

## **Document Profile: "De la dispersion a la unidad"**

**Title:** De la dispersion a la unidad. Volume 4 in the series Historia de los movimientos campesinos en Bolivia

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### **Historical Context:**

As land reforms came into effect in Bolivia starting in 1953, the country quickly moved away from the *hacienda* system under which most of the country's arable land was concentrated into large plantations. Petitions for land redistribution could only be made by syndicates, unions, or otherwise organized groups of at least forty peasants, which gave them enormous political power. The National Confederation of Farm Laborers organized groups of peasants into syndicates. Under the new government, the peasants' obligations to their former landlords were abolished and they were declared owners of the *haciendas* on which they had been working. Landowners often fled from the *haciendas* in fear of retaliatory violence from their former underlings, and waited for title arrangements of the land in the future. These sweeping land distribution reforms were done by reformist governments that used them to give confidence to the peasantry and guarantee political stability in the face of opposition from the traditional elite. Peasants had substantial political power in Bolivia because they were armed by the government and given seats of power at the local, regional, and national levels. In 1952, the army was disarmed and replaced by a peasant militia. These reforms were made to create a system that guaranteed political stability and democratic participation.

The *Historia de los movimientos campesinos en Bolivia* series of pamphlets was written in 1982, a period of transition for Bolivian politics from a decade of intermittent military dictatorships to the realization of democracy. After Hugo Banzer's dictatorship ended in 1978, elections were held each following year, in late 1978, 1979, and 1980, with the military and anti-popular/peasant blocks involved each time to retain hold over the country. In 1981 Luis García Meza's military regime, which had gained power in 1980, lost the support of much of the military in 1981 due to his internationally independent policies that resulted in an economic crisis for the country. Although he tried to remain in power, protest and backlash from civilian and peasant groups such as the Bolivian Workers Center (Central Obrera Boliviana, COB), a lead trade union representing miners and other workers, was finally able to force him out of office and start the transition to democracy. In 1982, a new president was elected by the Congress, Hernán Siles Zuazo. He had won the popular vote in the previous 1980 elections, although the military had disrupted that process. Siles had served as president from 1956-1960 and played a leading role in the Social Revolution of 1952 and the co-founding of the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, MNR). Although Siles's second presidency, much like his first, saw massive economic devastation and inflation, it also brought to an end eighteen years of sporadic military rule over the country.

It seemed important during this time, when Bolivia at last saw the hard work and voices of the working class being heard and making a difference in the political outcome, to share the history of these mobilizing groups and expose the manipulation and violence that previous governments used against them. This pamphlet seems to have been made as a call to Bolivian workers and peasant-groups to continue fighting for their rights and representation despite having achieved temporary success. It

provides a detailed history of how their efforts were previously undermined by external intervention and deception. Although Bolivian politics have not been under the same influence of military intervention as they were between 1964-1982, and the socio-cultural freedoms of peasants and the indigenous have grown, democracy has remained unstable and at risk of corruption since. The labor and indigenous movements, closely aligned due to much overlap between indigenous Bolivians and miners/peasant workers, continue to be at the center of Bolivian democratization. The indigenous movement, focused on ethnic resurgence as well as gaining political and economic rights, was an important force between the 1950s and the turn of the century in the push for socialist reform and equality — eventually leading to the election of the country's first native president, Juan Evo Morales, in 2005. Bolivia's indigenous population is high compared to other Latin American countries, made up of many different ethnicities. Divides between different indigenous ethnicities have historically been used to fracture the greater indigenous movement and limit their representation.

### **Description and Content Summary:**

"De la dispersion a la unidad" covers a ten-year history of the peasant movement in Bolivia. It begins with the September 1969 coup that brought General Aldredo Ovando Candía to power and concludes with the formation of the Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia (Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia, CSUTCB) constitution in May 1979 which consolidated the peasant and indigenous movements with the goal of reclaiming land, freedom, and cultural representation. The pamphlet reveals a period of transition for Bolivia, when the working class fought for greater freedoms, pushed back against military dictatorship and political manipulation, and the country as a whole opened itself up to the prospect of democracy and stability.

The pamphlet walks the reader through the succession of power from Alfredo Ovando Candía to Juan José Torres and then Hugo Banzer, who was president of Bolivia for seven years from 1971 to 1978. It details the distinctions between the more leftist governments of Torres and Ovando from Banzer's dictatorship, and the impacts these governments had for the economy, the working class (specifically focusing on miners), the indigenous movement, peasants, and the environment. This history covers interventions by the Bolivian military, government officials, and anti-popular groups aided by the United States Embassy and other Latin American military groups. It shows how the governments of Ovando and Torres, despite their problems, aimed to represent the peasant and working class and bring them into political decision making while Banzer's regime did the opposite. The contrasts between these three presidencies is contextualized with a summary of the economic instability under each rule, examples of Banzer's government oppressing civilian uprisings, and a general history of the progress made by the labor movement in securing land reform and political freedoms across these political turns in power.

President Ovando attempted to counter the programs of former President René Barrientos Ortuño against the peasant and labor movements. While Barrientos's presidency initially saw economic growth and gains for Bolivian miners and rural workers, this deteriorated in the later years of his rule (1964-1969) with the massacre of miner towns, slashes to the COB's political power, and significant cuts to miners' pay and union abilities. Ovando secured the presidency after the death of Barrientos in 1969, supported by reformist groups. Upon his election, he made it a key priority to appoint reformist leaders to his cabinet. And while Ovando succeeded in giving power back to the COB and dissolving military occupation of Bolivian mines, his presidency did not gain popular support due to economic instability and his belief that the military should be an important force in bringing social justice to the country (a political strategy termed Revolutionary Nationalism). Ultimately, Ovando's revolutionary nationalist

programs divided the military— one of the reasons Torres became popular after Ovando's overthrow in 1970. Torres, president from 1970-1971, attempted more radical change for the working class. Torres established the Popular Assembly (Asamblea Popular), made up of primarily peasant organizations, and nationalized several United States land holdings (primarily mines) to weaken foreign influence in Bolivia. Despite Torres' attempts at social reform, he too struggled to create lasting change due to a general lack of authority or centralized movement. The absence of leadership under Torres's rule caused further polarization within the military and civilian groups, resulting in the August 21 Coup, 1971, which placed former military commander, Hugo Banzer, in office.

The pamphlet explains the political obstacles faced by the National Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia, CNTCB), whose role is protecting the working class and indigenous from capitalist exploitation, outlining progressive land reform (created by the people for the people), and giving political voice to these groups. The internal failings of this group are touched on briefly, mainly their struggle to work outside of a capitalist system, making them less effective as a political tool for those who suffer from this economic system. This organization underwent many transitions in response to a changing, and often repressive, political climate. This pamphlet spans the period from the forming of the 6th Congress of CNTCB, a series of proposals on agrarian reform and peasant representation which died during Banzer's rule, to the formation of the CNTCB's 7th Congress and transition into "The National Confederation of Peasants of Bolivia Tupac Katari". This latter group developed alongside the Tupac Katari Cultural Center— a movement based more heavily around cultural and political representation as well as union protection for peasants and indigenous peoples.

Jenaro Flores Santos, an active leader of the Tupac Katari Cultural Movement and founder of the CSUTCB ( Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia), became the leader of the CNTCB in 1971. In 1973 he guided the Tupac Katari Cultural Center in drafting *The Manifesto of Tiwanaku*, a series of proposals to push for an autonomous peasant and indigenous liberation movement. The pamphlet ends with a quote from the CSUTCB in 1979, the year when, under the guidance of Flores Santos, this unit was founded with the goal of reclaiming indigenous land and political power from the military and government. The quote begins by stating that the indigenous peoples of Bolivia, including Aymara, Chapaco, Quechua, and more, are the rightful owners of the land and will fight to be the subjects of their history not the objects.

### **Significance:**

The pamphlet is easy to read, with pictures dominating the majority of each page. The images give readers context, making the pamphlet more welcoming to a wider audience of readers. Yet, most of the political analysis is gleaned through the text, meaning the intended audience is likely literate.

The graphics include photos and illustrations of Banzer, Torres, and CNTCB leadership, as well as miner's strikes, peasant rallies, and military/government oppression of these movements. There are several illustrations of indigenous peoples raising the Aimara Wiphala, the flag of indigenous Andean peoples of Bolivia, in a call for cultural representation and political freedom. Photos of the military shutting down protests expose the brutality Banzer's government used against civilians, revealing murdered strikers and the violent occupation of indigenous protests. These illustrations bring a bluntness to a history that is often simplified or presented as purely objective in writing.

This pamphlet strongly sides with the CSUTCB and the CNTCB and is written for the peasant and indigenous populations as well as the working class to better understand the history of their fight to

gain economic, political, and cultural representation. While there is not a clear argument being made, it offers important information and themes to be recognized and understood by future peasant and indigenous movements.

The pamphlet largely ignores the viewpoints of the military that carried out the coups and exercised power during the period this text covers. The motivations of the military and how these changed throughout the decades are not clearly stated. The US government is briefly mentioned, but the authors do not explain why the US decided to intervene in Bolivia and support the coup that ousted Torres. Along with this, the perspective of the wealthy and bourgeoisie class is never given, nor are they mentioned. It can be presumed the wealthy and powerful class had a role in the political transformations of Bolivia.

Although the peasants and working class are the protagonists of this text, their push for agrarian land reform, abandonment of the hacienda system, and the nationalization of mines is commonly portrayed as a catalyst for the massive inflation seen between 1952 and 1956 (national inflation rates above 900%) and the stark reduction of agricultural supplies to cities. The shift of economic resources post revolution towards social welfare programs resulted in chaos for the national economy. What was left to fund the revolution in the midst of an economic crisis came from the middle classes, thus they found themselves suffering from a revolution intended to support them financially. The MNR, which lost the support of the middle class because of this economic crisis, is often blamed for the political instability of the country during this time. However, it was largely because of these radical changes over such a short period of time, that the economy crashed and production decreased. In this pamphlet, the MNR is partially faulted for not continuing to push for further social radical reform, but other histories reveal just how difficult it was for them to leverage the support of several different social blocks in order to keep the country from dissolving into chaos again. While the government's decision to seek U.S. aid during this time is criticized, it was necessary in order for them to combat rising starvation and finance necessary social welfare programs such as universal suffrage and education. Although the United States had its own agenda for supplying Bolivia with more aid than any other Latin American country at the time, including establishing beneficial mining deals, this funding allowed the MNR to prevent further violence and social havoc. While the period of 1962 to 1982 is categorized by failure upon failure by the government in enforcing lasting social reform or organization, the peasant, working class, and middle-class blocks were manipulated under new regimes and the divides between these sectors easily exploited to prevent change. This pamphlet explains how peasants and the working class were excluded from political decision making, and while this is true to an extent, it leaves out other narratives from the time which highlight just how internally divided civilian groups were— making it difficult for them to create clear and concise political agendas.

This pamphlet covers, in a very concise manner, one of the most chaotic times for Bolivian politics and social order. It fails to capture the multidimensional factors at play during this time and the responsibility of civilian groups in partially instigating violence and halting reform— not just the corrupt military dictatorships, to which this pamphlet strongly attributes these two decades of political chaos. While there is limited information about the authors of this pamphlet, we can conclude by looking at other historical works that CENSED is strongly aligned with the peasant, working class, and indigenous movements.

What historical questions can this source help answer?

- 1) How did the peasant-movements of the 1970s affect the politics of Bolivia?
- 2) What led to the rise of peasant and indigenous movements in Bolivia?

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**Works Cited**

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