Fires consume more than 4.2 million acres of Bolivia's forests

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Massive fires in the eastern region of Bolivia continue to expand, threatening to destroy thousands of hectares of crops and pollute the air breathed by villagers with smoke and ash.

While the world's attention has been focused on the catastrophic destruction being wrought by fires in Brazil's Amazon rain forest, Bolivia, across Brazil's southwestern border, is also on fire. As with the Amazon blazes, the sharp increase in fires in Bolivia has been caused by dry summer heat exacerbated by climate change.

They are also the result of deliberate burnings and expanded deforestation that flow from right-wing policies pursued by the government of President Evo Morales that are quite similar to those of Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro.

With a month and a half left to Bolivia's presidential election, Morales is facing a series of crises on several fronts. In addition to the spreading fires, there has been an upsurge in the class struggle, with strikes by health care workers, teachers, miners, students and factory workers that have paralyzed the transit in Bolivia's capital and largest city, La Paz. Some of the strikes are led by Morales supporters, while others are being promoted by his adversaries, aiming to bring him down as one of the last links in what became known as Latin America's "Pink Tide" of bourgeois nationalist and populist governments.

A decree signed by Morales on July 9 authorized "controlled burns" to increase deforestation—expanding areas for raising livestock and opening up land for exploitation by the agribusiness sector. The decree, reflecting the growing pressure of the world economic slowdown on Bolivia's exports, was a betrayal of the campaign promises he and his MAS ruling party made in the last election to reduce biofuel production.

The international press has not let Bolivian events go without notice. According to the *Economist*, "Whatever reforms Morales pushed at the beginning of his long tenure as president, these are now being challenged by the world economic downturn. A report of the Center of Studies for Labor and Agrarian Development (CEDLA) said that what prevails today in Bolivia is 'more subcontracting, and temporary jobs without social security'."

Online newspapers point out that the most affected area is Chiquitania—a region of tropical savannas in Santa Cruz, a Bolivian department with 3.32 million inhabitants. Also hard hit is the department of Beni, with a population of 420,000. So far, two people have been killed by the fires, a policeman and a volunteer fire fighter.

Bolivian officials reported this week that the fires have devastated more than 1.7 million hectares (4.2 million acres) of land, more than double the destruction from just two weeks ago.

Data from NASA based on satellite imagery indicate that in Santa Cruz the scale of the fires tripled in a year.

The Bolivian newspaper *Página Siete* interviewed Ivan Quesada, mayor of Robore, a small town in the region with 12,000 inhabitants: "Fire is a monster and threatens us. Everything is ashes and fear."

Lands are burned every year—an act known as the *chaqueo*—to prepare them for cultivation. But a three-year drought and the presidential order to increase arable areas in Chiquitania—a region of tropical savannas in the Santa Cruz Department in eastern Bolivia—have turned "burning land" into an uncontrollable human catastrophe.

The *Mongabay* website, dedicated to the preservation of the environment, reports: "Human communities are suffering due to fires, with reports of diseases caused by smoke and a shortage of drinking water.

"Among the consequences to consider are the impacts on soil, air (increase in greenhouse gases) and water (pollution), in addition to the loss of the landscape," said Cecilia Tapia, an environmental engineer.

It should be added that this forest is home to hundreds of animal and plant species, many of them unique in the world. In the Tucavaca Valley Municipal Reserve alone, biologists have registered 554 different animal species, of which 35 are endemic; 55 endemic plants have also been found there.

Blaming the government, environmentalist Cecilia Requena declared: "...[the] government has consistently passed in recent years laws of 'forgiveness' and promotion of the expansion of the agricultural frontier. They also held an agricultural summit bringing together the government, the eastern agricultural sector and the communities allied to the MAS," she said. "At that summit, they decided to approve the harvest of genetically modified organisms, agrofuels, the expansion of the agricultural frontier, the export of beef to China and, finally, the approval of

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the decree of July 9 that allows deforestation for agricultural purposes."

Alcides Vadillo, the regional director of the NGO Fundación Tierra, said that in the land concessions, "there is a lot of money at stake."

Initially, Evo Morales rejected foreign aid for fighting the fires on the grounds of national sovereignty. A few days ago, during the Mercosur summit meeting—Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay—to which Morales was invited as a guest, he claimed that in Bolivia his reforms have surpassed the neoliberal model of the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) arguing that it is the people—and not imperialism—who govern today in Bolivia, the poorest country in South America.

However, unable to contain the expansion of the fires, Morales entered into talks with right-wing French President Emmanuel Macron on "humanitarian aid," and over the weekend French teams of firefighters equipped with drones arrived in Bolivia. Argentina has also sent firefighters and Russia two airplanes for use in battling the blazes.

Meanwhile, the presidents of Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru signed the Leticia Pact to help protect the Amazon.

Economic facts contradict Morales's rosy portrayal of Bolivia's development. According to Bolivia's CEDLA (Center for Studies of Labor and Agricultural Development), under Morales "between 80-85 percent of jobs are precarious, 60 percent are extremely precarious." The situation confronting young people is even more oppressive. In the working-class city of "El Alto in 2013, 97 percent [of jobs for young workers] were precarious, with 70 percent extreme." In the capital La Paz, "93 percent of young people work under precarious conditions."

Deteriorating social conditions have spurred a growth in the class struggle. Since the beginning of the year, many stoppages have paralyzed traffic in La Paz. First, a 48-hour strike—January 3 and 4—was organized by the doctors protesting that the government's Single Health Insurance is inadequate and will not help improve people's care.

In August, workers at the San Cristobal mine, the largest in Bolivia and the third-largest producer of silver in the world, went on an indefinite strike to fight for their right to overtime pay, denied them by the mine's owner, the Japanese-based transnational Sumitomo.

Last week, another large march led by three universities protesting against deforestation paralyzed vehicular traffic in La Paz.

Meanwhile, doctors, drivers, miners, students and small businessmen have also taken to the streets to oppose Morales's abrogation of the February 21, 2016, referendum that narrowly—by a margin of 2.5 percent—rejected his bid for a fourth presidential term, which is unprecedented and barred by the Bolivian constitution.

Last December, under political pressure from the government, Bolivia's Supreme Constitutional Court overruled the referendum results, declaring Morales—on human rights grounds—eligible to run in the next election.

Politically, the movement in defense of the referendum, known as 21F, has been dominated by the Bolivian right. On July 9, the right-wing opposition, based in Santa Cruz, organized another strike with different sectors blocking the main traffic routes in La Paz. The march was supported by both teachers and medical staff.

There is a mood of growing anger, and Morales will face a series of new mobilizations leading up to the October 20 election.

Despite the growing opposition and the deepening economic problems in Bolivia, Morales remains a clear favorite in the election. Of the other eight candidates the only one coming close is Carlos Mesa, who was president for less than a year and a half, driven from office in 2005 by the so-called Gas War, the mass protests calling for the nationalization of Bolivia's hydrocarbon resources that claimed at least 60 lives.

Mesa is running with the support of the Left Revolutionary Front (FRI)—an alliance of pseudo-leftist parties, including the Stalinist Communist Party. Later, he formed alliances with civic groups forming the Citizen Community as his electoral bloc. Morales leads Mesa by 11 points.

Mesa has attempted to exploit the country's environmental crisis to promote his campaign. On his Facebook account, he charged: "The MAS government promotes in our country an annual deforestation of 300 thousand hectares of forest; pollutes the rivers of the Amazon with the illegal exploitation of gold; invades protected areas with illegal coca crops; and what is worse, it hands over more than 2 million hectares of forest land of the Chiquitano Dry Forest, one of the most important natural heritages of Bolivia and of humanity."

Whatever the results of the October 20 election, the crisis gripping Bolivia and the increasingly right-wing policies of the Morales government are a further manifestation of the collapse of Latin America's so-called Pink Tide and the organic incapacity of any section of the national bourgeoisie to provide a progressive solution to endemic poverty, the assault on democratic rights and the destruction of the environment plaguing the entire region.

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