

Bolivian trade union confederation enters far-right coup regime

By Andrea Lobo
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Last week, the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), the main trade-union confederation in the country, agreed to the entry one of its top leaders into the far-right “provisional” government led by Jeanine Áñez and installed in a US-backed military coup.

On Tuesday, Vitalino Mamani, COB secretary of organization and member of its Executive Committee, was sworn in as vice-minister of labor, marking a new stage in the participation of the COB in the coup that overthrew Evo Morales last month.

Following several massacres of workers and peasants and the amid continued deployment of special forces and paramilitary gangs by the regime to hunt down protest leaders and indigenous people, the COB’s decision is a criminal and historic betrayal of the working class. It provides irrefutable proof of the bankruptcy of the nationalist program of the trade unions and all pseudo-left organizations that claim that these thoroughly rotten organizations can be “recovered” or “reformed.”

The “provisional” minister of labor, Óscar Mercado, confirmed that the decision was backed by the COB and Áñez. He declared: “He [Mamani] doesn’t need much of an introduction. He is a respected figure that will undoubtedly give a substantial contribution to the work of this Ministry.”

The COB helped channel a revolutionary upsurge of workers between 2000 and 2005, which opposed the privatization of water and demanded oil and gas nationalization, behind the election of Morales and his Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party. However, back in May 2005, the trade unions carried out a general strike against rumors of a military coup against Morales’s right-wing predecessor, Carlos Mesa.

The COB became the backbone of the MAS government. Shortly after commodity prices began to fall in 2013, the COB announced its “independence” from MAS to better channel growing opposition behind futile appeals to the Morales government, as it implemented labor and land-use deregulation and social austerity.

Vitaliano Mamani himself marked this shift in April 2014 as president of the Bolivian Factory Workers Confederation by declaring that the largely textile sweatshops “don’t have the capacity to pay a 10 percent wage increase and 20 percent for

the minimum salary,” suggesting that “companies must increase their production capacity and expand their international markets,” which could only be done by further driving down labor costs.

In August of this year, San Cristobal miners at the largest mine in the country, owned by the transnational Sumitomo, carried out a 20-day strike. Demands for lost compensation over the last 12 years and against 12-hour days were sold out by the COB, which kept hundreds of miners camping outside the Labor Ministry while isolating them from the widespread support in the working class.

This suppression of the class struggle was exploited by the local oligarchy and US imperialism, which used the growth of mass opposition after Morales ignored a 2016 referendum result against his anti-constitutional bid for another term to rally growing sectors of the middle class and a minority of workers behind the far right.

As late as July 2019, Mamani declared that the COB opposed the demonstrations organized by the far right as “violent” and organized by “neoliberal politicians” and “elitist cults.” Then, an interruption in the release of the results of the October 20 presidential election was used by the far-right organizations led by Santa Cruz businessman Luis Fernando Camacho to escalate the protests with the allegation that the MAS was committing electoral fraud. At the time, Mamani said the COB would wait and respect the official final result.

The Trump administration quickly declared that the MAS had stolen the election, even before the final results showed that Morales had received the 10 percent lead needed to avoid a second round. Then, on November 10, the US-sponsored Organization of American States (OAS) issued a preliminary report claiming fraud without providing any evidence.

Minutes later, the COB met with Morales and asked for his resignation. This gave a “civilian” cover for the military to second the call that same day, leading Morales to resign, go into hiding and eventually seek asylum in Mexico. When tens of thousands of workers took to the streets to oppose the coup and were met by murderous military repression, the COB was compelled to threaten on November 12 to call an indefinite general strike against Áñez. It quietly dropped the threat, however, instead meeting with government officials. On

November 15, it urged that “those in power and in the opposition shake hands.”

Along with Morales and the MAS, the COB claimed that Áñez, who was sworn in by the military and with the blessing of Luis Fernando Camacho, represented a legitimate “transitional” government to oversee elections next year. Without a political leadership independent of both factions of the national bourgeoisie—those represented by the MAS and Áñez—the initial wave of workers’ resistance was suppressed.

Then, on December 4, Mamani announced that the COB would not participate in a MAS assembly to select candidates, “to keep our independence from the government in power, the political parties and the businesspeople.” Less than a week later, however, Mamani was sworn into the Áñez government.

Exposing the corrupt horse-trading in ruling circles, an audio has been leaked in which Potosí businessman Marco Pumari demands \$250,000 and two customs stations in exchange for becoming Luis Fernando Camacho’s running mate in the upcoming presidential election.

At the same time, in 2010, the USAID Office of Democracy and Governance reported that it was spending \$7.25 million yearly for programs run by the AFL-CIO’s Solidarity Center in 20 countries, including Bolivia, to cultivate US influence in the local trade union bureaucracy.

However, whatever the role played by the US State Department’s behind-the-scenes subversion and by corruption, the COB’s willingness to join a US-sponsored regime that will brutally accelerate the attacks against the social and democratic rights of workers is rooted in the pro-capitalist and nationalist nature of the trade unions themselves.

Many bourgeois historians have romanticized the COB, portraying it as different from other trade unions as it “didn’t originate from wage-related demands but from the struggle for power,” in the words of José Baldivia Urdininea. It was in fact decreed into existence by a bourgeois government to keep power away from the working class. In April 1952, the bourgeois Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) led by Víctor Paz Estenssoro—a week after being elevated to power by a mass armed uprising that overthrew the oligarchic military junta—founded the COB under the leadership of the MNR miners’ leader Juan Lechín to consolidate its rule and prevent a socialist revolution.

Despite its mass influence in the trade unions and leading role in the mass revolutionary mobilizations until 1957, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party (POR) of Guillermo Lora refused to fight for the working class to break decisively from Lechín and the MNR government and take power, which would have provided a decisive push for the post-war revolutionary convulsions across Latin America.

This was the result of the liquidationist perspective advanced since 1951 by Michel Pablo, with whom the POR aligned itself in 1953. Pablo had argued that petty-bourgeois and bourgeois nationalist leaders, including the trade union bureaucracies,

could lead a socialist revolution, effectively rejecting the revolutionary role of the working class and the need for a Marxist party to lead it to power. Referring specifically to the MNR and similar forces in Latin America, Pablo wrote in November 1951 about the “necessity of subordinating all organizational considerations, of formal independence or otherwise, to real integration into the mass movement wherever it best expresses itself in each country.”

In 1971, the COB, the different factions of the POR, along with the Stalinist Communist Party, again subordinated a mass revolutionary movement behind the Popular Assembly under General Juan José Torres, who refused to arm the working class and was overthrown by the fascist General Hugo Banzer.

In 1985, another mass protest movement culminated in a 24-day general strike in March and the downfall of the Hernán Siles Zuazo government in August, but Lechín again allowed the return to power of Paz Estenssoro, who crushed the strikes and laid off about 30,000 miners as part of an austerity drive.

The place of Bolivia in global capitalism as a cheap natural resource and labor platform, subordinated to imperialism, was never challenged by the national bourgeoisie. However, the lack of any reformist measures in 1985 compared to 1952 was a result of the globalization of finance and productive capital, undermining all nationally based programs and organizations, including the trade unions.

Today, whatever limited increases in social spending allowed by high commodity prices under Morales will be brutally erased by the local oligarchy and finance capital. This will trigger a renewed upsurge of the Bolivian masses, whose success depends on the development of mass rank-and-file organizations opposed to the trade unions and the building of an internationalist and socialist party in the working class to take power.

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