

The Cochabamba Water Wars: An Interview with Oscar Olivera

FROM: PEOPLE'S CONFERENCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE

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Oscar Olivera (**OO**) is a trade unionist and leader of the famous water wars which unfolded in Cochabamba in 2000 following the privatization of the city's water supply. The water wars, which involved shutting down Cochabamba for six months, were so successful because the social movements fighting against privatization of municipal water supplies were extremely well informed. There were four major leaders of the water wars, and the only one who hasn't entered government is Olivera.

Interview conducted by Ashley Dawson (**AD**) and James Johnson (**JJ**). Translation by Estela Vazquez.

JJ: We'd like to speak to you about your experience so that we can see if we can draw lessons for our struggles in the US. So how did you get involved in the water wars?

OO: In the mid-1980s, there was a strong weakening in the Bolivian labor movement as a result of changes in the modes of production and because of the demands of the capitalist world.

JJ: Was this because of the breaking of the tin miners' strike?

OO: Thirty thousand tin miners, the heart of the union movement, became coca growers. Evo Morales is a product of this. Worldwide there is a new reality of work. About fifteen years ago, we started to investigate this world of labor, not just working through the internet but also watching changes practically on the ground. We become aware of second-class workers in big factories.

JJ: Who owns these factories?

OO: They're multi-nationals. This process of investigation drew two types of workers: women and young children. This phase of investigation led to a second one: how to make this level of reality visible to everyone? We had a lot of support from the media to make this reality known.

AD: Who was in control of the media?

OO: Big corporations. The rights of journalists were being eroded, so they wrote about the oppressed in other sectors out of sympathy. In our research, we wanted to bring together two modes of work: old trade unions and the world of the new reality of work, where unions do not exist and people don't have any rights. So we formed a trade union school. This school was one where the two worlds of labor met (this is 1996), where people shared their experiences and their knowledge. It's now called "The People's School." Many people who come are not members of trade unions. And the school was also mobile, so that we could take it to factories and neighborhoods.

AD: What sort of pedagogical methods are used at the school? Is Liberation theology an influence?

OO: Yes, we employ popular education, so that we begin from people's own experiences. In this year, my union became a very important social point of reference. People were coming to us to ask for help in how to organize, how to deal with problems. Even ex-police officers and soldiers who work with the DEA came here asking for help after they were fired from the US embassy with no relief. So when they started the privatization of water at the end of 1999, the peasants came to the federation asking for help. They said: you work very well in defending your own rights, rights inside the factory, but we need your help to protect our rights. So we began thinking about water — what is it? It's life. This began to transform my vision of life and what the new vision for the union movement could be. This is how I became involved in the war for water. The struggle for water gave me a much broader vision of union struggle. It no longer involves just economic ends, but rather a struggle for life and a much broader framework. What we did as trade unionists and workers was to share an organizational experience in what became known as the Coordinator of Water. The demonstration of

50,000 people in the main plaza was like a kind of popular union. People were not accepting the privatization of water. We had formed a union that was horizontal, participatory, without hierarchical structure, and without walls.

JJ: What did the water war do to help the trade union movement? How did it help build unions? How did it influence other movements like the movement for the rights of indigenous people, rights of women, etc.

OO: I think, more than anything else, it showed that you can win victories under new conditions. The *coordinadora* was a new social space. It nurtured a battle from the base and not from the top down. It created organizations that were very flexible and very participatory. It showed new forms of organizing that were horizontal, participatory. The trust built this way gave us much strength. For example, the organization has worked with sex workers, homeless people, etc. We tried to create a situation where everyone feels protected and has a space. The Coordinadora and water wars challenged established unions.

JJ: What can you tell us about the organization on a concrete level?

OO: There was no president, there were no spokespeople. At the most, the responsibility to be the spokesperson could be taken away on short notice. Everyone felt they were the same, but there was a very strong commitment that what was decided had to be respected. We also cultivated values like solidarity, respect, and personal responsibilities. We didn't want the institution to become a part of the state. We think that many state institutions that exist today are corrupt. So we couldn't ask the state to give us recognition. Today, the space is more closed. The space has been co-opted by political parties and we've lost some autonomy of action.

JJ: To what degree do you feel that this movement made it possible for Evo Morales to become president?

OO: It's absolutely true. The Water Wars gave birth to his presidency.

JJ: Did Morales's party exist before the Water Wars?

OO: Originally MAS (movement for the sovereignty of the people) existed before the water wars, but Morales really took off after the Water Wars.

JJ: How does the union struggle impact the status of women in Bolivia?

OO: There has been an incredible increase in their participation, but in working class areas they do not take a leadership position.

JJ: Do you have an explanation for this?

OO: I've not had time to investigate this, but I'm finding a strong recovery of traditional values, which is highly political. The indigenous sector is linked to the union movement. In the urban sector, women have two roles: women are workers and housewives, and they also have to cope with terrible conditions of poverty. So women often don't have time for union activity.

AD: Was there cross-pollination between rural and urban movements in the course of the water wars?

OO: Once upon a time in Bolivia, factories were largely rural. I remember a time when a Czech shoe firm opened in the country and people didn't know what the toilets were for, but would instead go to the fields. Today, of course workers are more urbanized. But the new world of work is populated mainly by young people. For example, software developers. People who don't have hours. The new worker is one who is very young and very urban. They have their iPods and cellphones, but nonetheless very exploited. Big US multinationals have huge factories here where young people are working for very low wages. Typical people are telephonic workers.

The public sector — teachers, health care, etc. — I'm not talking about people in this sector. In these sectors, there might still be some traditional factors. Here in Bolivia, university educators are hired to teach very specific subjects, on a set quota — but you're not a tenured teacher, you don't have insurance, etc. The same thing as in the US.

The number of unionized people in Bolivia used to be 80%. The major form of citizenship *was* the unions. If you weren't a member of a union, you didn't exist. Today, to be a citizen you need to belong to a party. Today, only 15% of the country's population is unionized. There are about 40,000 workers in Cochabamba, but we have only organized 6,000.

AD: What strategies are you pursuing to unionize the new knowledge workers?

OO: We've tried this, but these workers are based in powerful international companies, and the people who work there are very fearful. We've denounced them, but the process is very slow. We also work with workers in the service sector such as in supermarkets. But such people are often without an identity, someone who sees a coworker as an enemy. This will be a long ideological battle. Lots of people don't want to say that they work, but that they are 'technicals,' that they're not workers exploited by the system. Winning such workers over is a very difficult job because you have to regain the traditional values of workers.

AD: Can the notion of commons be useful for struggles going forward?

OO: We're having lots of discussions over whether water can be owned. But we have very different ideas and values than the West. Do we talk about water as a communal property or a property of all and no one? The issue of water allows us to regain a vision that is more humane and more inclusive. For the Andean people, everything is alive. The stones, the air, the earth. And we're part of that concept of inclusive life. The western concept of nature is more anthropocentric. People need to use natural resources for their good. We've been recuperating such values gradually in our struggles over the last ten years.