

Bolivia's Morales confronts general strike over food prices

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After five years in office, the government of Bolivia's President Evo Morales faced a nationwide general strike, amid a growing popular rebellion against rising food prices.

All of Bolivia's major cities—La Paz, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz and Oruro—were paralyzed last Friday, as workers marched in city centers and blockaded roads and highways to demand that the government substantially increase wages and take measures to combat rising prices and food shortages.

Long lines of workers marched through Cochabamba in a steady downpour, while thousands of factory workers, teachers, health care workers, other public employees and students took over the center of the capital of La Paz, punctuating their chanting of demands with explosions of dynamite.

Reelected in December 2009 by a landslide 62 percent majority, Morales has seen his popularity rating slide to barely one third. The country has been rocked by a series of escalating protests that began at the end of last year, with the government's shock announcement of an end to fuel price subsidies.

The action sent gasoline prices soaring by 72 percent and diesel by 82 percent. The decision was rescinded in the face of violent protests, and now Morales is saying that he intends to introduce an end to the subsidies more gradually.

Despite this tactical retreat, the damage done by the brief price hikes proved to be sustained, unleashing an inflationary spiral that has seen the prices for virtually all basic foodstuffs climb between 10 and 50 percent.

Protests have escalated steadily as a result. Last month saw 5,000 people march through the southwestern town of Llallagua in two separate protests organized by miners and by the local farmers unions.

Poorer peasants who had come in from the countryside for the demonstration looted stores, while police did not intervene.

Then on February 10, Morales was forced to flee the mining city of Oruro where he had gone to participate in a ceremony commemorating a colonial-era uprising. Miners, workers and the unemployed stormed the ceremony, tossing dynamite to protest deteriorating economic conditions. A presidential spokesman announced that Morales and other officials had left the city and returned to La Paz. "The government has decided not to respond to such shameful and painful provocations," he said.

Bolivia's unions issued a statement last week insisting that as a result of the inflationary spiral, the *canasta familiar*, or basic monthly expenses, for a Bolivian family, has risen to 8,300 bolivianos (\$1,100)—approximately 11 times more than the present \$96 monthly minimum wage in South America's poorest country. They demanded that wages be increased accordingly.

Morales' response only inflamed sentiments against the government. He called the demands "laughable," insisting that the wages would be increased by only slightly more than 7 percent, the official inflation rate. Bolivians maintain that this rate does not begin to reflect the real double-digit increases in prices of basic necessities.

"It makes me laugh when" they demand "a wage increase of 40, 50 or even 70 percent," said Morales, who added that when he was president of Bolivia's coca growers union, "our demands were always reasonable."

Morales continued, "It is important to think first of the future of the fatherland before regional or sectoral interests," effectively equating the demands of masses

of Bolivian workers and poor for food with the reactionary agitation of ruling elites, like those in Santa Cruz, seeking secession from the country.

Pedro Montes, the president of the COB (the Bolivian Workers Federation, the country's main trade union), publicly acknowledged that the union leadership had been forced to call the general strike out of fear that the mass spontaneous protests were becoming uncontrollable.

"We can't control the protest of the workers over the rising cost of living they are experiencing," said the COB leader. "That's why they are going into the streets to protest and express their discontent over hunger, misery, unemployment and over having nearly empty stomachs."

In earlier protests, particularly in the volatile town of El Alto, outside of La Paz, populated largely by impoverished workers who have emigrated from the countryside, popular anger was turned against the COB itself because of the union leadership's support for and close integration into the Morales government. Union offices were attacked by workers hurling bricks and stones.

It was in El Alto that the mass uprising of 2003 that toppled US-backed President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada was centered. That struggle, in which 63 Bolivian workers were shot to death by troops, began over a corrupt deal to sell off the country's gas resources to the US and Chile. It laid the basis for Morales' rise to the presidency two years later.

Hailed as the first indigenous president of the country, Morales came to office as the candidate of the Movement towards Socialism, or MAS. Since his election, he has regularly proclaimed his opposition to capitalism and his commitment to a "communitarian socialism".

His vice-president, Álvaro Garcia Linare, a leftist professor and former guerrilla who comes from Bolivia's upper middle class, has been somewhat more circumspect, declaring the government's aim to be the creation of "Andean-Amazonian capitalism," meaning state promotion of capitalist development.

In reality, the country's social structure has remained little changed, while its economy continues to be dominated by multinational corporations centered on the extraction of Bolivia's mineral wealth under some of the most favorable conditions for foreign capital

existing on the continent.

In the first years of Morales' presidency, an unprecedented rise in raw material prices made possible some minimum social assistance programs, but the impact of the world capitalist crisis and resulting downturn in foreign investment and production have created the conditions for new social explosion.

Morales recently reappointed all but three of his cabinet ministers—rejecting demands for the sacking of those most responsible for the drastic fuel price increases last December—and has attempted to portray his government as essentially stable.

There are growing signs of divisions, however, as popular unrest mounts. The Bolivian president's former spokesman and close political associate, Alex Contreras, denounced Morales for his economic policies in statements to the Bolivian media.

"The president, with these measures, appears to be ruling in the interests of the agro-industrial sector, the multinational enterprises and the black-marketers, who speculate in and profit basic foodstuffs like sugar, rice, flour and others," Contreras said.

Gonzalo Flores, one of Bolivia's representatives to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, blamed the government's policies for the food crisis, which he said had resulted in "a large part of the population not having access to sufficient food to maintain a healthy life." He said that up to 25 percent of Bolivia's children suffered from stunted growth because of inadequate nutrition.

Meanwhile, Morales' erstwhile supporters in the COB and in the peasants' union CSUTCB have called attention to the fact that the ruling party, the Movement for Socialism, has become increasingly dominated by political operatives drawn from the parties of the Bolivian right, including members of such fascistic forces as the Santa Cruz Youth Union.



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