

# Teachers in Bolivia stage national strike against police repression by MAS government

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A national strike of the 140,000 public school teachers in Bolivia took place Friday after the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) government of President Luis Arce ordered the brutal police repression of a peaceful march of teachers in La Paz on Wednesday.

Tens of thousands of teachers and supporters flooded downtown La Paz in the largest marches seen since the 2019 protests against the US-backed coup that overthrew MAS president Evo Morales.

Defying the threat by the government to withhold wages for missing work, there was widespread participation in the strike, with teachers setting up numerous roadblocks on the national borders and across major cities, including Sucre, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Beni, Tarija and Potosí. Parents associations and university students were important contingents.

Teachers have maintained partial strikes and daily marches centered in La Paz for three weeks to protest the worsening conditions for students and teachers under the ostensibly “left” government.

Their demands include a major increase in the education budget, the hiring of more staff and the end of a new curricular program that compels teachers to work more unpaid hours.

For years, the issue raised most frequently by teachers has been the accumulation of unpaid hours, referred to as the “historic deficit.”

Despite the large class sizes, usually more than 30 students, teachers in public schools in many parts of the country rely on the already impoverished working class parents to get paid at all, without any insurance, pension payments, or other benefits.

Remote lessons during the pandemic were provided in many cases without payment, while Arce refused to implement a program to buy computers and improve connectivity to maintain remote classes. Instead, like his fascistic predecessor Áñez, Arce has ordered teachers and students back into unsafe classrooms.

While inflation remains low compared to other countries, teachers insist that wages are not enough to meet their essential needs. In general, the deterioration of conditions on many fronts has reached a breaking point that has become intolerable for teachers, parents and students.

The Arce administration has refused to meet any of these

demands, with the education minister Edgar Pary insisting that the sector already represents 10.8 percent of the national budget. This compares to 21 percent in 2006, when the MAS first came to power.

At the time, a boom in commodity prices driven by Chinese demand allowed the bourgeoisie in Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador and other countries to extract greater profits from the working class, pay the financial vultures and also provide limited increases in social spending.

The situation today has changed, however, and the government made clear its unwillingness to make any concessions by ordering riot police that had been continuously harassing demonstrators to violently attack a march in La Paz on Wednesday.

The police violently dispersed the crowd with pepper spray, tear gas and rubber bullets, and chased down the protesters with batons. “They have broken heads, broken bodies. There are women injured,” yelled one teacher, who was visibly shaken, to reporters at the site.

Another added, “They dragged fellow elderly teachers on the ground. This government claims to be the government of the people, but it is not. It never was.” This was followed by chants calling for the resignation of education minister Pary.

The Urban Teachers Union Confederation (CTUB), which has sought to limit the impact of the demonstrations and channel the anger behind endless appeals and futile talks with the government, felt compelled to call for the one-day strike with mobilizations on Friday and to radicalize its rhetoric.

The head of the confederation, Ludwig Salazar, said on Thursday that 30 teachers had been injured in the repression, which left them no option but to strike. “We are reaching a limit in terms of a dialogue. Teachers at the national level are furious and all of them want a strike with mobilizations on Friday, and we are not going to be able to prevent this action.”

Confirming the right-wing character of the MAS government, minister Pary responded to the strike by declaring that teachers don’t have the right to strike. “You have the right to protest, but not the right to affect anyone else’s right, of citizens, of the police officials, and above all of the right of students to education,” he declared in a press conference Thursday night.

The policies of the MAS authorities for years explode any

claims by the authorities to be concerned by children's rights.

Akin to a dictatorship, Pary has insisted that major policies like the budget will be worked out only with the official union sanctioned by MAS, the Bolivian Workers Central (COB). The CTUB does not recognize the COB, which has become deeply discredited after years of enforcing austerity measures and sanctioning the 2019 coup.

But the strategy of the CTUB bureaucrats, who merely want a seat at the table, is not an alternative. The entire union apparatus insists that it's possible to pressure the MAS government for concessions by mobilizing on a nationalist basis and not trying to mobilize miners and other major sections of the working class in Bolivia or internationally. Moreover, the CTUB has a long record of helping the government impose its social cuts and the unsafe return to in-person classes.

The mass teachers strike in Bolivia is objectively part of a worldwide eruption of the class struggle against capitalism and its nation-state system, which offer nothing but endless pandemics, a drive to World War III, bank bailouts and a reduction of the living standards of workers everywhere.

This week, 65,000 public school workers in Los Angeles struck for three days to protest almost exactly the same issues as teachers face in Bolivia: understaffing, low pay, and increased workloads. On Tuesday and Wednesday, teachers in the southern Puno region in Peru walked out as part of ongoing demonstrations demanding the resignation of the Dina Boluarte regime installed in a US-backed coup last December.

The other "pink tide" allies of Arce across Latin America have responded with similar hostility to the demands by teachers. The Peronist government of Alberto Fernández in Argentina has continued imposing massive cuts to teachers' real wages while deploying the National Police to crack down on their demonstrations. In Mexico, the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) has repeatedly sent National Guard soldiers to attack teachers and teaching students blocking railways to protest cuts and unpaid wages in Michoacán.

The authoritarian response by the Arce administration to teachers' basic demands makes clear that it is determined to make workers pay for the deepening economic crisis, while the ruling elites continue to amass profits.

Arce's fading populism has largely rested on paltry cash transfers for the poorest Bolivians and a "Tax on Big Fortunes," but these amount to mere window-dressing for a pro-rich agenda.

The "voluntary" tax was limited to a yearly 1.4-2.4 percent charge on the less than 200 individuals with fortunes larger than US\$4.3 million. The revenue amounted to only \$26.5 million in 2021, compared to more than \$1 billion collected annually from the regressive value-added tax, which hits individuals with lower incomes disproportionately. Meanwhile, the rich Bolivians continue to syphon hundreds of millions of

dollars to tax havens, and "competitive" tax rates are given to corporations.

Moreover, Arce has allowed those that profited from ransacking the public treasury under Áñez to go unscathed. According to the French daily *Liberation*, Áñez handed \$600 million to reimburse large private companies in Santa Cruz for taxes under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic.

MAS is also being rocked by a series of corruption scandals based on allegations from within the party and the government. The National Statistics Institute reported that the state-owned oil company YPFB imported last year 30 percent more diesel than what was consumed, provoking questions by the media and former MAS officials whether there is a corruption scheme to sell the rest and pocket the money.

While YPFB officials have denied any surplus, it has not provided any documentation to explain the data. Increasing suspicions, historically a net exporter of fossil fuels, Bolivia imported last year \$1 billion more fuel than it exported. Beyond the higher prices due to the war in Ukraine, natural gas production—Bolivia's main export—has fallen by nearly a third since 2015 due to a lack of investments and exploration.

All of these policies that have overwhelmingly benefited the rich have left the country's international reserves at a record low level of \$3.5 billion, compared to \$15.5 billion in 2014, while the public debt has increased to about half of the country's GDP.

The response of the Arce administration has been to drive the country deeper in debt and attack the living standards of the working class. Only months after returning a \$327 million IMF loan adopted by the Áñez regime, the Arce administration agreed to a new \$326.4 million loan from the IMF and \$300 million more from the World Bank.



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