

Bolivian unions end strike against Morales government

By Luis Arce
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After 36 hours of negotiations, the Bolivian Workers Confederation (Central Obrera Boliviana or COB) and the government of President Evo Morales reached an agreement April 18 on an 11 percent wage increase for close to two million members of the union confederation.

The increase is just one percent above what was offered by Morales last February and is significantly below the 15 percent hike demanded by the workers, which was the reason for the open-ended strike that left the country semi-paralyzed for 11 days.

The union leaders accepted the minimal increase in the immediate aftermath of what was the most violent day of clashes between workers and police.

According to the Bolivian daily *La Prensa*, April 15 saw the most violent confrontation between some 5,000 rural teachers who had occupied the La Paz-Oruro highway and hundreds of riot police. At least nine people were wounded, including police, reporters and the strikers themselves.

La Prensa reported that the police attacked journalists and photographers, kicking them and grabbing their cameras so that they would not be able to record the brutal beating of a teacher who was attacked by several cops.

“This place will be a battlefield, and we will not be responsible for the consequences,” one of the leaders of the teachers said.

According to the daily *Correo del Sur* published in the department of Chuquisaca, on the same day there were “protest marches in Cochabamba, Santa Cruz and Tarija, among other cities.”

The demonstrations, the paper continued, “were joined by air traffic controllers, causing the government to order the military to intervene at the air terminal in La Paz.” Health care workers and thousands of retirees also joined the protests, demanding that the wage increase “be for everyone” and not limited to just one section of the workforce.

The police violence provoked outrage, threatening to radicalize the strike and lead it beyond the immediate demand for a wage increase. Faced with the danger of the strike turning into a political confrontation with the self-described multi-cultural government of the Movement toward Socialism (MAS) of President Morales, the COB leaders hurried to reach an agreement and bring the strike to an end.

There were signs of the strike’s radicalization over the course of the previous week, with President Morales being unable to attend public events commemorating the nineteenth century Battle of La

Tablada out of fear that he would be attacked by angry crowds of strikers and their supporters.

The daily *La Patria* in Oruro reported that demonstrators moved through the streets of this city chanting, “The police have only two choices, join the people or be their assassins!” During the march, the explosion of dynamite sticks could be heard.

In Oruro, the strikers had taken over the government headquarters, where they shouted “Rifle, machine-gun, the people won’t be silent!” and “If this is change, then change is shit!”

Several leaders of the ruling MAS have criticized the policies of the government. Roberto de la Cruz, a national assembly member from the department of La Paz, denounced the Morales cabinet for “managing a discourse similar to those of previous governments.” Then he proceeded to excuse the government and remind people of its popular origins, calling for dialogue.

Workers reject deal between government and the COB

Different sections of the working class have expressed their rejection of deal signed by the COB leaders and the government. The La Paz daily *La Razón* reported in its April 20 edition that the Departmental Workers Confederation (COD) de Santa Cruz, the Medical College, the Labor Defense Committee of the Universidad Autónoma Gabriel René Moreno and the College of Biochemistry are among the sectors that have rejected the accord.

La Razón reported, “The president of the Medical College, Gueider Salas, believes that the problem of the lack of beds in public sector hospitals and the lack of human resources has still not been solved, and therefore the health sector has decided to declare itself in a state of emergency.”

Similarly, “The urban teachers of Santa Cruz,” told the La Paz daily that they “too have rejected the agreement and will continue taking measures to pressure the government.”

Arguing against the 15 percent increase demanded by the COB, a government functionary told the *Correo del Sur* that “the country would have to stop building schools and hospitals, and it would affect plans for productive development, directed at the generation of jobs.”

The government’s claims that there is no money for the increase sought initially by the COB conceal the fact that the mining companies are registering record profits due to high mineral prices.

On the other hand, inflation in food prices is higher than 18 percent, with sugar surpassing 100 percent. Similarly, the inflation

in relation to transportation costs reached 3.59 percent for the month of March, equivalent to 52.7 percent on an annual basis. Food and transport costs affect those with low income disproportionately.

The massive confrontation between the COB and the MAS government underscored the inviability of the attempt to reconcile the interests of the working class with a model of capitalist development tinged with populism and nationalism.

In 2009, Evo Morales was re-elected with the support of the COB, winning 60 percent of the vote. Now, immediately after the strike was ended, the Bolivian president proceeded to attack the union federation.

Correo del Sur reported that vice president Álvaro García Linera described the strike as a “poorly planned political adventure that failed.”

Linera, a former Guevarist guerrilla turned academic, added that the recent mass struggles consisted of a “conspiracy of the right with the workers to overthrow the government of Evo Morales.” He then charged the parties of the right of plotting with the COB against the government, describing this amalgam of his own creation as a “bloc of the restorationist right.”

In Cochabamba, Linera continued his attack against the strikers “before a crowd of peasants, coca growers, guild members and party members and local officials of the Movement toward Socialism (MAS) in Cochabamba’s Plaza 14 de Septiembre, brought together to answer the COB mobilizations and give support to President Morales,” the *Correo del Sur* reported.

Not all sections of the miners supported the COB strike. The leader of the Departmental Federation of Mining Cooperatives (FEDECOMIN), Julio Quiñónez, said that his members opposed the strike because they “don’t have a fixed monthly wage and if they work they eat, not like salaried workers who can resort to protest actions like strikes and road blockades.”

From the beginning, the Morales government has been pursuing a policy of dividing the working class. To this end, it has implemented a series of corporatist measures designed to tie the worker to the productivity and profitability of the mining companies.

The MAS government has also put into effect the payment of bonuses for the completion of production contracts and bonuses for surpassing minimum production requirements, which establish a differentiation of pay based on labor performance.

Moreover, according to the head of the Mining Corporation of Bolivia (Comibol), Hugo Miranda, under a law approved under Morales—with the explicit support of the COB leadership—“25 percent of the total monthly returns (net income) of the (state-owned) enterprises can be distributed between the enterprise itself, the workers and Comibol; the other 75 percent goes to the state.”

This measure has made it possible during periods of peak production for a few miners to earn as much \$5,600 in a month.

On the other hand, it was reported that some unions are opposed to the nationalization of the mines. This is the case at the Bolivar, Porco, Colquiri and San Vicente mines. The first three are operated by a subsidiary of the Swiss company Glencore, and the last one by the Canadian company, Pan American Silver

Corporation.

Bolivia has benefited from the current boom in mineral prices, which has increased the country’s income by 67 percent. From taxes and royalties, the public treasury has received US\$500 million. Exports from the mineral sector have amounted to US\$4 billion, compared to US\$2.5 billion in 2010. Between 2009 and 2010, Comibol’s profits quadrupled.

The corporatist measures adopted by the Morales government have left the wellbeing of the miners entirely dependent upon the high price of metals. While silver, for example, has increased from US\$16.65 to an all-time high of over US\$40 an ounce, if the prices of metals were to fall, the miners would see their income seriously affected.

The “incentives” of the Morales government for the miners are in line with its policy of capitalist development, which subordinates the future of the workers to the profits of foreign capital and the Bolivian bourgeoisie. The aim is to keep wages low and to suppress any independent struggle by the working class.

Nonetheless, even under the best conditions, these measures have not changed the reality of Bolivia, which remains the poorest country in the Americas after Haiti.

According to the 2001 census, 59 percent of Bolivians are living under conditions of poverty, and 24.4 percent in extreme poverty, unable to secure the basic means of survival. The United Nations Development Program has placed Bolivia in 104th place out of 174 countries in terms of urban development.

Correo del Sur reports that “Bolivia is among the countries with ‘moderately high’ malnutrition...The investigation, which establishes six categories for classifying world malnutrition, puts Bolivia on the fourth rung, together with the Dominican Republic, various countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, India and Mongolia.”

The open political support which the COB initially gave to Morales, together with its collaboration with the government in sabotaging the workers’ struggles, makes it an indispensable accomplice in the government’s corporatist policies that are being employed in an attempt to divide the Bolivian working class.

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