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LECHIN Oquendo, Juan

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Date: 1/16/54 Reviewer: 06/11/69 BOLIVIA

Leader of the Left-Wing Faction of the
Government Ruling Party, the Movimiento
Nacionalista Revolucionario

Leftist labor leader Juan Lechin Oquendo can still be considered the second most powerful politician in Bolivia, next to President Hernán Siles Zuazo, despite the fact that his prestige and power have measurably declined since the beginning of 1958. He has been intermittent head of the Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia (Syndical Federation of Mineworkers of Bolivia -- FSTMB) since its founding in June 1944; he is also founder (April 1952) and leader of Bolivian labor's centralized federation, the Confederación Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Labor Confederation -- COB). Since the year 1952, when the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Movement -- MNR) returned to power in Bolivia, Lechin has been considered as engaged in a subtle struggle for power, first with ex-President Victor Paz Estenssoro and for the past two years with now-President Hernán Siles Zuazo. Lechin has rather consistently pursued a policy of embarrassing and confusing the latter's government.

As leader of the left-wing faction of the MNR and as one who has complete control over the Bolivian labor movement, Lechin is probably the most controversial figure on the Bolivian political scene today and as such has been the subject of numerous contradictory reports. He has been labeled a fascist by the communists and a communist by "conservatives." In reality, he appears to be a skillful, opportunistic, ambitious politician, and a demagogic labor agitator without fixed political orientation. He has in the past, however, shown no reluctance to deal with Communists and be amenable to their suggestions in order to achieve certain limited trade union or political objectives. In summary, it may be said that while he has a record as a cynical rabble-rouser who has used the discontent of the workers to advance his own interests, Lechin is not believed to be completely devoid of all sincerity as a social reformer. With respect to the U.S.-backed Stabilization Program for Bolivia, Lechin specifically charges that it causes economic stagnation and low worker compensation, and that it signifies the renunciation of Bolivia's economic independence and the acceptance of "colonial impositions" on the country. He further argues that U.S. economic aid is "of no value" as currently conceived and practiced and that it leaves "no permanent benefits in the country."

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LECHIN Oquendo, Juan (continued)

Juan Lechín was born in Corocoro, a mining center in La Paz Province, not far from the City of La Paz, on May 19, 1912. His father was of Lebanese origin and his mother was a Bolivian with a goodly strain of Indian blood. Lechín's education extended but little beyond the secondary school level. During the years 1929-32 he worked as a laborer in the Bolivian tin mines and then enlisted in the army for service in the Chaco War. He was given a medical discharge late in 1932. Lechín at this time apparently went through an experience common to many veterans -- restlessness of spirit and trouble finding congenial or profitable work, or any work at all. He mined a small vein of tin, studied accounting in La Paz, and tried to sell automobiles.

By 1940 Lechín had become a commission merchant dealing in textiles, presumably with the help of Lebanese friends, and his business was considered fairly extensive. It entailed travel to the country's mining centers and provided occasion for him to develop the great range of friendly contacts among laborers and lower-salaried white collar people in the mines which became the foundation of his career. A star player on one of the Patiño company football teams, and subsequently one of the most outstanding players of the country as a member of the La Paz team called "The Strongest", he became widely and popularly known to the miners. As a commercial agent he won friendships by taking special orders and doing personal errands in La Paz for people in the isolated mining towns.

Lechín's first political activity was in 1942 when he campaigned for the MNR in the mining centers. After the joint military-MNR insurrection of December 1943, he was named Sub-prefect of Uncia, the town nearest the Patiño mines, in Bustillo Province. He quickly made friends in his new job and has said personally of that period that unlike previous prefects he "declined financial assistance from Patiño, refused to be bribed, and surprised the workers by supporting their contentions in disputes with the Patiño management." June 1944 saw the emergence of the FSTMB as a formal organization, with Juan Lechín in the dominating position of permanent secretary. During the second half of that year he took on increasing importance in the national scene when he gained public recognition as the head of 40,000 organized miners. By the end of 1945, at the age of 33, he was unquestionably the most important figure in the country's labor movement.

In January 1947 Lechín was elected to serve in Bolivia's National Senate. He did not complete this term of office however, for, as the result of pressure which he exerted on the administration of President Enrique Hertzog through his leadership of the FSTMB, he was arrested in May 1949 and exiled to Chile. While in Chile he undoubtedly

LECHIN Oquendo, Juan (continued)

moved in the circle of international political exiles and intellectuals where ideas and theories on social and economic problems had been exchanged for many years. Lechin appears to have been interested only in learning revolutionary and underground methods from these individuals, irrespective of their underlying philosophy, whether anarchist, communist, ex-communist, or anti-communist. While he was still in Chile his followers placed his name on the ballot as MNR candidate for the Bolivian National Senate and he was again elected to that body in May 1951. The military junta then in power in Bolivia allowed him to return, only to arrest him shortly thereafter and to exile him again in July 1951.

During the MNR revolution of April 1952, the tide of the fighting was turned partly by the victory of armed workers controlled by Lechin. He was then immediately appointed Minister of Mines and Petroleum. In February 1953 he was elected First Vice President of the MNR. After repeated attempts by Lechin to relinquish his cabinet post, his resignation was accepted in October 1954. His resignation is said to have been dictated partly by ill health, for which he received medical treatment when he traveled to Europe in October 1955. Lechin was again elected to the Bolivian National Senate in June 1956 and was named president of that organization the following August. Consistent and increasing reports of differences occurring between Lechin and President Siles began at this time. Siles declined to rename Lechin to membership on the MNR's National Political Committee in July 1957 and the next month he was replaced as President of the Senate.

Lechin, who is alleged to have been married and divorced early in his career, has been married to the former Nancy Weise since October 1955. He is the father of several children by his second marriage. Lechin is believed to speak some English.

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State-FD, Wash., D.C.
November 1958

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