

Pitched battles between miners and police in Bolivia's capital

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Striking miners from the southeast mining center of Potosí waged pitched battles with riot police in the Bolivian capital of La Paz Wednesday after a negotiating session with government ministers quickly dissolved in acrimony.

The miners, together with other residents of Potosí, a city of 200,000, have been on strike for 19 days, demanding that the government of Movement toward Socialism (MAS) President Evo Morales carry out election campaign promises to launch economic development projects for the impoverished region.

Representatives of the Civic Committee of Potosí, which has led the nearly three-week struggle walked out of the negotiating session within minutes after government ministers rejected their demands that the deliberations be broadcast live by the state and private media and that President Morales sign any agreement reached.

When the delegates left the Interior Ministry building where the talks had been scheduled, hundreds of angry miners in hardhats erupted in protest, throwing small dynamite charges at the building and pelting riot police with rocks and explosives. Police attacked the miners with teargas and shotguns. At least two miners suffered buckshot wounds.

Government authorities reported that a number of buildings were damaged in the confrontation, while part of the grounds of the German embassy caught fire.

By the end of the day, at least 44 demonstrators (one La Paz daily put the number at 52) had been arrested and were being held in the cells of an elite police unit. Leaders of the civic committee said that they would not negotiate with the government until all of their members had been released.

The confrontation is the most violent and bitter that Bolivia has witnessed since Evo Morales first took

office in 2006 promising land reform, redistribution of wealth, nationalizations of oil and gas resources and rule by the country's indigenous majority.

While a prolonged energy and raw materials boom provided the government with the resources to effect minimal social assistance programs, Bolivia remains the most impoverished nation on the South American continent, with 58 percent of the population suffering "multi-dimensional poverty" (which factors in housing, health care and other indicators as opposed to solely income).

At least 65 percent of the population works in the so-called informal sector, which includes most of the country's miners, who have formed cooperatives to carry out subsistence mining. Previously, miners constituted the largest section of the Bolivian working class and played the decisive role in the 1952 Bolivian revolution and a host of subsequent social struggles. In the mid-1980s, the government shut down most of the state-owned mining operations and laid off some three-quarters of the country's mine workers as Bolivia's resources were rapidly privatized.

The commodities boom, in large part driven by the expansion of China's economy, provided the basis for Bolivia's average annual growth rate as well as expanded employment and increased living standards for the country's miners. With the ongoing slump in demand for raw materials, these gains are threatened throughout Latin America, and in Bolivia the consequences are erupting in the streets.

The demands of the Potosí strikers are for the government to carry out promises to build hospitals, airports, factories and other facilities to provide a stable base of employment in the region. The protest has enjoyed broad popular support even while resulting in growing hardships as the blockaded city runs out of

food and medicine, and ATM machines run out of cash.

Morales, whose election was hailed by the pseudo-left layers in Europe and North America as some new road to socialism, has viciously denounced the strikers, calling them “traitors” and tools of the political right seeking to sow divisions to enable imperialism to loot Bolivia’s resources.

The reality is that Morales needs no help from anyone on this score. In his third term, his MAS has largely incorporated the old political right based on the agribusiness and ranching aristocracy centered in Santa Cruz, who now view him as a viable custodian of their interests and whose candidates in many cases joined the MAS ticket.

As for US capitalism, the Morales government recently received a clean bill of health from the Fitch rating agency, which upgraded Bolivia to a rating of “BB+” from “BB-”, assessing that the country has a stable outlook and that, Morales’ “socialist” pretensions notwithstanding, Bolivia is open for exploitation by the transnational corporations and banks.

“Regulatory uncertainty and nationalization risks have eased,” according to Fitch. “Government and businesses agreed on reforms to the investment regime that facilitate private participation in sectors that are not subject to state control ... The authorities ceased nationalizations in 2013 and have paid US\$690 million (2 percent of GDP) in compensation to multinational companies.”

Just how far the Morales government is prepared to go in lifting the restrictions on foreign exploitation of Bolivia’s resources was spelled out by the president himself on Tuesday when he addressed the Fifth International Oil and Gas Congress convened by the Bolivian state energy company YPFB.

He announced that he will allow international energy conglomerates to begin aggressive exploration for oil and gas within the boundaries of seven Bolivian national parks, supposedly created to protect the country’s national environment as well as the rights of its indigenous population.

“We’ve made a decision,” he told those attending the congress, which included representatives from at least 25 foreign oil corporations. “It’s our right to conduct exploration in protected areas, and we’re going to do it aggressively.” Morales has also issued a decree

allowing the diversion of water from peasant farming to mining operations and begun studies to assess the profitability of fracking to exploit the country’s shale gas deposits. All this from a president who has postured on the world stage as a champion of the environment.

All of these measures, designed to maintain growth rates and preserve the interests of both national and international capital, are creating the conditions for an eruption of class struggle in Bolivia.



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