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"THE ROAD OF NO RETURN" & THE
BOLIVIAN REVOLUTION ✓
by Lionel Martin

A Bolivian with Indian features commented on the recent failure of the Bolivian army's operations against the guerrillas in the Santa Cruz region and on the mass arrests of September 16:

"These offensives will continue and the repression will increase but there is one salient fact: our country has started down the road of no return."

He went on to explain the historical background of Bolivia's current struggle.

"The Bolivian people have a long and proud history dating back to the Tiahuanacu culture that flourished 4000 years ago. When the Spanish conquistadores came the Indians were forced to slave in the silver mines and on the haciendas. They revolted frequently: one of the greatest rebellions was under Tupaj Matari in 1770. .

"In 1824 Bolivar's army under General Sucre defeated the Spaniards at Ayacucho. Thus we won our first independence.

"We are still fighting for our second and definitive independence from U.S. economic and political control.

"The big powers manipulated us like puppets. In 1875 the rivalry between British and American interests for the nitrates and guano on the Pacific coast of Bolivia brought us war with Chile. We lost the war and lost our coastline. We became a landlocked country in the heartland of South America.

"Then in 1930 we fought the war of the Chaco against Paraguay and Argentina. Standard Oil was in our corner and Royal Dutch Shell in the other. We were defeated again and lost another big chunk of our territory.

"The tin barons, Hoeschild, Aramay and Patino, controlled our nation from top to bottom, that is, in conjunction with the interests of U.S. policy. In spite of the vast wealth produced by our workers during hundreds of years of virtual slavery, life is miserable for our people. They chew coca to make themselves oblivious to the cold, hunger, pain, fatigue and worry. The average life span is about 40 years and there are only three doctors for every 10,000 people, and most of these doctors are in the cities. After almost 150 years of so-called independence more than 75% of our population is illiterate; Indians make up 84% of our people.

"The depression of the '30's with its drop in tin exports and prices brought starvation to our land, even worse than before. The peasants fell deeper into semifeudal bondage. The miners lived on hunger rations and 90% of them suffered from lung diseases. But the tin barons and the 4.5% of the population that owned 70% of the land lived on the French Riviera!

"During World War II trade unions were organized. But when the miners of the Catavi Mines struck for higher wages in 1942 they

were charged with subversion and shot down like dogs. One hundred were killed and hundreds wounded.

"The tragedy of the Bolivian economy is its dependence on a sole product, tin. The world market prices controlled by the big powers brought riches to only a handful of Bolivian families and misery to the rest. During the war, when the U.S. was in dire need of tin and the prices in a free market would have soared, the U.S. forced Bolivia to sign an accord that fixed the prices at a given level. After the war, when supply and demand as a price regulator again became beneficial to the tin monopolies, the fixed price system was dropped. Then during the Korean war, when prices soared to \$1.83 a pound because of the rising demand, the U.S. again imposed a fixed \$1.03 a pound.

"Bolivia continued in chronic crisis. When the miners, teachers, students and farmers struck or protested they were met with violence.

"In 1950 the Communist Party was organized in Bolivia, one of the last CP's founded on the continent. The C.P. won a great following among the miners in subsequent years.

The election of the progressive candidate Paz Estenssoro in 1951 was met with an almost immediate military coup d'etat.

Then in April 1952 a new stage of Bolivian history began. An armed insurrection, leading a full scale Revolution, broke out on a national scale. Farmers, workers, students and professional

took on the regular army and defeated it.

"Paz Estenssorro and the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), a heterogeneous party that included both the left and the right, returned to power. Under the impetus of the popular revolution, the MNR proceeded to carry out profound changes.

"In 1952 the government of Paz Estenssorro nationalized the tin mines, passed an agrarian reform law, and established a state monopoly of petroleum.

"But the MNR led by the national bourgeoisie was incapable of carrying out the revolution to its ultimate conclusion: the development of an independent foreign economic and political policy, the ~~diversificat~~ diversification of the economy and the mobilization of the Bolivian people in the struggle to fundamentally transform the country.

"Due to continued dependence on U.S. capital, and internal mismanagement the chronic crisis of the Bolivian economy deepened even further. Tin production fell drastically.

The MNR took a sharp swing to the right with the ascension of Siles Suazo to the presidency, who began in earnest the process of returning the nation to the pre-1952 status quo. A professional ^{INSERT} army was built up with U.S. help; U.S. companies were invited to explore and develop the oil resources; the agrarian reform was pushed aside and never benefited more than 8% of the rural population.

Strikes and demonstrations were met with brute force.

In 1961 Paz Estenssoro was elected again. His early radicalism had turned into a more pro-American policy. More and more he lost the support of the people.

"In 1964 General Barrientos, the vice-president, with U.S. backing, staged a military coup. Barrientos' assumption of power represents the total defeat of the 1952 revolution. The denationalization of the mines is in progress and the peasants are compelled to pay for the land given them under the agrarian reform.

"In 1965 the government replied to the miners' demonstration by bombing villages. Miners' wages have dropped by 40 to 50%."

The Bolivian said earnestly:

"If you understand this history, its hopes, frustrations and lessons you can also understand why we have chosen the path of revolutionary armed insurrection, just as you did against the British in 1776."