

Rival factions of MAS ruling party clash in Bolivia

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Nearly five years after being overthrown by a US-backed military coup in 2019, former Bolivian President Evo Morales marched into the capital of La Paz with thousands of supporters last Monday demanding the resignation of President Luis Arce, his hand-picked successor and former economy minister.

The march took seven days to cross 120 miles along the main Andean highway from the small town of Caracollo. Crowds of goons deployed by the Arce government clashed with the pro-Morales march when it attempted to invade the headquarters of the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), the main union federation. Anti-riot police then used tear gas to disperse the crowds.

The last time Morales led a similar march was in late 2021 to defend Arce against renewed threats by the far-right in response to the arrest of the leaders of the 2019 coup.

A rift first opened between the two in late 2021, at least in public, over the control of the ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party. After a court ruled last December that Morales is not allowed to run for reelection, the conflict escalated, and his supporters began organizing widespread roadblocks and mass rallies.

Then, in late June, the head of the military at the time, Gen. Juan José Zúñiga threatened to arrest Evo Morales for seeking another term. After Arce demoted him, Zúñiga attacked the government palace on June 26 with hundreds of soldiers and a few armored vehicles in an abortive attempt to overthrow the government. The mutineers demanded the liberation of the 2019 coup leaders, exposing their alignment with the fascistic right and Washington.

Initially, Morales called for a mobilization to halt what he described as an attempt to overthrow Arce. But soon after the military riot failed, he claimed that Arce had staged a “self-coup” to gain popularity.

Morales argues that Arce has failed to resolve the deepening economic crisis and should hand over power.

However, the implosion of the MAS sums up the failure of not only MAS, but the entire so-called “pink tide” movement of bourgeois nationalist governments across Latin America to resolve the region’s historic economic and social backwardness and unite any country, much less the region, against imperialist oppression.

The government claims that Morales hopes to provoke another coup to install the pro-Morales chair of the Senate, Andrónico Rodríguez, as interim President and allow Morales to run in snap elections. Currently, the next presidential elections are not scheduled until August 2025.

Judicial elections, including for the Constitutional and Supreme Courts, on December 1 could also result in the election of judges that will favor Morales’s candidacy. Finally, a national referendum on the question of re-election announced by Arce has now been indefinitely

suspended.

For months, the Bolivian public has been bombarded with threats exchanged between the two factions of MAS, round-the-clock coverage by the corporate media, and an alignment of the union bureaucracy behind one or another faction of the ruling capitalist party.

The thrust of this conflict has been to step in front of any independent intervention of the working class in the political crisis.

On Friday, the leaders of the pro-Morales camp, which includes sections of the union bureaucracy and peasant leaderships, announced that major national roadblocks planned for September 30 would not take place, feigning concern about its effects on the poor and about the need to fight wildfires.

For its part, the COB leadership has gone from backing the 2019 coup and having bureaucrats join as officials of the far-right regime to becoming the main cheerleaders of the Arce administration. The mining union bureaucracy used its congress on September 20 to appeal to miners, largely unsuccessfully, to mobilize against the “coup attempt” by Morales.

Earlier this month, COB officials policed the doors of the Congress to intimidate pro-Morales and other legislators into voting in favor of \$140 million in new loans from the international banks.

Each faction of MAS is focused on demonstrating to different sectors of the ruling class and their partners among the imperialist and other major international powers that they are the most reliable enforcers of their interests.

This boils down to their ability to suppress the class struggle and implement social austerity and a major economic reshuffling amid an escalating economic and military war instigated by US and European imperialism against China, Russia and Iran, all powers with close ties to both factions of MAS.

Strikes by teachers and protests by garbage collectors in Cochabamba, street cleaners in El Alto and manufacturing workers point to a growing unrest against the increase in the cost of living and rising poverty.

Significantly, Arce has exploited the pro-Morales mobilizations to impose repressive legislation against roadblocks. Both Morales and Arce have a history of deploying riot police and the military against peaceful worker and peasant protests.

The inability of the regime under the fascistic coup leader Jeanine Áñez to suppress mass unrest while implementing its economic agenda forced it to call for elections and allow the MAS to return to power in 2020.

Washington officials have said little about the MAS dispute and have remained laser-focused on building up the far-right political and

business elite in the eastern department of Santa Cruz along with its fascist gangs, which were the main contingent behind the 2019 coup. US imperialism has not abandoned its plans to destabilize Bolivia and install a puppet regime to secure control of the country's strategic natural resources.

The US State Department, according to journalist Carlos Fazio, has financed the fascist Santa Cruz legislator Svonko Matkovik, who was jailed for eight years for organizing an armed insurrection for Santa Cruz independence. Meanwhile, the US embassy has also sought to unite the far-right opposition ahead of the scheduled 2025 elections, which could be used for a provocation behind claims of vote fraud, as in Venezuela.

At the same time, Washington is working closely with the government of fascist President Javier Milei in Argentina in preparing for military conflict across the region against its rivals. Buenos Aires already launched a bellicose provocation by claiming in April, without any evidence, that Bolivia is hosting hundreds of members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The internecine war in the MAS has only further undermined popular support for both factions. Polls show that most Bolivians—the latest by Ipsos found 81 percent—think Morales merely seeks personal gain. Meanwhile, the approval rating for the Arce administration has fallen from 42 percent to 22 percent since January.

According to pollster Diagnosis, concerns over the economy are primarily responsible, with a positive view of the economic situation dropping dramatically from 43 percent in July 2022 to only 5 percent this month.

Dollar and fuel shortages are regularly cited in the media. Bolivia's main trade partners in South America have suffered their worst economic decade, while the gas field of the "Southern Sub-Andean basin" that have represented the greatest source of income and foreign reserves for decades are drying up. A new major basin was discovered but questions remain about its real size, profitability and the years it will take to begin production.

International reserves have also plummeted from \$15 billion to \$1.7 billion, and Bolivia's public debt is among the fastest growing in the region. With nearly half of public spending going into servicing the debt, global capital is demanding deeper attacks on the limited social programs implemented by Morales when gas prices and production were booming.

Most importantly, Bolivia has the world's largest known reserves of lithium, a key ingredient for the batteries that go in electric vehicles and electronics. But a drop in global lithium prices, legislative hurdles and the massive investments needed have prevented production from really taking off.

The Arce administration has responded to this systemic crisis by enforcing a pact with the main business groups, providing tax and credit incentives, further subsidies, government investments in chemical and other industries, and freedom for exporters and investors to take dollars out of the country. The president has proposed to "relax" regulations in the oil sector to let foreign firms own and exploit larger shares. The government has eroded environmental and other regulatory obstacles to mining and selling gold, whose prices and production have continued to increase.

Regarding lithium, Arce signed an investment deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow last June to develop the processing of the mineral, while it has negotiated several mining concessions with Chinese companies. The projects are merely in their pilot phase, however.

The current context presents enormous dangers for workers in Bolivia.

Time and again across Latin America the revolutionary struggles of the working class have been blocked from taking power by leaderships who backed one or another section of the ruling class as more "democratic" or "progressive." This opened the doors for imperialist-backed fascist coups and regimes that have then crushed the workers movement and left-wing organizations.

In 1971, the Pabloite Revolutionary Workers Party (POR), which had mass influence in the working class, including in the mining unions, played the most important role in collaboration with the Stalinists in carrying out the most significant betrayal of Bolivian workers. It provided political support for the bourgeois nationalist dictator J.J. Torres and his Popular Assembly, suggesting they could be pressured to fight imperialism. POR leader Guillermo Lora then placed hopes that Torres would arm workers against the threat of the far right, facilitating the coup of fascist Col. Hugo Banzer Suárez, which launched a regime of mass torture, kidnappings and killings of leftists at the behest of imperialism and the local oligarchy.

The internecine war between Arce and Morales and the efforts of the union bureaucracy and its Pabloite and Morenoite apologists to promote illusions in the national bourgeoisie threatens to become another catastrophic exercise in politically disarming the working class.

The working class and the impoverished peasantry have remained on the sidelines so far, unconvinced by either faction. But without a genuine, revolutionary party leading the working class to power, the prospect of another fascist dictatorship will become inevitable.

Analyzing a similar betrayal by Stalinism in China in 1927, Leon Trotsky explained:

Everything that brings the oppressed and exploited masses of the toilers to their feet inevitably pushes the national bourgeoisie into an open bloc with the imperialists. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened, but, on the contrary, is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every serious conflict. The Chinese bourgeoisie always has a solid rearguard behind it in imperialism, which will always help it with money, goods and shells against the workers and peasants.

The most crucial task today in Bolivia and Latin America is the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which alone embodies the lessons of the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against the betrayals of Stalinism, Pabloism and all petit-bourgeois and bourgeois nationalist movements.



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