

Before April 2000, few people outside of Bolivia had ever heard of Cochabamba. Four months into the new century that changed. Against all odds – standing down soldiers, resisting a declaration of martial law, and rising up against a wave of worship-the-market economic theology – South America’s poorest people evicted one of the world’s wealthiest corporations and took back something simple and basic – their water.

The World Bank laid the foundation for privatization in the mid-1990s, by ‘offering’ a \$14 million loan to expand water service if Cochabamba’s water was placed under corporate control. The resulting contract with US corporation Bechtel was a sweet deal. The agreement guaranteed the company an average profit of 16 per cent annually over the 40-year life of the contract. The company was also to be given control over hundreds of rural irrigation systems and community wells that had been built by local people without government help. Water bills increased by up to 400 per cent. People were even charged for collecting rainwater from their roofs.

The outraged population began organizing, forming a group known as the Coordinadora. They became convinced that they needed to campaign not just for rolling back water rates to repealing the contract altogether and putting Cochabamba’s water under direct public control.

In March, Coordinadora leaders took up an organizing strategy pioneered by activists in Mexico – the consulta popular. For three days activists set up small tables in plazas and other public gathering places throughout the region to survey residents with a simple question – should the water contract be cancelled? The answer, by a vote of over 90 per cent, was a resounding yes. Cancellation of Bechtel’s contract became the main demand. This was bold, to say the least. Nowhere else on earth had popular protest succeeded in reversing such a major privatization deal. But Cochabamba was about to make history.

The Water Is Ours, Dammit!

by Jim Shultz

Mountains of silver

Bolivia’s experience with the darker forces of globalization began centuries ago, in another Andean city – Potosí. There, in 1545, a modest hill was discovered to be, quite literally, a mountain of silver. For nearly three centuries Spanish colonialists mined the hill, Cero Rico or Rich Hill, of enough silver to virtually bankroll the Spanish empire. They also left behind, in the words of Eduardo Galeano, “eight million Indian corpses”. Slave miners were sent into the pitch dark and stale depths for as long as six months at a time. Many of those who survived went blind from re-exposure to sunlight. Bolivia’s first lesson about globalization was this one – a people blessed by the Earth with one of the largest single sources of mineral wealth in the history of the planet ended up the poorest nation in South America.

This memory of horrific abuse and the theft of wealth across the sea was not lost on the Bolivian soul when, in the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) decided to make Bolivia a laboratory for their own modern experiments in global economics. World Bank water officials believe in privatization the way other people believe in Jesus, Mohammed, Moses, and Buddha. So they focused their most aggressive campaign for privatization on the public water system of Bolivia’s third largest city, Cochabamba.

“The Bolivian government would rather respond to the directives of the World Bank than take into account what the people themselves consider to be their needs. The heart of the problem is this: who decides about the present and the future of the people, resources, work and living conditions. We, with respect to water, want to decide for ourselves: this is what we call democracy.”

– communication from the Coordinadora, 28 January 2000

In September 1999, in a closed-door process with just one bidder, Bolivian officials leased off Cochabamba’s water until the year 2039, to a mysterious new company named Aguas del Tunari – which was later revealed to be a subsidiary of the California engineering giant, Bechtel. Just weeks after taking over, the company hit local families with rate increases of up to 200 per cent and sometimes higher. Workers living on the local minimum wage of \$60 per month were told to pay as much as \$15 just to keep the water running out of their tap.

The water war begins

Even before the huge rate hikes were introduced, a citizens’ movement began forming to challenge the privatization, a

group which came to be known as *La Coordinadora*. Its leadership came from the local factory workers’ union, irrigators and farmers, environmental groups, local economists, progressive members of Congress, and a broad base at the grassroots. *La Coordinadora* was both urban and rural, both poor and middle class.

In November 1999, the Federation of Irrigators, furious about the planned give-away of water systems they had dug with their own hands, staged a 24-hour blockade of the highways leading in and out of Cochabamba. “Our objective was to test what capacity we had to fight,” recalls Omar Fernandez, leader of the irrigators’ union. “We found out that our base wanted to move faster than even our leadership. In [the small town of] Vinto they blockaded the highway for 48 hours.” After the blockades, the rural water users formed an alliance with urban users concerned about Bechtel’s take-over of the city water system and on 12 November 1999 *La Coordinadora* for the Defence of Water and Life was born.

In January 2000, after the water company announced its huge rate increases, *La Coordinadora* sprang out of nowhere

ballot which would give prosecutors the power to decide whether children as young as 14 are tried and jailed as adults. 175 people, mostly high school students and their parents, are arrested at the Hilton in what is referred to as “the first hip-hop generation sit-in”.

>> March 12 >> Over a million people in Spain take part in an unofficial referendum on ‘Third World’ debt. More than 97 per cent vote in favour of Spain’s

cancellation of external debt with poor countries. The referendum goes ahead despite the Spanish Electoral Committee’s ban and despite attempts by the police to shut down voting booths.

>> March 16 >> Pressured by the IMF, the Costa Rican government passes a law allowing the privatization of the state telecommunications company. Widespread protests erupt, resulting in five protesters being shot,

one killed, and 60 police officers injured as riot police clash with demonstrators. At least 100 students are arrested. Days later, 40 protests take place all around the country. The following week, 10,000 people descend on the presidential residence demanding the withdrawal of the bill.

>> March 27 >> Three thousand people, including undocumented migrants, occupy trains to take them

with its first public action, a city-wide *paro*, a general strike. For three days Cochabamba was shut down. Blockades closed down the two main highways leading in and out of town, eliminating bus transportation and food shipments. The airport was shut. Roadblocks cut off all traffic in the city. Thousands of Cochabambinos occupied the tree-lined, colonial central plaza. At one corner of the plaza *La Coordinadora* set up its headquarters in the ragged offices of the local factory workers' union and hung a wide banner from the third floor balcony. Bright red with white letters the banner carried the city's new rallying cry, '¡El Agua es Nuestra Carajo!', The Water is Ours Dammit!

"Men and women of Cochabamba, rights cannot be begged for, they must be fought for. No one is going to fight for ours. We will fight together for what is just or we will tolerate the humiliation of bad government."

– **declaration to Cochabambinos from the Coordinadora, January 2000**

Just across the plaza sat the offices of Cochabamba's regional governor, an appointee of the President. After a day of refusing to recognize the *Coordinadora* as a legitimate organization, the governor agreed to meet its leaders. During the negotiations the governor could hear the angry chants of thousands of protesters, quite literally at his door. The government finally signed an agreement to review the water company's contract and the new water law, if the protest was suspended. *Coordinadora* leaders gave the government three weeks.

As is political custom in Bolivia, the government broke

its word. As January turned to February, no change in the rates was forthcoming and the people of Cochabamba were refusing to pay their bills to Bechtel. The company, growing desperate, threatened to shut off people's water. The *Coordinadora* announced that it would stage a take-over of the city's central plaza once again, on 4 February.

What was planned was a simple lunchtime protest to remind the government that the people were still watching. Several hundred protesters would march to the plaza, hear some speeches, prod the government to keep its word, and then go back to work. "We told the minister of government, 'Nothing is going to happen,'" says Oscar Olivera, head of the Cochabamba Factory Workers' Union and one of the *Coordinadora*'s most visible leaders. "It is a take-over with white flags, with flowers and bands, like a party."

The government announced that the protest was not going to be allowed and on the morning of the fourth, more than 1,000 heavily armed police and soldiers took control of the city's centre, almost all brought in from other cities (as Cochabamba police could not be counted on to take such a hard line against their own relatives). For the people of Cochabamba, even those who may not have been sympathetic to the water revolt before that, the invasion of police was akin to a declaration of war. Not only was the government refusing to rollback the company's huge price hikes, now it was protecting Bechtel's increases with tear gas and guns.

For two days central Cochabamba turned into a war zone. Every block leading to the plaza was converted into a mini-

battle field. At one end, police outfitted in full riot gear blocked the streets with tear gas cannons. At the other end, protestors – young people, old people, poor and middle class – held their ground with rocks and slingshots. Many wore the impromptu uniform of vinegar-soaked bandanas over the mouth and nose, and baking soda under the eyes as protection against the gas.

“The cost of the repression: a six month supply of tear gas was used, 3,840 tear gas grenades, on the first day of the repression. Each grenade costs between \$5 and \$10.... On Friday \$28,000 was spent on tear gas grenades alone. The second day, fewer tear gas grenades were used because their reserves had been depleted... 5,600 grenades were used over the two days of the conflict, at a cost of approximately \$42,000. Eighty police officers arrived from La Paz, each having received \$7 per day for food and other needs. It cannot be confirmed but is it supposed that each police officer who participated in the repression received a bonus of \$35. The government also incurred costs for a small plane and for the leaflets which were distributed by this means during the first days of the conflict.” – Los Tiempos, 8 February 2000

from Italy to Paris to participate in the Solidarity and Open Borders in Europe demonstration. Everyone travels without identification or travel documents in support of the free movement of citizens regardless of nationality or income. The train drivers union, on strike that day, grant an exception and guarantee their journey to the French border. The train is stopped nine miles from the border and all crossings without

documents are banned by the Prime Minister, despite the Schengen Agreement which guarantees EU citizens freedom of movement within the EU. The protestors walk to the border and are trapped in a tunnel by French riot police and Foreign Legion soldiers.

>> **April 13** >> A demonstration in Nairobi, Kenya calling for debt relief and an end to the IMF's economic conditions is broken up by riot police with 63 protesters

As the conflicts continued, the doors of middle class homes would open up and bowls of food and water would appear, an offering of support to those standing up to the government in the streets. In two days more than 175 people were wounded, most all victims of tear gas canisters or police beatings. The government lost whatever public legitimacy it had on the issue. It announced an agreement with the company to invoke a temporary rate rollback for six months. The Coordinadora had won its first victory.

The final battle

In April the Coordinadora announced what it called *La Ultima Batalla*, the Final Battle. On Tuesday 4 April, Cochabamba was shut down again for the third time in four months by an indefinite general strike and blockade of the highways. The Coordinadora issued two key demands – cancellation of the water company's contract and repeal of the national law through which the government planned to give Bechtel control over wells and rural irrigation systems.

On Thursday, after Cochabamba had been shut down for two days, government officials finally agreed to sit down to

arrested, including 13 nuns and 2 priests. Brother Andre, one of the priests, later writes, “The IMF and World Bank have power over the financial decisions of poor countries. Poor countries have totally lost their autonomy. They are often recolonized, with the powerful countries dictating the terms.”

>> **April 10** >> After a fierce and bloody struggle, the people of Cochabamba, Bolivia regain control over their



Stand-off during the water wars. Cochabamba, Bolivia

talk with *Coordinadora* leaders, in negotiations moderated by Cochabamba's Catholic Archbishop, Tito Solari. Late that night *Coordinadora* leaders began their talks in the state's offices, with the governor, the city mayor, the Archbishop and other officials. Suddenly police, under orders from the national government in La Paz, burst in and put the *Coordinadora* leaders under arrest. "It was a trap by the government to have us all together, negotiating, so that we could be arrested," says Olivera, who was among those taken into custody. Bishop Solari locked himself in his own office for the night, telling reporters that if the *Coordinadora* was under arrest, so was he.

"We aren't going to forget what they have done to us."

– Citizen cited in *Pulso*, 11 February 2000

On Friday, after the *Coordinadora* leaders were released, Cochabamba residents expected a military take-over of the city at any moment. Bolivia's president, Hugo Banzer, who had ruled as dictator during the 1970s, was well known for his easy use of political repression. The atmosphere in the city was incredibly tense, especially in the central plaza

where news of the arrests the night before had drawn a gathering of more than 10,000 people. Many were locals, but thousands of others had marched in long distances from the countryside and had been there for days. Community by community they arrived, to great cheers, each group carrying a banner bearing the name of their *pueblo*. One rural town official, who had marched 44 miles to get to Cochabamba, told me, "This is a struggle for justice, and for the removal of an international business that, even before offering us more water, has begun to charge us prices that are outrageously high."

A meeting was announced for 4.00 pm between the Governor and the *Coordinadora*, to be mediated by Archbishop Solari. After midday it was announced that the Governor would sit down once more with *Coordinadora* leaders, this time in the offices of the Bishop. When word spread that the Governor had failed to show, people in the plaza feared the worst. A half dozen teenage boys climbed to the bell tower of the city's Cathedral, tying ropes to the bells so that they could be rung as a warning when soldiers started to invade the city.

water supply and evict US corporation Bechtel, which had imposed rate hikes of 400 per cent.

>> **April 15-17** >> Thirty thousand converge in Washington DC, US, to protest the World Bank / IMF annual meeting. Groups from across the world are represented, including affected peoples from South Africa, Guatemala, Haiti, the Philippines, Nigeria, Uganda, and Eastern Europe, as well as labour unions,

church groups, NGOs, students and more. During the lock-down blockades, a 1,000 strong Black Bloc keeps on the move all day, keeping the cops distracted, and providing welcome solidarity to activists holding intersections. A total of 678 are arrested and report widespread abuses in prison. Though unsuccessful at blockading the meetings entirely, the protests lead to widespread debate in the media. Parallel protests are

held in several countries including South Africa, Hungary, Turkey, and Kenya.

>> **April 26** >> Scores of protesters in Lusaka, Zambia's capital, demanding an end to IMF austerity measures, picket the hotel where the IMF is meeting with the government. Organized by a leading civil society group, Women for Change (WfC), the protesters blame the IMF and World Bank for continued poverty in their country.

In his plaza office, Governor Hugo Galindo could hear the angry crowd outside. Windows had already been broken on the front of the building. A fire was set against the giant wooden main entrance door. At the hour he was supposed to have met with *Coordinadora* leaders, instead he telephoned his superiors in La Paz. He explained that he saw no alternatives except cancellation of the contract or an all out war between the people and government. He recommended that the contract be cancelled. Banzer's people were noncommittal. Galindo then called Bishop Solari, sitting in his office with *Coordinadora* leaders. He told the Bishop that he had urged the President to cancel the contract. When Bishop Solari relayed that message to Olivera and other *Coordinadora* leaders it got transformed into something more dramatic – that the company was leaving.

Minutes later, still wearing a vinegar-soaked red bandana around his neck and with white smudges of baking soda under his eyes, Olivera emerged from a third floor balcony over the plaza. “We have arrived at the moment of an important economic victory over neoliberalism,” he yelled with a hoarse voice to the crowd, which erupted in a cheer that rivalled thunder. He thanked the neighbourhoods, the transportation workers, people from the countryside, university students, and others who had made the battle and the victory possible. Cochabambinos celebrated in the streets. Archbishop Solari presided over a packed service of celebration in the Cathedral.

Within hours, events took a dark and unexpected turn. Banzer's spokesman refused to confirm the company's

“For many years, governments felt that the supply of fresh water and the safe disposal of wastewater were matters which were too important to be left to business. Now we all know better. International Water has already shown that powerful resources applied skillfully by conscientious private enterprise can lift a huge burden from the shoulders of governments, and so transform the lives of citizens. Together, we serve a public which likes what we do.”

– website of International Water, a subsidiary of Bechtel

departure. Bechtel's local representatives faxed notices to the press declaring that they weren't leaving. At midnight Governor Galindo went on TV live, told city residents that he didn't want to be responsible for a “blood bath”, and resigned. Bands of police started to appear at the doors of *Coordinadora* leaders and their families, arresting all those they could find. Seventeen people were arrested, put on a plane in Cochabamba, and flown off to a mosquito-infested jail in Bolivia's remote eastern jungle. Those that escaped arrest, including Fernandez and Olivera, went into hiding.

On Saturday morning, panicked city residents scrambled to local markets, which had been closed for four days, to stock up on food. At 10.00 am President Hugo Banzer, the former dictator, declared a state of emergency, initiating martial law. Soldiers shut off TV and radio broadcasts. A whole section of the city, the hillside where antennas continued to broadcast news, had its power cut off, taking most of the remaining stations off the air. A curfew was instituted. Public meetings of more than two people were banned. Cochabamba was under a dictatorship.

“What can we do when they charge us so much for water that does not even reach our houses? We had to fight in whatever way we could. Of course, what we have seen is that we are fighting between brothers, but they have not left us any other option.”

- Cochabambino quoted in *Opinión*, 7 April 2000

The public response was quick and furious. Even with its leaders under arrest and in hiding, the *Coordinadora* called for an immediate reinstitution of the road blockades and work stoppages. In my neighbourhood an old woman with a bent back laid out rocks in our street to block it. Young

people, dubbed “the water warriors”, headed back downtown to challenge Banzer’s troops. Women travelled door to door to collect rice and other food to cook for the people who remained camped in the plaza.

By Saturday afternoon the conflict turned violent. Protesters set fire to a vacant state office building, sending a huge plume of black smoke into Cochabamba’s clear blue sky. Soldiers switched from using tear gas to live rounds. A local television station captured footage of an army captain, Robinson Iriarte de La Fuente, a graduate of the US School of the Americas, disguised in plain clothes as he shot live rounds into a crowd of protesters. He was tried later in a Bolivian military court, and was acquitted, then promoted to Major, even though his flying bullets coincided exactly with the time an unarmed seventeen-year-old boy, Victor Hugo Daza, was killed by a bullet through the face. His companions brought his bloody body to the plaza and held an angry, emotional wake.

Cochabamba had reached a bloody stand-off. President Banzer, who now faced spreading protests on other issues in cities all across the nation, made it clear that he was not

“The IMF are killing us, especially women and children,” says Emily Sikazwe of WfC. The protesters are eventually dispersed by armed riot police.

>> **April 26** >> Workers belonging to the Confederation of Turkish Labour Unions begin a walk to Ankara to protest against privatization, to demand their union rights and employment security as well as an end to political labour discrimination. The Confederation’s

Aegean Region chairman Mustafa Kundakci says; “We are walking for workers’ rights and to reject the government’s economic policy. This march is the last warning for the Government. If it does not listen to the workers, we will turn Turkey to ashes.”

>> **May 6** >> The Asian Development Bank (ADB) meeting in a luxury hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand, is blockaded by farmers and students calling for ADB

loans to Thailand to be scrapped. Thai police say they had never seen such a determined crowd, as 5,000 activists break through police lines and crowd control barriers during the opening ceremonies. Later, 100 students manage to scale the wall of the hotel. Weeraporn Sopa, the 33-year-old leader of a farmers’ confederation from Thailand’s northeast, said the demonstration built on the WTO Seattle protests he

about to cancel a contract with a major multinational corporation. His public relations staff went to work to spin a false story to foreign reporters that the price increases had only been 20 per cent and that the Cochabamba protests were being orchestrated by “narcotraffickers” intent on destabilizing the government. The people of Cochabamba were also not about to back down. The streets were still getting fuller.

Meanwhile, while Bolivians were shedding blood, the water company’s foreign owners and managers were escaping accountability altogether. The foreign managers sent in to run the company were laying low in a five star hotel, insistent in their demand to control the water, watching the suffering on television, and hanging up on reporters who got hold of their cell phone numbers. It was then that we decided that the company’s vague connection to Bechtel was worth another look.

On Sunday morning, as a funeral service was being held for Victor Hugo Daza downtown, I began looking into the Bechtel-Bolivia connection via the internet. After two hours of examining the webpages of Bechtel and its assortment of international shells and subsidiaries we had the smoking gun. Bechtel was not only a player in the Bolivian water company, it had been its founder and 55 per cent controlling owner. We used The Democracy Center’s large email network to send alerts to thousands of activists worldwide, calling on them to pressure Bechtel to leave the country. We also gave them the personal email address of Bechtel’s President and CEO, Riley Bechtel.

On Monday the confrontations continued, though more peacefully than on the bloody weekend. That afternoon the government made an announcement. Bechtel officials had left the country and the government declared the contract cancelled. The city celebrated as it would have a World Cup soccer victory, with cars parading along Cochabamba’s avenues with horns blaring. The *Coordinadora*’s leaders came out of hiding and were flown back from their jail in the jungle, greeted as heroes.

“There is a sort of rebirth of people’s capacity to believe. People want to have faith in themselves again, something that neoliberalism had taken from us. Before, we had to believe in the ‘expert’, in the sort that barely speaks Spanish, who speaks English instead, in the way they speak at Harvard.”

– A. Garcia in *Pulso*, May 2000

In the wake of Bechtel’s departure, Cochabamba’s water company, SEMAPA, was turned over to a public board appointed by the *Coordinadora* and Cochabamba’s city government. Water rates were rolled back to what they had been before Bechtel’s price hikes and local water users lined up to pay their bills. *Coordinadora* leaders turned from the high drama of street protest to the headaches of trying to make a water company work more efficiently. Management and system problems remained, but a series of new neighbourhoods were added to the water grid and the company accomplished something else extraordinary. Even at the pre-Bechtel rates, Cochabamba’s water company was operating in the black. It also began qualifying for loans,

from the Inter-American Development Bank and others, to allow for expansion of the water system. Even the powers of international finance had begun to accept that, in Cochabamba, the water was to remain in public hands.

Why they fought and why they won

“They want to make us believe that the privatization of water is going to save us, that it is a lifesaver. As if we don’t have experience with privatization? Privatization is total chaos, privatization has failed in Bolivia. Now we see that the corporations, the corrupt and the politicians work together against the people.”

– Cochabambino on the radio, 5 February 2000

“The privatization of the water was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” says Tom Kruse, a US researcher who lives in Cochabamba and was an active advisor to the *Coordinadora*. Cochabambinos had endured one privatization after another, always with resistance by those directly affected – the airline workers union, for example – but never with enough force to make a difference. The revolt over water was a revolt over everything, a reaction to official corruption, economic decline, and the clear and

broad belief that the government was looking out for everyone but the people. In one neighbourhood a sixteen-year-old boy explained to me how he received his political awakening over a piece of bread. “My mother sent me to the store one morning to buy bread but told me she had no money, not even one Boliviano [about 15 cents at the time] to pay for it. She told me to ask the storeowner if we could pay later. I thought to myself, ‘How can it be that my mother works so hard and we don’t even have even one Boliviano to buy bread?’ It was then that I realized something was really wrong.” When the *Coordinadora* came to his neighbourhood to organize resistance to the water privatization, he saw his chance to do something.

“Older people told us stories about the dictatorships but we had never been directly involved in struggles like those,” explains Leny Olivera [no relation to Oscar], a 23-year-old university student. She adds, “I think it was a way for our generation to show our courage.”

Water is something essential to life, not like an aeroplane or even electricity in a poor country. People know that if they lose control of their water they lose control of their lives. The

attended. “I have to warn the ADB and organizations like it – they should listen to us. When you still have a conscience, you can control the streets.”

>> **May 10** >> Half of South Africa’s work force – 200,000 people, since eight out of ten are unemployed – honor a general strike across the country, demanding an end to neoliberal policies which have resulted in mass job losses.

>> **May 12** >> Eight thousand Honduran hospital workers go on strike, demanding a pay raise after the IMF mandates cuts, including the privatization of telecommunications, electricity, social security, and the pension system. 28 public hospitals and 500 clinics are affected, and riot police are deployed in and around the hospitals to maintain order.

>> **May 15** >> Labour unionists and human-rights

activists in Zomba, Malawi try to march to the New State House, where a consultative group of Western donor countries are meeting government officials. The protesters, carrying placards protesting against the effects of structural adjustment, are stopped by police and dispersed by tear gas.

>> **May 15** >> In Ecuador the National Educators’ Union goes on strike for five weeks over the proposed

Coordinadora gave people a hope that was new. It also unified people from the rural areas and people from the city, which was absolutely key. “Many people say it is impossible to fight against the neoliberal model,” says Leny Olivera, the university student. “But we showed that you can, not just in Bolivia but in the world. The humble people are the majority and are more powerful than multinational corporations.”

Birth of an international symbol

“The other great success of this movement is that we have lost our fear. We left our houses and our communities in order to talk among ourselves, in order to get to know one another, in order to learn to trust one another again. We occupied the streets and highways because we are their true owners. We did it counting only upon ourselves. No-one paid us, no-one sent us orders or fined us. For us, urban and rural workers, this is the true meaning of democracy: we decide and do, discuss and carry out. We risked our lives in order to complete what we proposed, that which we consider just. Democracy is the sovereignty of the people and that is what we have achieved.”

– communication of the *Coordinadora*, 6 February 2000

In the end it was a revolt not just about water but about arrogance, against an attitude by the World Bank, Bechtel, and Banzer that said, “You are losing control of your water and you are going to pay more for it, take it and shut up.” In its aftermath, Cochabamba’s water revolt became an international symbol, a modern day victory of a humble David against a giant corporate Goliath. The water revolt drew broad international media attention. Oscar Olivera

was awarded the prestigious international Goldman Prize for environmental activism. Cochabamba became synonymous with the struggle for global economic justice, a source of great inspiration and hope. How the water revolt went from being a local struggle to an international icon is a story in itself, the product of the internet, a great story, and the luck of great timing.

The only international reporting directly from the scene was mine. I was in Cochabamba because that is my home. Each morning as the revolt deepened I would walk down the long hill into the city centre and to the centre of the protests to get the story. Then I would walk back up the hill in the afternoon and send out dispatches to the 2,000 press outlets and activist organizations on The Democracy Centre’s email list. How far and fast these spread through the internet was astonishing. My reports were syndicated by Pacific News Service and picked up by publications all across the US and Canada. These stories later sparked other writers, from the *New Yorker*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, to write their own stories.

More importantly, activists from all over the world picked up Cochabamba’s fight and made it their own, sending my alerts far and wide and pummeling Bechtel with messages of “Get out!” Water activists in New Zealand received my alerts and asked what they could do help. With the revolt still raging across Bolivia, activists in Auckland got hold of a fire truck, covered it with anti-Bechtel and anti-Banzer signs, drove to the Bolivian consulate and before the amazed eyes of local media, hosed it down at high pressure. They sent pictures of the event to us in Cochabamba which we

gave to the local press. One Cochabamba daily, *Gente*, dedicated its first three pages to the story, amazing Cochabambinos with the fact that their local rebellion was drawing the attention of the world.

Also, quite by accident, it turned out that Cochabamba's revolt over water was unfolding just as tens of thousands of young people a hemisphere away were on their way to Washington DC to protest at the joint meeting of the World Bank and IMF, the first major globalization action since Seattle five months earlier. With Oscar Olivera in hiding to avoid government capture, my colleague Tom Kruse came up with the idea that we could buy him some political protection by getting groups in the US to invite Oscar to attend the events in Washington. The idea was never that Oscar would go but that these invitations, which we gave to the Bolivian press, might make the government hesitant to arrest someone who now had an international profile.

On Wednesday, with the water revolt just ended and with the smell of tear gas still hanging thick over the city centre, Oscar told us that he thought he really should go to Washington, to share Cochabamba's story. The Washington

protests were just two days away and Oscar had neither a Bolivian passport nor an entry visa from the US (which generally take months to secure if they can be gotten at all). On Thursday morning Oscar went to the local passport office which, by chance, was run by an old schoolmate, and got his passport in less than an hour. Later that day, Oscar and Tom flew to La Paz to attempt the impossible task of convincing the US Embassy that it ought to grant an immediate entry visa to a man wearing a Che Guevara wristwatch who had just led the eviction of a major US corporation. While they were waiting, I received a call from a reporter for a major newspaper chain in the US, begging for help to secure an interview with Oscar. I suggested a bargain. If he would agree to call the US Ambassador and ask if she were going to give Oscar a visa, I would set up the interview. He agreed and a few hours later Oscar strolled out the Embassy doors with the seal of the US stamped in his fresh passport. On Friday Oscar, Tom, and I flew to Washington.

By Sunday, Oscar was at the head of a procession of thousands through the streets of the capital of the most powerful country in the world. Just a week earlier he had

IMF cuts in spending and salaries. President Noboa says he will take a tough stance: "I'm willing to go all the way with this. If they want to strike for a year, let them do it. We're not going to back down."

Protests by teachers in Quito are dispersed by riot police using tear gas.

>> **May 24** >> In Genoa, Italy 10,000 people respond to a call to action against a gathering of pro-GMO

scientists and corporate leaders. Among the protesters are members of India's KRRS, and members of Tute Bianche who wear full body padding and carry shields, demanding the right to enter the exhibition hall to debate the issues. Despite a helicopter flying only 33 feet above their heads, and constant attack by police, they manage to push the police line back to the entrance of the hall and block it. The conference is shut

down for the rest of the day. The Italian government withdraws its endorsement of the event, and eventually bans GMOs from the country. The media christen the event "Italy's Seattle".

>> **May 29** >> Thousands of Bolivians block the nation's most important highway in Alto, the poorest city in the poorest country in Latin America. They issue three separate demands: the creation of an autonomous



The clampdown is resisted across the city. Cochabamba, Bolivia

been in hiding, and Bolivia was under a state of martial law. Walking next to him I asked Oscar, “So, what do you think of the United States?” He paused a minute and said to me in Spanish, “Es como Cochabamba. Hay policias y jóvenes en todo lado.” It is just like Cochabamba. There are young people and police everywhere.

Epilogue – the water war, round two

In November 2001 the Bechtel Corporation launched round two in the Cochabamba water war, filing a lawsuit of \$25 million against Bolivia in a secret trade court operated by the World Bank, the same institution that forced the Cochabamba privatization to begin with. “We’re not looking for a windfall from Bolivia. We’re looking to recover our costs,” explains Michael Curtin, the head of Bechtel’s Bolivian water company. However, Bechtel didn’t invest anything close to \$25 million in Bolivia in the few months it operated in Cochabamba. Bechtel officials paid for its rental cars and five star hotel rooms with funds from the public water company it took over and Bechtel left behind an unpaid electric bill of \$90,000. Bechtel currently masquerades as a Dutch company, shifting its Bolivian registration to an Amsterdam post office box in hopes of getting covered by a Bolivia-Holland treaty that makes the Bank the arbiter of their investment disputes. With such an obvious sham, it’s clear that just as the water revolt became an international symbol in the struggle against privatization, Bechtel vs. Bolivia will become an international symbol for everything wrong with rigged international trade law.

“After having been passive in the selling off of 60 per cent of our economy, we have finally reacted. What we have done means that we have redeemed our honour, in order to construct a common home with our own ideas and our own hands...” – editorial in *Opinión*, 8 April, 2000

The stakes in the Bechtel vs. Bolivia case are high. \$25 million is what Bechtel earns in half a day. In Bolivia that is the annual cost for hiring 3,000 rural doctors, or 12,000 public school teachers, or hooking up 125,000 families who don't have access to the public water system. But the stakes in this case go well beyond Bolivia. The World Bank's secret trade court is the prototype for the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The same tool Bechtel is using today against Bolivia could be used by other corporations to repeal environmental laws in California, health regulations in

university, repeal of IMF-imposed tax-reforms, and revocation of increases in charges for electricity, fuel, and sewage systems. About 20,000 people converge at City Hall, where they are tear gassed by police. Chanting slogans denouncing the genocidal former dictator and current president Hugo Banzer, they enter the building and smash furniture, computers and windows, setting fire to the building. Police disperse the crowd hours

later and arrest six people.

>> **May 31** >> Protests against the IMF austerity plan in Argentina which will raise taxes, reduce social spending, and cut salaries, culminate with 100,000 people taking to the streets of Buenos Aires. Protesters liken the IMF to a financial dictatorship and promise “fiscal disobedience” by refusing to pay taxes, which have jumped from 8 to 22 per cent.

Québec, and worker protections in Venezuela – all in the name of knocking down barriers to trade.

In August 2002 more than 300 citizen groups from 41 different countries launched their own round two in the Bolivian water revolt, filing an International Citizens' Petition with the World Bank, demanding that the doors of its secret trade court be opened up to public scrutiny and participation. “The Bolivian water revolt has had an enormous impact on the global fight for water rights,” says Maude Barlow [of the Council of Canadians]. “Many people feel that if some of the planet's poorest and disenfranchised people could stand up to the World Bank and Bechtel, so can all of us. The personal stories of heroism and struggle of the Bolivian people are very powerful and have been recited over and over all around the world.”

Jim Shultz is executive director of The Democracy Centre, based in Cochabamba, Bolivia. He also writes extensively on globalization issues and is president of an 80-child orphanage. He retains the copyright to this piece. Contact him directly if you wish to reprint it. JShultz@democracyctr.org

>> **June 4-6** >> The US-Canada border is shut down on the occasion of the meeting of the Organization of American States in Windsor, Canada, preventing thousands from demonstrating against the planning session for the FTAA. The Canadian Auto Workers join members of the US and Canadian steelworkers' unions, service employees and Ontario public employees in the streets. The meeting is