1-10-1991

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Recommended Citation
Bolivia: Labor Unions Organize 48-hour Nationwide Strike To Protest Fuel Price Increase

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Category/Department: General
Published: Thursday, January 10, 1991

On Jan. 5, the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) announced a 48-hour national strike to begin Jan. 8 in response to the government's 35% price increase on all fuels. The price hike was announced Jan. 2. COB executive secretary Victor Lopez Arias said the only activities exempt from the strike are hospital emergency and electricity, water and telephone services. Lopez told reporters that on the first day of the strike, union leaders will meet with cabinet ministers involved in economic policymaking to discuss workers' demands, such as automatic wage hikes to compensate for general price level inflation. The consumer price index rose last year by 16%. Union leaders also planned to discuss their reservations about the government's privatization program. Labor Minister Oscar Zamora told reporters that President Jaime Zamora plans to raise wages this year by establishing a new minimum, and "some type" of compensation to alleviate the impact of the fuel price increases on low-income households. The current minimum wage is 60 bolivianos (US$17.40) per month.

On Jan. 7, the government declared the strike illegal, and suspended talks scheduled for the following day with labor union leaders. Participants in the strike included not only trade unions representing the most traditionally militant workers e.g. miners, oil workers and teachers, but also labor and civic organizations not affiliated with the COB, such as journalists, public transport employees, neighborhood associations and "civic committees." The 48-hour walkout marked the first time in 10 years that the COB has organized a strike alongside the public transport union confederation (Confederacion de Choferes). Strikers set up barricades blocking streets and major avenues throughout the capital city on Tuesday. The barricades were comprised largely of striking transport workers' vehicles. Since employees of the state-run airline (Lloyd Aereo Boliviano-LAB) were also on strike, all domestic flights were cancelled. An estimated 20,000 people participated in a three-hour demonstration in downtown La Paz. Similar protest marches took place in all department capitals. The Agence France Presse reported that on Wednesday, Jan. 9, "relative calm" prevailed in Laz Paz. Street barricades had been removed, but public transport had disappeared from city streets. Labor Minister Oscar Zamora asserted that public and private banking, public administration and commerce activities were "normal" on Tuesday, with the exception of the Information Ministry's press department, result of adherence to the strike of all Press Workers Federation (FTPBB) affiliates. Newspapers were not published, and radio and TV news programs were suspended, with the exception of reports on the strike for a few hours. Sixteen persons were arrested by police on Tuesday after clashing with strikers. The nationwide strike is the third of its kind since President Jaime Paz Zamora took power. The first, in November 1989, was organized in support of a teachers' strike, and concluded with the government's imposition of a state of siege. Last year's general strike was aimed at protesting a government-imposed fuel price hike. (Basic data from AFP, 01/05/91, 01/09/91; EFE, Notimex, 01/07/91)

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