

# « **Previous** **Next** » **Progress in Bolivia: A Reply to Jeff Webber**

Tuesday 17 May 2011, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 9 May 2011).

**Six years after Bolivians elected their first Indigenous-led government, their ongoing struggle for national and social liberation remains a subject of debate and disagreement among socialists around the world.**

## Contents

- [Cochabamba Initiative for](#)
- [Agenda for Sovereignty](#)
- [Defeating a Rightist Insurgenc](#)
- [Why Defend the Morales Regime?](#)
- [A Revolutionary Opportunity?](#)
- [Metropolitan Responsibilities](#)

Six years after Bolivians elected their first Indigenous-led government, their ongoing struggle for national and social liberation remains a subject of debate and disagreement among socialists around the world.

- Have the Bolivian masses been able to score significant gains under the government of President Evo Morales, first elected in December 2005?
- Or has the Morales presidency served to limit popular movements and block the possibility of significant change?

The second view is argued by Canadian socialist Jeffrey Webber in a new book and a variety of recent articles, including an interview published March 15 in *The Bullet*. [[1](#)] While Webber says that activists in the North should defend Bolivia against “imperialist meddling,” his primary concern is to disabuse First World socialists of illusions in the country’s government. Despite Morales’s “nominal inclusion of revolutionary slogans,” his actions involve only “relatively superficial policy initiatives,” Webber says. (Except as indicated, all quotations are from the March 15 interview in *The Bullet*.)

Far from moving toward socialism, Webber says, the Morales government has served to close off a “possibility of a fundamental, transformative overhaul of social, economic, and political structures” and to consolidate a “reconstituted neoliberalism.”

Jeffrey Webber has won international recognition for his writings on the social struggles in Bolivia, so his analysis deserves respectful consideration. His argument rests on his view – in my opinion correct – that Bolivia remains capitalist, and that a socialist transformation is not under way.

But surely that is only part of the story. The reforms that Webber derides as “superficial” have been violently opposed by the Bolivian oligarchy, who don’t seem to agree that Morales is strengthening capitalism. The U.S. embassy in La Paz has participated actively in attempts to overthrow the

government. Internationally, the Bolivian government has joined ALBA, the progressive alliance founded by Cuba and Venezuela, and has taken other positive steps, including breaking diplomatic relations with Israel.

In my view, Webber and others who agree with him are measuring the Bolivian government against an impossible standard, against the ideal program of a hypothetical mass socialist movement. If we instead consider its real achievements, the gains it has made against formidable odds, we must conclude that our priority lies in support of Bolivia's positive moves toward national sovereignty, social progress, and effective action on global warming.

## **Cochabamba Initiative for Climate Justice**

Webber himself praises one recent Bolivian initiative of world import: the Morales government's hosting of "a major anti-capitalist gathering in Cochabamba last year." This was "a genuine step forward for the construction of international, eco-socialist networks," he says.

Let us add that the conference, with more than 30,000 participants, provided a model of how social movements can establish an agenda for action by sympathetic governments. The conference also creatively applied an Indigenous perspective to the most urgent crisis facing humankind through its call for a "universal declaration of the rights of Mother Earth," which has won significant international support.

Bolivia led an alliance of Global South countries in taking the Cochabamba resolutions to the world climate change conference in Cancun, Mexico, last December. There, Bolivia ended up standing alone in flatly rejecting an imperialist-imposed deal that again failed to act on climate change. The outcome in Cancun was a serious setback for ecological forces, but Bolivia, undeterred, is helping to spearhead organizing toward the next world climate change conference in Durban, South Africa, next December.

Imperialist powers are not accustomed to be defied in this way by a small Third-World country. Why did this historic challenge, the world's first expression of a mass anti-capitalist ecological movement, come from Bolivia, a small and desperately poor country, remote from the world's power centres, and weighed down with a historically fragile, dependent, and crisis-prone economy?

## **Agenda for Sovereignty**

To explain the Cochabamba initiative, we examine its context: a reversal in U.S.-Bolivian relations since Morales was elected. Bolivia has long been subjected to aggressive U.S. intervention, supported by the country's capitalist elite. Previously, the U.S. utilized three extended campaigns – the so-called wars against communism, drugs, and terrorism – to keep Bolivian society off balance and to pave the way for various forms of intervention. After Morales's election in 2005, Washington turned to backing separatist forces in Bolivia's internal conflicts.

But Bolivia shook off these aggressive intrusions and has now has taken the initiative, rallying international forces against U.S. sabotage of climate justice. [\[2\]](#)

Webber tips his hat to this reality, noting that "the Morales government has also developed a relatively more independent foreign policy." This aspect of its record is worth closer attention, however, especially given Canada's oppressive involvement in the region.

In December 2005, Morales concluded his first speech as elected president by repeating a slogan of the coca-farmers' union, "Causachun coca, wañuchun yanquis" ('Long live coca, death to the Yankees'). Defense of the coca leaf, significant in Indigenous culture, against the depredations of U.S. drug-war contingents was symbolic of a new course to affirm Indigenous and national dignity. In the following months:

- Bolivia broke with the previous practice of allowing U.S. ambassadors to influence appointments to senior government posts.
- Bolivia refused to grant legal immunity to U.S. soldiers operating in the country; in response, the U.S. cancelled 96% of its support to the Bolivian army.
- Bolivia broke with U.S. drug war policies and protected coca cultivation in family farms.
- When Washington caused visa problems for Bolivian government leaders seeking to visit the U.S., Bolivia slapped a compulsory visa requirement on all U.S. visitors.
- Bolivia cancelled the practice by which the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank had a say in the country's financial policies, and ended its dependency on loans from these agencies. [3]

The last of these steps was part of a package of measures designed to free Bolivia's finances from vulnerability to great-power economic pressure.

But Bolivia's most effective challenge of North American tutelage lay in promoting steps toward regional integration, free of U.S. and Canadian intervention. Webber mentions Bolivia's "closer ties to Venezuela, Ecuador, and Cuba": in fact, these ties took shape in ALBA (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), a plan for alternative economic relationships on the basis of solidarity, not the capitalist market, and simultaneously a political bloc coordinating member countries' resistance to U.S.-led imperialism.

The campaign against U.S. intervention led, in 2008, to the expulsion of the U.S. ambassador. In the Obama administration's third year, it has yet to negotiate terms for its ambassador's return to La Paz.

The main barrier to resuming normal diplomatic relations is Bolivia's strong objections to subversive activities of U.S. agencies within the country. Indeed, the Morales government has just expelled the Environmental and Economic Development program of USAID, a U.S. government agency that has engaged in protracted efforts to undermine the government.

Bolivia's campaign to free itself from U.S. tutelage and assert national sovereignty is an outstanding achievement, which was spearheaded by the Morales government.

### **Defeating a Rightist Insurgency**

When elected, the Morales government had "substantial room for manoeuvre," Webber tells us. "The U.S. was overextended in Iraq and Afghanistan" and the "domestic right had been politically destroyed." Instead of taking advantage of this opening, he says, the Morales government's policies, despite "superficial policy initiatives ... that run against orthodox neoliberalism," remain "pre-eminently concerned with the restoration of profitability and the subordination of the working class."

This picture is hard to square with the reality of social polarization during the regime's first years. Far from showing gratitude for Morales's supposed efforts to restore capitalist profitability, major

sectors of Bolivia's capitalist class launched a violent rebellion, purportedly for regional autonomy but primarily designed to shatter the government's authority in the country's richest areas.

The rightist revolt was triggered by the government's initiative for a new constitution that would refound Bolivia as a "plurinational" republic, and by fear that Indigenous peasants would use their enhanced status and authority insist on return of lands stolen by white, mestizo and foreign elites.

It is true, as Webber says, that the reform of the hydrocarbon industry, which vastly increased government royalties, fell short of full nationalization. Also, agrarian reform measures have been less radical, so far, than those that followed Bolivia's 1952 revolution. Nonetheless, surely it is clear that, the present Bolivian government's reform measures – the assertion of national sovereignty vis-à-vis the U.S. empire; the new constitution; the agrarian reform, with all its limitations; rights and dignity for Indigenous peoples; increased royalties from resource extraction; etc. – were regarded as crucially important by both the rightist oligarchy and popular movements.

The manner in which this confrontation was overcome is instructive. The right-wing insurgency took the form of a political movement mobilizing in the streets and seeking to impose its will through violence – the characteristic method of fascism. For a time, much of the eastern region where the rightists were strong was close to a no-go area for government leaders and their supporters. Washington threw its support strongly behind the anti-government forces.

A capitalist government's standard response, faced with such a challenge, is to call in the police and army and impose its authority by force. If successful, such action in Bolivia would have left the army as arbiter of the situation; more likely, it would have led to civil war and foreign intervention.

It is thus striking that the Morales government relied not on the army but on the strength of social movements that had elected it to office. And far from resisting the government's supposed measures to subjugate them, the country's working people mobilized again and again to defend government initiatives against forcible right-wing obstruction. Fascist-type violence and provocation was thwarted through counter-mobilization, followed up by democratic consultations in which Morales obtained the backing of almost two-thirds of the voters. The neo-fascist thugs were isolated and marginalized. This historic achievement by Bolivian working people stands as a model of how to respond to Fascist-type movements.

### **Why Defend the Morales Regime?**

Speaking of Bolivia today, Webber states that "the popular sectors are rightly concerned with defending the Morales regime against any imperialist meddling and right-wing efforts at destabilization when they emerge." This is a welcome statement. Still, if Morales truly represents "reconstituted neoliberalism," why should he be defended?

Certainly it is true that the Bolivian state remains capitalist, and the government functions within the framework of deeply entrenched capitalist culture and social relations. It rules through a capitalist state apparatus that is ill-adapted to implement progressive reforms. It is often at odds with popular struggles – particularly now that gains against the rightists and Washington have opened more scope for such movements. Capitalist state bureaucrats have attempted to infiltrate the MAS, and turn it to their own ends.

But it is equally true that, through the victories of the MAS, popular movements have taken positions of authority within the government and successfully used this leverage to drive forward a popular agenda on many issues that the Bolivian people feel are deeply important.

In Bolivia today, Webber notes, “a situation persists in which there is no organized, alternative socio-political force to the left of the ruling party.” Surely this fact suggests that, despite all strains, the tie between social movements in Bolivia and the Morales government has not been broken.

### **A Revolutionary Opportunity?**

Webber regrets the “failure of the 2003 and 2005 mass mobilizations to translate into an overthrow of the existing capitalist state and the construction of a popular, sovereign, self-governing power of the Indigenous proletarian peasant majority from below.” He attributes this negative outcome to “the impact of the absence of a revolutionary party.”

Certainly, the presence of a broad, effective revolutionary organization would have strengthened the people’s movement and influenced the outcome. Yet it is striking that not only was a revolutionary party absent (a not uncommon situation in our world) but that no significant group on the left posed a viable alternative to MAS’s electoral project. How can this be? Was there something wrong with the Bolivian popular movements – with the human material, perhaps, or with their traditions? Or were there factors that made an all-out drive to overthrow the capitalist state less attractive than Webber implies?

The type of overturn that Webber describes – which I would call a socialist revolution – has not occurred since Cuba’s revolution of 1959-62. Indeed, some Marxists argue that there has been no successful socialist revolution anywhere since 1917. This decades-long delay cannot be put down to inadequacies of revolutionary will or organization. It points to the existence of deep-rooted cultural, social, and economic barriers to implementing a socialist agenda, which cannot be overcome quickly or in a small, isolated sector of the world.

Moreover, we must recall the overriding lesson of the great Russian anti-capitalist uprising of 1917-18: to survive and flourish, the revolutionary alternative had to be extended internationally. That was true not just “ultimately,” as Webber states, but immediately. The failure of revolution outside Russia had a swift, devastating impact on the new workers’ state that was keenly felt by 1919. Fortunately, Soviet Russia, which covered a sixth of the world’s surface, possessed a range of raw materials and diversified industries sufficient to enable it to withstand several years of capitalist blockade and armed assault. Bolivia, by contrast, has an economy that is totally dependent on imports and exports, and does not have even an ocean port, let alone the backing of a powerful sponsor such as that enjoyed by Cuba during and for many years after its anti-capitalist revolution.

The greatest barrier to a socialist overturn in Bolivia is not the Morales leadership but the absence of workers’ governments in economically advanced countries that could provide effective support.

The Morales government’s focus on developing ties with other progressive or semi-progressive regimes – and even (to Webber’s dismay) with other governments in conflict with imperialism such as Iran – represents intelligent revolutionary strategy. The ALBA alliance is an attempt to widen the options for poor, dependent countries, a project that, if it flourishes, will create more favourable conditions for anti-capitalist revolution.

As we know from experience in Canada, working people do not normally attempt to overthrow the capitalist state if the road to reform appears to be open. Revolution and the struggle for reform are not counterposed, but are rather part of a single process. A struggle for reforms can both strengthen workers’ combative power and demonstrate the limits of what can be achieved in capitalism. Certainly, in Bolivia, events have shown that the path to reform did indeed lie open. The Morales government did not overthrow capitalism and does not appear likely to do so, but its period in office

has been marked by tangible advances for working people and, also, has demonstrated limits of reform under the present capitalist state.

## **Metropolitan Responsibilities**

In terms of sheer drama and as a demonstration of the power and creativity of working people, struggles in Bolivia over the last decade call for close attention. Many writers on the left have studied this experience and expressed their opinions on where Bolivian workers acted wisely and where they took a wrong step. This process is natural and positive, and Webber has contributed to it significantly.

However, we must bear in mind that in the Bolivian drama we are not just analysts and critics, we are also actors. Bolivia's struggle for democracy and sovereignty has been actively opposed by the Canadian government and its allies. Imperialist intervention in Latin America is under way right now – to restrict national sovereignty, shore up reactionary regimes, overthrow defiant governments, and crush popular movements. It is an urgent threat that has Bolivia in its gun sights.

In another article, Webber has written,

*“From my perspective, the first priority of activists in the Global North should indeed be to oppose imperialist meddling anywhere. This means, concretely, opposition under any circumstances to imperialist-backed destabilization campaigns against Morales. But the political situation is too complicated to end our discussion at that stage. Our first allegiance ought to be with the exploited and oppressed themselves, rather than any leaders or governments who purport to speak in their name.”* [4]

Agreed, our “first allegiance” should be to the masses, but Webber's counterposition of the masses and the MAS leadership fails to acknowledge their close relationship.

Moreover, Webber's use of the term “imperialist meddling” radically understates the systemic nature of imperialist domination or the devastating violence of its intervention in countries like Haiti, Honduras, or Colombia. Imperialist domination is not expressed merely in “destabilization campaigns” – it permeates and defines every aspect of Bolivia's social, economic, and political reality.

In this situation, the “first priority of activists” is not criticism of the process in Bolivia, but solidarity – which must be expressed above all in opposition to Canadian government policies. In that spirit, all of us, including those who share Webber's dim view of the Morales government, need to contribute to the broad movement of solidarity with the people of Bolivia and with other peoples victimized by imperialist domination.

**John Riddell**

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**P.S.**

\* From The Bullet, Socialist Project • E-Bulletin No. 499,  
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## Footnotes

[1] "[From Red October to Evo Morales: The Politics of Rebellion and Reform in Bolivia](#)", ESSF (article 21546). See also Jeffrey R. Webber, *From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia: Class Struggle, Indigenous Liberation, and the Politics of Evo Morales*, Haymarket Books: Chicago 2011; "[From rebellion to reform – Bolivia's reconstituted neoliberalism](#)", ESSF (article 18566)," *International Socialist Review*, no. 73 (Sept.-Oct. 2010); "[Fantasies aside, it's reconstituted neoliberalism in Bolivia under Morales. A rejoinder to Federico Fuentes](#)", ESSF (article 21548)," *ISR*, #76 (Mar.-Apr. 2011); "[Struggle, continuity and contradiction in Bolivia](#)," *International Socialism*, #25 (Winter 2010), ESSF (article 21550), "[Evismo - Reform? Revolution? Counter-Revolution?](#)," ESSF (article 3673) (October 2006).

For a reply by Federico Fuentes, see "[Government, social movements, and revolution in Bolivia today A response to Jeffery Webber](#)", ESSF (article 21547) *ISR*, #76 (Mar.-Apr. 2011).

[2] See Martin Sivak, "The Bolivianisation of Washington-La Paz Relations: Evo Morales' Foreign Policy Agenda in Historical Context," in *Evo Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo in Bolivia*, London: Institute for Study of the Americas, 2011.

[3] Sivak, "Bolivianisation," pp. 161-71.

[4] Webber, "Rebellion to Reform"; also quoted in "Fantasies Aside."