

COB betrayal paves way for “state of exception” in Bolivia: strategic lessons of the workers’ uprising

Part 1

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25 June 2026

On the morning of Saturday, June 20, hours after President Rodrigo Paz announced a nationwide state of exception by national broadcast, soldiers and police fanned out across the Andean highway network. Supreme Decree 5636, invoking a “states of exception” law promulgated only weeks earlier, suspended the right to demonstrate and to block roads, authorized the Armed Forces to clear highways without a prior judicial order, and established an extraordinary 90-day regime over the entire country.

Paz justified the offensive by branding the 51-day workers’ uprising “an attempted coup d’état from narco-terrorism.”

The characterization is not Paz’s invention. He’s reproducing the narrative manufactured by US imperialism under the fascist Trump administration to justify its direct intervention across the region—the same “narco-terrorism” charge is deployed to justify bombing fishing boats in the Caribbean, to invade Venezuela and abduct its president and to put troops on the ground in Ecuador, Colombia and Mexico.

Bolivia’s place within that offensive was clearly spelled out by Paz’s defense minister Ernesto Justiniano when he announced the preparation of the military response to the protests remarking: “Bolivia once again takes its place in the democratic defense of the continent,” affirming that the country “is and must remain part of the Shield of the Americas.”

By Tuesday, the armed forces had cleared the roads. The Bolivian Highway Administration reported for the first time in 48 days that not a single active roadblock remained. Paz, declaring that “the blockade has been defeated,” has nonetheless kept the state of exception in force, because the masses might “reorganize.” The police state repression is also being pursued through the courts, with terrorism charges filed against unionists, peasant organizations and

former president Evo Morales.

This repression was made possible by the undisguised betrayal of the bureaucracy that claims to lead the Bolivian working class.

On Friday, June 19, the executive secretary of the Central Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Workers’ Central - COB), Mario Argollo, signed an agreement with Paz “oriented to the pacification” of the country.

In exchange for vague government promises, the COB union bureaucracy committed to lifting “measures of pressure,” calling off blockades and joining “working committees” with the Paz administration. Argollo proclaimed: “There must be reconciliation between those who govern and those who are governed.”

The central demand raised by the mobilized masses since mid-May was that Paz must fall. The COB not only trampled upon the will of the rank-and-file, but legitimized the demoralized capitalist government at the precise moment it prepared bloody repression against the Bolivian people.

The legal apparatus for repression had been assembled in plain view over the preceding weeks. On May 28, Paz signed the abrogation of Law 1341, the statute that had constrained the deployment of the armed forces against the population—removing, in the words of a deputy of the ruling alliance, “the principal obstacle” to a state of exception.

The legal obstacle had fallen; what remained was the political one, which the Bolivian bourgeoisie counted on the union bureaucracy to remove. Less than 24 hours separated Argollo’s signing of the “pacification” agreement at the Casa Grande del Pueblo and the government’s deployment of troops in the streets.

None of this was unforeseen. In January of this year, the same COB leadership called off the previous general strike against Paz’s austerity package, ending the strike, as the WSWWS wrote at the time, “to prevent it turning into a

struggle to bring down the government.”

The pattern of betrayals is the constant feature of the confederation’s 70-year history. From its foundation amid the 1952 Bolivian Revolution, the COB was held under the control of the bourgeois nationalist Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Movement – MNR) that aimed to suffocate a workers’ revolution. It subordinated the working class to General Torres in 1971, delivered the miners to President Victor Paz Estenssoro’s (the current president’s great uncle) austerity in 1985, facilitated the 2019 coup and entered the Áñez government, and called off strike after strike whenever the movement threatened to escape its control.

The Bolivian workers and peasants have sustained a 50-day uprising against the reactionary national bourgeoisie and its imperialist backers. The counterrevolutionary conspiracy assembled by Paz and Trump against it is a measure of its strength, not its weakness. The determination of the masses was never in question. What remained, as we wrote on June 5, “the most dangerous terrain of the conflict,” was the gap between that determination and the political leadership at the workers’ disposal. The task facing the working class was and remains to break from the bureaucratic agencies of the bourgeois state and establish its political independence.

The Morenoite left wing of the bureaucracy

The Morenoite Liga Obrera Revolucionaria – Cuarta Internacional (Workers Revolutionary League – Fourth International, LOR-CI)—the Bolivian affiliate of the Permanent Revolution Current (PRC), which publishes *La Izquierda Diario*—has emerged as a definite obstacle in the Bolivian workers’ path to class independence.

The Morenoites sought to present themselves throughout the struggle as a radical left opposition to the COB leadership. Its pamphlets denounced the union’s vacillation and hailed the militancy of the rank-and-file. From all of it they drew a single demand: that “the COB make the general strike effective.”

Their May 24 declaration, “Not a step back: The COB must carry out the general strike!,” argued:

We cannot allow the union bureaucracy to once again hijack our struggle, with people dying in the process. Peasant, indigenous, and neighborhood organizations, as well as rank-and-file groups, can

and must demand that the COB carry out the general strike with work stoppages in all factories, mining sites, banks, and workplaces. We rank-and-file workers, who watch with anguish as we are unable to put bread on our tables, must take the implementation of the general strike into our own hands, and we must demand that our union leadership carry this struggle through to the end.

The pseudo-radical phraseology about “taking the implementation of the strike into our own hands” serves only to reinforce the authority of the union bureaucracy being confronted with the upsurge of the working class.

The Morenoites’ line proceeds from a clear recognition of the bureaucracy’s betrayals and of the revolt brewing against it from below. They note that the confederation declared the general strike on May 1 and spent six weeks refusing to make it effective; they recall that it struck a pact with the government in January and was branded traitorous for it; they registered the rank-and-file rejection of the official leaderships. But their function is to manage that revolt—to keep the workers from drawing the political lessons of these betrayals and remaining oriented toward pressuring the rotten apparatus, peels to the peasant and indigenous federations still carrying the blockades forward. *La Izquierda Diario* amplified the Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia’s (Unified Single Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia, CSUTCB) denunciation of Argollo for having signed an agreement that “betrays the cause.” Toward these non-working class and socially heterogeneous organizations, the Morenoites are even less critical than toward the COB.

What the LOR-CI’s documents never raise is the need for an independent revolutionary party of the working class.

The Morenoites make a cult of “self-organization,” “open assemblies” (or “cabildos”), and speak of “building socialist and revolutionary hegemony.” Through the use of such rhetoric, they cloak their rejection of the conscious construction of a Marxist leadership in the working class.

To be continued



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