



¡Cochabamba!: Water War in Bolivia

Oscar Olivera, Tom Lewis

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“Many of the wars of this [20th] century were about oil, but the wars of the next century will be about water.”—Former World Bank Vice President Ismail Serageldin

Historically a common trust, water has become the focus of commodification and privatization. It is easy to understand why water is also the center of an international movement to turn back the rising tide of corporate globalization. Sounding a significant opening salvo in the water war is the triumphant struggle of grassroots activists in Cochabamba, Bolivia, who not only regained control of their water supply, but kicked out the transnational corporation that had privatized it.

Cochabamba! is the story of the first great victory against corporate globalization in Latin America. Oscar Olivera, a 45-year-old machinist at the center of the movement that brought thousands of ordinary people to the streets, conveys the ideas and emotions of a first-hand participant in this victorious rebellion that has inspired activists around the world.

Cochabamba! relates the selling of the city’s water supply to Aguas del Tunari, partially owned by U.S.-based transnational Bechtel, the subsequent astronomical rise in water prices and the refusal of poverty-strapped Bolivians to pay them, explaining how the people organized an opposition and recounting the dramatic struggles that eventually defeated the privatizers.

Olivera reflects on the themes that emerged as a result of the war over water; the fear and isolation the Cochabambinos overcame through a spirit of solidarity and mutual aid; the challenges of democratically administering the city’s water supply; and the impact of the “water wars” on subsequent resistance.

Oscar Olivera is president of the Cochabamba Federation of Factory Workers and 2001 winner of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize. **Tom Lewis** is Latin America editor for the *International Socialist Review* and professor of Spanish at the University of Iowa.

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