

BOLIVIA - Pro-business 'Strike' Targets Morales (by Federico Fuentes, Green Left Weekly)

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September 20, 2006 - [Green Left Weekly](#) - Reporting in La Epoca, Daniela Otero wrote of the September 8 "pro-autonomy" strikes across Bolivia's four eastern departments (Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni and Pando): "The government and the leaderships of the civic committees with the conservative parties confronted each other, in a week that finished as one of the first battles for effective control of power.

"They did it in a day of regional stoppage marked by an elevated participation, as well as street scuffles and provocations, from both sides; one side demanded the respect of minorities in the Constituent Assembly and the others defended the governing party that insisted in utilising its majority of votes to approve the new constitution."

Otero noted that groups from the Cruceñista Youth Union (UJC) — renowned for racist provocations against unarmed campesinos (peasants) and indigenous demonstrators — "were mobilised by the civic committees to guarantee that the stoppage was effective".

Claiming that the strike was a success, the bloc opposing the government of left-wing President Evo Morales, involving the pro-business civic committees, business federations, and the right-wing parties PODEMOS and the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement, along with the institutions of the opposition-controlled prefectures, have threatened more radical measures if the government does not change its current "totalitarian" course.

They will meet on September 18 to discuss their next moves, but have already talked about measures ranging from a follow-up 48-hour strike to the possibility of forming a parallel constituent assembly to draft a constitution to present to the eastern departments, raising fears of a possible division of the country.

Since mid-2004, the pro-business Santa Cruz civic committee has been stoking regionalist sentiments in order to mobilise opposition to the powerful indigenous-based movements of the Andean west.

However, there was significant resistance to the anti-government stoppage from within the east. This reflected that despite a resounding "yes" vote for autonomy in the east, Morales's Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) won the highest vote of any parties in Santa Cruz and Tarija in the July 2 Constituent Assembly elections.

While the centres of department capitals were desolate, as businesses locked out workers and the UJC enforced the stoppage, in the poor neighbourhoods surrounding Santa Cruz's capital and in the rural areas many did not adhere to the stoppage. In areas heavily populated by local indigenous peoples, as well as those who have migrated from the west seeking a livelihood, the stoppage was almost non-existent.

Significantly, the stoppage did not go ahead in the indigenous region of Chaco, which straddles Santa Cruz and Tarija and sits on 80% of Bolivia's gas.

The strike came after disagreements over the Constituent Assembly. The pro-business opposition claims that the law of convocation for the assembly means all decisions should be made by a two-thirds majority, which in practice would give them a veto over any new constitution.

On the other hand, MAS, which won over 50% of the delegates, argues that each article should be voted

on by simple majority and that only the final text should be approved by two-thirds of the assembly, before going to a referendum. (If after three attempts a two-thirds majority could not be reached, the draft would go directly to a referendum.)

The opposition fears the possibility of MAS “constitutionalising” the dramatic changes it has made in its first eight months of government.

Seeking to “re-found” Bolivia through the Constituent Assembly, the indigenous and campesino movements that are the backbone of MAS are pushing for the creation of a single “pluri-national” state that will place control of the country’s natural resources in the hands of the state and indigenous peoples.

On September 12, Morales commented that “the strikes have been aimed at the policies of Evo Morales, against the nationalisation of hydrocarbons, against the constituent assembly, against the new land policies, against the agrarian reforms”. He stated that there was clear evidence of a plot to destabilise his government and its project of change for Bolivia.

ABI reported on September 12 that Alex Contreras, a spokesperson for the government, recounted that after Morales became president, members of the Military High Command revealed that a meeting had taken place between business owners, political parties and representatives of the departmental institutions to “define” a new system of government, because “they were certain that the Morales presidency would not last more than 3 months”.

Morales lashed out at the US government, arguing that Washington “does not accept our struggle and is trying to conspire against us”. He added, “The popular movement, the indigenous and campesino movement has been strengthened and is organised in order to resist”. One reflection of this is that in Santa Cruz and Cochabamba popular civic committees have begun to take form, parallel to the existing civic committees and aiming to challenge their influence.

Additionally, a number of campesino and indigenous organisations from the east have declared that they will initiate an indefinite blockade of the city of Santa Cruz beginning on September 20.

<http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/2006/684/684p16.htm>