

**ABSTRACT**

Robert L. Smale’s work looks in detail at the origins of Bolivia’s labour movement in the tin mines of the early 20th century. This provides a good starting point for an account of the rapid rise of Trotskyism in the period leading up to the national revolution of 1952, a phenomenon described in detail in S. Sándor John’s book. Sándor John’s work in particular is important in understanding both the strengths and limitations of the Trotskyist POR, which was not able to displace rival nationalist organisations to achieve political hegemony in the struggles of the second half of the 20th century.

**ENDS**

In the decades following the split between Trotskyism and Stalinism there were just three countries in which organisations supporting Leon Trotsky could rival those loyal to Moscow in size or influence: Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Bolivia.
In the case of Bolivia socialist ideas first became influential in the early 20th century and were to resonate particularly strongly with mine workers. By then tin had eclipsed silver as the country’s primary export, and the trajectory of the economy in the decades that followed was largely shaped by the demand for the metal on world markets and the price it could command. A narrow elite of business leaders, mining barons, landowners and their hangers on, known collectively as la rosca (the ring), dominated public life. Their political power was reflected in oligarchic parties that presided over the country for the first three decades of the century.

A militant working class movement, centred on the mines of the highland departments of Oruro and Potosí, compensated for its late arrival on the scene with its rapid development. The growth of the tin mining industry, and the mechanisation and specialisation this involved, began the process through which wage labour with formal contracts replaced more flexible arrangements such as ore-sharing deals or piecework. The old paternalist relationships between mine owners and miners were dissolved, laying the basis for collective workers’ organisations to emerge.

The first bodies created by those who toiled in this and other industries were guilds formed by skilled artisans. Insomuch as they sought a wider social role, they initially concerned themselves with mutual aid and educational initiatives such as the founding of night schools. However, by the 1910s some of these organisations sought to play a wider role by promoting the formation of a national federation encompassing both artisans and unskilled workers. The outbreak of the First World War accelerated this trend. While the wartime demand for tin ultimately worked in Bolivia’s favour, the initial economic dislocation as European industry shut down caused a brief recession, forcing workers to take action to defend their conditions. These problems were exacerbated when neighbouring Chile, also caught up in the economic chaos, expelled thousands of Bolivians from its nitrate fields and copper mines. Some returning migrants also brought with them socialist or anarchist ideas.

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1 There were some fascinating 19th century forerunners, for instance the ‘Egalitarians’, influenced by Proudhon and utopian socialism, who in 1876 took control of the isolated lowland city of Santa Cruz for six months. See Lora 1977, pp. 56-60.
which had in turn arrived in more industrialised countries of Latin America such as Chile and Argentina with waves of emigration from Europe.

The upheaval of the period was accompanied by the emergence of a new oligarchic party, the Republicans, to rival the previously dominant Liberals. While the parties shared almost identical political philosophies, the clashes between them, with the Republicans ultimately replacing the Liberals in a coup in 1920, heightened the sense of turmoil.

The foundation of the Workers’ Labour Federation of Oruro in 1916 ‘which immediately showed itself to be more aggressive than any previous labour association had been’ was one sign of the new mood. This was initially led by the old artisans’ organisations and suffered from considerable illusions in the ascendant Republican Party, but nonetheless it sought to encompass for the first time the entire working class of the region. The same year saw the formation of the Federación de Artes Gráficas within the La Paz print industry. This organisation was notable for its recognition of strike action as a legitimate form of struggle. Soon railway workers had created their own association, helping to spread radical ideas through the country and declaring a national strike in January 1921 when a parliamentarian sympathetic to the workers was insulted by a right wing rival. A series of often violent strikes by workers in the mines also began to develop from 1919, winning improvements in wages and conditions.

The rise in struggle was accompanied by attempts on the part of socialists to break the influence of the various oligarchic parties on the workers’ movement. A Socialist Party was launched at a national level by 1921, following similar regional initiatives, and had a programme similar to that of social democratic organisations elsewhere in Latin America. Although the organisation proved to be short-lived, it played an important role in helping to politicise some of the labour disputes of the early 1920s.

From Uncía to the Chaco war

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2 Smale 2010 p. 62.
3 Lora 1977, pp. 74-79.
The desire for workers’ political independence would grow when the wave of strike activity and ruling class repression culminated in the Uncía massacre of 1923, one of the episodes explored in detail in Robert L. Smale’s book. Deadly force was used to break union organisation in one of the most important sites for the tin industry. ‘In Uncía’s wake workers began to express a growing scepticism of traditional oligarchic parties and the government,’ argues Smale.

The violent confrontation between miners and the military established a pattern of relations that would dominate Bolivia’s history for the rest of the 20th century. The workers never completely extirpated oligarchic liberal-democratic thought, but after 1923, the appeal of alternate ideologies—socialism, Marxism and anarcho-syndicalism—grew stronger.4

The first steps towards the creation of a workers’ movement on a national scale came in the period of relative industrial peace that followed the massacre—and now the focus was firmly on workers in the tin industry. Congresses held in 1920 and 1925 had failed to create a national organisation but the Third Workers’ Congress held in Oruro in April 1927 proved more successful. This congress gathered a broad array of organisations and activists from ‘La Paz, Oruro, Cochabamba, Potosí and Chuquisaca’.5

One notable feature of the meeting was the deep-seated concern of those present with what would become known as the ‘indigenous’ or ‘Indian’ question. The congress declared: ‘The liberation of the Indian will be his own accomplishment, just as the redemption of the workers will be their own accomplishment; as such, all labour organisations should work for the formation of federations and unions among the Indians’.6 This was not simply well intentioned rhetoric. Twenty representatives of indigenous communities attended the congress and, in the same year, the largest

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4 Smale 2010 p. 143.
5 Smale 2010 p. 170.
6 Smale 2010 p. 166.
rural uprising in several decades broke out. Smale writes, ‘The rebels drew on more than Andean beliefs in attacking their enemies. Many leaders maintained contacts with urban socialists, and several had served as delegates to the Third Workers’ Congress’.7

The congress also demonstrated a growing ideological confidence among workers and their representatives. Both Marxists and self-declared anarcho-syndicalists took part, setting the scene for confrontation between the two currents. By 1930 it was the anarchists who had the upper hand, with the socialist delegates walking out of the fourth congress held that year.

The period that marked the formation of this national movement ended abruptly with the slump in tin prices during the great depression of the 1930s. This exacerbated an already serious fiscal crisis and led to a collapse of civilian government and the repression of workers’ organisation, especially the now anarchist-led union federation. The labour movement in Oruro briefly emerged from the turmoil, now under socialist leadership. But the revival was short lived. From 1932 the Chaco war waged against Paraguay, which would end in humiliation for Bolivia, killed off all political opposition. Yet this three year conflict, fought to seize control of territory where ‘there is nothing but mosquitoes, crocodiles and oil’, would lead to further important ideological shifts in the labour movement.8

Trotskyism was the first major political tendency to emerge, crystallising out of the milieu of ‘defeatists’ who opposed the mobilisation for what turned out to be the bloodiest conflict in the Western hemisphere since the American Civil War. The highlight of S. Sándor John’s book is the story of the emergence of this current, supported by a wealth of original interviews and research.

The birth of the Bolivian Trotskyism

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7 Smale 2010 p. 174.
8 Sándor John 2009, p. 28.
Small circles of communists had existed in cities such as La Paz in the mid-1920s and as Smale shows Marxism already exerted some influence over the labour movement. However, state repression, the geographical dispersion of the working class and Bolivia’s isolation from other Latin American countries, and hence the wider international movement, frustrated successive efforts to forge a common organisation of any size or influence. The Moscow-aligned Partido de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (PIR) was only formed in 1940, an official Communist Party a decade later. In these unusual conditions Trotskyism actually pre-dated Communism.

The key figure responsible for bringing Trotskyism to Bolivia was José Aguirre Gainsborg, who became a revolutionary and student leader while studying law at Cochabamba University and was among those exiled to Chile as a result of agitation against the Chaco war. He joined Chile’s Communist Party, siding with a faction sympathetic to Trotsky when the party split in 1933. On his return to Bolivia he set about forming a similar group. Here he made a fateful decision. A close comrade at the time recalls, ‘We needed a leader...someone with enough prestige, whom we could trust. And so Aguirre, who was a Don Quixote, said...Tristán Marof’.9 Marof, another defeatist, was at the time Bolivia’s best-known socialist. He had been involved in the workers’ congresses in Oruro in the late 1920s, was the author of countless pamphlets and literary works, and had built his own left wing current. He was also the movement’s connection to the great Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, one of Latin America’s foremost writers on the ‘indigenous question’. However, Marof’s concept of revolution was essentially a variant of the Stalinist ‘two-stages’ theory (‘first against “feudalism” and imperialism, later against capitalism’).10

The Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR) that resulted from the fusion of the Marof and Aguirre groups was a tiny and confused organisation, blending popular nationalism, reformism, Stalinism and Trotskyism. Furthermore, on his return to Bolivia, Aguirre’s focus was not on building the POR but on work within the La Paz

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9 Sándor John 2009, p. 34.
labour federation and on pulling around himself a group of young radical intellectuals. Many of these would later form the cadre of the country’s nationalist movement, which was to be the real beneficiary of widespread discontent over the Chaco debacle.

Further disorientation of the Trotskyists resulted from a succession of military coups. The first of these, which took place amid a strike movement in 1936, installed a left nationalist dictatorship. Against a backdrop in which, according to Sándor John, ‘strikers patrolled La Paz, virtually controlling the nation’s capital’, the new government sought to incorporate the workers’ movement into the state. Aguirre and his comrades rushed headlong into the Ministry of Labour as advisors, only to be driven into exile when changes in the regime led to savage redbaiting. Belatedly, Aguirre criticised ‘entry into the apparatus of the bourgeois state’ and called for the reorganisation of the POR. He himself played no role in these attempts due to his absurd death, falling from a Ferris wheel in La Paz in 1938. He was 29 years old. Marof, for his part, soon broke with the party he had nominally led and was to become an advisor to successively more reactionary nationalist governments. It seemed that Bolivian Trotskyism was to be stillborn.

But just months after Aguirre’s death the remnants of the POR would re-found the party. For several years the POR consisted of a small ‘circle of friends in Cochabamba, which began calling itself the Central Committee—a committee of the whole, evidently, since the party had no other members’. The links between the POR and international Trotskyism were tenuous. Though there was a sporadic correspondence with other national organisations, the Bolivians only managed to send a delegate to the world congress of the Fourth International in 1951.

11 Sándor John 2009, p. 58. Lora’s account, by contrast, emphasises the extent to which the 1936 strike was controlled from above by union leaders: ‘Although there was no written pact between the unionists and the conspirators, in practice they established a perfect division of labour... The strikers organised pickets to maintain order and defend private property against any possible excesses. The union leadership definitely did not want things to go any further than the strike, leaving others to settle the question of power by violence.’ See Lora 1977, p. 176.
12 Sándor John 2009, p. 60.
13 Sándor John 2009, p. 70.
The tiny group did however manage to attract some talented individuals. Among those who joined was Guillermo Lora Escóbar, one of the outstanding figures of Bolivian Trotskyism, who died in 2009 and remains a household name in the country. From 1942 Lora became an important member of the leadership, helping to reorganise the party, and by the late 1940s the POR was putting down roots in working class life, crucially building among the tin miners who remained the core of the class.

The rise of the POR

One factor in the success of Trotskyism was its identification with the perspective of permanent revolution.14 This sought to set out the conditions in which socialist revolution was possible in a backward country where the prerequisites of socialism—above all a sizeable working class and advanced capitalist means of production—were clearly not yet sufficiently developed on the national terrain.

Trotsky argued that a process of combined and uneven development, in which elements of modern capitalist industry could fuse in novel ways with elements drawn from earlier historical stages, would pose peculiar problems for such societies, resulting in revolutionary explosions. In such a context the country’s late developing capitalist class would be too weak and too fearful of workers to perform the tasks carried out by the bourgeois revolutions of the past. This role fell instead to the working class, using revolutionary means and allying itself with other oppressed and exploited groups such as the peasantry. Even though workers might be a minority in such a society, they could come to power before workers in the more developed countries. In doing so they would be unlikely to stop at the point of solving the basic ‘democratic’ of ‘bourgeois’ tasks of the day, such as establishing universal suffrage, introducing land reform or achieving national liberation. The revolution could develop towards socialism without interruption. However, for the revolution to become ‘permanent’ it had to be completed through a regional and ultimately

14 For the theory in various forms and stages of development, see Trotsky 1973, Trotsky 1982 and Trotsky 1985.
international process, as only this could secure the prerequisites necessary to create a socialist society—access to the most advanced means of production and the global working class.

This implied a particular approach for the Trotskyists, based on the independent activity of workers who could lead a revolutionary movement of the oppressed classes and push for this to flow over from a ‘democratic’ revolution into a struggle for socialism. It also necessitated forming a sufficiently large and well implanted revolutionary organisation within the working class that could implement this strategy.

The perspective of permanent revolution, though often, as Sándor John shows, badly garbled in the POR’s material, made a certain amount of sense in Bolivia, where small numbers of workers in the mines and associated industries were frequently to play a decisive role in the political life of the nation.

However, this is not sufficient to explain the relative importance of Trotskyism when Bolivia is compared to other similarly late developing countries. More important was the mendacity of the Stalinist alternative during the Second World War and the late 1940s—a period of repression and rising militancy when the left began to penetrate most seriously into working class life. During the war the Moscow-aligned PIR fell in behind the mine owners and government who were keen to supply the Allies’ growing demand for tin. In the post-war period it would further disgrace itself by allying with reactionary political parties in order to win governmental influence. The PIR was to prove its credentials to the ruling elite most clearly in January 1947. A massacre of miners in the streets of Potosí that month was just one in a series of horrors inflicted on workers in the 1940s—but the Potosí massacre took place under the direction of a Minister of Labour, a city mayor and chief of police who were all members of the PIR.\(^{15}\) In this context, the main contenders to the PIR, the POR and

\(^{15}\) Sándor John 2009, p. 98.
the popular nationalist Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), could both expand their influence considerably.

As the POR’s support grew it came into contact with miners’ leader Juan Lechín, who was a member of the MNR. Trotskyists, especially Lora, would advise Lechín, who they increasingly saw as a mouthpiece for their own cause. Lora says of one of Lechín’s addresses to a labour gathering in 1946, ‘The speech had been carefully worked out by the POR leadership... In short it was the POR programme in trade union language’.16 While the POR hoped to use Lechín to gain influence and push the MNR in a more radical direction, the MNR was using Lechín to bolster its support among the working class, and Lechín was in turn using the POR to strengthen his revolutionary image.

The reliance on Lechín was part of a wider alliance between the POR and the left of the MNR, premised on the notion that the MNR could drive through a socialist programme in Bolivia. A resolution passed by the Fourth International at the time can only have reinforced this position:

> In the event of a mass mobilisation promoted or mainly favoured by the MNR, our Bolivian section will support it...even carrying it through to the seizure of power by the MNR... If, on the contrary, it becomes evident...that our Bolivian section has as much influence as the MNR...it will launch the slogan of forming a Workers’ and Peasants’ Government constituted by both organisations.17

According to this formulation, the Bolivian Trotskyists were to help establish a nationalist government, rather than seeking to go beyond and, ultimately, overthrow it.

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Initially the alliance with the MNR did seem to bolster the POR. By early 1947 it could claim to lead ‘nine factory unions in La Paz and three in Ouroo’. Its members won election to parliament as part of a bloc with labour movement candidates. Its influence was also reflected in the Theses of Pulacayo, a ‘credo of revolutionary radicalism adopted by the miners’ union in late 1946’ and drafted by Lora. The theses were not quite the clear and unambiguous statement of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution that they have sometimes been assumed to be. On the one hand, they argued, ‘The proletariat, even in Bolivia, is the revolutionary class par excellence’; on the other hand, they stated that the revolution would be ‘bourgeois-democratic’ rather than socialist; ‘those who claim we propose an immediate socialist revolution in Bolivia are liars’, since ‘we know quite clearly that objective conditions for this do not exist’. This left open the possibility of the revolution, while being led by workers, remaining at the stage of resolving these democratic tasks, a position in some ways closer to that of pre-1917 Bolshevism than that of Trotsky. Yet despite such ambiguities, the theses, with their talk of ‘armed pickets’, ‘armed worker cadres’ and a ‘proletarian united front’, caused a scandal in the circles of the Bolivian elite when they appeared in the press. Sándor John quotes one passage:

‘Worker’ ministers do not change the structure of bourgeois governments. So long as the state defends capitalist society, ‘worker’ ministers become vulgar pimps for the bourgeoisie. The worker who exchanges his post of struggle in the revolutionary ranks for a bourgeois cabinet portfolio goes over to the ranks of traitors. The bourgeoisie invests ‘worker’ ministers the better to deceive the workers.

This reflects the disaster that befell the first wave of Bolivian Trotskyism, but it is particularly tragic given the fate that lay in store for the POR just six years later.

**The 1952 revolution**

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In many ways the 1952 revolution confirmed the viability of Trotsky’s strategy as applied to Bolivia. It began with a botched uprising by MNR activists against a military government. When the army failed to split as the MNR had hoped and began instead to move against the uprising, the intervention of workers, particularly the miners, was decisive. A contemporary newspaper report gives a flavour of the action:

Groups of miners appeared in El Alto [the city overlooking the capital, La Paz]...and took two train cars full of munitions. Civilians and miners came down to the capital, taking the army troops by surprise, forcing them to retreat in disorder or surrender to the revolutionaries... Two hours later, with cannons they had captured from the army, the victorious civilians from El Alto entered the Plaza Murillo [site of the presidential palace].

By the time the fog of war cleared, the army had disintegrated and armed workers were the power on the streets. Meanwhile Lechín had captured the presidential palace and promptly handed it over to the MNR leaders.

The MNR, finding themselves thrust to power not through an alliance with sections of the army but on the back of a workers’ revolt, skilfully ran to the head of the movement, implementing a series of reforms while seeking to contain struggles within constitutional limits. Lechín played a particularly important role in stabilising Bolivia under MNR rule and dismantling elements of dual power that had emerged during the uprising. He and a number of other ‘worker ministers’ were able to ride the tide of workers’ struggle but also contain it. The POR, despite its earlier rejection of worker ministers as ‘vulgar pimps for the bourgeoisie’, now placed the demand for complete control of the government by the left wing of the MNR at the centre of its propaganda.

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Amid conditions in which Lora claimed ‘trade unions acted as organs of workers’ power, and posed the question of dual power both locally and nationally’, sections of the POR argued for ‘critical support’ for the MNR government. When Lechín eventually turned on the POR and sidelined it in the unions, the Trotskyists found that their influence had been largely contingent on the goodwill of the left of the MNR. Once working class power was contained, the governing party no longer needed the Trotskyists.

Why was the POR so decisively marginalised? Why was the revolution so successfully contained? The tragedy of 1952 was foreshadowed by the methods the POR used to pass their *Theses of Pulacayo*. A group of Latin American Trotskyists visiting the country in 1947 noted that the theses ‘came out not as a document of the party but as a programme of the Miners’ Federation. This hesitation to act directly as Trotskyists, constantly shielding oneself behind the trade union organisation, is proof of political weakness’. In reality, the Trotskyists were relying on Lechín and the unions to implement the theses, rather than focussing on building a mass revolutionary party with real roots in the working class.

An article from a journal produced by followers of Max Shachtman gives a similar impression of POR activity in the 1946 general strike that helped overthrow the earlier Villaroel government:

> For various reasons, the spontaneous character of the miners’ movement being in first place, the role of the Fourth Internationalist party was very limited. Because the party lacked hegemony over the movement, some POR members tried to lead the miners directly, permitting themselves to be dragged along at ties by the elemental movement. The Miners’ Parliamentary Bloc...is an amalgam of Trotskyists and trade unionists with a nationalist past... The limited

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22 Quoted in Justo 1992, p. 42.
23 Lora later claimed to have opposed this position on his return from Paris, where he was attending a congress of the Fourth International, and expressed regret at not having thrown ‘the nationalists’ out of the POR prior to 1952. See Lora 1992, pp. 20-21. He was also critical of the draft resolution of the International Secretariat of the Fourth International that praised the POR for its ‘critical support granted [to] the MNR government’. See ISFI 1992, pp. 33-34.
role of the POR was quite evident in the strike; only unions of secondary importance...followed the slogans of the Fourth Internationalist party; the others marched behind their union leaders, doubtful and ex-nationalist elements.25

Lora was later to speak of the failure of the organisation to shift from a propaganda circle to a party that could undertake mass agitation in 1952. This reflected a broader political problem. The perspective of the POR seemed to be that the unions would fight and small groups of Trotskyists would provide the programme—and the reliance on Lechín as a figure who could carry the programme into the class was the political consequence. The POR remained numerically tiny. One visitor to Bolivia in 1947 estimated that the POR ‘might have had 100 or 150 members throughout the country’ even if ‘due to the particularities of Bolivian society there was an echo to everything they said’.26 When the revolution arrived, the POR was incapable of transforming itself into a mass party. According to Lora:

This support [for some of the POR’s criticisms of the nationalists among rank and file MNR members] produced the false belief, held particularly by comrades abroad, that the POR increasingly controlled the masses, particularly the organised proletariat. The failure of the party to grow, despite favourable conditions, showed that this was not so. Those (including Lechín) who supported and voted for POR positions remained members of the MNR... The illusions that the party [the POR] was on the brink of seizing power often disorientated its leaders.27

The weakness of the POR as an independent political force would have profound implications. As James Dunkerley writes in his classic 1984 study:

The POR lacked the organisational capacity to turn the miners’ radical syndicalism and general sympathy towards it into direct political support. The overall result was that in the years prior to the April [1952] revolution when the

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26 Sándor John 2009, p. 103.
mining proletariat was held at bay by repression it developed a strong radical orientation that was in many respects circumscribed by economism but also threatened to break beyond it to head an independent working class initiative. The contradictions in this relationship were a constant feature of the miners’ actions over the 30 years that followed the revolution.28

An article by John Newsinger, published a year before Dunkerley’s work, makes a similar assessment of the POR: ‘The real question was not how successful the POR were at passing resolutions at miners’ congresses, but how successful they were at building a revolutionary party, a revolutionary leadership rooted in the working class’.29 He goes on to assess the extent to which the failure of the POR was due to subjective factors or the product of objective Bolivian conditions:

While the ‘programmatic’ and purely propagandistic tendencies of ‘Orthodox Trotskyism’ were strongly working in favour of the first alternative, objective conditions were important too… The most advanced workers who led the class struggle were revolutionary syndicalists. They looked to the trade unions to achieve their ends and did not recognise the need for a revolutionary party in the Leninist sense at all. As they were recruited into the POR, they brought these politics with them and this vitiated against turning the party into a combat organisation.30

Newsinger adds a third factor. In line with their interpretation of Trotsky’s perspective of permanent revolution, the POR held that the ‘petty bourgeois’ MNR could not consistently drive through a ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution. Despite its initial prominence in the revolution, the MNR would prove unstable. It would swiftly ally itself with the right and the POR would then be able to supplant it. In other words, the close practical alliance with the MNR masked a theoretical underestimation of its capacity to rule Bolivia. However, a number of revolutions in the Global South in the post-war period were led by groups outside the working

30 Newsinger 1983, p. 80.
class, notably sections of the petty bourgeoisie and middle class intellectuals, and yet led to regimes that significantly transformed their societies.\textsuperscript{31}

The MNR did, under pressure from workers and peasants, push through important reforms, nationalising the mines, introducing some land reform and allowing universal suffrage, thereby changing the face of Bolivia. Indeed the MNR governed for 12 years—an epoch in Bolivian terms, given the chronic instability of political life in the country—before it was replaced by a succession of military regimes. MNR rule proved to have deeper roots than the POR seems to have recognised. As late as 1978, Lora still argued that Paz Estenssoro, the leading nationalist in 1952, was ‘Bolivia’s Kerensky’. ‘A mere puff would have been sufficient to overthrow him’.\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the ultimate failure of the 1952 uprising, the power demonstrated by organised workers in the course of the revolution would have lasting consequences. Military-led governments from the mid-1960s still had to contend with the COB union organisation, which had formed in the revolution and which remained for some time the most radical union confederation in the world. The COB’s statutes of the day describe it as ‘a genuine centralised system of revolutionary councils, whose historical origins are to be found not so much in the English trade unions as in the Paris Commune’.\textsuperscript{33} Crucial to the success of the military regimes was the decision to revive some elements of the land reform programme in order to forge a ‘Military-Peasant pact’ to contain the militancy of the miners. The collapse of this pact under the pressure of neoliberal restructuring from the mid-1970s—and the important peasant and indigenous movements that followed, often allied with urban and workers’ movements—was important in laying the basis for the recent return of Bolivian radicalism.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} Newsinger 1983, pp. 81-82. Newsinger sees parallels with Tony Cliff’s theory of deflected permanent revolution, which Cliff took as his starting point in his analysis of the Cuban and Chinese revolutions. See Cliff 2003. For a recent debate on the contemporary relevance of permanent revolution and deflected permanent revolution, within the same tradition as Newsinger and Cliff, see Davidson 2010 and Choonara 2011.

\textsuperscript{32} Lora, 1992, p16.

\textsuperscript{33} Cited in Lora 1977, p. 297.

\textsuperscript{34} The relationship between indigenous and other forces in Bolivian history is a major theme of Hylton and Thomson 2007.
The decline of Bolivian Trotskyism

The Trotskyists managed to survive the reverses of the 1952 revolution. By the late 1950s they had somewhere in the region of 1,000 organised activists and their influence, still largely channelled through the union movement, remained greater than their size would suggest. In 1965 one of the most well known Trotskyists, miners’ leader César Lora (the brother of the POR leader), was assassinated. A comrade recalls that ‘maybe 100,000’ workers and peasants attended the funeral at the Siglo XX mine complex.35 However, by now the Trotskyists faced a greater number of rivals on the left, including an official Communist Party, Maoist groups, social democratic parties, organisations influenced by Guevarism and the socialist PRIN launched by Lechín.

Many of these currents were to vie for influence with the POR during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period that saw a succession of coups and counter-coups. The best opening for the left in this period came as General Torres was thrust to power in the early 1970s with the help of a general strike, heading a left nationalist military regime that revived some of the language of 1952. Another general strike successfully prevented the first attempted right wing coup to overthrow Torres. Out of these struggles emerged the Asamblea Popular. While comparisons between this assembly and the Petrograd soviet of 1917, made by the press and sections of the left at the time, were certainly exaggerated, this was nonetheless an important innovation. It was a popular body with significant workers’ representation that discussed the major political issues of its day—and its mere existence was enough to spur the right into action.

In some ways what followed was a repetition of the tragedy of 1952. Many of the players were the same. The assembly was politically dominated by supporters of the MNR and was chaired by the ubiquitous union leader Lechín, who was busily reviving

his impressive line in left rhetoric employed 20 years earlier. After meeting several times in June and July 1971, the final session of the assembly made vague mention of popular militias to defend against a rightist coup—and then it adjourned until September. When the right made its move, launching its coup in August, Lechin was convinced that the army would remain loyal to Torres. Workers had better instincts. However, when up to 100,000 marched on the presidential palace to demand weapons from Torres to defend his government, he refused. A second moment of revolutionary crisis passed by—and this time the right would score a rapid and decisive victory, installing Hugo Banzer as dictator.

The Trotskyists would play a limited role on the Bolivian political scene from this period. Sándor John’s book gives glimpses of their continued heroism in the face of intense and often deadly repression. One photograph reproduced in the book shows the Trotskyist Grover Alejandro who, after drawing straws, ‘won’ the dubious honour of having to greet General Banzer during his visit to the mines at Potosí. The image shows Grover handing over a list of demands of the then banned miners’ union as the police close in. He recalls telling the dictator, ‘I am handing you this, the cry of rebellion of the exploited of this country. We will bury your dictatorship!’ As soon as he had spoken, his comrades smuggled him deep into the mine, from whence he ‘didn’t come out for 20 days’.  

Despite such gems, the second half of Sándor John’s book is a less compelling read than the first. The reasons lie in his focus on the Trotskyist tradition. The tensions produced by the failure of the POR to make a breakthrough in 1952, and in particular the differing assessments of the potential for collaboration with the MNR, interacted with divisions in the wider Fourth International to generate splits among the Trotskyists. Sándor John rightly rejects simplistic explanations that see the (ultimately five-way) split in the POR in 1954 as the straightforward transplantation of the split in the International a year earlier onto Bolivian soil. The global schism pitched follows of Michel Pablo against those of James P. Cannon, with followers of

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the former advocating, among other things, long-term ‘entryism’ into Stalinist, social democratic and in some contexts popular nationalist parties. While the MNR might have seemed a likely candidate for entryism, the faction of the POR that allied with the Pabloites did not follow this path. By contrast, other groupings, including the bulk of those who had in the split initially sided with Lora (but not Lora himself), did end up inside the MNR for a period and, in some cases, liquidated entirely into the nationalist party.37

By the late 1950s there were two significant groups, each with a few hundred members, claiming the mantle of the historic POR—known as POR-Lora and POR-González after their leaders (or, alternatively, POR-Masas and POR-Lucha Obrera after their publications)—each of which would suffer its own internal tensions. Sándor John heroically attempts to detail the subsequent history of splits and reunification attempts, and the differing political positions taken by the groups. But both the lack of narrative drive in this section of the book and the splits themselves largely reflect the isolation of the Trotskyists from a dynamic and insurgent workers’ movement, along with the growth of rival political currents that added to this marginalisation. As Alex Callinicos writes of Trotskyism more generally in this period:

It is perhaps appropriate to consider...why it was that the Trotskyist movement should so often have displayed the characteristics of religions sectaries. One could plausibly argue that it is generally true of radical movements in adverse circumstances that they dissolve into disputations fragments... Furthermore the inability to influence events is itself likely to encourage splits: since there is no way of settling differences in analysis or policy by practical tests, why not break away?38

Trotsky noted, early in the 20th century, that such isolation could lead to another tendency: substitutationalism, the identification of forces that could act on behalf of workers rather than looking to workers to emancipate themselves.39 Ultimately this

38 Callinicos 1990, p. 41.
was at stake in many of the debates faced by the Bolivian Trotskyists, for instance the arguments over participation in the MNR, disputes about involvement with the MNR-dominated Asamblea Popular of the early 1970s or a whole series of debates over the feasibility of transplanting Che Guevara’s guerrilla foco strategy to the country from 1959 onwards.40

Conclusion

Against this backdrop, Sándor John’s work inevitably gets bogged down in debates which are, for the most part, of ever decreasing significance in the development of working class struggle. For most readers, Dunkerley’s brilliant account of the period from 1952 to 1982 will prove more useful as it gives greater attention to the broader historical forces at work.41 Subsequent struggles, in which the Trotskyists have played a limited role, have been better documented by other works.42

Nonetheless, Sándor John’s work will be well received by those interested in the development of the Bolivian left and the history of Trotskyism, particularly those looking at the origins of the movement. It represents an extensive and lovingly excavated body of research, which is both sufficiently accessible and well-written to please general readers and sufficiently detailed and original to inform the more knowledgeable.

Smale’s book is drier. It will be useful to historians of the labour movement in Bolivia but for most readers its focus, both in subject matter and historical scope, will be too narrow. So too is its geographical range: the author only considers the tin mining areas of Oruro and northern Potosí, thus missing out on important developments elsewhere in the country. Lora’s history of the country’s labour movement, published in abridged form in English, is self-justifying and opinionated—hardly surprising when the author was a central participant in events from the 1940s—but

41 Dunkerley 1984.
42 Notably Webber 2011.
it is riveting and far more comprehensive (and it is worth reading just for the pen portraits of various figures from Bolivian labour history, which range from the moving to the viciously sardonic). However, Smale does help to give an impression of a critically important section the early workers’ movement and so complements Sándor John’s account of the origins of the Trotskyist left in Bolivia.

In recent years, particularly 2003 and 2005, Bolivia has provided some of the high points in radical mobilisation internationally. Its movements therefore have a far greater global significance than the country’s limited population or economic weight might suggest. The struggles of the past contain powerful lessons, both positive and negative, that will continue to inform debate on the prospects and perspectives for those movements. The growing body of English language writing on the history of the Bolivian left is therefore to be warmly welcomed.

References


43 Lora 1977.


