

MAS, trade unions and coup regime strike deal to quell revolt by Bolivian workers

By Tomas Castanheira
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After more than 10 days of blockades and protests by Bolivian workers and peasants, the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS, the party of ousted president Evo Morales), reached a pact with the coup regime of Jeanine Áñez.

Last Thursday, Áñez signed a law requiring that elections take place by October 18. The MAS and the organizations officially heading the protests, the Bolivian Workers Federation (COB) and social movements within the Unity Pact, then called for the demobilization of the blockades, over the opposition of the workers and peasants who had taken to the streets.

The demonstrations broke out on July 28, in rejection of the announcement by the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) of a third postponement of the general elections, then scheduled for September. In a massive rally in El Alto, a district with militant working class traditions in the region of La Paz, demonstrators voted for erecting blockades if the TSE did not reverse its ruling.

Cooperative miners join Cochabamba-Oruro road blockade. Poster reads: "Áñez, Murillo, we want your head". [Credit: Twitter]

The Áñez government ignored the warning, and the blockades of the country's main roads began the following week, on August 3. Provocatively, on the same day, the TSE signed a bill setting the elections for October 18.

The government's cynical and violent response to the protests, denying political responsibility while promoting an escalation of repression, sparked even greater unrest among the population.

The second week of blockades witnessed an escalation of the social and political crisis. The state militarized the main Bolivian cities, arrested demonstrators and gave criminal cover to the violent attacks by fascist gangs against the protesters. At the same time, new social sectors were entering the struggle, and the demand for the immediate downfall of the regime gained increasing popularity.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, August 11 and 12, it was reported that thousands of miners joined the blockades of

roads connecting Oruro to Cochabamba, demanding the downfall of Áñez. At other points, workers, peasants and youth prepared to resist the armed attacks against the protests.

Also on August 12, a struggle broke out by the workers of the Municipal Garbage Collection Company (EMSA) of the city of Cochabamba, where more than 50 blockades remained erected. They opposed the nomination of a new management and threats to privatize the company.

The sanitation workers attempted to occupy City Hall and were repressed by the police. According to *El Debra*, a confrontation broke out in which "flaming brooms were flying on one side while the cops responded with tear gas."

The continuation of these demonstrations threatened not only the de facto government, but the bourgeois order in Bolivia itself. Acting to demobilize the masses in the streets, the MAS proved once again to be a direct representative of the interests of the ruling class.

At the same time, Morales and Luis Arce, the presidential candidate for the MAS, publicly attacked the popular demand for the fall of Áñez as a policy that would benefit the right wing.

The elections law drafted in the Legislative Assembly by the MAS, Unidad Demócrata and Partido Demócrata Cristiano, and signed the next day by Áñez, was seen by Bolivian workers and peasants as a dirty deal. This was clearly expressed in the desperate response of the unions and social organizations, which tried to conceal their complicity in betraying the mass protests.

The COB and Unity Pact, which had announced on the previous day that if the elections were brought forward by one week, to October 11, "we will immediately demobilize ourselves," feigned surprise at the agreement signed by the MAS "behind our backs."

In the words of the executive secretary of the COB, Juan Carlos Huarachi: "The COB and the Unity Pact have never betrayed and will never betray their people. Today we have suffered a betrayal and that is what the people and those who are mobilized must understand. ... You cannot confuse

this social struggle with a political electoral struggle.”

They didn't have the courage to confront the ranks and declare an immediate suspension of the blockades. However, that night, the COB headquarters in La Paz suffered a terrorist bomb attack. Six suspects were arrested by police, allegedly carrying explosive materials. There was no one at the scene and the damage was apparently minor.

On Friday, August 14, using the justification of avoiding attacks by the extreme right against the demonstrators, Huarachi declared a “temporary truce,” calling for the demobilization of the protests. He also sought to dispute with Áñez credit for the “pacification” of the country, stating that, as during the coup of November 2019, the COB leadership were the “true peacemakers.”

With this statement, the COB leadership was asking for recognition by the ruling class of its role in containing the mass movement and blocking an independent political response by the working class.

The COB recognized the legitimacy of the coup against Morales, providing a civilian cover for the military's actions, and sabotaged a general strike of the working class, which wanted to resist the rise of the new regime, thus opening the path to power for the most right-wing forces of the Bolivian bourgeoisie supported by US imperialism.

A similar role was played by the MAS itself. Faced with the demands of the military, Morales meekly withdrew from the presidency and sought to open discussions with the coup regime mediated by the Catholic Church, the European Union and the UN. The masses, resisting in the streets, were asked by the MAS to “abandon their positions” in the name of pacifying the country and seeking new elections, as they were being massacred by the troops commanded by the coup leaders.

The most recent betrayal of the MAS and COB has further discredited them in the working class, leading to a massive demonstration in their absence in El Alto last Friday, which was accompanied by other peasant movements and unions that sought to maintain a certain legitimacy with the ranks.

The thousands of demonstrators present at the rally announced their willingness to continue the struggle to overthrow Áñez. Until this Tuesday, isolated blockades were seen in Cochabamba, challenging successive orders from different “authorities” within the movement.

In contrast to what Huarachi said, leaving the streets will not protect the workers from the attacks of the extreme right-wing forces, but will make them even more vulnerable to them.

A bill presented in the last few days by the head of the MAS legislative caucus, Betty Yañiquez, to protect blockade leaders from being criminally charged, was ridiculed by the bourgeois parties as a whole, including

representatives of the MAS itself. The ruling class is not preparing amnesty, but an escalation of repression.

Twenty-three people arrested during the protests are being held in pre-trial detention, being investigated for sedition, armed uprising and terrorism. According to vice minister of the Interior, Javier Issa, the public prosecutor will summon many more people and the ranks of prisoners will swell.

The government intends to charge these people, as well as the leadership of the COB, and MAS itself, including Morales and Arce, for the deaths of about 40 COVID-19 patients, allegedly produced by the shortage of oxygen in hospitals caused by the blockades.

At the same time, Issa declared that the “time of tranquility” inaugurated by the lifting of the blockades will serve to implement an economic reactivation and “overcome the damage that these measures caused.” This reactivation includes plans to relax labor laws and implement mass layoffs, while threatening to deepen the COVID-19 crisis.

According to official figures, there are already more than 100,000 infections and 4,000 deaths. Given Bolivia's mass poverty, the backward state of its health care system and one of the lowest rates of testing in Latin America, the real toll is undoubtedly far higher.

The explosion of new social conflicts in Bolivia in the next period is inevitable. The success of the Bolivian working class depends on their mobilization as an independent political force, openly hostile to the unions and organizations that seek to subordinate them to the bourgeoisie and impose a nationalist agenda upon their movement. They will find powerful support among their fellow workers in Latin America and all over the world, who are entering into direct struggle against capitalism.

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