

Bolivian Trade Union Leader Orlando Gutiérrez Gave His Life for Democracy and Socialism

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Orlando Gutiérrez, the Bolivian militant trade union leader, has been murdered by a fascist gang in Bolivia. He gave his life to the struggle for democracy, workers' rights, and socialism. Orlando will not be forgotten. And fascism will not win.

The death of Orlando Gutiérrez comes amid a surge in violence directed against the trade union and campesino movements in the wake of the coup in Bolivia last November.

The charismatic mining union leader Orlando Gutiérrez has died in Bolivia, days after he was beaten viciously by a fascist gang protesting the results of the Bolivian elections in which the left-wing Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) triumphed.

Gutiérrez's death at just thirty-six years comes amid a surge in violence directed against the trade union and campesino movements in the wake of the coup last November. In August, the headquarters of the COB (Bolivian Workers' Center), the trade union federation, in La Paz was bombed while recent months saw arrest warrants issued against syndicalists by the coup regime.

Gutiérrez was executive secretary of the FSTMB (Union Federation for Bolivian Mining Workers), the powerful miners' union in Bolivia founded in 1944 which dominates the COB. He was tipped to be the new mining minister in the Arce government. Last week he was attacked by an anti-MAS gang which left him with serious injuries. He had been in intensive care in a hospital in La Paz for several days before he died. The police and the public ministry have now officially opened an investigation into his death. The FSTMB has declared ninety days of national mourning.

Gutiérrez's death follows presidential elections earlier this month which signaled a dramatic return to democracy for the plurinational state and a landslide victory for MAS's candidate Luis Arce. Gutiérrez was an active supporter of MAS, accompanying the candidates to rallies across the country. Throughout the year he had led fierce criticisms of the de facto government for mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic, its politically motivated arrests, and for repeatedly delaying elections.

Tributes have been flooding in from the international labor movement. Ian Lavery, a former miner, ex-president of the National Union of Mineworkers, and former chair of the UK Labour Party, said: "The thoughts and solidarity of the labour movement across the world should be with the family of Orlando Gutiérrez today, a man murdered simply for standing up for dignity and justice for working class people."

"As someone who started my working life down the pit and lives through the Great Strike of 1984-85, I found his story particularly heartbreaking to read — so soon after the restoration of democracy in Bolivia this month."

“Orlando will not be forgotten. And fascism will not win. It must be confronted, wherever it rears its head.”

Last October, amid rising anti-MAS protests, miners’ unions descended on La Paz, dropping teeth-shatteringly loud dynamite to protest in favor of ousted president Evo Morales and the MAS. More recently, the COB and the FSTMB led the movement for democracy against the oppressive tendencies of the coup regime under Jeanine Áñez. In August, the COB and its assorted unions called an indefinite general strike, with protests, marches, and road blockades bringing the country to a standstill to demand fresh elections and the resignation of Áñez.

The murder of Gutiérrez indicates a rising threat from fascist, para-state groups. In Cochabamba, the violent armed group Resistencia Juvenil Cochala (RJC) spearheaded demonstrations against the recent election result, while in Santa Cruz, the civic group Pro-Santa Cruz Civic Committee issued a statement urging the electoral authority to suspend the vote count due to “fraud.” The mobilization last year of “pititas,” mainly middle-class, urban, and right-wing groups, marked the beginnings of a newly emboldened far-right movement in Bolivia.

In October 2019 these groups rallied ostensibly around the slogan of “democracy,” painting Morales and the MAS government as illegitimate and oppressive. In this they hoped to capitalize on discontent around Morales’s decision to run for a controversial fourth presidential term. In their chants they would denigrate Evo as a dictator and compare Bolivia to “communist” Venezuela.

When the coup government of Jeanine Áñez eventually seized power, darker fascistic currents proliferated and were at times actively supported by the regime. In the aftermath of the coup, several ex-Ministers and officials became subject to arrest warrants and claimed asylum in the Mexican embassy in La Paz. In response, gangs of right-wing paceños from the wealthy Zona Sur area gathered to harass embassy staff and vehicles with the support of the police.

State massacres of anti-coup protesters in Senkata, El Alto and Sacaba, Cochabamba coincided with a resurgence in acts of racial hatred, such as the burning of the wiphala which represents Andean Indigenous peoples. The demonization and systematic persecution of the MAS subsequently took on a highly racialized quality, with right-wing politicians invoking images of Indigenous peoples as “savage” and unfit for political power.

Gutiérrez rose to prominence in a workers’ movement renowned for its militancy and accustomed to harsh working conditions. The Bolivian intellectual and Communist Party founder Sergio Almaraz once said that in Bolivia “the twentieth century arrived on the shoulders of tin mining.”

The Bolivian labor movement — dominated by the miners — has historically been among the most powerful and tightly organized in the world. Owing in part to the efforts of the debonair mining leader Juan Lechín, the Bolivian Revolution of 1952 saw the nationalization of the Patiño, Aramayo, and Hochschild mining companies, which accounted for a quarter of world tin production at that time. This brought the mining sector under the control of Corporación Minera de Bolivia (Comibol) which was steered by the FSTMB although the catastrophic tin crash in 1985 irrevocably weakened the mining movement.

In later years, the COB the FSTMB would play a decisive role in the struggles for democracy in dictatorships of the 1970s and ’80s, spearheading general strikes and blockades.

Gutiérrez was born in the mining town of Colquiri, La Paz and worked his way up the mining union to become executive secretary in 2015. Angus McNelly, a research fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, who interviewed Gutiérrez and spent extensive time with mining unions for his research,

recalls a man quick to laughter, deeply respected by his fellow miners, and resolutely committed to the struggle for workers' emancipation. In a similar vein, president-elect Luis Arce tweeted, that he was a "great mining leader who always defended the interests of the Bolivian people."

The loss of Gutiérrez at the hands of fascist violence is a gut-wrenching blow to the workers movement in Bolivia, to democracy, and to the thousands who knew and loved a courageous union leader. His legacy must now be the just world he did so much to bring about, and he sadly never got to see.

About the Author

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 10.29.2020:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2020/10/bolivian-mining-trade-union-leader-orlando-gutierrez-democracy-socialism>

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