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Bolivia

¡Cochabamba! - Story of the Water Wars

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¡Cochabamba! - Water War in Bolivia, by Oscar Olivera in collaboration with Tom Lewis, South End Press - <http://www.southendpress.org/books/cocha.shtml>, 2004, 189pp.

Every socialist, every global justice campaigner, should read this book. Not just because it is an inspiring story of mass struggle and resilience, but because within that story many of the fundamental questions of strategy which face the global justice movement are concentrated. Oscar Olivera, one of the key leaders of the struggle, and Tom Lewis, a member of the editorial board of International Socialist Review (US), have done a tremendous service in writing this book. Although some basics of the Cochabamba story and considerations on strategy are recounted here, you can only get the Full Monty by reading the book.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/watercocha2.jpg>]

First the water war story. In 1999, at the 'suggestion' of the World Bank, the Bolivian government came forward with the proposal (Law 2029)' to privatise Cochabamba's water supply, and to sell it to a new company, Aguas del Tunari, a consortium of local and international capital, including Bechtel of the US (massive profiteers from the Iraq occupation) and Abengoa of Spain.

This was an almost pristine-pure example of David Harvey's description of neoliberalism as 'accumulation by dispossession'. E(For this was not just the privatisation of a nationalised or municipal company; 80% of the one million people in the greater Cochabamba area had their water supply provided by local non-profit associations whose charges just covered electricity and other basics. These local associations were just robbed. And not just that.

Local peasants, incredibly, were forbidden by law from collecting rainwater which henceforth became the property of Aguas del Tunari. Water bills shot upwards as the new company recorded massive (and impossible) water usage by households. People in Britain know about sharp increases in utility charges through privatisation, but this was in a poor country where a worker might make \$80 a month, and thus where water became impossible to pay for.

The first group of crucial actors we come across in this story is the Fabriles (the Cochabamba Federation of Factory Workers), a broad trade union co-ordination which had tried to act as a centre for local struggles, and address contemporary problems of trade unionism in Bolivia, about which below. Oscar Olivera was a key leader of this co-ordination. At the end of 1999 peasants and workers urged the Fabriles to broaden their scope and take on the water struggle.

Insurrection

The Fabriles became a central component in the Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua and de la Vida (Coalition to Defend Water and Life) formed in November 1999. The struggle began with a series of very militant actions, including roadblocks, marches and rallies. These were met with brutal repression, including brining in riot police from La Paz, and the army, to put down the protests. Between February and April 2000 the situation swung between rebellion, repression and open insurrection.

The book contains moving accounts of the 'February Days' and the 'April days', in which the entire plebeian population organised itself through neighbourhood assemblies, sectoral assemblies and meetings of the Coordinadora, to build barricades, fight the cops and the police and - especially during the Last Battle of April 4 to

effectively seize the city.

“As we walked, however, we realised the entire city was blockaded. The citizens had armed themselves with bricks and stones, and television cameras were broadcasting everything live...” (p.35)

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/watercocha12.jpg>]

Rebellions like these reveal new levels of social (and inter-generational) solidarity; young people and old people all had a role, from barricades built by children to older people filling pots with water to fight the tear gas. What had been built, on the basis of the popular assemblies and mass mobilisation, was virtually dual power at the level of the city. For a time, the populace held the city.

Faced with this rebellion, the government eventually caved in - not without having tried to trick the rebels with fake agreements, eventually unmasked. Not only did the government cave in, but it was forced to concede that of the seven directors of the now de-privatised water company, SEMAPA, three would be elected from the population as a whole and one would represent the water workers union. Law 2029 was kaput. In the space of five months, using the methods of popular assembly and decision making, mass participation and mass mobilisation, the Coordinadora, led effectively by militants from the Fabriles, had forced an embarrassing and spectacular retreat by the government and its foreign backers. “For one week the state had been demolished. In its place stood the self-government of the poor led by their local and regional organizational structures.” (p125)

Organisation and Strategy

Here I am going to quote what I think is a key passage from the book, not because in itself it crystallises all the problems faced by the global justice movement, but because it is a legitimate starting point for a reflection on these problems:

According to Oscar Olivera, “As the April blockades were winding down, one family stopped me on their way home. ‘Compañero, now the water is going to be ours, what have we really gained?’ a woman asked me. ‘My husband will still have to look for work. As a mother and a wife, I will still have to go out into the street to sell things, and my children will have to drop out of school because there’s just not enough money. Even if they give us the water for free, our situation still won’t have gotten any better. We want Banzer to leave, his ministers to go with him and all the corrupt politicians to leave. We want social justice. We want our lives to change.’”

This of course is the dilemma of all struggles for limited in which the masses begin to exercise their power; the results - in this case the winning of a municipal water company - seem terribly limited compared with the mobilisation and sacrifices made. But the comments of this peasant woman confirm that only by a massive change of the government and the state, and of fundamental social relations, will justice for the poor be achieved.

In fact the Cochabamba struggle then led into other giant struggles, those of the cocaleros (coca growers) and against the theft of the nation’s gas and petroleum reserves, struggles which eventually brought down the Sanchez de Lozada government, and which are still continuing today. Among the leaders of these struggles the idea of convening a Constituent Assembly - a classic demand from the arsenal of the workers and popular movements - began to take hold. It also led in 2003 to the formation of the Estado Mayor del Pueblo (Joint Chiefs of Staff of the People), and an attempt to create a national leadership structure for the anti-neoliberal struggles.

A large part of this book is taken up with reflection on the Cochabamba struggle, and what its organisational and

strategic lessons might be. A basic problem for popular struggles in Bolivia is that since the introduction of the ironically named New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1985, the organised workers movement has suffered decisive defeats and its vanguard has been all-but destroyed. In particular of course most of the tin mines have been closed and the miners, historic vanguard of the class, have become a very small section of the workforce. What then is the 'new world of labour', how can global justice fighters construct the necessary forces for progressive social change, and through what organisational methods?

A fundamental factor of the Cochabamba struggle is that it was based on the mobilisation of what one of the book's contributors, à lvaro García Linera, calls (after Negri) 'the multitude' - masses of the people, including informal workers, unemployed, peasants, retired people, children and students - not just the ranks of the 'industrial' working class.

Oscar Olivera and Tom Lewis comment : "If it is true that a reduction occurred in the number of workers organized in unions and concentrated in large workplaces, it is also true that over the 1990s an inverse process of 're-proletarianisation' unfolded within the economic and social structures of the country." (pp105-6)

In fact the number of workers has gone up, but they are less organised in large manufacturing plants and the mines, and now located across a swathe of manufacturing and service industries:

"...the number of wage workers who sell their labour power is much higher than it was ten years ago. Yet popular perception would have us believe just the opposite: that there are no wage laborers, there is no wage labor, and industrial production is irrelevant.

"How can we explain this kind of historical delirium, one that affects not only a certain gang of intellectuals but also experienced trade unionists?

"Almost invisibly, Bolivia has been converted into a semi-industrial workshop in which workers themselves do not realize their social power and economic importance. Neoliberal reforms have changed the world of work but they have not shrunk it. Neoliberalism has rather fragmented and transformed the conditions of work." (p106)

This is a familiar pattern, aspects of which can be seen in advanced capitalist countries as well. But it leads to a very difficult conclusion:

"The new working class has, so far, found it extremely difficult to project itself as an active social subject with sufficient personality to launch convincing mobilisations, to generate demands that motivate large numbers, or with even less success, to put forward practical proposals that incorporate the demands of other social sectors."

Anyone who can put forward a global, internationally-applicable, solution to this problem that the authors raise in relation to Bolivia gets my Lenin prize for revolutionary genius of the new century. In some ways it is the strategic problem of the whole socialist, workers and global justice movements.

However Oscar Olivera and Tom Lewis explain attempts to use the Fabriles to 'reach out' to the new world of work, to act as an 'organising centre' for the struggles of the informal sector, of un-unionised workers and especially oppressed sectors of the workforce, in the first place women. I will not recount this in detail, but it suggests new forms of organisation and solidarity, the imagining and construction of which are crucial experiments as the socialist and workers movements search for a path forward.

Lessons from the Water Struggle

In this the Cochabamba struggle itself provides lots of clues, but also lots of problems and imponderables. In the first place the leadership role of the Fabriles, the organising centre of the factory workers, is striking. Only they had the experience and the organisation to provide the leadership - and indeed the infrastructure in terms of offices, phones etc - that was need to get the Coordinadora going. But note of course that the Fabriles was not the local arm of a bureaucratised national leadership structure which could have intervened and demobilised the struggles. This autonomy from the bureaucratic structures, anathema to those who repeat the old slogans about the sacrosanct nature of 'trade union unity', gave the Coordinadora the flexibility and the mobility to dynamise the leadership of a whole city.

If we want to conceptualise what forms of organisation can reach out to the informal and non-unionised sectors, then in many countries it cannot be the traditional trade union form. In sectors with small workplaces, with a high turnover of the workers, and in which the relationship of forces is so overwhelmingly in favour of the employers, traditional unions are almost impossible to stabilise. The very attempt to construct them can expose the militants to immediate repression and dismissal. More politicised trade union and social mobilisation centres have to be constructed, which can provide mobilisations beyond one single or group of workplaces.

This is just one side of the coin; in many places in the 'third world', where huge factories of the transnational corporations have been constructed (Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam), the 'old' union form is exactly what is needed. But in most of those places the huge new factories in the 'special economic zones' are literally a relatively small island in a sea of informal, unemployed or underemployed workers, who themselves need to be linked to broader mobilisation structures.

Addressing the 'new world of work' means constant experiments to imagine and construct the type of fighting organisations capable of articulating overarching demands and struggles. Autonomy from every aspect of state corruption and clientalism, and de facto autonomy from the bureaucratic apparatuses are vital preconditions.

The second lesson of Cochabamba (the first in terms of importance) is the impressive type of self-organised structures constructed around the Coordinadora, at local and regional level. Such structures, however much they grope towards raising the question of power and self-government, are by nature temporary - unless of course the political content of the struggle which they lead is of a sufficiently 'high' (explicit) level to propel them to actually attempt to conquer power. This of course cannot be done by a local or regional structure such as the Coordinadora. If a Coordinadora-type organisation existed on a national basis, that would in itself pose the question of social transition.

Finally the question of political parties. This is basically not addressed by the authors, but probably is outside of the self-defined scope of the book, and there is no need to assume that all the book's contributors agree on this point. It is a vital question nonetheless from the viewpoint of overall strategy.

In a country like Bolivia, the term 'revolutionary' in their name is nearly obligatory for corrupt, right wing and pro-neoliberal parties. Mass popular disillusionment with all kinds of political professionals - including revolutionary and marxist ones - is not surprising; Oscar Olivera talks of the distance between the masses and 'discourse professionals'. A less sympathetic reviewer than myself might argue that a long-time trade union leader, and former member of a Marxist-Leninist organisation, is also in his own way a 'discourse professional', as is the regular activist in any type of organisation.

Similar moods can be found for example within the rebellious masses in Venezuela, including people who don't like

the Bolivarian committees in the barrios because they spend too much time discussing 'politics' as opposed to 'real problems'.

When you read this book, you start out with the Cochabamba struggle, and follow its course, almost entirely from within the perspective of the city itself. Only later in the book does the reader try to fit that very complex reality in the framework of an amazing panorama of social sectors and struggles throughout the country.

How can an organisation representing (and involving) the popular masses be put together which can construct a political map of this reality, can foresee, imagine and construct the decisive crossroads and turning points on the map, and know how to approach them? A body which is capable of inserting this complex picture into an historical discourse - in other words being 'the historic memory of the class'. And linking the day-to-day struggles with the question of government and power? Any membership structure which attempts these tasks will become a political party, whether it calls itself a 'movement', a 'front' or anything else.

Read ¡Cochabamba!. It is a window on the liberatory potential, and the strategic challenges, of our times.