

50 years since the Banzer coup in Bolivia

Miguel Andrade
30 September 2021

Fifty years ago on August 21, 1971, Bolivian Col. Hugo Banzer Suárez launched a coup against the bourgeois nationalist military dictator Gen. Juan José Torres, ushering in a bloody seven-year dictatorship. The Banzer regime would in a short order outlaw unions and political parties, close universities and plunge masses of workers into poverty as it guaranteed a bonanza for foreign capital and the traditional oligarchy through the exploitation of Bolivia's massive natural resources, from tin to oil and gas.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) understood this event as a critical strategic experience for the international working class. As was stated in *Bolivia: Bitter Lessons of the Defeat*, written only nine days after Banzer's coup by Tim Wohlforth, then the national secretary of the Workers League in the US, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party: "There is no time to lose in drawing these lessons. What has happened in Bolivia can be followed shortly in Peru, in Chile and even in Argentina. The crisis of capitalism is so intense and the working-class movement in Latin America is so determined that the crisis of leadership is posed with acute sharpness."

The ICFI's warnings over a failure to draw the lessons of the Bolivian 1971 coup and to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership in Latin America were tragically confirmed by the subsequent coups in Chile (1973), Uruguay (1974), Peru (1975) and Argentina (1976).

By 1976, over half the countries of South America, including Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil and Peru, were ruled by military juntas, many supported by fascist forces. They were to collaborate with US imperialism in the infamous Operation Condor to root out, kidnap and murder socialist and left-wing workers. Tens of thousands would be killed, tortured and forced into exile.

The events in Bolivia and the South American continent as a whole were by no means inevitable. On the contrary, they invariably succeeded massive upsurges by the working class which was systematically disarmed by its treacherous nationalist and Stalinist leaderships. But the most important factor, which prevented the working class from overcoming its crisis of revolutionary leadership and led to its defeat, was the role played by the Pabloite revisionists, including the French International Communist Organization (OCI) that deserted the ICFI as these developments were unfolding.

From the 1952 Revolution to the 1971 coup

The Bolivian coup of 1971 signaled the exhaustion of the limited bourgeois nationalist reforms enacted following the 1952 revolution, which had seen the working class, and especially the miners, erupt onto the national political scene as the most decisive social force.

It exposed the historical dead end facing the Bolivian bourgeoisie, two decades after the petty-bourgeois National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) took power on the backs of armed workers and expropriated the largest tin mine owners, initiated land reform, sought to expand literacy

and primary education and established universal suffrage for the first time.

The MNR and the 1952 revolution had emerged after the debacle of the 1932-1936 Chaco War, in which Bolivia lost to the much less populated and weaker Paraguay its last autonomous access to the sea through the River Plate. The military humiliation in face of Paraguay sounded the death knell of the old oligarchic domination over Bolivia, and fostered the growth of a reform movement by the small urban middle classes eventually organized in the MNR.

In a clear confirmation of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, when the MNR finally reached power, it was not based on the social force of the reticent middle classes, but through the intervention of armed workers, who rose up to prevent the military from overthrowing the MNR's 1951 electoral victory and ensure that the lawyer Victor Paz Estenssoro, the MNR's founder, became president.

The bourgeois-nationalist reforms, to the extent that they were based on the MNR's explicit repudiation of socialism, allowed for good relations with US imperialism, which aided the regime financially on the basis of the rapid post-war economic expansion and US economic hegemony over its imperialist rivals.

In 1971, the world situation had vastly changed. By 1964, US imperialism was already demanding that mining operations be made more lucrative with the dismissal of tens of thousands of workers, as well as the abolition of union participation in the affairs of the state-run Mining Corporation of Bolivia (Comibol), while the IMF had been called in to draw up a "stabilization" plan. The MNR's reelected president Estenssoro would be overthrown by his vice-president, Gen. René Barrientos, inaugurating a series of coups that gave rise to the regime of General Torres in 1970.

Banzer's coup was launched on August 18, 1971, only three days after US President Richard Nixon announced that Washington would cease to guarantee dollar-gold convertibility internationally, a key economic foundation for the post-war capitalist boom. The erosion of US imperialism's world economic hegemony, which was behind the "Nixon Shock," was also behind the exhausting of the bourgeois nationalist regimes in South America, which depended on US investment and aid.

A January 28, 1973 *New York Times* report on Bolivia's economy, titled "Bolivia's bold devaluation," spelled out clearly the impact of the Banzer regime in reversing whatever gains had been won by workers since the 1952 revolution. The newspaper stated:

"With the anti-Government forces in apparent disarray, President Banzer yielded to international lending agencies and devalued the boliviano from 12 to 20 against the dollar last Oct. 27. It was Bolivia's first devaluation in 14 years. The long-overdue devaluation affected the average Bolivian as no political event had in 20 years."

The *Times* called attention to the regime's attitude towards previous expropriations: "Foreign investments have been encouraged by Bolivia's recent borrowing to compensate owners of previously nationalized mines and other properties." It concluded with a more acute assessment than that of the promoters of guerrillaism as the main vehicle for socialism in the backward countries: "With half the labor force idle and with jobholders earning from \$25 to \$35 a month, the rise in the cost of living here is

potentially more dangerous to the Government than the guerrillas.”

Banzer’s conspiracy against Torres had been long in the making. Torres himself had taken power just ten months before in a coup promising a nationalist and bourgeois-reformist government against right-wing military conspirators. In order to tame the working class, Torres set up the Popular Assembly, whose 240 members were named largely by the unions. Both the fascists and a string of renegades from Trotskyism, from the Pabloites to the French OCI, which was moving toward a split with the International Committee of the Fourth International, were eager to describe the Popular Assembly as a “soviet-type” organ.

The fascists viewed Torres’ appeals to the Popular Assembly as a symptom of weakness and calculated he could soon lose control of the working class. They decided to preempt this with a coup backed by the fascist Falange Socialista Boliviana (FSB) and the right wing of the MNR, headed by former president Paz Estenssoro.

On the other hand, for the revisionists, the debate over the “soviet character” of the Popular Assembly had a different political use. It served to bury any discussion over the Stalinist and unionist domination of the body – and especially the leadership of miners union leader Juan Lechín – and to further the Pabloite thesis that in the oppressed countries, the revolution could be carried out with “blunted instruments”, namely Lechín or Torres himself. Thus, the betrayals being prepared by both did not need to be exposed by the organization claiming the heritage of Trotskyism in Bolivia, the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR) led by Guillermo Lora.

Banzer launched his offensive from the heartland of bourgeois reaction in Bolivia, the lowland city of Santa Cruz. He took La Paz and the remainder of Bolivia in just three days, meeting only the limited, albeit heroic, resistance of poorly armed workers in La Paz.

The POR’s betrayal of the Bolivian working class and Pabloism

As the leader of the Workers Revolutionary Party (POR), Guillermo Lora supported the Stalinists in subordinating workers to the Torres regime, defending a Popular Assembly resolution which stated:

The present process is contradictory: while the government is taking certain anti-imperialist and progressive measures on the one hand, on the other hand it is adopting pro-imperialist measures contrary to the national and popular interests. The proletariat supports whatever is positive for the emancipation of our people and at the same time criticizes and fights the measures which are against the masses’ interests, fighting to impose new anti-imperialist measures which will lead us to a true revolution on the road of national emancipation and socialism. This is our tactic in the present process, and this is without forgetting the final goals of the working class.

Such a resolution amounted to a complete repudiation of Marxism, handing over to Bolivia’s comprador bourgeoisie and its army the task of fighting imperialism, not to mention the complete abandonment of any struggle for socialism.

The resolution had been put forward by the Stalinist Bolivian Communist Party (PCB). It reproduced the same fraudulent two-stage theory of separate “bourgeois” and “socialist” revolutions, the first one led by the feckless “national bourgeoisie” in the colonial countries. This Stalinist policy had already led to defeat after defeat for workers in many

countries.

However, over two decades after the founding of the Fourth International, blame could not be laid only at the feet of the Stalinists. The Bolivian case proved this in a particularly acute fashion.

The POR led by Lora had already played a significant role in Bolivian politics for at least two and a half decades, since its leadership drafted and led the approval of the landmark “Thesis of Pulacayo” at the fourth congress of the mineworkers union in 1946. In line with Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, the resolution stated that bourgeois-democratic tasks in Bolivia could only be carried out by the working class. It stood in direct contradiction to the resolution supported by the POR in the Popular Assembly, giving political support to the Torres regime in 1970.

The Trotskyist movement had established itself in Bolivia as a section of the International Left Opposition in 1935, through the work of emigres in Argentina, while the Stalinists only organized themselves in 1940, with the Revolutionary Left Party (PIR). The PCB would be founded only in 1950 by PIR members, and would not hold its first congress until 1959.

Without ever admitting his decisive role in the 1971 defeat, Lora himself recognized days after Banzer’s coup that the POR had counted on the Torres regime arming the workers in face of the threats by far-right army factions led by Banzer. He confirmed his party’s support for the anti-Marxist resolution approved by the Popular Assembly. In a reply to the analysis of the ICFI of the Bolivian events, outlined in the article published in the *Bulletin*, Lora wrote:

In October of 1970 the working class occupied the political scene without arms, as a simple mass. By then it was clearly understood that in order to be able to defeat *gorilismo* it was indispensable to put a gun in the hands of the politicized worker. At this time everybody thought — including we Marxists — that the arms would be given by the governing military team, which would consider that only through resting on the masses and giving them adequate firepower could they at least neutralize the *gorila* right. This position was completely wrong. It did not take into account that Torres preferred to capitulate to his fellow generals before arming masses who showed signs of taking the road to socialism and whose mobilization put in serious danger the army as an institution.

As much as this political confession is truthful, one must make a correction. No true Marxist would have believed Torres would act as “imagined” by Lora. That a left bourgeois faction would prefer the victory of reaction over the danger of a socialist revolution by the working class is an ABC of Marxism going back as far as the revolutions of 1848.

What accounts for Lora’s abject capitulation, a quarter century after the Thesis of Pulacayo had made the POR a champion of orthodox Marxism with a deep association with the workers’ movement?

Between these two historical moments, the Fourth International had suffered a major attack from within its own ranks, leading to the 1953 split with the faction led by Michel Pablo and the formation of the ICFI to defend Marxism against the attempts of the Pabloites to liquidate the Trotskyist movement into the Stalinist and nationalist parties.

The Bolivian POR was among the first to fully apply the Pabloite program even before Pablo’s bureaucratic intimidation of the French section provoked a split in 1953. During the 1952 revolution, the POR completely abandoned the Thesis of Pulacayo. Under conditions in which armed workers controlled the streets, it demanded that miners leader Lechín and other members of the newly formed Bolivian Workers Confederation (COB) be admitted into the Paz Estenssoro cabinet in order to push his bourgeois government to the left.

In the following years, in Latin America in particular, the Pabloites took such attempts to their logical conclusion. Their motto would be the formula put forward by the leader of the American Socialist Workers Party, Joseph Hansen, that the revolution could be carried out through “blunted instruments,” that is, without a conscious proletarian Marxist leadership. These included first and foremost petty-bourgeois guerrilla leaders such as Fidel Castro and his Argentine co-thinker Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who would be murdered by the CIA and the US-trained Bolivian Army in 1967 during his disastrous attempt to reproduce the Cuban revolution in that country.

Guillermo Lora had sought to distance himself from his 1952 support for Paz Estenssoro and Pabloite politics. At the same time, however, he adamantly opposed taking a stand in support of the International Committee against the Pabloites, claiming the burden of national tasks in Bolivia was too heavy to allow time for international debates.

This nationalist approach was at the heart of the opportunist politics that led Lora’s POR to the embrace of popular front politics that subordinated the Bolivian working class to the regime of General Torres. It is impossible to build a genuinely revolutionary party in the working class and combat national bourgeois pressures outside of an international revolutionary perspective, the struggle to build the World Party of Socialist Revolution and an unrelenting fight against revisionism. Lora rejected all of this in the name of national tasks in Bolivia, and in so doing adapted himself and the POR to the politics of Pabloism.

The resolution in support of Torres took the idea of carrying out a revolution with “blunted instruments” to its most extreme form, placing confidence in the bourgeois army itself. Simultaneously, that policy was being put forward by the Stalinists and supported by the Pabloites in neighboring Chile under the government of Salvador Allende, where the Chilean ambassador to France, poet Pablo Neruda, summarized the Stalinists’ deception and dismissal of the dangers of fascism with the phrase, “As for our army, we love it. It is the people in uniform.”

The Chilean army followed the path blazed by the Bolivian, closing ranks around Gen. Augusto Pinochet after the Socialist Party President Salvador Allende, acting similarly to Torres, counted upon the army to prevent the working class from mounting a revolutionary challenge to capitalism.

It should be noted that Lora not only trusted Torres to arm workers and resist an overthrow by Banzer, but also trusted Allende and Torres’ Peruvian counterpart, the nationalist general Juan Velasco Alvarado, to come to the defense of the Bolivian regime in case of an attack by the Banzer faction. Needless to say, none of them acted as “predicted” by Lora.

Velasco himself would be overthrown by the right-wing Gen. Francisco Bermúdez in 1975, two years after Allende paid with his own life for entrusting General Pinochet with defending Chilean capitalism against a working class offensive.

Following the Bolivian tragedy, a key element in allowing its replication in country after country in South America over the span of just five years was played by the coverup of the role of the Stalinists and of Lora’s POR by a string of organizations outside of Bolivia claiming to be “Trotskyist.” After collaborating with Lora’s policies, they sought to prevent the international working class from drawing the lessons of the Banzer coup.

As we noted previously, the International Committee immediately recognized the international significance of the Bolivian events. The statement *Bolivia: Bitter Lessons of the Defeat* pointed to the crucial role played by the American Pabloites of the SWP, who recognized Lora as one of their own and supported his policies from the beginning of the Popular Assembly.

The SWP itself had engaged in an opportunistic criticism of the Pabloite promotion of guerrillaism after the 1969 split in Argentina between guerrilla leader Mario Santucho and the Peronist adulator Nahuel Moreno.

On the issue of Bolivia, it found a new means of attacking the Trotskyist perspective of Permanent Revolution, promoting the popular front policies of the POR and the Bolivian Stalinists in their subordination of the working class to the Torres regime.

Barely a month before the coup the SWP’s journal *Intercontinental Press* had stated in relation to Bolivia: “Arming to defend the democratic rights of the workers, the unions apparently gave critical support to the Torres regime— ‘support’ that perfectly suits Lenin’s definition: ‘as the rope supports a hanged man’.” The reference to Lenin, a grotesque abuse of his directions to the British Communist Party in its relation with the Labour party in the 1920s, was meant to lend the POR an aura of “orthodoxy” in face of its policies of capitulation to the bourgeois Torres dictatorship.

The article published by the *Bulletin* exposed the absurd analogy between the bourgeois Torres regime and the mass working class Labour Party in Britain, and contrasted the Pabloites’ extreme liquidationist perspective with the analysis of the ICFI: “The potential for building the Trotskyist movement in Latin America is now extremely great. What is fundamental is that now the struggle of the colonial peoples coincides with the struggle of workers in the advanced countries. This struggle now includes the powerful American working class as well as that of Europe — particularly following Nixon’s new economic policies.”

As the ICFI reacted against Lora’s betrayal, the development of such a potential found major obstacles imposed by international forces pretending to oppose Pabloism. Among them, the most significant was the French OCI, whose leader Pierre Lambert had previously played a major role in opposing the Pabloite line of “entryism sui generis” in the Social-Democratic and Stalinist mass parties.

The OCI defends Lora and breaks with the International Committee

By 1971, the OCI had undergone a protracted centrist drift. It had for years proclaimed the need to “rebuild the Fourth International,” thereby rejecting the significance of the 1953 split with Pabloism in defending the continuity of the Trotskyist movement.

In France itself, it was ever more dedicated to demands for “unity of the left”, which meant defending a common electoral front between the Stalinist Communist Party and the Socialist Party from 1969 on. When those organizations failed to embrace “unity” based upon their own opportunistic calculations, and the official “left” presented four candidates for the presidential elections, the OCI lambasted all of them for “destroying the class front of the proletariat.”

It was in this context that the OCI falsely presented Lora’s POR to the world as an ICFI section at its July, 1971 Essen youth rally. Significantly, the OCI not only invited POR delegates to the rally, but also delegates from the old centrist POUM of Spain. The POUM had played a crucial role in paving the way for the fascist victory in Spain by joining a popular front government and disarming workers at the behest of the Stalinists in face of the Francoist offensive.

A month after the coup, in September 1971, the OCI denounced all those pointing out the shared responsibility of the POR for the defeat in Bolivia as “enemies of the dictatorship of the proletariat, agents of counterrevolution and enemies, conscious or unconscious, of the Fourth International ...”

This bluster served to conceal the lessons of Bolivia from the South American working class, helping to pave the way for the bloody defeats of the following years. The burying of these lessons continues to serve the cause of revisionism to this day. Holding up Guillermo Lora as an “orthodox Trotskyist”, who did the best anyone could in 1971, has been a common line for all of those who, while rejecting the Pabloite United

Secretariat's policy of liquidation into Castroite guerrillaism, insisted that the Fourth International had been destroyed and had to be "reconstructed". This formulation is meant to cover up the betrayals, past and present, of these organizations, while leaving the door open to unprincipled alliances with all manner of revisionist tendencies.

For the OCI, the defense of Lora would represent a major step forward in its "unity of the left" policies, through which the OCI trained a number of high officials in the French Socialist Party, including the former French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, as well as a number of senior officials in former Brazilian president Lula's Workers Party government.

Despite the split with the OCI, the significance of the Bolivian events in the struggle for Trotskyism would only be fully worked out a decade and a half later, in the split between the ICFI and the British WRP, which reestablished orthodox Trotskyism in the leadership of the movement. As noted in 1985, in *How the WRP betrayed Trotskyism*:

While the split was directly precipitated by the Bolivian events, the SLL [the British section which preceded the WRP] was soon claiming that they were only of secondary importance, and that the split within the ICFI had already taken place at Essen when the OCI opposed the resolution on dialectical materialism. This was a false polemic. The events in Bolivia—in which the OCI provided a political cover for Lora—were of immense historical importance for the international working class, above all for the proletariat of Latin America. It was absolutely essential that the ICFI should have analyzed this experience in the most minute detail—just as Trotsky analyzed the events in China, Germany and Spain—in order to expose the counter-revolutionary implications of centrism in the present period. It was not enough to state that Lora and the OCI were wrong. More important from the standpoint of Marxism and the development of the ICFI as the World Party of Socialist Revolution would have been to raise this event to the level of a strategic experience of the international proletariat. This was all the more necessary in as much as the Bolivian proletariat had a long association with the Fourth International.

Pseudo-lefts still defend Lora

The political heirs of Nahuel Moreno, who spent decades trying to balance liquidation into guerrillaism with adulation of the bourgeois-nationalist Peronist movement in Argentina and later attempted an alliance with the OCI, to this day describe Lora as a standard bearer of Marxism. An obituary written by Eduardo Molina in *La Izquierda Diario* upon Lora's death in 2009 reads: "Until his last days, Guillermo Lora maintained his militant will, his intransigence toward the bourgeois regime and class collaboration with the bourgeoisie and his defense of the banners of Marxism, the workers revolution and socialism, in an epoch in which not a few leftists and ex-Trotskyist have ended up reneging on them to join bourgeois parties or the populism of the MAS."

As for the former Latin American political partners of Lambert, led for decades by the Argentine Jorge Altamira, their contemporary political balance sheet of the 1971 Bolivian coup can be found in the widely known work "History of Trotskyism in Argentina and Latin America" by the historian Oswaldo Coggiola. Coggiola is a member of Altamira's *Política Obrera* organization and is regarded in academic circles as a major historian of Latin American Marxism.

One must keep in mind that his "History" was published in 2006 – that is, not in the heat of the moment of the Banzer coup, but 35 years later,

long after Lora, from exile, had directed the POR to forge an "Anti-imperialist Revolutionary Front" (FRA) with the MNR and Torres himself, not to mention the Stalinists.

In his chapter dedicated to the 1971 Bolivian events, he repeats the logic of the statement of the OCI, and dismisses any criticism of the POR by stating: "Those criticisms were worthless, because they were based on the assumption that the masses are always willing to take power."

In summary, the Bolivian situation was hopeless, and the political direction of the Stalinists and Pabloites, including Lora, was irrelevant, because the masses "did not want to take power."

Coggiola then proceeds to express his support for the OCI's split with the International Committee, which strengthened its alliances with Lora and all sorts of bourgeois political forces in France and abroad under the guise of "rebuilding the Fourth International." He writes: "The novelty consisted in that the Assembly exploded the fiction of the ICFI."

He continues: "The crisis within the ICFI made room for a new international regroupment, given that *Política Obrera* (until then without international affiliation, despite being in contact with the POR since 1969) and the Peruvian POMR (Revolutionary Marxist Workers Party), a split from the Castroite Revolutionary Vanguard led by R. Napurí (ex Praxis), were invited to participate in a conference to be held in Paris and organized by the OCI."

Coggiola wants his readers to believe that the decisive factor in containing the revolutionary development of the POR and its allies were the shackles imposed by the "fictitious" International Committee.

He never mentions the alliances forged by the POR in the immediate aftermath of the coup, let alone in the following decades, in which the party deepened its line of subordination to the military, directing itself ever more to appeals to junior officers of the armed forces.

Nor does Coggiola inform his readers as to the results of the "freedom" obtained from the ICFI, and for good reason. It was the "freedom" to attempt ephemeral and opportunistic alliances with every strain of revisionism previously denounced by Coggiola's own *Política Obrera* and the OCI, only to see those alliances blow up in their faces.

The OCI itself left the alliance with the PO and the POR accusing their leaders of being CIA agents, before embedding itself ever more in the French Socialist Party and the Brazilian Workers Party.

Both the PO and the OCI would later attempt, separately, "unity" with their previous Argentine nemesis, Nahuel Moreno. Those alliances were forged invariably under the same pretexts as those used by Lora and the Pabloites themselves: that "national" work precluded principled discussions of program and history, and these should not stand in the way of the "real" movement. Fifty years later, Coggiola's *Política Obrera* has substituted for its defunct alliance with the OCI an alliance with the Stalinists of the United Communist Party of Russia (OKP) forged in 2018.

Build the International Committee of the Fourth International in Latin America!

The Banzer coup in Bolivia was the opening shot of what would become a continent-wide counterrevolutionary offensive by the Latin American ruling classes and imperialism.

Responsibility for the inability of the working class across the continent to defeat this offensive lies with all those who subordinated workers in one form or another to petty-bourgeois and bourgeois parties hostile by their very nature to socialism, and equally incapable of confronting imperialism.

These forces rejected the very foundations upon which they had been established as sections of the Fourth International in a period of deep

crisis not only of world capitalism, but of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and the deformed workers states, and of the nationalist movements internationally. That crisis thoroughly confirmed the Theory of Permanent Revolution and the Trotskyist assessment of Stalinism.

Fifty years later, the world capitalist system faces its worst crisis since the 1930s, which far eclipses the upheavals of the 1970s. Faced with a resurgent working class and fearing the threat of socialist revolution, the capitalist ruling classes of every country are shifting rapidly to the right.

Just two years ago, the bankrupt bourgeois-nationalist government of Evo Morales, presented by the Pabloites as another “new path to socialism”, and even as a regime representing “the socialism of the twenty-first century,” was removed in a coup again initiated in Santa Cruz and backed by the same Falange which backed Banzer in 1971.

In Chile and Colombia, US-trained security forces have kidnapped and murdered demonstrators with impunity in face of mass upheavals. In neighboring Brazil, the fascistic president Bolsonaro is advancing the ruling class preparations for a dictatorship in close coordination with the American fascists who attempted to overthrow the 2020 elections in the January 6 putsch. All across the world, the ruling classes are turning toward authoritarian methods of rule in preparation for major class battles.

Workers must prepare themselves accordingly. That means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which has succeeded in defeating the Pabloite liquidationists and outlived all of the bankrupt Stalinist and bourgeois-nationalist regimes they promoted.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact