

# National strike in Bolivia fueled by gas costs sees growing calls for president to resign

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Bolivia's right-wing President Rodrigo Paz Pereira is marking six months in office amid an escalating national strike, mass protests, and roadblocks demanding his resignation unless his government approves a 20 percent wage increase and halts its austerity measures.

The deepening social upheaval is being intensified by the global economic shock triggered by the US-Israeli war against Iran. The conflict and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz has disrupted roughly 20 percent of global oil supplies, driving Brent crude prices above \$100 per barrel and provoking fuel shortages internationally.

Bolivia, which has become heavily dependent on imported diesel and gasoline due to declining domestic gas production and chronic dollar shortages, has been hit especially hard. Long lines at gas stations, fuel rationing and soaring prices have sharpened social tensions throughout the country.

An indefinite strike called by the Bolivian Workers Confederation (COB) last Saturday has been accompanied by highway blockades, protest marches and threats of further actions involving ever broader sections of the working class, youth and peasantry.

Urban transport workers announced an indefinite nationwide shutdown beginning Tuesday, denouncing fuel shortages and the circulation of what they called "garbage gasoline."

At the same time, peasant and indigenous organizations from all 16 provinces of Cochabamba are mobilizing, while the Rural Worker Federation Túpac Katari of La Paz confirmed that beginning at midnight Wednesday it would launch an indefinite general blockade across all 20 provinces of the department of La Paz, which includes the capital.

The organizations are being driven by a social powder keg from below. Industrial workers affiliated with the COB occupied Bolivia's Ministry of Labor Wednesday. Riot police violently intervened to clear the building and arrested 13 protesters.

Attempting to maintain control over the radicalized workers and peasants, the COB announced a "pact of no betrayal" with the mobilized peasant and indigenous organizations directly raising demands for Paz to resign. The COB leadership cynically claimed that it will not betray like in the past.

At the announcement, the executive leader of the Túpac Katari federation, Vicente Salazar, acknowledged:

The people are already tired. The 20 provinces have decided. The people have overtaken us. They are tired of this government and the sole demand of the 20 provinces is the resignation of Rodrigo Paz.

This demand emerging from below reflects a growing aspiration among workers and rural masses for a direct political confrontation with the capitalist state and the comprador ruling elite represented by Paz, which the union bureaucracy and indigenous leaderships have repeatedly blocked.

The present crisis follows months of mounting unrest against the government's right-wing policies.

Last December, Paz eliminated fuel subsidies, doubling gas prices virtually overnight. The move triggered nationwide protests and road blockades led by transportation workers and joined by miners, teachers, factory workers, indigenous organizations and the COB.

Major cities such as Cochabamba and Santa Cruz were partially paralyzed for nearly a month amid supply disruptions and transportation shutdowns.

Although the protests forced the repeal of the original decree, the COB leadership and protest organizers accepted a revised measure that maintained the elimination of subsidies while introducing fixed market prices, increasing the monthly minimum wage by 20 percent to 3,300 bolivianos (approximately \$474) and modestly expanding pensions.

The COB is now demanding another 20 percent wage increase as inflation rapidly erodes living standards.

The most recent wave of roadblocks and strikes was preceded by worker, peasant and student mobilizations throughout March and April.

On March 31, thousands of workers marched through La Paz and surrounded Bolivia's government palace demanding higher wages, labor protections and lower fuel prices.

A major source of anger has been the administration's plans to eliminate existing labor protections, allowing employers to increase working hours and worsen working conditions. Demonstrators have also demanded an end to plans for privatization of state-owned mining and energy companies.

On April 8, dozens of peasant and indigenous organizations began a march toward La Paz from Pando in Bolivia's Amazon region. As the marchers enter the capital this week, they are being joined by students, municipal workers, teachers and retirees demanding an end to university closures, education cuts and starvation-level wages and pensions.

The peasant march began in opposition to Law 1720, which permits the dissolution of peasant-owned communal lands and facilitates their takeover by agribusiness interests. Protesters are also opposing legislation aimed at criminalizing and repressing highway blockades.

Healthcare workers across Bolivia carried out a 24-hour strike on April 9 protesting layoffs, shortages of medications and deteriorating

conditions in hospitals and clinics.

On May 1, thousands gathered in the working-class city of El Alto for a *Cabildo Abierto*, or open town hall meeting, called by the COB unions representing truckers, educators, miners, agricultural laborers and health workers alongside peasant organizations.

The rally expressed support for the peasant march against Law 1720 and called for a unified struggle against the Paz government. The COB announced from the platform that an indefinite general strike would begin May 2.

The demands advanced at the meeting included the 20 percent increase in the minimum wage, a 50 percent reduction in salaries for high government officials, lower taxes for small businesses, increased pensions and an end to privatization plans.

At a separate May Day event in Cochabamba, President Paz rejected the COB's demands. "If you want higher wages, first work more," he declared.

Paz also attempted to divide workers by arguing that because 85 percent of Bolivia's economy is informal and only 15 percent formal, wage increases would benefit only a privileged minority.

Bolivia's economic breakdown has deep historical roots. The country has transitioned from a net energy exporter to importing roughly 86 percent of its diesel and 54 percent of its gasoline due to decades of mismanagement, declining investment in exploration and dependence on commodity exports.

#### **The betrayals of MAS and the COB set the stage for Paz's policies**

Paz is now exploiting this crisis of representation of the Bolivian ruling elite to accelerate privatization of natural resources and strategic industries, threatening a return to the conditions that provoked the gas and water wars of 2000-2005.

Those historic struggles marked a rebellion of workers, peasants and indigenous masses against neoliberal privatization and austerity imposed by governments backed by Washington. The upheavals toppled two presidents and created the conditions for the rise of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) under Evo Morales, who became Bolivia's first indigenous president in 2005.

The MAS, however, politically contained these revolutionary struggles by channeling them into bourgeois parliamentary politics. Under the banner of "Andean-Amazonian capitalism," Morales implemented limited and largely symbolic nationalizations that enriched transnational corporations such as Petrobras and ExxonMobil while preserving the capitalist state apparatus and military.

Morales increasingly aligned his government with agro-industrial oligarchs, repressed indigenous protests against extractive projects and integrated organizations such as the COB into the framework of capitalist governance.

During the commodity boom, the MAS financed limited social programs that reduced poverty, but the collapse in global commodity prices after 2014 exposed the underlying fragility and right-wing trajectory of the regime. Gas production declined sharply while austerity measures intensified.

Morales's maneuver to override presidential term limits through compliant courts further eroded popular support and paved the way for the US-backed coup of November 2019 following disputed elections.

The 2019 coup, organized by sections of the military high command and fascist oligarchs from Santa Cruz led by Luis Fernando Camacho, was facilitated by the political betrayals of the MAS and the COB bureaucracy.

The COB leadership demanded Morales's resignation and even

imprisonment, while some union bureaucrats collaborated directly with the far-right dictatorship of Jeanine Áñez.

The coup regime unleashed bloody repression against anti-coup demonstrations in El Alto and Senkata, targeting indigenous communities and MAS supporters.

Confronted with mass opposition, economic collapse and the COVID-19 pandemic, the Áñez regime was forced to call elections in 2020, allowing MAS candidate Luis Arce, Morales's former finance minister, to return to power.

Arce deepened austerity measures in line with IMF dictates while prioritizing "the economy over health" during the pandemic. The government continued pro-business policies that increasingly alienated workers and peasants.

At the same time, factional warfare between Arce and Morales paralyzed the MAS government amid rising inflation, mounting debt, shortages of fuel and dollars and deteriorating living conditions.

The failed military coup attempt of June 2024 by Gen. Juan José Zúñiga, who demanded the release of Áñez, exposed the advanced crisis of the Bolivian state and the continued activity of fascist forces tied to imperialism.

The collapse of support for the MAS culminated in the 2025 elections, where the party won only 3.2 percent in the first round. This opened the door for Rodrigo Paz Pereira's victory on promises of "capitalism for all," restoring close ties with Washington and releasing Áñez.

Paz subsequently aligned Bolivia with Donald Trump's "Shield of the Americas" coalition aimed at consolidating US influence in the region against China—next to Brazil, the country's main trade partner—and preparing authoritarian forms of rule to suppress mounting social opposition.

The US war against Iran has now dramatically intensified Bolivia's fuel crisis. The government lacks sufficient dollar reserves to finance imports, while the estimated \$56 million weekly cost of purchasing fuel abroad is overwhelming public finances.

Bolivia is once again approaching a social explosion, reflecting a broader process unfolding across Latin America and internationally, including within the United States itself.

The decisive question confronting workers and youth is the need to draw the political lessons from the debacle of the MAS and the role played by the COB and indigenous leaderships in paving the way for the return of the right wing.

The struggle against imperialism, austerity and capitalist exploitation cannot be waged through nationalist or bourgeois parties tied to the existing state. It requires the independent political mobilization of the working class throughout Bolivia and Latin America, uniting workers with oppressed peasants and indigenous masses in a common struggle against capitalism and imperialism.



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