

Bolivian workers strike against government salary decree

By Bill Van Auken
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Thousands of Bolivian teachers, miners, other workers and students have carried out strikes and mass protests for more than a week in opposition to the government's attempt to limit wage increases.

In what is becoming an ever more militant challenge to the government of President Evo Morales, workers have laid siege to the capital of La Paz, throwing dynamite and waging pitched battles with riot police. They have also blockaded roads linking the capital to Cochabamba and Trinidad and, on Tuesday, cut access to the main airport for most of the day.

The central demand that has brought thousands into the streets is for a "living wage" that will cover the cost of basic necessities, which has risen sharply as Bolivia confronts spiraling inflation, particularly in food and fuel costs.

The unions have put forward the demand for a 15 percent hike, but the government has decreed a 10 percent increase, and only for some sections of the workforce.

The country's main union federation, the COB (Central Union of Bolivian Workers, or *Central Obrera Boliviana*) succeeded in imposing a "pause" in the mass struggles over the weekend, while its leaders negotiated with the government. However, workers rejected an agreement announced Monday that maintained the 10 percent increase, and the strikes and protests resumed.

"We're going to stay in the streets," Johnny Milan, a teachers leader in Cochabamba, told *El Pais*. "The 10 percent salary increase does not satisfy our needs." He said that workers would consider it "a real betrayal if the COB decides to sign the agreement."

Bolivia's inflation is driven in large measure by rising world prices. But the present spiral was set off last December, when Morales announced the end of

fuel subsidies, which drove the cost of gasoline up by more than 80 percent. While the government was forced to rescind the measure within a week in the face of mass social upheavals, prices of food and other basic necessities, driven up in tandem with fuel, failed to come back down.

According to Bolivia's official National Institute of Statistics, the inflation rate for the first quarter of this year has reached 3.89 percent—almost two thirds of the rate that had been forecast for all of 2011.

A report put out by the Center for Studies of Labor and Agricultural Development (CEDLA) found that food prices in Bolivia had increased by 18.5 percent compared to March of last year. This is 7.4 percent more than the 11.1 percent general inflation rate announced by the government for the same period.

In a statement, the center noted that the rate of inflation for basic necessities was "nearly double the government's offer" of a 10 percent wage increase. The figures for the first quarter of this year, it added, "calls into question the claims by government officials and businessmen that wage increases are the cause of inflation."

The protests have been dominated by teachers, health care workers and miners, with university students joining them in the streets.

These struggles have escalated as Morales's popularity ratings have plummeted. According to one recent poll, only 22 percent of the electorate would vote for him today if there were an election—barely one third of the 64 percent he won in his re-election in December 2009, when he scored a crushing victory over a right-wing opponent.

First elected in 2005 as the candidate of the Movement towards Socialism, Morales came to national prominence as the leader of the *cocaleros*

movement, which defended small coca growers against the attempts of the government, backed by the US, to eradicate the crop as part of Washington's "war on drugs."

Despite the use of the word "socialism" in his party's name, Morales has left Bolivia's class and property relations intact.

Bolivia is one of the poorest countries of the hemisphere, with roughly 60 percent of the population living in poverty and a quarter of Bolivians barely surviving in extreme poverty. Poverty rates have remained virtually unchanged under Morales, while the sharp social inequality that characterizes Bolivian capitalism persists.

The conflict over wages has underscored the fact that the MAS government rules on behalf of the country's capitalist owners and the transnational banks and corporations, despite resting on the support of the union bureaucracy of the COB, peasant organizations and indigenous groups.

In its categorical rejection of workers' demands for wages that keep pace with inflation, the Morales government has its eye on the country's fiscal deficit—which is expected to reach \$870 million, or 4.2 percent of GDP—and its impact on Bolivia's standing with world financial institutions.

In his attempt to suppress the upsurge of the working class, Morales has portrayed workers employed for wages as a "special interest" minority, whose demands would force the government to curtail subsidies for the poor and the elderly and scrap economic development programs. In reality, the government refuses to grant a livable wage because it defends the profits and wealth of big business, the banks and the major landowners.

It has sought to mobilize its supporters in the leadership of peasant and indigenous organizations, calling a march in the government's defense later this week.

Last week, Morales accused the workers demonstrating for wages of attempting to stage a "coup" against his government. "If the police had let them in, they would have dynamited the Legislative Palace, the government palace," he said. "If they had found me, I am sure they would have dynamited me."

Using rhetoric that echoed Bolivia's previous anticommunist governments and military juntas, the vice minister of Coordination with Social Movements,

César Navarro, charged that "some radical union groups are carrying out daily acts of violence and confrontation in the streets." He claimed they are acting out of "political motives, proven by the presence of paid marchers."

In a measure of the government's desperation, Morales has also attempted to play the nationalist card by threatening to bring a case before the international courts to force Chile to grant land-locked Bolivia's historic demand for access to the sea and bringing together five of Bolivia's ex-presidents in a show of national unity.

The government is depending heavily on the treachery of the union bureaucracy. COB leader Pedro Montes has asked the Morales government for a new round of talks scheduled for Saturday and will no doubt renew the bureaucracy's attempts to bring the strikes and demonstrations to an end.

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