COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, REBELLION, AND THE PROGRESSIVE STATE: NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS IN EL ALTO, BOLIVIA

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Introduction

Visitors to La Paz in August 2004 experienced a rare event: a day without car horns, gasoline fumes, and traffic congestion in a major Latin American capital city. A strike by transportation workers protesting an increase in gasoline prices had sparked a series of road blockades, converting major downtown arteries into impromptu soccer fields and pedestrian-friendly boulevards.

Soon the streets were filled with thousands of indigenous demonstrators demanding the nationalization of gas. Women in traditional wide skirts and bowler hats discoursed eloquently on the link between the lack of basic neighborhood services (including cooking gas) and the role of transnational corporations in exploiting Bolivia’s natural resources. To a progressive urban planner, even more remarkable was the realization that these groups were marching for nationalization under the banners of their local neighborhood councils—chapters of FEJUVE (the Federation of Neighborhood Councils), a grassroots community organization in the neighboring indigenous city of El Alto.

In fact, during the tumultuous “Gas Wars” of 2003–5, while many groups (including campesinos, coca-growers, workers, and students) participated in the broad-based social movements that brought down two neoliberal governments and ultimately elected Evo Morales as Bolivia’s first indigenous president, the role played by FEJUVE-El Alto was decisive.

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1 An earlier version of this article was published in Progressive Planning, No. 172, Summer 2007.

2 References to FEJUVE throughout this article are to FEJUVE-El Alto. FEJUVEs also exist in each of Bolivia’s nine departments and are loosely affiliated through their federation, CONALJUVE. While all FEJUVEs are involved in community organizing activities, their national political orientations and affiliations vary. FEJUVE-El Alto is the largest and most dominant of the organizations.
It was FEJUVE that forged a national consensus and mobilization around the demand for nationalization of gas. By barricading El Alto’s gas storage plant, blockading road access into La Paz, and carrying out massive civic strikes, FEJUVE and its allies created a prolonged state of siege that paralyzed the national economy and government. And El Alto paid the price, providing most of the Gas Wars’ 67 victims.

How did a grassroots urban community organization, focused on the delivery of basic neighborhood services, become the major protagonist in a civil insurrection against the neoliberal order? How did FEJUVE move from organizing the community to organizing rebellion? What challenges do FEJUVE and the neighborhood councils now confront in relation to the new MAS (Movement Towards Socialism) government? These issues are of interest to progressive planners and others seeking to understand the relationship between urban neighborhood organizations, popular movements, and new left governments in Latin America and elsewhere.

El Alto and the Neoliberal City

As Bolivia analysts Linda Farthing, Juan Arbona, and Benjamin Kohl have noted (2006), the La Paz/El Alto metropolis is a dramatic expression of the neoliberal globalized city. El Alto, an impoverished township of rural migrants steeped in traditional indigenous customs, sits on the rim of the altiplano overlooking and nearly surrounding La Paz, the colonial capital driven by market forces and the perpetuation of elite privilege.

El Alto itself is largely a product of the Bolivian state’s failed agricultural and economic policies over the past 50 years. While the 1952 revolution redistributed land to highland campesinos, credit and price supports were channeled primarily into lowland commercial agriculture. Fragmented through inheritance and buffeted by drought, traditional peasant farms could not compete with the cheap food imports introduced by neoliberal structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and ‘90s. Massive numbers of campesinos were expelled from the Altiplano, along with 30,000 miners displaced by the shutdown of government-owned mines (Kohl and Farthing 2006).

Fueled by these migratory forces, El Alto grew from a village of 11,000 in the 1950s to become an independent municipality in 1988.