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Bolivia

“We want to govern ourselves”

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Felipe Quispe Huanca was, in the early 1990s, one of the leaders of the Ejército Guerrillero Tupak Katari (Tupak Katari Guerilla Army), an armed organization that took the name of the legendary Aymará leader who besieged the Spanish conquistadors in the city of La Paz at the end of the 18th century. For his participation in this failed experience, Quispe, alias 'El Mallku' (the condor, in the Aymará language) spent five years in jail. There he decided that struggle on the trade union and political front would be more effective. In 1999 he became secretary general of the peasant trade union confederation, the Central Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia.

In 2000, he was at the head of the two indigenous protests that shook the government of Hugo Banzer. An army of hungry peasants blocked the roads of the country in April and September of that year, putting into practice the mythological "war of the six stones", a strategy that consisted in filling the Bolivian roads with thousands of stones of every size, to be replaced again when the Bolivian military removed them.

In this interview, Quispe relates the experiences of struggle of the Bolivian peasant-indigenous movement and outlines the demands of the Pachakuti Indigenous Movement.

"The Bolivian leftist is very fragile, very rickety. If we placed him in a balance, he would weigh nothing", says - with an evident desire to start a controversy - Felipe Quispe, "Mallku", executive secretary of the Confederación Ñšnica de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CUTCB) and leader of the Movimiento IndĀ-gena Pachakuti (MIP).

For Quispe, orthodox Marxism is incapable of explaining the Latin American indigenous reality.

"The Indian must be the social actor in politics and ideology. We cannot simply be voting masses or political supports for the bourgeois parties, the traditional parties that have betrayed us. We want to govern ourselves, we want to reconstruct the Qullasuyu, the communitarian socialist society of the ayllus", he says.

"We have seen that there are other countries where the indigenous movement has its political arm, for example Ecuador or Mexico, where there have also been politico-military arms that have won some victories. In Peru a Movimiento Pachamama is developing, and so on. We have had some contacts with our brothers in Ecuador and other places and with pride they tell us that in five nations we indigenous peoples are the majority. They see that in Mexico, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru and Bolivia the indigenous peoples must liberate themselves. And for this, or as a function of this, we have to work. This is the goal, this is the initiative from Alaska to Patagonia, from the Peruvian coasts to the Brazilian Amazon, where we are spreading..."

Lately there has been a whole theoretical current which questions Marxism, and which raises differences of race or gender above social inequality, or class. How can this tension be resolved?

We know Marxism like the palm of our hand, because Marx saw the communitarian form of the ayllus, or of the indigenous communities, and based himself on that. From the preincanato (the Inca period - ed.), from Tiwanaco, the ayllu was structured as a community without capital, and until now there has been no capital in some communities, there is barter! I give you my production and you give me your production, we exchange as equals, in horizontal and not vertical form. This reciprocity exists, this distribution, then, still lives.

You are thinking of an Indoamerican reading of Marxism, like for example Mariátegui?

Something like that. Nobody is perfect. We have a great thinker, Fausto Reinaga, who we gave us enough as theory. But also if we take this path we have enemies who say that we are racists, that we want to eliminate the whites, that we would be replacing a system of white racism with Indian racism. That won't happen, we don't think like that, they are very worried about the fact that indianismo advances and is gaining strength. The truth is that we never were racist. We always argued for equality of conditions. That's why when visitors from the city arrive in the communities, they are given the best treatment, we have to give them good food, we dance with them to our music. Never have we discriminated. Nevertheless, when we come from the country to the cities the whites discriminate against us.

But for example, could the indigenous movement establish an alliance with the new Aymara employers?

Look, if we found the names and the surnames, the "mamanis" and "condoris", the "quispes", if we look right now and they are in the Confederation of Private Employers, then we would be against them, but this isn't the case. If it was, then we would also have to get rid of them, because we cannot allow this inequality while our brother is in rags, while in the countryside our brothers have no electric light, no roads, no telephone or internet or fax, no roof over their heads...We do not have hospitals or sanitary places, then we cannot have this inequality. So we cannot agree with them to have a movement, no. It has to be a movement essentially of the poor.

Then the project of a socialist society of the ayllus is not compatible with capitalist society...

No, no. They are totally antagonistic systems.

From the theoretical point of view, the industrial working class was considered as the vanguard of the political fight for liberation. In Bolivia, for many years, the mining working class was the vanguard of that fight. At the moment this seems to have changed, because of the combativity of the indigenous masses and farmers.

It is obvious that in Bolivia there was a mining majority here, I do not have the exact number in my head, but in 1960 it was more than 50,000 workers. Then it was a driving force that placed itself in the vanguard, but as the COB (Bolivian Workers' Confederation) was controlled by Juan LechÁ-n (and Juan LechÁ-n was an agent of the CIA then, an agent of imperialism), it could never lead the working class to power. For example, I remember that in 1964 there were miners in the street and they had paralysed the city. And one wondered where the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (Revolutionary Workers Party) was so that they could distribute, so that they could organise... and they were hidden underneath the polleras (skirts) of their women, because nobody appeared!

What happened to the combativity of the miners then?

Well, with the supreme decree (21060, which officially installed neo-liberalism in Bolivia) they were eliminated, they stopped being a vanguard because there were no workers here. Also you have to take into account that here the roots, the ancestral trunk is Aymara and Quechua. It's not like in Europe, where the boss is white and the worker is also. Here it is not like that, the bricklayer is indigenous here, the person cleaning the walls is indigenous and the maid is indigenous. However, with this we are not rejecting the working class. We have our flag of seven colours, the wilpala, and the red flag could be alongside it because we are brothers; we are people who have come from the communities and have become workers, but when they are booted out of the factories or the mines, they return to the communities. We have leaders who have been miners. This is our reality. And now there are no workers, we are obliged to play an important role and to be protagonists.

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Interview from Resumen Latinoamericano, with the collaboration of its correspondent in Bolivia, Felipe Guamán.