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Bolivia's Striking Miners, COB Return to Work

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During the first three weeks of May, the administration of Bolivian President Evo Morales had to confront a difficult situation when the labor federation Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) and workers—especially miners, the country's key labor sector—declared an indefinite strike. The country was paralyzed and a spiral of violence began. In their daily demonstrations, the miners resorted to the sector's long-standing practice of setting off dynamite sticks in the streets of the cities.

On May 8, while one group tried to interrupt the weekly Cabinet meeting, another blew up a bridge in Caihuasi, a strategic point in the altiplano, 200 km southeast of the capital La Paz. The COB tried unsuccessfully to convince the police to join the strike. The inopportune decision to strike came without an existing conflict, without a prior presentation of a list of demands, and, remarkably, only days after electoral authorities ruled that Morales could constitutionally run for another term in the presidential elections set for December 2014.

The political right, fragmented, without a program or representation, latched onto the union action and put its powerful media apparatus at the COB's disposal, so that radio stations, newspapers, and television stations gave the conflict more visibility that it had at the beginning.

Late on May 8, Presidency Minister Juan Ramón Quintana addressed the COB leadership to ask it to "be more like its base and move away from the temptation of a coup, away from the violence that leads to taking over public buildings and destroying state assets." Quintana used words that would, days later, be repeated by Morales. "Compañeros, you are demonstrating with the worst language of coup mongers."

Miners demand pensions equal to 100% of salary

The strike had one demand, something still not achieved by workers in any country in the world: when they retire, salaried employees would receive a pension equal to 100% of their pre-retirement salary (NotiSur, July 2, 2004). The law now stipulates a pension of 70% of their salary when they retire. In absolute numbers, that means that, when a Bolivian leaves the work force in that impoverished country with a fragile economy, he or she receives between US$172 and $575 a month. That law was passed in 2011 and was written jointly by government experts and COB technical personnel, a common practice under the Morales administration.

Besides the 70% being what the COB asked for less than two years earlier, the government refused to consider the new demand because, when it agreed to pay 70%, the Fondo Solidario de Pensiones (FSP) had reduced its estimate of the fund's sustainability from 39 to 30 years. A payment of 100% of workers' salaries would reduce the fund's sustainability to the point that it would only be able to cover between 30% and 40% of what it would owe workers. "The COB leadership is lying to the people who earn less," said Morales.

On May 20, the miners recognized the validity of the government's position and abandoned the indefinite strike. Two days later, still without the miners' vital support, the COB was forced to return to the path of sanity. One might think that the only thing it was looking for was to destabilize
the country and deal a blow to an economy that is already poor. By that point, indigenous and campesinos organizations had gone to La Paz and other cities to lead large-scale marches in support of the government.

**Failure to create new workers party**

Weeks before the strike began, and until mid-July, the COB was trying to create its own political party, which it was calling the Partido de los Trabajadores (PT). Although no legal impediment existed, reality advised against it. On paper, the PT was founded on March 8, but it never functioned as a party. As of now, the Movimiento al Socialism (MAS) led by Morales is the political instrument for workers, although some small parties with Trotskyite roots try to manage and represent unionism. That is what happened with the miners organization, the major backer of the failed PT.

On July 2, La Protesta, the newspaper of the Trotskyite Alternativa Revolucionaria del Pueblo (ARP), related what happened at the conclave to create the PT. "The congress was opened with a large demonstration, the columns of delegates marched in singing, 'How beautiful, how beautiful it's going to be, Evo is going to hell, the workers to power,' making explicit the break with the government," the article said. Then it explained the rupture. "Evo betrayed the fight to expel the transnationals and is creating a totally anti-worker government and turning it over to the transnationals, allied with the large landowners."

La Protesta said the PT, a party that synthesizes the poor revolutionary ambitions of Bolivian Trotskyites, "only aspires to have legislative representation." At its founding congress, it counted on the presence of delegates from Trotskyite parties in Argentina and Brazil.

**TSE rules Morales can run again**

In this context, the right tried to make the most of the situation and joined the COB's effective destabilization process. Thus, when the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) spoke of possibly moving up the date of the presidential elections (from December to October 2014), the right's leaders immediately weighed in. "They're preparing something to guarantee the re-election of Evo Morales," said Deputy Norma Piérola. "This smells like fraud," said former presidential candidate Samuel Doria Medina.

TSE president Wilma Velasco explained that it was not moving the election date up but rather adjusting the electoral calendar to allow space for an eventual runoff. The new Constitution establishes that, if one candidate does not win an absolute majority in the first round or at least 40% of the valid votes with a 10% lead over the second-place candidate, a runoff will be held within 60 days, said Velasco.

During this whole process, Morales and Vice President Álvaro García Linera had taken care to "not get into a direct clash with those who are our natural allies and who should be our firmest allies at this time when the far right is trying to stop the process of change that we are promoting." In the first days of the strike, the government merely asked that their action be consistent and reminded the COB leaders that the retirement law "was written in consultation with you."

Along the same line, the government reminded the miners that each day of the strike at the rich Huanuni tin mine (NotiSur, Oct. 13, 2006)—in the western department of Oruro—meant a loss of a half million dollars, so they, especially the highest paid workers, were pushing the nationalized
company to the edge of bankruptcy. Addressing the miners, García Linera told them that, as privileged salaried workers, "you should show solidarity and be aware that your contributions to the social security system serve to compensate the 70% of workers who are unregistered and those who still have not found a job."

Visibly indignant, on May 13, a week before the strike was called off and both the COB and the miners admitted that the government was right, Morales again addressed the Huanuni workers. He told them that more than 450 of them earned salaries that were exceptional in the country. "Among you are 312 people who earn between 15,000 pesos (US$2,170) and 20,000 pesos (US$2,895) a month; 99 who every month earn 25,000 pesos (US$3,618); and 36 others who earn salaries that exceed 40,000 pesos (US$5,790). Compañeros, we are talking about luxurious salaries, even for countries that make up the world's elite," said the president.

On Aug. 4, when he spoke at the closure of the XIX Foro de San Pablo—a meeting of delegations from more than 100 progressive and leftist parties from Latin America and the Caribbean—Morales returned to the theme to ask the leaders for "three things that I consider fundamental: civility, humility, and commitment to socialism."

First Morales mentioned some problems that he observed in leftist sectors but did not identify, then he warned about inconsistencies "that cannot be tolerated in a socialist or in a revolutionary," and finally he lamented that in Latin America "leftist parties exist that call themselves socialist and do not act like it, simply because they are not socialist."

The president then returned to the national situation and, without mentioning names, but referring obliquely to the many very active small Trotskyite groups, said, "In Bolivia the struggle is to free ourselves not only from the right but also from the sectarianism of some leftist parties that have no dignity and flirt with coupism."

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