

Tenth Anniversary of Bolivia's Water War

Report from the World People's Conference on Climate Change in Bolivia

David Solnit

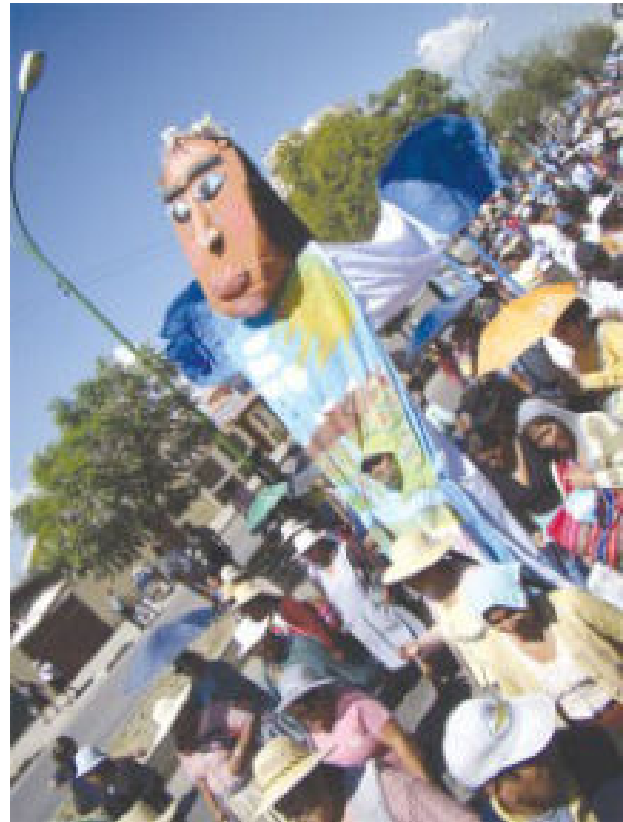
2010

In spring 2000, the people of Cochabamba, Bolivia rose up against the privatization of their water, forcing out the US based corporation, Bechtel, and Bolivia's neo-liberal government to back down. The rebellion opened up new political space in Bolivia, catalyzing the most powerful, radical, visionary mass movements and mobilizations on the planet. My friend and collaborator, Mona Caron, a public muralist from San Francisco, and I spent six weeks in Cochabamba, a city in central Bolivia, during March and April co-creating art and visuals with local communities and organizations. We came at the invitation of the organizing committee for the International Feria del Agua (Water Fair) commemorating the ten year anniversary of what has come to be known as the Water War. We also participated with 30,000 others in the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, organized by the Bolivian government of President Evo Morales.

At a Bay Area "Peoples Movement Assembly" of local grassroots organizations leading up to the June 2010 US Social Forum in Detroit, a well-respected, longtime community organizer spoke of his desire for a "socialism for the 21st century, like Evo Morales in Bolivia."

For many, Bolivia serves as a model and an inspiration to those fighting for change in the US and around the world. Bolivian social movements are among the world's most sophisticated and powerful and although Bolivia is very different, those of us seeking change in our own communities can learn much from what is occurring there.

Bolivian social movements have practiced two different paths of social change: by taking government power as Evo Morales and his political party MAS (Movement Towards Socialism) have done, or change from below pro-



Commemorative march on the tenth anniversary of Bolivia's Water War, Cochabamba, April, 2010.

—photo Mona Caron

posed in the past visionary movement-wide proposal for a Constituent Assembly, and in the well-organized, directly democratic and strategic practices of the movement organizations and mobilizations. Neither model fit's into simplistic old ideological boxes—anarchist, socialist or progressive.

I returned with a complicated view of Bolivian social movements particularly the contradictions of movements for radical change becoming governments, the Bolivian government taking leadership globally on addressing climate, and ecological crisis with its own economy based on resource extraction. Massive organizing and mobilizations of Bolivia's social movements opened up the space for Evo Morales to be elected as the first indigenous president in a majority indigenous country. In office, he has enacted many positive changes and contributed to the demise of right-wing elites and parties.

However, trying to radically change our communities and world by having left parties assume the power of the state has mostly resulted in social and ecological disasters. Conversely, the practices and experiments of movements around the world creating change from below—especially in Latin America—thereby avoiding the trap of pursuing political power, offer a hopeful path that we can study and learn from.

SEATTLE 1999 AND BOLIVIA'S WATER WAR

Bolivia's "Water War" began the month after the November-December 1999 Seattle WTO shutdown, and culminated in April 2000, when thousands of us in the US were occupying downtown Washington DC to disrupt IMF and World Bank meetings.

Although Cochabamba and Seattle were more intense and sustained, both those and the IMF-World Bank mass actions opened new political space within each country and marked an escalation against corporate-globalized capitalism.

As Mona led the painting of a 128-foot water war mural, and we both facilitated art making workshops at the factory worker-owned complex, Complejo Fabril, we spoke daily with Oscar Olivera.

Oscar was a shoe factory worker, who became a rank and file union leader and acted as spokesperson—and key organizer and strategist—for the Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida (The Coalition in Defense of Water and Life), that coordinated the mobilizations and strategies that won the water war which took on ferocious intensity leading to the government's collapse.

Oscar is Bolivia's most profound critic of his former fellow organizer, Evo Morales, and one of the world's strongest voices, strategists and thinkers for creating change from below based on lived experience and practice.

In his account of the water war, Cochabamba!, Oscar explains the government's privatization law that triggered the massive popular resistance.

"In 1999 and 2000—after privatizing many industries, most significantly the mines—the transnationals, the World Bank and the government mafias, attempted to take away our water. When Law 2029 was passed on October 29, 1999, only half of Cochabamba's population was connected to the central water system.

"Many others obtained water from cooperative water houses which had been built in each barrio to meet the community's needs. Law 2029 demanded that the autonomous water systems be handed over without reimbursement to the people who had invested their own time and money to build their own systems.

"The law went so far as to include wells established in people's houses. It required people to ask permission of the superintendent of water to collect rainwater."

After the Water Law took effect, details emerged about the deal that the government had cut with a private business consortium.

Olivera wrote: "Worse than Law 2029 was the forty year contract with Aguas del Tunari to run the Cochabamba water system. Registered in the Cayman Islands, the US-based Bechtel Corporation held the majority interest in the Aguas del Tunari consortium. In some cases, people's water bills skyrocketed as much as 300 percent. A pensioner or a teacher who made \$80 a month might see his or her bill jump from \$5 to \$25 a month. The people look at water as something quite sacred. Water is a right for us, not something to be sold."

Following the Water War, Bolivian social movements fought the 2003 Gas War to reclaim Bolivia's oil and natural gas from multinational corporations, still yet to be fully won. When the government responded to mass demonstrations and blockades with bullets, killing and injuring many, the country rose up in outrage, driving out President Gonzalo "Goni" Sanchez de Lozada, who fled to the US where he remains today.

Two years later, Evo Morales was elected President of Bolivia, and together with his party MAS, has changed Bolivia and complicated the role of social movements.

CALL FOR A CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY TO REPLACE THE STATE

“One lesson of the Water War stands out clearly; the need to dismantle the existing state.”

–Oscar Olivera, 2004

Bolivian social movements catalyzed by the Water War are the most radical and visionary in the world because they have a mass participatory, democratic and horizontal way of organizing and mobilizing by drawing on the communitarian roots of the majority indigenous country.

Since 2000, there had been widespread support among the social movements to replace the elite-dominated system of political parties, elections, and professional politicians with a directly elected Constituent Assembly.

I asked Marcela Olivera, Oscar Olivera’s sister, about where the idea for the Constituent Assembly came from. Marcela was a participant in the Water War, an organizer with The Coalition in Defense of Water and Life, and currently is a coordinator of Red Vida, the international network of water movements that emerged in the years following the Water War. She was also one of the organizers of the ten year anniversary.

She said, “In Bolivia, for almost 20 years, the neoliberal system left the decisions in the hands of an elite. So, we said: ‘Let’s change the rules of the system; let’s call for a constituent assembly where we, the people, can decide what kind of country we want to live in.’”

“That was not possible in the short term, but it happened when Morales assumed the power. When Morales called for the constituent assembly, we realized that the parameters for the assembly to be were completely wrong.”

“The different sectors that make up Bolivia, factory and other workers’ unions, indigenous, etc., couldn’t participate. Instead, the same political parties with other names were there—old leftists, old right wing, the same people.”

FERIA DEL AGUA & WATER COMMITTEES

On April 15, Mona and I marched with 3,000 people through Cochabamba’s streets ten years after the Water War to commemorate the victory. The factory workers union led the procession together with a group of kids from the city’s poorer Zona Sur (Southern Zone) neighborhoods carrying the giant blue puppet their community had made in workshops with Mona and me. Many others joined in the march and the Feria del Agua, including representatives from movements fighting for water rights all over the world.

The bulk of the marchers came from Zona Sur, large numbers of whom resisted fiercely during the water war. The public water system, SEMAPA, does not serve their neighborhoods, so they have self-organized into neighborhood water committees of several hundred families each and self-manage their own communitarian water systems. Besides making decisions and choosing coordinators in assemblies, they often physically built their local water system with their own hands.

The International Feria del Agua took place the following weekend and each water committee displayed the water systems they had constructed and the innovations they had devised. Thousands of families came out for the fair, visiting the displays and tables, enjoying food, drink, and performances.

SIN PATRONES, SIN CAUDILLOS, SIN PARTIDOS

A colorful 2010 wall calendar from the Cochabamba Federation of Factory Workers showing three giant fists, each a different color of the Bolivian flag, and on them is written: “Sin Patronos, Sin Caudillos, Sin Partidos” (Without Bosses, Without Authoritarian Leaders, Without Political Parties) in the best tradition of anarcho-syndicalism.

The fabriles, factory workers, are perhaps the clearest among Bolivia’s social movements maintaining their independence from Morales’ popular ruling party, MAS. When the MAS-led government proposed a new labor law that included provisions limiting workers right to strike and cutting maternity leave, the fabriles were the sole union that stood up to the government and organized protest marches. A month later the government dropped the law.

Some MAS party activists say, “Either you are with MAS, or you are with the fascists,” meaning the anti-Morales right wing elites and their supporters. But, even those who vote for and support MAS mobilize and push the government to make more significant changes than it appears willing to initiate on its own.

I asked Marcela Olivera what she thought were important considerations regarding demanding changes from above through the agency of the state. She replied, “We have learned over the last few years that real change is never made from the top. It comes from below. That is why it is very important to have independent and non co-opted social movements no matter who is in power, because they are the ones that are going to make change possible.

“When neoliberals were in power, people made change possible through mobilizations. That is why—even if it sounds contradictory—Evo Morales is in power. However, right now in Bolivia, social movements have been co-opted and the few ones that remain independent, are being criminalized and accused of being the new right wings.”

She continued, “Real change is in the ground, the daily work we do. In Bolivia, we know that solutions will not come from the state. People have to look for the solutions from their own hands. That is exactly what happened with the water committees in the south of Cochabamba or the suburbs in Santa Cruz. We do not see anymore the state as the ‘father’ that has to provide solutions or take care of us.”

AUTOGESTION: SELF-MANAGEMENT

In the US, myself, and often other radicals, find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of opposing privatization of education, welfare, or water, while recognizing the deep problems with the humiliating manner in which state and federal agencies manage our resources and administer basic services.

As I listened to Bolivian social movement organizers, I realized that when they say, “El Agua es Nuestra. Carajo!” (“The water is ours, damn it!”), or call for the nationalization of gas and oil, their vision is not just to take it out of the privatized hands of corporate capitalists to have it administered by the government.

Rather, they use the term “autogestion,” or self-management, meaning run directly by the people. Marcela explained this idea.

She said, “After the water war, when the water company was recovered by the people, we had a dilemma. We didn’t want the company to go back to the state, to be ‘public’ again because before the water privatization the company was really bad; it was corrupt; it was handled by politicians. With the privatizations things didn’t get better. So, we didn’t want any of those alternatives: neither private nor public in the sense that it was from the state.

“We began to question the concept of ‘public.’ What does public mean? Public is when it is in the hands of the state? Or, our local governments? Our municipalities? We believe that public is when it is in the hands of the people, when people can decide about it, can participate in it, when people can control it. That is what autogestion means, when we decide about it. In the case of the water, we want self-managed.”

CLIMATE WARS: GLOBAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS VS. CAPITALISM

“We are here today because the governments of the world could not reach an agreement in Copenhagen [in December 2009] on cutting emissions and acting on climate change. Capitalism merchandises everything. It seeks continual expansion. The system needs to be changed. We have to choose between change or death. Capitalism is the number one enemy of mankind.”

—Evo Morales, President of Bolivia, Opening Ceremony of The World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.

Today, the primary conflict between global social movements and capitalism is over climate. When 170 heads of state met in Copenhagen last December at the highly charged 15th annual meeting of the United Nations to address the climate crisis, the US and other rich countries blatantly ignored the world’s poorer nations, the ones most immediately impacted by climate change. Any pretense of process was disregarded allowing the big polluters to shove through the so-called Copenhagen Accord, which ensures that the climate pollution by rich countries will not be regulated or impeded. Copenhagen made it clear that the UN process will not solve climate change and the rich countries are committed to opposing any real solutions.

Demonstrators mobilized in the streets by the thousands, facing heavy Danish police repression, and held movement building alternative forums. Bolivia was one of just a few countries to vote against the hastily constructed accord, immediately nicknamed the “Copenhagen Discord.” The Morales administration allied itself with the social movements in the streets that had mobilized from across Europe and around the world, and the Bolivian president enunciated an explicitly anti-capitalist position more radical than many of the environmental groups present.

In the wake of Copenhagen, Morales announced that Bolivia would host a World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in April in Cochabamba, and invited activists and governments from across the world. 30,000 people attended from Bolivia, Latin America and around the world, together with representatives of governments. Though completely ignored in mainstream US media, the conference was successful in opening up an alternative space to address climate change.

Having just participated in the very grassroots Water Fair in Cochabamba, the contrast with a government sponsored conference in which the Bolivian state played a commanding role was stark. The government reserved all the hotels in town for participants, even paying to bring activists to the event including renting a plane to fly in 50 activists from the New York City area. For those who couldn’t afford hotels, there was free accommodations at military barracks. Army officers and English speaking students from the local high school and a private university where the conference was held in Tiquipaya just outside Cochabamba attended to help visiting participants.

The opening ceremony was held in a sports stadium and was a surreal combination of a leftist mass rally with movement and national flags waving similar to World Social Forum marches, stunningly beautiful costumed indigenous dance groups weaving through the stadium, and an official ceremony of state including uniformed soldiers marching in formation. Morales, joined by other heads of state and movement representatives, made a dramatic entrance and inspected the troops, followed by hours of speeches, broken up with Bolivian indigenous and popular music.

A document, the Cochabamba Peoples Declaration, came out of 17 working groups or “tables” at the climate conference as well as a new international coordinating network, the World Peoples Movement, involving both participating governments and social movements. Indigenous representatives and their allies, such as Tom Goldtooth from the Indigenous Environmental Network, fought hard to change the conference’s position on REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation in Developing Countries), which violates self determination in forest communities.

MESA 18/TABLE 18: NO “DIRTY LAUNDRY”

However, the Morales Government refused space for a Bolivian network of communities fighting the impact of resource extraction projects—oil and gas, mining, forestry, dams, etc.—to present their struggles and their critical meaning for stopping climate change. They were told by government representatives that they were “local issues,” and this was an international conference at which they did not want “dirty laundry” aired.

The excluded groups decided to create their own space outside the official conference calling it Mesa (table) 18, since there were 17 official approved tables. At table 18, an organizer told me that the government had made it difficult for them. After they had rented a space a couple of blocks away from the university hosting the event, a government representative contacted the owner and offered him more money to cancel the rental. Table 18 eventually secured another space with a landlord that kept their agreement.

At the opening session, Table 18 co-organizer Rafael Quispe, said, “Both capitalism and socialism depend on resource extraction, which is not compatible with taking care of Mother Earth. Eighty percent of Bolivia’s economy, like other ALBA [the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America] countries depend on resource extraction.” Table 18 heard accounts from dozens of communities impacted by destructive resource extraction within Bolivia and issued a declaration offering constructive criticism of the climate forum.

Its introduction read in part: “This working group established itself as a necessary space of reflection and criticism within the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of the Mother Earth. Its objective is to give a deeper examination into the local effects of global industrial capitalism. We take on the responsibility of questioning the so-called popular Latin American governments and their destructive and consumerist logic, and the deadly logic of neo extractive development.”

David Solnit organizes with the coalition Mobilization for Climate Justice West and is co-author of *The Battle of the Story of the Battle of Seattle* and editor of *Globalize Liberation*.



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