

# Cocaleras Take to La Paz!

## A 350-mile March to Demand Human Rights in Bolivia

About five hundred Quechua-Aymara women organized a 350-mile march from the Chapare (a coca (*Erythroxylum coca*) producing area) to La Paz, Bolivia's capital. The women marchers entered the capital on January 18, 1996, thirty days after having left from the upper reaches of the Amazon basin. Their main purpose was to demand that the Bolivian government of President Sánchez de Lozada respect and enforce human rights in their home region, since abuses against the women and their families, also known as *cocaleros*, have increased recently. It was the first time organized Indigenous-peasant women from the coca areas marched to La Paz to discuss coca-related policies that affect them and their communities.

### Coca: Spiritual, yet Demonized

Coca, the raw material for the production of cocaine, is a native crop to the area. It was first made illegal by the Vienna Convention of 1961. However, due to strong Indigenous resistance (coca holds ancient spiritual and cultural value for the Indigenous peoples who cultivate it), Bolivian officials agreed on a depenalized status. Ritual consumption and cultivation of coca has been allowed since that time by the Vienna Convention of 1988. However, due to the uncontrollable status of cocaine exports and consumption abroad, governments have demonized coca leaves, condemning the product and pressing for eradication. Surprisingly, here in the US, the well known writer William F. Buckley Jr. recently reactivated the debate over legalization of drugs in the journal *National Review*. The fact is that consumption of drugs in general, and not only of cocaine, has been steadily rising in the US and Europe. A possible answer, Buckley stresses, lies in legalization. (William F. Buckley Jr., "The War

on Drugs is Lost" *National Review*, Vol XLVIII No. 2, February 12, 1996: 34-48).

### War on Drugs or People?

In the same way that the War on Drugs is perceived by policy makers as a failure, above all in the US, Indigenous peasants are not convinced by the long line of alternatives to coca cultivation. Chapare Indigenous peasants indirectly answer to foreign demand—the "consumption side," in the US and Europe, which is almost never discussed. From the point of view of states, coca harvests must be condemned as the main providers of raw material for cocaine processed outside their domains. The US embassy in La Paz has continually pressured the Bolivian government for complete eradication of coca fields. However, there has been a general failure to demonstrate the economic viability of alternative development projects, or alternative agriculture. *Cocaleros* are trapped in a never-ending profit cycle based on coca harvests that continue to guarantee their income, and thus their survival.

As part of the march, the *cocaleras* clearly addressed the fact that criminalization of coca has spelled disaster for the Indigenous peasants of Chapare. The state militarized the area, which they denounced as a violation of their human rights. In addition, the women marchers demanded the cessation of eradication of coca fields, compensation for Indigenous peasants who were killed or have been physically disabled due to police brutality in the area, government support for initiatives seeking viable alternative development, legal protection for union leaders who represent Indigenous peasants in the coca areas, the decriminalization and commercialization of coca leaf nationally and internationally, and government accountability for agreements signed in 1994

regarding the implementation of alternative development projects in the area.

The Women's *Cocalera* March received massive support from the public. Aymara leader Cristina Márquez, who represented the COB (Bolivian Workers Union) during the march, said the "women are clearly struggling against the neoliberal model" led by President Sanchez. Ximena Iturralde and Lidia Katari, first Lady and vice President Cárdenas' wife, respectively, agreed to analyze the demands of the *cocaleras* in order to better understand their situation.

### UMOPAR: Spreading Terror in the Coca Regions

A sharp condemnation of UMOPAR, a specialized anti-drug armed unit, was voiced by Quechua leader Silvia Lazarte. "For us [*cocaleras*] there is no life, justice, peace nor tranquillity in the coca fields...we continue to suffer systematic abuses. We want you to think about this," she stated. This coincides with a recent *Human Rights Watch Americas* report which analyzes the human impacts of the War on Drugs: "The resources possessed by Bolivian antinarcotics forces are too few: too few men too poorly equipped are being asked, on the one hand, to battle well-entrenched drug traffickers funded by immense profits. On the other hand, they are being asked to control the thousands of poor people who labor at the lowest end of the drug production pyramid... This law enforcement effort, moreover, is conducted in the absence of institutions and traditions that hold public agents accountable for their own adherence to laws protecting civilians from abuse." (July 1995, Vol. 7, No. 8, page 38). 🗨️

(Compiled with information from the Bolivian National Newspaper, *Presencia*)