

# Bolivia's indefinite national strike faces military repression

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An indefinite national strike in Bolivia has continued to expand for more than two weeks in opposition to rising fuel costs and the right-wing policies of President Rodrigo Paz. A close ally of the Trump administration, Paz is responding with deadly repression and detentions.

Manufacturing workers, miners, teachers, peasants and indigenous groups have joined the strike, erecting roadblocks and threatening to shut down whole sections of the economy and country, including the capital La Paz.

The protests are an expression of how the global crisis of capitalism, sharpened to a breaking point by the US-Israeli war against Iran and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz—which disrupted supply chains globally and triggered fuel shortages—is driving an explosive upsurge in the class struggle on every continent.

A new counteroffensive from below against social cuts, layoffs, fascistic reaction, dictatorship and war is growing, from the picket lines of Long Island Rail Road workers in New York to transportation workers and miners in the Bolivian Andes.

The national strike is the product of an explosive escalation against the Paz government that began with last December's mass protests against Decree 5503, which eliminated decades-old fuel subsidies overnight, doubling gas prices virtually at a stroke. Bolivia's nine departments were rocked by roadblocks and marches for weeks. The Bolivian Workers Central (COB) leadership ultimately called off protests after accepting a revised measure that kept the elimination of subsidies while introducing a 20 percent minimum wage increase.

This treacherous settlement proved unable to contain the anger from below as the cost-of-living crisis worsened in the context of the Iran war and ongoing threats to further privatize natural resources, including the world's largest lithium reserves.

On May Day, thousands gathered in El Alto—a stronghold of indigenous Aymara workers and the setting historically of major militant struggles—for an open town hall called by the COB. Facing a massive mobilization of teachers, truck drivers, miners, health workers, agricultural laborers and others, the COB was compelled to call for an indefinite general strike starting May 2.

The demands raised include another 20 percent minimum wage increase, a 50 percent cut in salaries of high government officials, the repeal of the reactionary Law 1720 on land classification, increased pensions, an end to privatization plans and lower taxes for small businesses.

Meanwhile, indigenous groups walked 1,100 kilometers (684 miles) over more than 20 days from Bolivia's Amazon lowlands to the near-freezing Andes to La Paz to protest Law 1720. Enacted in April, the law allowed for voluntary conversion of titled small agricultural properties into larger holdings, opening indigenous and peasant communal lands to takeover by agribusiness and mining operations.

On May 12, the COB and several indigenous and peasant organizations announced a joint escalation of protests and called for the resignation of Paz. At least 67 roadblock points have been recorded, nearly paralyzing eight of the country's nine departments. Daily economic losses have been estimated in millions of dollars, while the state oil company YPFB was forced to suspend gas supply to municipalities as tankers became stranded by roadblocks. Urban transport has ground to a halt.

But the center of gravity has been El Alto and the corridors surrounding La Paz. The Túpac Katari peasant federation launched an indefinite blockade across all 20 provinces of the La Paz department, cutting routes to the Peruvian border at Desaguadero, to Copacabana, to Caranavi and the critical La Paz–Oruro highway.

Miner Cooperatives in La Paz joined the strike last week, with hundreds of miners seen descending from El Alto in caravans and detonating dynamite sticks outside the presidential palace. Miners have announced their own demands: an end to fuel scarcity, restoration of explosive supplies for mining operations and the resignation of Paz.

On Thursday, May 14, Paz sought to debilitate protests by eliminating law 1720, while making a direct appeal to the indigenous capitalist leaderships for “dialogue” to come up with “a new land law.”

On Friday, however, the streets of La Paz again filled with demonstrators, and the organizations mobilized said they will not end protests without the resignation of Paz or the full satisfaction of their demands.

Paz has responded with brutal force and legal persecution. On Saturday, approximately 3,500 soldiers and police were deployed in a pre-dawn crackdown on roadblocks around El Alto and along the La Paz–Oruro highway, firing tear gas as workers and peasants used stones, dynamite cartridges and burning barricades in resistance.

Around 57 people were arrested, according to Bolivia's ombudsman's office. Clashes continued Sunday, with military and

police convoys clearing blockade points.

At least four people have died in the course of the repression and at least two others in connection with the protests. The Paz government and Bolivia's corporate media have given prominent coverage to two deaths attributed to blocked medical access due to roadblocks.

On Sunday, the government issued an arrest warrant against Mario Argollo, leader of the COB, for participating in the roadblocks in La Paz.

This follows a week after an arrest warrant was issued against former president Evo Morales, charged with contempt for failing to appear for trial on highly politicized human trafficking charges. This is another dimension of the repression. Morales, sheltered by supporters in his Chapare stronghold, has claimed a US-backed military operation is being prepared to detain or kill him.

## The way forward

Bolivian workers are demanding the downfall of the repressive Paz government, with whom there is nothing to negotiate. They are fighting for their own livelihoods and independent class interests.

However, the leaderships of the COB and the different factions of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party, including that of Evo Morales, defend the interests of sections of Bolivia's ruling class and its international partners, all of whom seek to place the burden of the crisis of Bolivian capitalism on the shoulders of workers and poor peasants.

Their aim is to destroy the limited social gains under MAS administrations in the 2000s, when high commodity prices were used to finance limited social programs, subsidies and partial nationalizations.

MAS was part of the Latin American "pink tide" movement of capitalist governments that sought to suppress the class struggle through such social concessions, while pursuing closer economic ties with Russia and China. When prices collapsed and revenues dried up, MAS offered workers social cuts and repression—and the party imploded.

The COB was founded on April 1952, by decree of the bourgeois nationalist Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) government of Víctor Paz Estenssoro to consolidate its rule and prevent a socialist revolution, with MNR miners' leader Juan Lechín appointed as its executive secretary. Lechín became Paz Estenssoro's vice president, formalizing the COB's integration into the capitalist state through a "co-government" arrangement that bound the union leadership to the nationalist regime.

The Revolutionary Workers' Party (POR) of Guillermo Lora facilitated this integration by abandoning Trotskyist principles after 1951, aligning with Michel Pablo's liquidationist perspective that bourgeois nationalist leaders could lead a socialist revolution, thereby refusing to fight for the working class to break decisively from Lechín and the MNR.

This pattern of subordinating workers' organizations to

bourgeois nationalism continued for decades: The POR and COB supported the bourgeois nationalist General Juan José Torres when he took power in October 1970, with Torres naming Lechín head of his People's Assembly. This subordination of workers to the capitalist state disarmed them politically and physically, allowing the fascist General Hugo Banzer to carry out a US-backed military coup and launch a counterrevolutionary onslaught.

The COB became the backbone of Evo Morales's MAS government after channeling the 2000–2005 popular upsurge behind his election, and in May 2013–2014 the union leadership declared "independence" from MAS precisely to better implement labor deregulation and austerity as commodity prices fell.

Today, the arrest warrant against its leader notwithstanding, the COB has sought to maintain the movement within the bounds of negotiations with the Paz government, defending their seat at the table above all, not the interests of those they nominally represent.

The workers in Bolivia must see their struggle against Paz as part of an international movement that has sent Long Island Rail Road workers onto the picket lines and led US autoworkers to repudiate sellout contracts and demand strike action, amid mounting class conflicts internationally. These are not parallel national crises. They are expressions of a single global breakdown of a capitalist system that has nothing to offer the working class but war, impoverishment and fascism.

The trade union bureaucracies in every country will attempt to isolate, fragment and exhaust these struggles, directing them back into negotiations with governments that serve the ruling class.

Workers need to build their own structures of struggle, independent of these bureaucracies, opposing any attempt by their pseudo-left apologists claiming workers must respect their authority. This means building rank-and-file committees, accountable to workers on the shop floors, mines, highways, schools, hospitals and neighborhoods—and connecting them internationally. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) exists to do precisely this.



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