is something that will teach us to take care of what we have not been able to defend at the time. Today we make an assessment of this illegitimate government and say that it is a disaster. Notice that Defence Minister Luis Fernando López, a former military man, a bloody man, threatened a citizen that he could make him disappear in ten seconds if he wanted to. They rewarded him: to his position in Defence they added that of Minister of Health.

In this the government of Jeanine Añez resembles that of Jair Bolsonaro who also appointed a military minister to Health, right?

Yes, we know that neoliberal policies have been imposed in America, they have invaded the continent. Suddenly Bolivia was one of the countries that suffering this shock with the overthrow of the government of Comrade Evo and now we are trying to regain democracy. We want to rip it from the hands of the coup leaders, puppets of the North American government and this within less than a year. With the unity and fighting power of the people. And that is something that for me, who was a miner working for fifteen years in the Bolivian subsoil, is a great responsibility. Hopefully no action will have to be taken, but if they force us, the people are prepared to rise to the highest level of rebellion.

The Mining Federation you lead is part of the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) trade union federation. How much have you influenced the confrontation strategy with the coup regime?

If we talk about miners we are talking about the history of Bolivia. If we talk about the creation of the glorious FSTMB, it is the backbone of the COB. We consider ourselves a spearhead in the fight. So unfortunately we have many martyrs and it is what our ancestors have taught us, our legacy. They have left us that unique principle of struggle to avoid being more oppressed by neoliberal and capitalist governments.

On their miners' helmets, on the banners, on the flags, they always bear the image of Che Guevara. What is his significance for you 53 years after his murder?

Comandante Ernesto means a lot to socialist ideas and to the principles of dignity and sovereignty. It is what we have learned in the fight for a Guevarist Bolivia, to fight against oppression. We are not violent, those who generate social inequality are violent and not those who fight against it. That is why the image of our Che Guevara will always be

present in the miners’ meetings. As an emblem of the COB, our federation and many Bolivian institutions.

Last Tuesday the workers’ movement marched across the country. Is it the beginning of a plan of struggle?

It was a warm-up. We cannot leave people sleepy. We lived through fourteen years of government with our comrade Evo Morales. We really had problems, differences, even some sporadic mobilizations. But with this coup we have been surprised. We know that elections are just around the corner and we know the dirty tricks of those in government. But the people are active.

What happened to the different MAS pre-formulas, your pairing with David Choquehuanca, then the appearance of Andrónico Rodr  guez and finally the formula headed by Luis Arce Catacora?

I am the leader of a new generation, the youngest leader of the Federation of Miners and I feel very proud when in a COB general meeting they said that we should have a candidate for the vice-presidency and thanks to the union and advocacy work we do, my name emerged. At that time a good leader appeared, Andr  nico Rodr  guez del Chapare, from the peasant movement, who like me represents the Bolivian workers’ movement, so there were some problems, I cannot deny it, many people who debated. But we did not want to start a fight to get me a position. Hopefully later we can consolidate bigger things for the benefit of our beloved Bolivia.

You represent the COB, Andronicus the peasants, and who does the presidential candidate Luis Arce Catacora represent?

The candidacy of our colleague Lucho comes from extensive analysis and it is for the economic issue, for the experience he has had with our colleague Evo. So who better than him to strengthen the economy. Because the coming four or five years will be devoted to reconstruction.

What has been the damage to the purchasing power of the average worker in Bolivia in these eight months of the government of Jeanine A  ez?

We have practically decreased more than 70, 60 percent in purchasing value and why? Who previously bought ten things with 100 Bolivians, today only buys four. In the mining sector since the closure of the borders there are no exports, no imports, we are looking at how to survive, even to collect wages, and unfortunately Decree 4272 came out, which is practically the closure and privatization of state companies.

What do you think about the group of former officials who have sought refuge in the Mexican embassy since the moment of the coup?

I have already told our comrade Evo when I have gone to Buenos Aires two or three times. And the same to the brothers who are in the Mexican embassy and outside of Bolivia. The only way for us to get everyone out of the embassy is to regain power. Winning the national elections on 6 September, and I am sure that we will do it. I imagine what the reception for Evo will be like at the El Alto airport. This is a class-conscious project and today we are demonstrating it by putting our lives at risk or being persecuted and threatened. We are at the forefront and we are going to fulfil our objective without seeking anything in return. If we win the elections I will say mission accomplished.

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