

# Protests against water rate rises sweep Bolivia

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Five people were killed and more than 30 injured in protests across Bolivia against the privatisation of the country's water supply and massive price hikes. According to local press reports, 17 protest leaders were arrested and flown to a remote jungle prison following the government's imposition of martial law last weekend.

The imposition of emergency rule, the seventh since the so-called transition to democracy in 1982, was in response to a week of protests over a government contract signed last year that sold the region's water system to a consortium of British-based investors. London based International Water Limited (IWL) is owned by Italian utility Edison, US company Bechtel Enterprise Holdings and several wealthy Bolivian partners. It acquired Cochabamba's public water system in a one-bidder sale carried through at the insistence of the World Bank. The sale was the latest in a systematic sell-off of public enterprises to foreign investors and follows the privatisation of the airline, train system and electric utilities.

The protests assumed a particularly violent character over the weekend following a government announcement on Friday, April 7 that it was breaking the contract with IWL, which was subsequently withdrawn and martial law imposed.

In Achacachi, 80 miles north of the capital La Paz, farmers blocked roads and engaged in rock throwing battles against soldiers armed with rubber bullets and tear gas. Hundreds of protesters stormed government offices, destroying furniture and documents by setting fires. Some are reported to have entered a hospital, dragged an injured army captain from his bed and killed him on the main square.

Army units fought with Aymaran Indian farmers who formed roadblocks in Batallas, located 45 miles north of La Paz. Despite the imposition of martial law, confrontations continued through Sunday with three

soldiers and two farmers killed and dozens more injured.

Friday's announcement of an end to the contract was seen by protest leaders as a concession to four days of massive public protests, including a general strike and road blockades that began on the morning of Tuesday, April 4 in Cochabamba and shut down the city of half a million. The action closed schools and businesses throughout the city, including the 25-square-block marketplace, which is one of Latin America's biggest. In fact, the government announcement seems to have been nothing other than the latest in a long series of manoeuvres aimed at disarming the growing protests and carrying through ever more repressive measures.

A similar tactic was used in mid-January when protests over rate increases, organised by a new alliance called the *La Coordinadora*, exploded with a four-day shutdown of Cochabamba. The government responded at that time by agreeing to reverse the rate increases.

Families were hit with a \$20 per month or more increase under conditions where the minimum wage in the city is less than \$100 a month. Tanya Paredes, a mother of five who works as a clothes knitter, said that her increase of \$15 per month was equal to one and half weeks' worth of food for the family. "What we pay for water comes out of what we have to pay for food, clothes and the other things we need to buy for our children," she said.

By early February, government promises had still not materialised and *La Coordinadora* called for a peaceful march on the city's central plaza. The march was met by 1,000 police and an armed occupation of Cochabamba centre. Two days of confrontations between riot police and marchers left more than 175 protesters injured and two youths blinded.

In response to the February protests, the government and water company agreed to roll back the rate increase and implement a price freeze until November. A new

round of negotiations was also agreed to. *La Coordinadora* pressed ahead with demands for the government to break the contract with IWL and return the water system to public hands. Last Tuesday was set as a deadline for action if the demand was not met, with *La Coordinadora* declaring it to be *la última batalla* (the final battle).

As the Tuesday deadline arrived, city residents took to the streets. By Wednesday they were joined by thousands of people from surrounding rural areas, who reinforced the road blockades.

On Thursday a crowd of nearly 500 surrounded the government building where talks had been convened by the Roman Catholic archbishop between protest leaders and government officials. The meeting was halted when the government ordered the arrest of 15 *La Coordinadora* leaders and others present at the meeting.

*La Coordinadora's* most publicly known leader, Olivera, said, "We were talking with the mayor, the governor and other civil leaders when the police came in and arrested us. It was a trap by the government to have us all together negotiating, so that we could be arrested."

The arrests provoked an angry response among thousands of city and rural residents, who filled the city's central plaza carrying sticks, rocks and handkerchiefs to block the anticipated tear gas. Media crews speculated about the imposition of martial law and there were reports of army units arriving at the city's airport.

Protest leaders who were freed from jail early on the morning of April 7 agreed to a 4 p.m. meeting with the government, again convened by the archbishop. By 5 p.m. government officials still had not arrived. Despite their experiences the previous day, and widespread expectations that the army would arrive instead, the opposition appear to have been completely thrown by Friday's empty promises.

A pro-opposition article, published in the *San Jose Mercury News* April 8, gives the following triumphant report of subsequent events:

"Suddenly and unexpectedly, the archbishop walked into the meeting and announced that the government had just told him it had agreed to break the water contract. Jubilant *La Coordinadora* leaders crossed the street to a third-floor balcony, announcing the victory

to the thousands waiting below, many waving the red-green-and-yellow Bolivian flag, as the bells of the city's cathedral echoed through the city center.

"We have arrived at the moment of an important economic victory," Olivera told the ecstatic crowd."

Jubilation quickly gave way to mourning as a 17-year-old boy, shot in the head by the Bolivian army, was buried on the second day of martial law.



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