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Climate

Cochabamba points the way

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“The birth of a new climate movement” is how radical Canadian writer, Naomi Klein, described the World Peoples' Summit on Climate Change in the Bolivian city of Cochabamba at the end of April. The meeting had been called by Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, in response to the collapse of intergovernmental climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December.

He told the opening ceremony that the world faced a stark choice, between capitalism and survival. Another participant, a leader of Enlace, the Fourth Internationalist current inside the Brazilian PSOL (Party of Socialism and Freedom), described the event as by far the most developed expression in the world today of that badly-needed meeting “between ecological questions and socialist imagination”.

There were obvious threads connecting this gathering with the post-Seattle global justice movement and especially the World Social Forums in which figures like Klein played a prominent part. The format was similar. More than 35,000 people from 142 countries, representing dozens of social movements, took part in 17 main panels and 18 working groups on themes from the structural causes of climate change and climate debt to agriculture and food security or the dangers of the carbon markets, as well as many more self-organised seminars and other activities.

The core content, too, that radical combination of demands for environmental and social justice, with an explicit rejection of the capitalist economy that denies both, was anticipated by the Belem Declaration, drawn up by the Assembly of Social Movements alongside the last World Social Forum in the north of Brazil early in 2009.

There were also differences. This summit was strongly marked by the presence, and ideology, of indigenous movements, especially from the central Andean countries of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. Yet there were also official delegations from more than 40 governments. President Morales as host, plus his Venezuelan counterpart and main guest, Hugo Chavez, played key roles, as they both had in the different circumstances of Copenhagen. But the biggest difference with earlier World Social Forums was that this people's summit set out very deliberately to take decisions and plan actions.

The two most important of these were the proposal to hold a worldwide referendum on climate change – this would ask people to decide on the levels of emission reductions required of the developed countries and of finance they should offer to developing countries, as well as on the need to change the capitalist system; and secondly the plan to set up an International Climate and Environmental Justice Tribunal with the legal capacity to try those states, industries and people “that by commission or omission contaminate and provoke climate change”.

Both of these initiatives were underpinned by the adoption of a position of principle, in favour of a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, and the proposal to set up a new world movement, “a Global People's Movement for Mother Earth..., constituting a broad and democratic space for coordination and joint worldwide actions”.

Some important and complex debates are to be had here, debates that go to the heart of what an ecosocialism appropriate to the 21st century would be like. As a first stab, we would suggest there are two pitfalls to avoid. One is an uncritical and potentially paternalistic endorsement of anything that passes for indigenous or “ancestral” knowledge. To take one example, there is often a patriarchal (not to mention homophobic) bias built into the “indigenous” concept of a natural “balance” between men and women. The other, probably greater danger, is to reject, in the name of a supposed “marxist rationality” or even universal culture, the real lessons and inspiration that

this new movement can draw – is already drawing – from the experiences, demands and proposals of Latin America's indigenous movements.

The people's summit also drew up specific demands to be taken to the next governmental summit, the COP16, in Mexico in December. These include “an amendment to the Kyoto Protocol” which would not only require legally-binding commitments from developed countries to “emissions reductions of at least 50% based on 1990 levels”, but would exclude “carbon markets or other offset mechanisms that mask the failure of actual reductions in greenhouse gas emissions”. Evo Morales delivered these conclusions and demands to Ban Ki-Moon at the UN in the first week of May and was due to take them to Spain, which holds the presidency of the EU, later. They are demands that take into the heart of the international climate negotiations an explicit rejection of the market-based “solutions” peddled by all northern governments.

These are important advances for the international movement against climate change. But they are advances that raise delicate tactical and strategic questions, in particular over the relation between social movements and governments in this new climate campaign. On the one hand, just as Chavez and Morales were able to take the voice of the street protests into the COP15 plenary sessions in Copenhagen, it is now clear that the demands and alternatives raised in Cochabamba would never have the same international impact without the backing of these governments. On the other hand, it is also clear that these governments in Bolivia and Venezuela, not to mention other supposedly progressive Latin American administrations, are themselves caught in a sharp contradiction. Whatever their expressions of anti-capitalist intent, in different ways and degrees, all of them remain tied to “extractivist” forms of capitalist development. That is why the Bolivian government refused to recognise the deliberations of Working Group 18 in Cochabamba, set up by one of the Bolivian indigenous movements that provides key support for the government, to examine the role of big mining and infrastructure projects in Bolivia and elsewhere. In a more acute form, this is also the contradiction that has pitted all of Ecuador's indigenous movements, including those previously closest to the government of Rafael Correa, against riot police in Quito and across the country in early May, protesting against the governments' failure to take account of indigenous concerns in its bill on water rights.

Mother Earth, in the form of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, ensured that few European, African or Asian campaigners reached Cochabamba. But these are challenges for the whole international movement, challenges that show just how broad and potent the campaign against climate change has already become.