

**Contents**

- 277. Canada's Elections: What's the Alternative to the Tories?  
Roger Annis
  - 278. Cuba at UN: "The very existence of the human species is at risk."  
José Ramón Machado Ventura
  - 279. Refounding Bolivia: Morales Calls for Vote on a New Democratic Constitution.  
Raul Burbano
  - 280. Financial Crisis Signals Grim Times for Working People.  
Robert Johnson and Roger Annis
  - 281. Election 2008 — the Quebec left's challenge to socialists in the Rest of Canada.  
Richard Fidler
  - 282. Bolivia: Unprecedented Alliance Defeats Right-Wing Assault.  
Federico Fuentes
- 

Socialist Voice #277, October 1, 2008

## **Canada's Elections: What's the Alternative to the Tories?**

**By Roger Annis**

Canada's minority Conservative Party government has called a federal election for October 14. Serious issues confront voters — war in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the economic downturn that will grow out of the U.S. financial crisis, and climate change that endangers human life on our planet. But four of the five parties in the federal parliament are avoiding serious debate on these issues.

The fifth, the labour-based New Democratic Party (NDP), has a platform that responds to many working class needs, but it is evading vital issues. Only action by trade unions and social justice movements can place working class concerns at the center of the electoral spectacle.

### **The Liberal Party – lesser evil?**

The two leading parties — Conservatives and Liberals — have traded off the governing of Canada since the founding of the country. The Conservatives, who replaced the Liberals in power in 2006, currently take a more right-wing stance. This leads many working people to favour a vote for the Liberals as a lesser evil, but in reality there is much more continuity than difference in the successive governments of these parties.

The Liberals are campaigning aggressively as a "left" alternative to the Conservatives. The party's supporters have disrupted NDP events, claiming that a vote for the NDP will split the "left" vote and return Conservatives to power.

The country's largest industrial union, the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW), echoes this position with a call for "strategic voting" — support for NDP candidates in constituencies where the party has a chance of winning, and for Liberals elsewhere. CAW national president Ken Lewenza

urges CAW members to “support candidates who have the best chance of defeating a Conservative.”

Many social democratic writers and thinkers, including Murray Dobbin and James Laxer, also favour the Liberals as the lesser evil choice.

### **A wartime election**

Whichever of the two parties heads the next government, it will be a government of war.

A key feature of the Conservative record is its close warmaking alliance with U.S. imperialism in what economist and former oil industry executive John Foster terms “The New Great Game,” the neo-colonial grab for the oil and gas-producing regions of the Middle East and central Asia. Harper sought to deflect attention on the war at the outset of the campaign by announcing that he would stick to Parliament’s vote last March for withdrawal of Canadian combat troops from Kandahar in 2011.

The Liberals, who took Canada to war in Afghanistan in 2005, voted with the government in March. Both parties have massively increased military spending: a new study says that by 2012 the Canadian war in Afghanistan will have cost \$22 billion.

The Green Party and the Bloc Québécois criticize the war one day and say it should continue the next.

Only one opposition party, the NDP, says it would end Canada’s war mission in Kandahar. But the NDP has not highlighted the war in its campaign, and it accepts the imperialist rationale behind the war, the idea that wealthy countries are entitled to subjugate countries and peoples by labelling them as rogue or failed states that require protection.

### **Democratic rights and the social wage**

The Conservatives have continued Liberal policies on other fronts. Attacks on democratic rights and on the social and economic conditions of workers, especially the most vulnerable, continue. Canada conducts illegal detentions and participates in torture in the name of the “war on terrorism,” including the now-infamous kidnapping, rendition and torture of Maher Arar in 2002.

Police agencies across the country are engaged in an unprecedented wave of killings and other forms of violence against ordinary citizens. Police budgets doubled between 1997 and 2006, the last year for which statistics are available.

Meanwhile, spending cuts have been the order of the day for everything from social services to funding of arts and culture under successive Conservative and Liberal party governments. 18 people have died as a result of contamination of meat products at the country’s largest processor, Maple Leaf Foods — a direct result of cuts to food safety inspection.

### **A campaign of denial**

The crisis in financial markets and collapse of major U.S. banks has drawn little attention in this election. All parties agree with financial industry claims that Canada will be little affected by the

crisis. The NDP's principal financial proposal in the first weeks of the campaign was for reduced credit card charges.

There is a word for all this — denial. The near-trillion-dollar bailout of some of the largest financial corporations in the world will shift more wealth to the wealthy while providing little protection against further financial crises.

Canadian capitalists have pursued many of the same predatory policies as their U.S. counterparts, and the Canadian economy is now slowing as interest rates rise, credit gets harder to obtain, and capitalists shut down production because of falling profit rates. On September 29, the Toronto Stock Exchange suffered its largest point drop in history. The livelihoods and pensions of millions of Canadians are at risk.

### **Green smoke**

Climate change is the most hotly contested issue in this election. As a recent Socialist Voice article showed, there are only minor differences between the five major parties. None of them favours the radical cuts in greenhouse gas emissions that scientists are calling for.

None of the parties calls for shutting down the massive tar sands projects in western Canada, the largest single source of greenhouse gas emissions in the country: the parties disagree only on the scale that should be permitted. When NDP candidate Michael Byers declared that the projects should be “shut down,” he quickly drew a rebuke from party leader Jack Layton.

### **Indigenous rights and sovereignty – another disappeared issue**

The more than one million Indigenous people in Canada are waging militant struggles against continued encroachment and pillaging of resources on their territories and to protest the horrendous social conditions that they are forced to endure. None of the parties supports these struggles in a meaningful way.

The Conservatives in office turned their backs on Indigenous peoples. One of their first acts in government was to repudiate the Kelowna Accord under which Indigenous leaders and the previous Liberal government agreed on \$5 billion of new spending on social programs and capitalist economic development. And the Tory government made Canada one of only four countries to vote against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Chief Phil Fontaine of the Assembly of First Nations contrasts poor government spending on Indigenous needs to the vast increases on military spending in recent years. “The response we are looking for from each of the parties is next steps in regards to the eradication of First Nations poverty,” he said, urging Indigenous people to engage more actively in the election campaign.

### **Quebec's alternative: the Bloc or the NDP?**

In Quebec, the election is a three-way race between the Conservatives, Liberals, and Bloc Québécois. The Conservatives and Liberals oppose Quebec's right to freely decide if it wishes to form an independent state.

The Conservatives' aggressive war policy and cuts to arts and culture funding are unpopular, but the party has won support through its skilful manipulation of nationalist feelings. It offers a more friendly form of federalism to Quebec voters than the Liberals.

Liberal support in Quebec have been in decline for years because of the party's unwavering hostility to the national aspirations of the Quebec people. Liberal leader Stéphane Dion was the author of the hated Clarity Act, under which the federal government claimed the power to override the results of any future referendum on Quebec sovereignty.

The nationalist Bloc Québécois, which holds the largest number of federal seats in Quebec, arose in 1990 out of the ashes of attempts at constitutional reform that would have granted more autonomy to Quebec within the Canadian state. Today, the Bloc is stagnating, unable to form or participate in a federal government and unable to lead Quebec to independence. It is also coming under fire from more conservative nationalists for its relatively progressive social policy.

The NDP hopes to capitalize on the Bloc's stagnation to make an electoral breakthrough in Quebec. Last year, it won a surprise victory in a by-election in a Montreal riding. But the party has a long history of opposing Quebec's national aspirations and it ducks issues of Quebec sovereignty. Polls show its support rising above 15 percent, up from 7.5% in 2006.

### **The NDP campaign**

New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton has highlighted three key issues in the NDP's platform – the economy, protecting the environment, and improving Canada's mixed public/private health care system. In the 2006 election, the party scored one of its highest results in history, with 17.5 % of the vote. Polls now have it challenging the Liberal Party for second place.

The NDP has built its campaign around a string of popular proposals, including a national daycare program, increased spending on care for seniors, and more public transit. It proposes to pay for these programs by revoking a large tax cut given to corporations earlier this year and by the savings that will come from ending Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan.

The rise in support for the NDP is a positive development for the labour and social justice movements. Its program is broadly progressive, and its opposition to the war in Afghanistan opens doors to deepen antiwar discussion and mobilization in the labour movement. The election of more NDP members would encourage a spirit of fightback and be a step towards breaking up the Conservative/Liberal duopoly in Ottawa.

That's why the labour movement should reject the strategic voting option put forward by the CAW and others. The proponents of strategic voting exaggerate the differences between Liberals and Tories, and prevent the working class from using the election to advance its agenda and to strengthen its forces for the post-election period.

At the same time, however, an anti-capitalist program is needed to counter the NDP's pro-capitalist outlook. Hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs have been lost in Canada in the past several years. The numbers will now grow sharply as a result of the financial crisis.

The NDP's program voices concern about this, but its central proposal is a \$2 billion subsidy to large corporations in the name of preserving jobs, including for projects dubbed "green."

The party avoids policies that would offend Canada's business elite. A call to nationalize the oil industry and use its profits for social and economic improvements, as Venezuela is doing, could win broad support. Similarly, it could demand the nationalization of companies that threaten to close operations when profit rates decline.

While the NDP's program calls for an end to Canada's "combat mission" in Afghanistan, it does not recognize the right of the Afghan people to live free of foreign intervention. It supports a continued foreign military presence there.

Electing the maximum number of NDP members is an important step for the labour movement, but it's only a beginning. Gains can only be won by stepping up mass pressure and mobilizations.

The NDP has governed in four of Canada's ten provinces and its record in office has always disappointed its supporters. Its leaders preach reliance on parliamentary procedure to make social and political gains, as opposed to mass mobilization and creation of new institutions of popular power. In power, the NDP has proven to be a loyal defender of capitalist interests.

### **Labour action**

At the May 2008 convention of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), an "Action Plan" was submitted by the Executive Council and approved by delegates. It posits the building of "a broad, diverse and inclusive movement for social change," including support for the NDP and "the political choice of unions in Quebec." It concludes, "let us commit ourselves to continue to work in solidarity to achieve our goals and build a society that meets the needs of working people and their families."

In the current campaign, the Congress has issued an election flyer that contains many positive proposals, but omits many of the "Action Plan" proposals and repeats flawed notions from the NDP program. It doesn't mention the war in Afghanistan, even though the CLC convention voted overwhelmingly to call for withdrawal of Canadian troops. It does not deal with the environmental crisis or the destructive tar sands projects. Its proposals for the economy mirror those of the NDP, calling for tax breaks and subsidies to large corporations.

### **Needed: A new movement**

What's needed in Canada today is an anti-capitalist and socialist movement. Working people in Canada need a vision for a socialist future that will confront the horrors that the capitalist system is unleashing. We need a movement that champions such a vision, that builds mobilizations in the streets and workplaces to achieve it, and that contests for its program in the electoral arena. A socialist movement that adopted a cooperative but critical attitude toward the NDP — supporting its progressive demands while advancing a program and perspective that can help build the struggles of unions and social movements for fundamental change — would strengthen, not divide and weaken, a resurgent working class.

Such a movement is needed in Canada to help mobilize for serious action on climate change, to end Canada's participation in the Afghanistan war, and to oppose factory shutdowns and attacks on democratic rights and the social wage.

The labour and social movements should also focus on the parts of the world where working people are building new societies. There is much to learn there, especially in Latin America where an alliance of governments including Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia, is making important advances towards societies of justice and equality.

*Roger Annis is a trade union activist in Vancouver, BC and was a delegate to the May 2008 Canadian Labour Congress convention.*

**Related Reading:**

- NDP or Bloc? Quebec left debates election tactics
- Canada's Election and the Climate Crisis: Five Parties, No Solutions

Socialist Voice #278, October 5, 2008

## **Cuba at UN: “The very existence of the human species is at risk”**

*Speech by José Ramón Machado Ventura, First Vice-President of Cuba’s Council of State and Ministers, to the general debate of the 63rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 24, 2008. Translation by Granma, September 25, 2008*

Mr. President:

We are living a decisive moment in the history of humankind. The threats looming over the world put the very existence of the human species at risk.

The promotion of peace, solidarity, social justice and sustainable development is the only way to ensure the future. The prevailing world order, unjust and unsustainable, must be replaced by a new system that is truly democratic and equitable, based on respect for International Law and on the principles of solidarity and justice, putting an end to the inequalities and exclusion to which the great majorities of the population of our planet have been condemned.

There are no alternatives. Those responsible for this state of affairs, the industrialized nations and, in particular, the sole superpower, have to accept their responsibilities. Fabulous fortunes cannot continue to be wasted while millions of human beings are starving and dying of curable diseases. It is not possible to keep on polluting the air and poisoning the oceans; this destroys the living conditions of our future generations. Neither the peoples nor the planet itself will permit this without great social upheaval and extremely serious natural disasters.

Mr. President:

The wars of conquest, the aggression and illegal occupation of countries, military intervention and the bombing of innocent civilians, the unbridled arms race, the pillage and usurping of the Third World’s natural resources and the imperial offensive to crush the resistance of the peoples who are defending their rights, constitute the greatest and most serious threats to peace and international security.

Concepts such as limitation of sovereignty, pre-emptive war or regime change, are an expression of the desire to mutilate the independence of our countries.

The so-called war on terrorism or the false promotion of their freedoms, are an excuse for aggression and military occupation, for torture, arbitrary arrests and the denial of the right of self-determination of peoples, for unfair blockades and unilaterally imposed sanctions, for the imposition of political, economic and social models that facilitate imperial domination, in open disdain for history, cultures and the sovereign will of the peoples.

The gap between the rich and the poor widens with every passing day. The very modest Millennium Development Goals constitute an unreachable dream for the vast majority.

While a trillion of dollars is spent on weapons in the world, more than 850 million human beings are starving; a 1.1 billion people don't have access to drinking water, 2.6 billion lack sewage services and more than 800 million are illiterate.

More than 640 million children lack adequate housing, 115 million do not attend primary school and 10 million die before the age of five, in most cases as the result of diseases that can be cured.

The populations of the South are suffering with increasing frequency from natural disasters, whose consequences have been aggravated by climate change. Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba and other Caribbean countries are examples of that. Let us make a plea for solidarity especially for our sister country of Haiti as it faces its dramatic situation.

The rise in oil prices is the result of irrational consumption, strong speculation and imperial war adventures. The desperate search for new sources of energy has pushed the criminal strategy driven by the United States government to transform grains and cereals into fuel.

Mr. President:

For a large part of the Non-Aligned countries, the situation is becoming unsustainable. Our nations have paid, and they will continue to pay the cost and the consequences of the irrationality, wastefulness and speculation of a few countries in the industrialized North who are responsible for the world food crisis. They imposed trade liberalization and the financial prescriptions of structural adjustment on the developing countries. They caused the ruin of many small producers; they denied, and in some cases destroyed, emerging agricultural development in the countries of the South, turning them into net food importing countries.

They are the ones who maintain obscene agricultural subsidies, while they force their rules on international trade. They set prices, monopolize technologies, impose unfair certifications and manipulate the distribution channels, the financing sources and trade. They control transportation, scientific research, genetic banks and the production of fertilizers and pesticides.

Mr. President:

We have not come here to complain. We have come, on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned countries, to demand and defend the vindication of thousands of millions of human beings who claim justice and their rights.

The formula is not difficult nor does it require great sacrifices. All we need is the necessary political will, less egotism and the objective understanding that if we do not act today, the consequences could be apocalyptic and would affect the rich and poor alike. For this reason, Cuba once again calls on the governments of the developed countries, on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned countries, to honor their commitments and, in particular, Cuba urges them to:

- Put an end to the wars of occupation and to the plunder of the resources of the Third World countries and to free up at least a part of their millions in military spending to direct those resources towards international assistance for the benefit of sustainable development.

- Cancel the foreign debt of developing countries since it has been already paid more than once, and with this, additional resources would be released that could be channeled to economic development and social programs.
- Honor the commitment of directing at least 0.7% of the Gross Domestic Product for Official Development Assistance, unconditionally, so that the South countries would be able to use those resources for their national priorities and promote access of poor countries to substantial sums of fresh financing.
- Direct one-fourth of the money that is squandered each year on commercial advertising to food production; this would free up almost 250 billion additional dollars to fight hunger and malnutrition.
- Direct the money being used for the North's agricultural subsidies to agricultural development in the South. By doing this, our countries would have about a billion dollars per day available to invest in food production.
- Comply with the Kyoto Protocol commitments and set commitments to reduce emissions more generously starting in 2012, without wanting to increase restrictions for countries that, even today, maintain per capita emission levels that are much lower than those of the North countries'.
- Promote the access of the Third World to technologies and support the training of their human resources. Today, in contrast, qualified personnel from the South are subjected to unfair competition and incentives presented by discriminatory and selective migratory policies applied by the United States and Europe.
- And something that is today more urgent than ever, the establishment of a democratic and equitable international order, and a fair and transparent trading system where all States will participate, in sovereignty, in the decisions that affect them.

Moreover, it is our deepest belief that solidarity between peoples and governments is possible. In Latin America and the Caribbean, ALBA and PETROCARIBE have demonstrated this.

Mr. President:

The Movement of Non-Aligned Countries has remained faithful to its founding principles.

We support the cause of the Palestinian people and their inalienable right to self-determination in an independent and sovereign State, with its capital in East Jerusalem.

We support the cause of all those other peoples whose sovereignty and territorial integrity is being threatened, like Venezuela and Bolivia, and we endorse the right of Puerto Rico to be independent.

We condemn the imposition of unilateral coercive measures in violation of International Law, and attempts to implant a single model for a political, economic and social system. We object to the negative practices of certifying countries according to the patterns and interests of the powerful. We strongly oppose political manipulation and the application of double standards in

the matter of human rights, and we reject the selective imposition of politically motivated resolutions against the member countries of the Movement.

The establishment of the Human Rights Council gives us the opportunity to open up a new era in the promotion and protection of all human rights for all, on the basis of international cooperation and constructive dialogue. Those who caused the demise of the old Human Rights Commission are now trying to disqualify the Council because they have not been able to bend it to serve their own self interests. They refuse to participate in its work to escape the scrutiny of the international community in the framework of the Universal Periodic Review Mechanism.

The legitimacy of the Council does not depend on the perception that the Empire has about its work, but on its capacity to discharge its mandate with the strictest adherence to the principles of universality, objectivity, impartiality and non selectivity in the treatment of human rights issues.

The Movement of Non-Aligned Countries will continue to defend the interests of the Third World and promote the building of a world which is more just, more democratic and with more solidarity.

Mr. President:

Cuba has had to pay a very high price for the defense of its independence and sovereignty.

The heroic people of Cuba have endured the longest and cruelest blockade in history, imposed by the most powerful nation on Earth. Despite the fact that this Assembly has repeatedly and resoundingly pronounced itself in favor of ending this genocidal policy, the United States government has not only ignored the will of the international community, but in marked disregard of the same, has gradually intensified its economic war against Cuba.

Never has the foreign policy against a country been armed with such a broad and sophisticated arsenal of aggressive measures in the political, economic, cultural, diplomatic, military, psychological and ideological domain.

Cuba has just been lashed by two intense hurricanes which have devastated its agriculture and seriously affected part of its infrastructure and damaged or destroyed more than 400,000 homes.

Allow me to take advantage of this opportunity, on behalf of the Cuban government and people, to thank all those countries, organizations and persons who in one way or another have honestly and sincerely contributed with resources or moral support to the reconstruction efforts undertaken by my country.

That stands in contrast with the position of the United States government which continues to ruthlessly apply their blockade.

Cuba has asked for no gifts from the United States government. It has simply asked and asked again that it be allowed to purchase in the United States the materials that are indispensable for the reconstruction of homes and power grid and that US companies be authorized to grant Cuba private commercial credits to buy food. The answer has been negative, and it has been accompanied with an attempt to manipulate information in such a manner that the government of

the United States seems to be concerned for the wellbeing of the Cuban people while the government of Cuba is perceived to be turning down their offer.

If the United States were really so concerned for the Cuban people, the only moral and ethical behavior would be to lift the blockade imposed on Cuba for the last five decades, in violation of the most elemental rules of International Law and the Charter of the United Nations .

This irrational policy has a clear aim: to destroy the process of profound revolutionary transformations undertaken by the Cuban people from 1959, in other words, trampling on its right to self-determination, wresting away its freedom and its political, economic and social conquests and plunging it backwards to its former neocolonial status.

The Bush administration intends to justify the intensification of its policy against Cuba by turning once more to fraud and deceit, with the cynicism and hypocrisy that characterizes it. Its determination to dominate and re-colonize Cuba is being presented, no less, like an endeavor to liberate and democratize.

Who, other than its accomplices, recognizes that the United States government has any authority in this world in the matter of democracy and human rights? What authority would such a government claim, one that hunts down and cruelly mistreats the illegal migrants at its southern border, that legalizes the use of torture and keeps in concentration camps, such as the one installed in the territory illegally occupied by the U.S. base at Guantánamo, people who have not been proved of or even charged with any crime?

What respect is due to a government that attacks the sovereignty of other States using the excuse of the fight against terrorism, while at the same time guaranteeing impunity to anti-Cuban terrorists?

What kind of justice can be promoted by an administration that illegally keeps imprisoned five Cuban patriots who were only seeking information to prevent the actions of the terrorist groups operating against Cuba from the United States?

Mr. President:

Cuba appreciates the solidarity which it has received from this General Assembly in its fight against the blockade and the aggressions which it has had to confront for almost five decades.

Cuba reaffirms its unyielding decision to defend its sovereignty and independence.

Cuba reaffirms its will to carry on, together with members of the Movement for Non-Aligned Countries, in the battle for a better world, where the rights of all peoples for justice and development are respected.

To conclude I would like to recall the words of the Commander in Chief of the Cuban Revolution, comrade Fidel Castro Ruz: "A world without hunger is possible ... A just world is possible. A new world, which our species eminently deserves, is possible and will become reality".

Thank you very much.

Socialist Voice #279, October 13, 2008

## **Refounding Bolivia: Morales Calls for Vote on a New Democratic Constitution**

**By Raul Burbano**

Bolivian President Evo Morales has called for a national referendum on the country's new draft constitution on December 7. The demand of the Bolivian people for a new and socially, politically and economically inclusive constitution is at the heart of the present political upheaval in that country.

Right-wing forces representing the country's traditional ruling oligarchy have launched a secessionist movement to balkanize the country, in an attempt to block the constitutional referendum. They have organized murderous fascist gangs to terrorize the population.

They are backed by the U.S. government, whose ambassador, Philip Goldberg, has recently been expelled from Bolivia for his support of the opposition and openly admitted interference in Bolivian political life.

On the other side the vast majority of the Bolivians, more than 67% of whom just voted support President Evo Morales in a recall referendum.

The constitutional struggle in Bolivia is linked to the broader regional struggle in Latin America over who will benefit from its wealth – the masses of the continent or its traditional oligarchy backed by Washington.

The demand for a new constitution is not limited to Bolivia. In fact, over the past 15 years there's been a demand for a Constituent Assembly to propose such a document in virtually every Andean country in Latin America: Colombia (1991), Peru (1993), Ecuador (1998), and Venezuela (1999). All of these countries have written or modified their Constitutions. In contrast to some of these experiences, the demand for a constitution in Bolivia emerged from grassroots movements and has widespread national support.

### **Lengthy constitutional struggle**

Bolivia's demand for a Constituent Assembly is not a recent development; it goes back to the early 1990s. It emanated from the Guarani people with their "Great March" from the eastern lowlands of Bolivia to La Paz; their slogan "Land, Territory and Dignity" which was rooted in the demand for a Constituent Assembly. Then in early 2000 we saw the demand for a Constituent Assembly taken up by both urban and rural social movements who had suffered at the hands of previous governments' neoliberal policies. This culminated in the Water Wars of Cochabamba, where residents poured into the streets to protest Bechtel's takeover of their water system, and the attempted nationalization of their gas, the Gas Wars in La Paz. During this turbulent period the call for a Constituent Assembly merged with the call for a referendum on the gas issue.

In 2005 the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) under Evo Morales was elected under a platform to “refund” the country’s political institutions through a Constituent Assembly. This was seen as the only way to bring about change and address the endemic inequalities in the country. The magnitude of inequality that the MAS is trying to rectify can be summed up by the issue of land. According to the United Nations’ Development Program, 25 million hectares of prime farmland is controlled by 100 families. In contrast, the remaining five million hectares of farmland in the country are shared among two million campesinos. This profound inequality is endemic and represents what is being challenged with the new constitution.

### **Constituent Assembly**

The Law Convoking the Constituent Assembly resulted from a negotiated process between the political parties in the Bolivian Congress and the executive branch headed by Evo Morales. Bolivians in each of the 70 voting districts elected three delegates. The party that received the most votes sent two representatives from the district and the second or third place party sent one, thus guaranteeing that no party could monopolize the assembly. The only condition was that a minimum of 30% of the delegates had to be women. On July 2, 2006, Bolivians elected 255 delegates for the Constituent Assembly. The MAS sent 137 delegates (64 were women), the opposition 99, and the rest were independents.

There are 411 articles in the new constitution. Many are progressive and outright revolutionary promising to refund the country to the benefit of the majority. The new Constitution is controversial, but the majority of Bolivians, the indigenous people, fully support it, as the August 2008 recall referendum showed.

### **Focus of controversy**

The following articles or sections of articles from the new constitution are the most important to the indigenous majority of Bolivia and also the most controversial.

- *Bolivia is a unitary, plurinational, communitarian and democratic State:* This means that all 36 peoples, cultures, languages have the same rights and opportunities, and are recognized equally before the law, institutions, and society. It refers to a Bolivian unity that respects autonomy – i.e. municipal, departmental, regional, indigenous-originario, campesino and peasant autonomies. This guarantees the unity of the state and the democratic decentralization of power.
- *Plurinational public administration:* This refers to all public functionaries, requiring them to know the dominant indigenous language of the region where they work. This will enable them to be able communicate with the people they represent. They are also to know the Spanish language, to enable them to communicate with the rest of the Bolivians; and a foreign language, as a link to the outside world.
- *The nationalization of natural resources, renewable and non-renewable, under the control and ownership of the Bolivian people:* This would forbid the ownership of gas, oil, mining resources, water, land, and forests by foreigners. All natural resources will be

the property of Bolivians, for use by Bolivians for the benefit of Bolivians, and administered by the state.

- *Sovereign natural resources*: Non-state organizations are prohibited from directly involving themselves in the administration, management, control and preservation of forests, parks, and natural reserves, as well as biodiversity, all of which are under the control of the state.
- *Social and communitarian economy*: The state will participate in the strategic sectors of the economy. Foreign private investment will be subordinated to national development plans. Private property should guarantee that it plays an effective social function for the benefit of human beings. Ownership in the economy will be public, private and communitarian. Medium and small rural producers, agrarian communities and productive associations will receive state protection, economic support, credits, technology, and infrastructure in order to guarantee the well being of society. A mixed economy is proposed to reassure business interests and maintain market stability.
- *Expropriation without indemnification of latifundios*: The goal is to redistribute land amongst producers including those from the countryside and city who are willing to produce for the benefit of society. This is a major blow to the giant landholders – the Ronald Larsens and Branko Marinkovics of the Media Luna (eastern) departments.
- *Reelection and revocation by popular mandate of any elected authority*: Never again will authorities be untouchable owners of their positions. The people are sovereign and the people can ratify or change their authorities when they so desire.
- *Election of all authorities of the Judicial Branch, including the Supreme Court*: This is a change from the current undemocratic model of appointment by congress, which has seen nepotism flourish in the courts. It looks to redress the balance of power that has for so long being in the hand of the elites.
- *Recognition of communitarian justice as an alternative, complementary and ancestral form of solving differences and conflicts*: The indigenous systems of justice would be given the same standing in the official hierarchy as the existing system.
- *A plurinational Parliament with only one chamber*: In essence, this is a reengineering of the political institutions. The goal is to break the oligarchies' traditional monopoly in the Senate that has traditionally acted as an obstacle to all progressive governments.
- *All Bolivians have the right to free health care and education in equal conditions.*
- *Total elimination of illiteracy.*

Other articles in the constitution those are relevant and important to note:

- *A new capital of Sucre*: Sucre is to be acknowledged as Bolivia's official capital.
- *Ban on sexual orientation discrimination*: Bolivia would be only the second country in the world, after South Africa, with this constitutional provision.

- *Bolivia is a country of peace that promotes the culture of peace.* Bolivia repudiates all war of aggression and prohibits the installation of foreign military bases on its national territory.
- *Water is considered a human right.*
- *All the cultural rights for indigenous people are also accorded to the Afro-Bolivians.*
- *A wide number of social rights are established for children, youth and older people, never before seen in 183 years of Bolivian history.*

### **Ratification procedure**

The national assembly approved the new constitution in December 2007. The country's main opposition party boycotted the assembly vote on the new charter. The constitution now requires ratification by at least 51% of Bolivian voters in a national referendum. If voters reject the draft, the country's existing constitution will remain in effect.

It's important to note that a number of articles have to be specifically approved by the voters. Among them is an article that would limit the size of individual land holdings to a maximum of 10,000 hectares. This is bitterly opposed by the country's agribusinesses and big landowners of the Media Luna region in the East. If passed this would have a major impact on the lowland departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, and Pando, and finally address the historical injustice of unequal land distribution.

The opposition claims the constitution proposes the creation of two Bolivias: "one for indigenous people and another for non-indigenous people." As one opposition member said, "with separate and parallel judicial systems and languages effectively making the indigenous people first-class citizens and everyone else second class citizens." The opposition parties claim that the government is trying to establish a Cuban-type one-party-dominated state that will put an end to pluralism. They also argue that the government is just following in the footsteps of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez.

Those who support the constitution feel that its plurinational communitarian aspect is a decolonization of the state that for centuries has discriminated and marginalized the indigenous majority. They believe that it is designed to give every citizen equal access to Bolivia's resources. Others see it as confronting the neoliberal doctrine and replacing it with a viable alternative – the cosmovision of the indigenous people (communitarian land and rights for nature) – thus creating a more humanist and just society.

Vice-President Álvaro García Linera called it a first step in the new road towards "*capitalismo Andino Amazónico*" (Andean-Amazonian capitalism) which will "improve the possibilities of the emancipation of the worker and community forces in the medium term". The Agencia Nodo Sur (South Node Agency) explains that "Andean-Amazonian capitalism is neither socialism nor neoliberalism, but a system catering to the contemporary realities of Bolivia which recognizes communal, state, and private forms of economic organization as being equal under the law."

### **Intensified conflict**

The “refounding of Bolivia” with the new constitution and the reengineering of the political institutions has widened the rift between the mountainous, largely poor, and indigenous part of the country that backs Morales, and rulers of the more prosperous Media Luna states, where the opposition has their base of support.

The conflict is now rapidly coming to a head. The opposition has said they would not allow the constitution to be imposed on them. They are instigating a civil war in the country with the hope that direct U.S. involvement in the conflict will turn the tide to their advantage. Meanwhile, the government is pressing for a vote on the new constitution before the end of this year in the hopes that it will, for once and for all, refound Bolivia.

*Raul Burbano is a member of Toronto Bolivia Solidarity and the Latin American Solidarity Network.*

Socialist Voice #280, October 19, 2008

## **Financial Crisis Signals Grim Times for Working People**

**By Robert Johnson and Roger Annis**

The collapse of the capitalist financial system, now sweeping the planet, is the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. The deep-rooted financial crisis heralds harder times and greater suffering for working people the world over.

Working class and popular movements in Canada and around the world will be challenged as never before to defend living conditions and democratic rights that will now come under harsher attack. Our defense must also include struggle to put an end to a political and economic system that will destroy the planet if left unchecked.

### **Grim times ahead**

Trillions of dollars in financial assets have evaporated in recent weeks. Some of the largest financial institutions in the world have gone bankrupt, been placed under government control, or sold for pennies on the dollar. Stock markets have declined by one quarter or more.

Credit markets have seized up and growing numbers of firms find it impossible to borrow the funds they need for routine operations. The very existence of some companies, including the big three U.S. automakers, is in peril because their profits were already in sharp decline before the crisis exploded.

Capitalist governments in Canada, the United States and Europe have adopted a policy of “socialism for the rich,” bailing out many failed institutions and the ruling families who own them. They are shovelling stupendous amounts of money — several trillion dollars to date — from public treasuries into the coffers of the very corporations responsible for the chaos and misery. Little or nothing is being offered to the real victims of the crisis — working people facing the loss of their jobs, homes, life savings or pensions.

Economists admit that even the extreme measures adopted to date will not avert a generalized recession in the wealthy countries. Some admit that even a longer-lasting depression is possible.

Already in “prosperous” Canada, capitalism’s inhumanity has produced countless personal tragedies: factories are closing, careers are destroyed, livelihoods and homes are lost, and hunger and homelessness are on the rise. These evils are spreading like an epidemic and worse is to come.

The economic decline already underway in the U.S. is accelerating and reaching every corner of the globe. Retirement savings have been lost. Home foreclosures are increasing — there were 300,000 in the U.S. in August alone. Higher taxes and fewer essential services will plague working people for years to come as capitalists attempt to recover trillions of dollars at our expense.

Working people will suffer from the waves of inflation unleashed by the governments’ massive expansion of the money supply.

The situation in Iceland shows how disastrous the economic situation can become for people in smaller countries. Its currency has become effectively worthless for international transactions by ordinary citizens. Savings and pension funds are in limbo following the collapse of the country's largest banks. The government is restricting the use of foreign currency by Icelandic firms to essential purchases such as food, fuel and medicine.

The financial and economic collapse will also lead to increased demands by the capitalists to abandon any pretence of concern for the natural environment. The relentless build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will continue as corporations place their profits before the needs of humanity.

Most vulnerable of all are the billions of people who live in third world countries dominated by imperialism, people who already live in harsh economic and environmental conditions. The crisis threatens to push them deeper into the abyss as exports dry up and jobs disappear. The head of the International Monetary Fund has warned that the crisis could trigger famines in Africa and Latin America.

### **Capitalism, a failed system**

The financial crisis was triggered by the collapse of the real estate bubble in the United States, which had an immediate world-wide impact, bringing the world capitalist financial system to the brink of collapse.

The severity of the crisis, its international scope, and the speed with which it developed demonstrates that much more is involved than speculative excess, bad policy decisions, or irresponsible political leaders. What has collapsed is the entire overblown structure of credit on which the expansion of profits during the last two decades has been based. Every capitalist country and government in the world is implicated.

Capitalism as a system has proven to be bankrupt, not just its mortgage lenders, its banks, or its political leaders. The financial crisis results from the operation of the blind economic laws of capitalism, rooted in private ownership of the means of producing social wealth.

The crisis signifies that the capitalist world order of recent decades is broken and something much worse is taking shape.

### **Socialism, the only solution**

A radically different political realignment will begin to take shape in the world in the wake of the crisis. On the one hand, the capitalists will intensify their greed and violence in order to salvage their failed system.

On the other hand, tens and hundreds of millions of people will be compelled to struggle in ways they never imagined to defend their jobs, homes, health care and education, communities and the environment. They will resist the national and racial oppression that will deepen with the crisis.

Their practical experience in these struggles will have profound effects on social and political consciousness, laying the basis for challenges to the entire profit system — responsible not only

for the present economic crisis but for endemic imperialist war, economic catastrophe and ecological suicide.

Although the future course of the financial collapse and its fallout cannot be predicted, it can be said with certainty that new conditions are being created to struggle for the only solution available to humanity — socialism.

There are positive, living examples today of countries that have successfully raised the banner of revolt against imperialist domination and charted a course toward societies founded on principles of social justice. There will be no foreclosures or starving pensioners in Cuba. The government of that country represents the interests of working people. Its socialized, planned economy is organized to meet human needs, not profits. These were the key elements that enabled Cuba to survive the economic collapse brought on by the sudden rupture of trading ties with the Soviet Union in the 1990's.

Working people in Venezuela and Bolivia have also established governments that prioritize the needs of ordinary people over those of the wealthy bankers and industrialists. They are inspiring others in Latin America to follow suit.

Imperialism has been weakened by its financial catastrophe. This creates new opportunities and responsibilities for socialists and the broader labour movement in Canada and around the world. We must join in the growing struggles of working people, and in the process show that there is an alternative to the chaos and anarchy of capitalism.

Socialist Voice #281, October 26, 2008

## **Election 2008 — the Quebec left's challenge to socialists in the Rest of Canada**

**By Richard Fidler**

Once again, the Bloc Québécois has taken a majority of Quebec's seats in the House of Commons — 50 out of 75, one less than in 2006, although down by three percentage points.

In doing so, it dashed Stephen Harper's hopes of a Conservative breakthrough in Quebec that would deliver him a majority government in Ottawa. Working people throughout Canada heaved a sigh of relief.

The Bloc's support is more than a rejection of the Tories' right-wing policies. As Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe declared on election night, October 14, it is a clear demonstration "that Quebec is a distinct nation linguistically, culturally, socially and economically." This was the sixth consecutive federal election since 1993 in which the pro-sovereignty Bloc has won a majority of Quebec's seats under the first-past-the-post system.

Any credit the Tories may have won for their parliamentary vote in 2006 recognizing the existence of a "Québécois nation within Canada" has been dissipated by subsequent events revealing the superficiality of that non-binding motion. Even on the eve of the election, Ottawa made drastic cuts in federal funding to arts and culture programs in Quebec as elsewhere, undermining its claims to respect and foster Francophone culture. So strong was the reaction in Quebec that even Liberal premier Jean Charest, a firm federalist, came out publicly for transferring all control over culture and communications to Quebec jurisdiction.

Earlier, Parliament had rejected a Bloc motion to force federal government institutions in Quebec to comply with Quebec's Charter of the French Language.

Ottawa continues to defend its alleged right to create and fund programs in areas that are constitutionally within Quebec's jurisdiction. And during this election campaign, the Tories promised youth justice reforms that would jail 14-year-olds — a clear violation of Quebec's rehabilitation-oriented juvenile justice system, which has helped the province achieve one of the lowest crime rates in Canada.

The Tory mocking of Liberal leader Stéphane Dion's English (when he had difficulty understanding a question put to him) was a painful reminder of anti-French chauvinism in the rest of Canada; as many Québécois noted, they welcomed Harper's attempts to speak French although his mastery of that language is much less than Dion's of English.

Such incidents, which may seem trivial to some, reflect an important underlying reality: Quebec, for all the progress it has made through educational reform, social programs, language legislation, etc., is still threatened by its minority status within Canada and its lack of control over key powers essential to its survival and development. It is an oppressed nation within the Canadian state. And in federal elections, the Québécois vote is strongly influenced by their

consciousness of their vulnerability as a minority lacking even constitutional protection of their national rights.

As if to drive this point home, on the day after the election Harper threatened to proceed with plans for an elected Senate, which would further reduce Quebec's weight and influence within the federation. It was a reminder that Quebec is becoming increasingly marginalized as a political force within Canada.

The Bloc Québécois platform, while proclaiming its support of Quebec independence, was essentially defensive, vowing to defend "Quebec's interests" against "Alberta oil interests, Ontario financial interests" and "free of compromises with the centralizing left or doctrinaire right of Canada...."

### **NDP has little impact**

As in past elections, the New Democratic Party was not a serious contender in Quebec, largely because of its perception as a Canadian nationalist party. Although its platform claimed to recognize "the national character of Quebec" and opposed federal spending on "new programs in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction", its proposals on "Canadian federalism" were little more than bromides about such things as the "unique role and responsibilities of the Quebec National Assembly". Among its "key priorities" were support for "Our Canadian Cultural Identity", with no reference to the need to defend the French language and culture.

In fact, when *Impératif français*, a French language rights group, polled the federal parties on their views during the campaign, neither the NDP nor any of its candidates responded — while the Bloc provided detailed answers describing its own record and making concrete proposals for positive measures at the federal level.

The NDP undermined its own memberships' convention resolutions in support of Quebec's right of self-determination when its MPs voted in 2000 to support the Chrétien-Dion "Clarity Act", giving Ottawa the power to override a Quebec referendum vote for secession. That decision, which shocked many Québécois, continues to block the party's electoral prospects in Quebec. Its only victory this year was the re-election of one MP, an Anglophone ex-Liberal running in a multicultural Montréal riding.

The NDP in Quebec lacks the identification with the trade unions that it has in English Canada. The Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), the largest union central, endorsed the Bloc and some Bloc candidates were prominent FTQ activists. A four-page pamphlet explaining the FTQ's position stated that the choice in the October 14 election was "between two diametrically opposed visions of society".

"Despite the nice words on the recognition of Quebec as a 'nation', none of the federalist parties in Ottawa — and especially not the Conservatives — has undertaken to entrench this in the Canadian constitution. Without that commitment, all the motions voted in Ottawa are just symbolic.

"The Bloc's presence in Ottawa shows that English Canada is still not prepared to accept in fact that Quebec is a nation...."

Events in the last five decades have demonstrated over and over that Quebec workers, as they develop political consciousness, do so in a nationalist context that sees Quebec sovereignty as the framework for resolving their social problems. This has important implications for the left in both Quebec and English Canada.

Unable to build a strong base in Quebec, the NDP lacks credibility as a contender for governmental office in Ottawa. Conversely, the lack of a credible political ally in English Canada has seriously hampered the Quebec left's ability to build a viable alternative to the nationalist but neoliberal Bloc. The result is a left in both nations that has no viable governmental perspective at the level of the federal state — notwithstanding NDP leader Jack Layton's unconvincing claim that he was running to be prime minister!

### **Debate among Quebec socialists**

These dilemmas were the subject of a lively debate during the election campaign among supporters of Québec solidaire, the fledgling left-wing pro-sovereignty party.

Writing in the September 30 edition of the on-line journal *Presse-toi-à-gauche (PTàG)*, Jean-Paul Pelletier put the issue clearly:

“I am well aware that a recommendation to vote for the Bloc does not lead straight to a unified progressive alternative in Quebec and Canada, as we would like. But does a call for an NDP vote do that, either? ... We have enough trouble building an independentist left-wing party in Quebec; in addition, do we have to convince the Quebec working class to vote for a federalist and centralizing left party? ...

“Federally, we need an alliance between an independentist left party based in Quebec and a left party based in the rest of Canada that truly recognizes Quebec's right to self-determination and rejects the Clarity Act. But there is no such thing. This is the tragic history of two working classes that constitute two solitudes, that engage in struggles and develop their political consciousness in accordance with their own completely different dynamics.”

Pelletier said he would vote for the Bloc in order to defeat the Conservatives, but “without illusions” that it would provide real protection against neoliberal policies. A Conservative defeat, he said, might give us some needed time in which to organize resistance to the coming right-wing offensives.

André Frappier, in a further contribution to the debate, was more positive about the value of the NDP. In his view, the real task is “the construction of a pan-Canadian left alternative”:

“The NDP is a vehicle on the basis of which we can begin working with English-Canadian progressives,” he wrote in the October 10 PTàG. “Recognition of Quebec's right to sovereignty is an issue on which we must work to achieve a break with the Canadian ideology. If it turns out that the NDP is no longer the tool to achieve this, it will be necessary to create a Canada-Québec solidaire alternative.

“In Quebec, the challenge is to bring about a break with the bourgeois nationalist solutions of the PQ and the Bloc, in order to take our place and impose the solutions of the workers movement and the progressive and feminist movements. From this perspective, the conjunction of the Canadian and Québécois workers movement is decisive, and the only promising one.”

Short-term “lesser evil” strategies to block the right, Frappier argued, did nothing to advance the task of building a left alternative. In Parliament, the Bloc voted with the Tories in support of free trade deals and in favour of the war. In Quebec itself the so-called strategic vote for the PQ has impeded the emergence of a genuine party of the left.

### **More than a voting formula**

Summing up the PTàG debate — which included several other contributions — Jean-Paul Pelletier noted in the October 14 edition that it was much more than a debate on a voting formula. More fundamentally, he said, it comes down to the place occupied by the demand for independence in the perspective of the left in Quebec:

“Which should prevail? A sovereigntist vote, or a social-democratic vote? Some posed the question very directly in those terms. Others were less direct, but strongly emphasized the NDP’s good social positions while minimizing the importance of its unacceptable positions on the question of Quebec and the Clarity Act.

“The question of independence does not seem important enough to prevent them from voting for the NDP, but the Bloc’s weaknesses on Afghanistan and NAFTA categorically prohibit a vote for the Bloc. There is a certain ‘hierarchization’ here which leads to a dichotomy between the social question and the national question. Are we sovereigntists first or leftists first? Is that the right way to pose the question?

“Personally, I am unable to answer a question put that way. It reminds me too much of the old hobbyhorse of a certain left that sought to dissect the reality into “principal contradiction” and “secondary contradiction”. Of course, the proper proletarian morality always had it that the national question was simply a secondary contradiction, and thus subordinate. Today, we no longer use these old-fashioned terms, but it seems that the same schematic thinking tends to rise from the ashes. It is always more reassuring to be able to classify things that way, in hierarchical order, but it has little to do with the reality....”

Pelletier was referring, of course, to the approach taken in the past by Quebec’s largest far-left organizations, the so-called Marxist-Leninists or Maoists, whose opposition to Quebec nationalism and support of Canadian nationalism was a major cause of their quick decline and demise in the early 1980s.

He continued:

“Is it the disarray and retreat of sovereigntist fervour under a neoliberal leadership that has promoted a tendency to relativize the importance of the national question within the left? I tend to think so when I read certain interpretations of the position of Québec

solidaire, according to which [citing a contribution by Mario Charland] ‘political independence is meaningful only to the degree that it strengthens the possibilities of achieving a substantial reduction in inequalities between social classes and not in a so-called pressing need for national affirmation or some sort of search for identity of the Québécois.’ This way of opposing independence as a mere tool for social justice, on the one hand, and the search for identity on the other, seems to be another way to reduce the importance of the national question. And that is a serious error.”

### **A pan-Canadian left?**

As to the perspective of building a pan-Canadian left alternative held out by André Frappier, “a genuine left independentist”, Pelletier responded:

“If I really believed in the possibility of such a pan-Canadian left alternative, with the objective of course of taking power and implementing a progressive social program respectful of the Quebec nation, I would no longer be an independentist. What would be the use, if the national question could be resolved in the pan-Canadian context? Instead, I would be a partisan of a left-wing version of the ‘beau risque’ [PQ premier René Lévesque’s phrase to describe his gamble in accepting Mulroney’s promise to reintegrate Quebec “in honour and dignity” within the Canadian constitution by recognizing its distinctiveness]. Perhaps I would keep the independentist option in my pocket, just in case it didn’t work (I’m not completely crazy), but I would no longer be an independentist. I, too, would end up relativizing the importance of the national question.

“If it were possible, it would certainly be the best way to go. But all of history shows us the contrary, and I see nothing in the Canadian political landscape to convince me otherwise. Quite the contrary.... The search for a pan-Canadian strategy is illusory. We can intervene only indirectly on some players who will never clearly reflect our values.”

This, then, is the challenge that Quebec socialists put to the left in English Canada. As long as it is posed in the restrictive context of an electoral contest in which socialists in both nations confront only a choice among lesser evils, there are no obvious answers. But the debate in Quebec touches on a fundamental issue that has long haunted the left in both nations: whether an alliance can be built between us and on what basis. There is no disagreement that a genuine alliance would aid the struggle for socialism in both nations.

Quebec socialists are clear that any meaningful alliance must be based on the defence of Quebec’s right to national self-determination, not just in words but in deeds. It is indeed virtually excluded that the social-liberal Canadian nationalist New Democratic Party can serve as an adequate vehicle for Quebec’s aspirations. But it is equally true that no anticapitalist force can be built in the Rest of Canada that does not put Quebec self-determination at the centre of its program.

*Richard Fidler is a Socialist Voice Contributing Editor. This article originally appeared in his blog, Life on the Left.*

Socialist Voice #282, October 28, 2008

## **Bolivia: Unprecedented Alliance Defeats Right-Wing Assault**

**By Federico Fuentes**

LA PAZ: After three months of intense class struggle, there can be no doubt that the US-backed right-wing opposition to the government of President Evo Morales has suffered three important defeats. The right's offensive to topple Morales, which climaxed with the September 11-12 "civic coup" attempt, has been decisively rolled back by the combined action of the government and social movements.

The government secured a historic vote in its favour with more than 67% endorsing Morales' mandate in a referendum in August that also revoked the mandate of two opposition prefects. Another opposition prefect was arrested for his role in the coup. And now Morales has secured a referendum for the new draft Constitution to "refound Bolivia" on the basis of justice for the indigenous majority.

More importantly, a strengthened Morales government now counts on an unprecedented alliance of indigenous, peasants' and workers' organizations determined to defend their government and the Morales-led "democratic and cultural revolution."

### **Third wave of struggle**

With the turn of the century, Bolivia's social movements — united behind Bolivia's powerful indigenous peasant movement — began to rise up in opposition to neoliberalism and indigenous oppression, overthrowing two presidents and paving the way for the victory of the Morales-led Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) in early general elections in 2005.

On assuming the presidency, Morales moved to nationalize Bolivia's gas reserves and convoke a constituent assembly to draft a new Constitution — the two central demands of the mass movement.

A concerted campaign led by reactionary forces grouped around the prefects of the "half moon" — the eastern departments of Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz and Tarija — to wear down government support in order to pave the way for Morales' downfall, succeeded in stopping the advance of this process for most of 2007.

Mistakes by the government and a relative demobilization of the movements also contributed.

With their ability to mobilize an important social base against the government in the east around defense of "regional autonomy" and to stall the constituent assembly around the demand for a two-thirds majority vote on the new Constitution, these forces spread their support outside of the half moon to the central departments of Cochabamba, where violent clashes occurred in January 2007, and then Chuquisaca.

Racist attacks against indigenous people and the assembly delegates in Chiquisaca's capital Sucre forced the assembly to reconvene, first in a military barrack and afterwards in a different state — without the opposition — to approve the final text.

Bolivia appeared to be approaching the abyss, as regional and ethnic tensions deeply divided the country.

### **Victory at the ballot box**

Believing that the time was right to move to get rid of Morales, the right-wing Podemos party (which controls the Senate) approved a law for recall referendums on Morales and the prefects.

This was also partly an attempt by Podemos to seize the initiative within the opposition from the half moon opposition prefects.

The opposition prefects, now grouped together in the National Democratic Coalition (CONALDE), initially opposed the referendums. However, following a series of meetings with US ambassador Phillip Goldberg, they agreed to accept the challenge.

A June by-election resulted in an anti-MAS prefect replacing the MAS predecessor in Chuquisaca, further lifting the right's hopes.

But the results of the August 10 vote demonstrated a totally different reality. Morales' mandate was endorsed with an historic 67.4% of the vote.

Morales also won in Pando, tied in Tarija and got over 40% in Beni and Santa Cruz, with the opposition's support base isolated to the main cities, encircled by MAS-aligned rural areas.

In the majority of rural electorates Morales scored over 90%, while in poor urban areas like El Alto in the west and Plan 3000 in Santa Cruz his support was above 80%.

Opposition prefects were also recalled in Cochabamba and La Paz.

Together with social programs that had begun to change the lives of millions, the deep connection felt with a president "just like us" that exists among the indigenous and poor urban sectors helps explain this result.

### **A coup by any other name**

Fearing the government would use this victory to push ahead with a referendum on the draft Constitution, the right wing went to Plan B.

After a series of meetings between the US ambassador, US congresspeople and the half moon prefects, it was agreed to enact a plan to destabilize the east, stirring up violence to the point where either the military would be forced to react, causing deaths and Morales' resignation, or creating the justification for some kind of United Nations intervention to "restore stability."

Small groups of balaclava-wearing thugs took over airports to create an image of a president that could not set foot in half the country, while the prefects openly talked about regional independence.

With violent attacks on indigenous people escalating, fascist youths began to target police officers and soldiers. The aim was to stir up discontent within these institutions.

The plan was ratcheted up as paramilitaries began to appear openly together with armed youths and to take over and loot state institutions, stating that they would now come under the jurisdiction of the prefectures.

Uncertain as to the potential reaction from the people and soldiers, the government wavered on whether to send in troops.

At the same time, the right began to seek out support among high-ranking military officials. On September 5, a meeting was held between US embassy representatives and military figures, including the Santa Cruz-based commander of the army's eighth division, General Marcos Bracamonte.

Bracamonte agreed to not act against the coup plot.

The government finally decided to order the top commander of the Armed Forces Luis Trigo, known to have links with the Santa Cruz oligarchy, to move into Pando to take control of the situation. He responded that he would do nothing until a presidential decree had been signed to ensure that full responsibility for any blood spilt lay with Morales.

Once in Pando, he ordered troops to remain in their barracks and turned off his phone. According to sources in the government, Morales could not communicate with Trigo for four days. Others in the military high command did the same.

An emergency meeting of social movements was held in Cochabamba on September 10 where they resolved to march on Santa Cruz and crush the coup-plotting offensive.

### **Pando massacre**

In order to distract the attention of the social movements focused on Santa Cruz, the coup plotters agreed to create a crisis in Pando.

Paramilitaries ambushed and fired upon unarmed peasants travelling to a meeting of their departmental union federation. At least 20 men, women and children were massacred, with more than 60 still missing.

A wave of revulsion spread throughout society, including among middle-class sectors in the east that the opposition had hoped to mobilize.

The social movements stepped up plans to encircle Santa Cruz. Peasants in the rural areas of Santa Cruz cut off all access to the city.

Amidst generalized revulsion against the actions of the right, and with the social movements on the march, Morales — and the entire ministerial cabinet according to one source — signed the decree to implement marshal law in Pando.

Desire for action also swept through the military, as soldiers demanded to be allowed to go and defend their indigenous brothers. Under direct orders from Morales, new troops were sent to Pando.

After fighting off armed paramilitaries in the airport, they moved in to restore order in the capital Cobija.

Three days later, at an emergency summit of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), nine countries in the region came out strongly in defence of the Morales government and against any attempt to break up Bolivia.

Lacking international support, and with their plan unravelling, the prefects quickly called for a return to dialogue. The right-wing gangs began to lift their roadblocks and the government regained control of public buildings.

Although many of the social movement marchers wanted to continue until they reached the central plaza of Santa Cruz, on September 23 a decision was taken to end the protest and avoid a potential confrontation and bloodbath, as there were no guarantees for the security of protesters and snipers were rumoured to be present.

### **Dialogue**

The government stated that the dialogue would focus on two controversial issues: regional autonomy and the level of funding to the departments from the Direct Tax on Hydrocarbons.

Meanwhile, the government stepped up its campaign to hunt down those responsible for the Pando massacre and the destruction of state property. Pando prefect Leopoldo Fernandez, accused of ordering the massacre, had gone into hiding. He was found and arrested.

Numerous opposition “civic leaders” find themselves in the same situation.

With no overall agreement reached, dialogue shifted to Congress. Even with the votes of the other two opposition parties, MAS did not have the numbers without support from at least some Podemos deputies to achieve the required two-thirds vote of approval for a referendum on the Constitution.

The National Coalition for Change (CONCALCAM), which unites more than 30 peasant, indigenous, worker and social organisations, together with the Bolivian Workers Central in a historic unity pact, decided to organize a march on Congress to ensure the approval of the law.

As a result of negotiations, the mobilization of the social movements and the overwhelming public support for the law’s approval, Congress voted on October 20 to hold a referendum in January.

As well as agreeing to minor modifications to around 100 of the 411 articles in the draft, the government agreed to take Morales’ current presidential term into account under the new Constitution. This means Morales will not be able to stand for re-election in 2014 if he wins the proposed December 2009 presidential elections.

The new Constitution will limit presidents to a maximum of two terms in office.

A separate referendum will be held to determine whether large landholdings will be limited to 5,000 or 10,000 hectares.

The land reform proposed in the Constitution will not be retroactive, but continued ownership of land will depend on landowners using the land productively.

The CONALCAM supported the decisions, arguing that they demonstrated the willingness of the government to negotiate, and announced that it will immediately begin to campaign for a “Yes” vote.

On the other hand, while the parliamentary right have stated they will also campaign in favour of the new Constitution that until recently they described as approved by a “constituent assembly stained in blood”, the opposition prefects have announced they will campaign for a “No” vote.

An important political space has opened up in the east, where broad parts of society that until now have not felt part of MAS’s project, now openly reject the right-wing prefects who hoped to drag them into a civil war.

How MAS can reach out to these sections and consolidate its national hegemony is a crucial question in the next period. MAS is attempting to use the issue of regional autonomy, previously used by the right, to win these sections over to an autonomy based on solidarity and national unity.

Importantly, the Morales government now also counts on the revitalized social movements, which, together with their government, successfully neutralized the fascist coup attempt.

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### **‘The people will decide’**

“For the social movements and the Bolivian people, the approval of the new constitution is key to reversing the centuries of discrimination,” Julio Salazar, executive secretary of the Six Federations of Coca Growers from the Tropics of Cochabamba, told *Green Left Weekly*.

Sitting in his office, the walls covered with posters of Bolivian President Evo Morales, who also presides over the six federations, Salazar explained that “no matter what happens, no matter what they say, no matter what it costs, the new Constitution has to be approved.”

“The social movements are going to mobilize in order to ensure this happens.”

Together with a bus load of cocaleros, we arrived in Caracollo on October 13 to begin the 200 km march on Congress to force that body to agree to a referendum on the new constitution that was drafted by an elected constituent assembly.

At 2:00 am in the morning of October 21, Morales signed the historic law of convocation for the referendum, while more than 100,000 protesters — with whom he had spent the last eleven hours awaiting Congress’s decision — cheered and shouted for joy.

Bolivians will now go to the polls on January 25 to vote on the draft Constitution — demanded since the peasant mobilizations of the early 1990s — that will dramatically increase the rights of the historically excluded indigenous majority, expand state control over natural resources and land, and give a measure of autonomy to departments, municipalities and indigenous peoples within the framework of a united plurinational state.

Once approved, new elections will be held in December 2009 for President, Vice President, Congress, and departmental prefects.

Conversing at the start of the march, Salazar pointed to the crowd and explained: “Before they used to say ‘its just the peasants, the cocaleros, that are marching.’ This time, other sectors are uniting with us: health workers, teachers, university students, neighbourhood committees, professionals are all participating in the march.”

Pedro Montes, head of the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), which joined forces with the National Coalition for Change (CONALCAM) to organize the march, told GLW that the protest was a demonstration of the type of unity that was required to ensure “the refounding of Bolivia.”

“Our recent national gathering voted to be part of this march. All our regional centrals and affiliated unions will be participating.”

Asked what would happen if some union leaders decided not to participate, Montes replied that “the rank and file will go over the top of them.”

“The people have wakened up,” said Leonilda Zurita, leader of the National Federation of Peasant Women of Bolivia–Bartolina Sisa (FNMCB-BS).

“Today, our president comes from the people, a people that have become the government. With or without Evo, this process will continue.

“It is the people that will decide, at the ballot box and not with arms as the oligarchs wanted.... The choice is clear: continue the process of change or return to neoliberalism.”

*Federico Fuentes is a Socialist Voice Contributing Editor; he also edits Bolivia Rising. An earlier version of these articles was published in Green Left Weekly, October 25, 2008*