

After the COB's betrayals, Bolivian workers launch new wave of struggles against fuel hikes and IMF austerity

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Last Monday, October 19, a major march by peasant, trade union and political groups against fuel and food price increases was confronted by a large police deployment in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Prevented from advancing toward the city center, the march was reduced to a rally on Avenida Petrolera.

Then, following a demonstration before the Ministry of Education in La Paz on Tuesday, urban teachers held a 24-hour national strike Friday against rising prices and the government's plan to decentralize public education. Schools shut down across the country, and thousands of teachers, students and supporters joined marches, rallies and roadblocks in different cities. On both Tuesday and Friday, police responded with tear gas, rubber bullets, beatings and detentions.

The protests come a month after the government of President Rodrigo Paz Pereira abolished the last diesel subsidy on September 18, raising the price per liter from 9.80 to 17.95 bolivianos.

Paz has responded by extending a state of exception, in force since June 2, through the end of the year, banning highway blockades and authorizing the armed forces to clear them.

Lorenzo Chávez, a leader of the Santa Cruz urban teachers union announced that the Confederation of Urban Education Workers of Bolivia (CTEUB), together with its 31 departmental and regional federations, announced that it would back Friday's strike.

The Bolivian Workers Central (Central Obrera Boliviana—COB) has refused to join. At a national meeting in Cochabamba last week, its executive secretary, Mario Argollo, declared that “the opposition is now here, in the leadership, in the streets,” but announced no strike and no date for any action.

Despite the militancy shown by the masses in the streets of La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba, Oruro, Potosí, Sucre and Santa Cruz in past mobilizations, the COB has already called off two general strikes this year, in January and June. The government answered each retreat with new attacks.

These betrayals underscore the need for the working class to break with the COB bureaucracy and with the Movement Toward Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo—MAS), whose two decades in power prepared the present catastrophe.

The COB's betrayals

The first betrayal came in January. In December 2025, Supreme Decree 5503 eliminated fuel subsidies, raising gasoline prices 86.1 percent and diesel 163.4 percent. The COB called an indefinite strike, and road

blockades paralyzed seven of the country's nine departments. On January 11, Argollo signed an agreement in El Alto to repeal the decree. It was replaced by Decree 5516, which kept the fuel price increases in effect. “Here the ministers have not lost, the leaders have not won. Bolivia has won,” Argollo declared.

The second strike, launched in May against fiscal cuts and the rising cost of living, became an uprising of workers, peasants and indigenous communities that lasted some 50 days. Terrorism warrants were issued against Argollo and 24 other union leaders. On June 19, he signed another agreement with Paz that lifted the blockades without securing the restoration of subsidies. “We don't want to be part of the government, only to participate in the decisions,” Argollo said.

Peasant, indigenous and coca-growing sectors rejected the agreement, and six federations of the Cochabamba Tropics accused the COB of “treason.” The government's response shows what the agreement was worth. On June 20, the day after the signing, Paz decreed the state of exception. On June 29, he floated the boliviano. In September, he extended the state of exception, secured a \$1.9 billion agreement with the International Monetary Fund and abolished the diesel subsidy.

These betrayals facilitated brutal state repression. The Ombudsman's Office recorded 583 arrests, 88 injured and 22 deaths during the May-June conflict, three of them during police and military operations to clear the roads. The state of exception authorizes the armed forces to act alongside the police without a court order.

Now that the COB has declared itself “in opposition,” Argollo uses the language of “political independence” to keep the COB away from the marches called by MAS supporters. “We will not take part in any political movement,” he said on October 15. He has shown no such reluctance to sign agreements with the government.

The “Safe Border” plan and Washington's hand

On October 21, the government launched the “Safe Border 2.0” plan in Santa Cruz, sending 230 police specialized in “transnational organized crime” to the department and border areas, with new contingents to follow every 45 days.

The Safe Border 2.0 and other “anti-crime” operations will ultimately be used against the mass struggles provoked by the *dieselazo*. The government has already branded the uprising of May and June as “narco-terrorism.”

In September, Vice President Edmand Lara, who is in open conflict with Paz, released an audio recording attributed to Paz and his former top

adviser, the Argentine far-right operative Fernando Cerimedo, where they discuss a “regionalized” state of siege in the Chapare and San Julián and the need to design “the novel we are going to write.” One voice asks: “What if we beat the hell out of the Chapare people first? Because they are the center of terrorism.”

Cerimedo has been jailed since August, charged with ordering the shooting of his former partner, Nadia Beller. Prosecutors are also investigating him for illicit enrichment and for protecting drug flights from Beni. Beller says \$800,000 a month passed “through the presidency.”

On October 22, the State Department announced visa restrictions on a new list of Bolivians, among them former Attorney General Juan Lanchipa, two sitting deputies, judges, prosecutors and police commanders. Washington said it backs the Paz government in removing “criminal influence” from the justice system, the police and the Legislative Assembly.

The previous list, issued on September 28, included Attorney General Roger Mariaca, who was prosecuting Cerimedo. Bolivian police arrested him at Viru Viru less than 48 hours later. Washington now decides who may staff the courts, the police and the legislature of a nominally sovereign country.

This reveals the degree of control US imperialism seeks to exercise over South America through its “Shield of the Americas,” the alliance Trump launched in March at his Doral, Florida, resort. Bolivia is a member. On September 22-24, US troops trained Bolivian forces in La Paz in crowd control. The objective goes beyond driving China out of the region. Under the “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, Washington claims the right to dominate South America directly, and that includes suppressing its working class.

The collapse of the Bolivian economy

Since December 2025, the price of diesel has risen from 3.72 to 17.95 bolivianos per liter, nearly fivefold. The increase has a multiplier effect, since practically all goods in Bolivia are transported by truck. Its impact will fall first on food prices, hitting the working class and peasantry hardest.

Inflation reached 20.40 percent in 2025, the highest in 36 years, up from 2.12 percent in 2023. The government points to the fall in year-over-year inflation from 14.18 percent in April to 5.70 percent in September. But that rate is measured against last year’s surge, and it has been rising again since July, when it stood at 4.93 percent.

After the June 29 decision to float the currency, the dollar rose from Bs 6.96 to about Bs 11.73, an increase of 68.5 percent. Everything priced in dollars now costs 68.5 percent more in bolivianos. According to the IMF, Bolivia will be the only South American economy to contract both this year and next, with GDP falling 3 percent in 2026 and 1.5 percent in 2027.

Paz now intends to make workers pay for the collapse of the economy, as he accelerates the destruction demanded by the IMF of the policies implemented by MAS, which governed from 2006 to 2019 and again from 2020 to 2025. The MAS’s so-called “21st-century socialism,” part of the regional “pink tide,” rested on subsidies, a fixed exchange rate and dollars from natural gas exports to finance public spending and pacify the population. These measures relied on the global commodity boom that ended in 2014.

The MAS never touched capitalist property. Its 2006 “nationalization” renegotiated contracts with Petrobras, Repsol, Total and other transnationals, which continued to operate the main gas fields. The rent financed social bonuses while the fields were depleted without new

reserves being developed.

Gas exports fell 82.1 percent between 2014 and 2025, an annual loss of about \$4.9 billion compared with the 2014 peak. According to the Bolivian Foreign Trade Institute (IBCE), the country spent \$15.8 billion importing diesel and gasoline between 2015 and 2024. Bolivia now depends on the production of gold, silver, zinc and other minerals, which have not prevented the contraction.

The social impact is exposed by the National Statistics Institute’s 2025 Household Survey, citing a rise in poverty in 2024 to 44.7 percent, with extreme poverty climbing from 12.8 to 16.7 percent. Poverty means income insufficient to cover food and basic necessities. Extreme poverty means income insufficient even to purchase staple food. In the countryside, extreme poverty reached 31.5 percent.

Some 85 percent of Bolivian workers are employed informally, without contracts, pensions or health coverage. They are the first to be hit by every increase in transport and food prices.

Despite the economic contraction, the working class remains enormously powerful, as measured by the economic losses estimated at \$60 million a day during this year’s general strike. The CNI and the National Chamber of Exporters (Caneb) put total losses at \$2.3 billion to \$3 billion, equivalent to 4.3 to 5.6 percent of the projected 2026 GDP.

Under globalization, this power has a multiplier effect. A general strike in Bolivia also hits the capitalist buyers of Bolivian minerals and other commodities in China, the United States and elsewhere.

The lessons of Bolivian history

To mobilize this power, workers must assimilate the lessons of their own history. Twice before, in 1952 under the MNR and in 1971 under Gen. Juan José Torres, Bolivian workers had power within its reach. Both times their leaders subordinated them to a “progressive” wing of the national bourgeoisie, and both times defeat and dictatorship followed.

In April 1952, armed workers, above all the miners, defeated the army and brought the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) of Víctor Paz Estenssoro to power. The government nationalized the major tin mines, carried out land reform and established universal suffrage. But it preserved the capitalist state, rebuilt the army and established close relations with US imperialism.

The section of the Trotskyist Fourth International, the Revolutionary Workers Party (POR) led by Guillermo Lora followed the line advanced by Michel Pablo during the Third Congress of the Fourth International in 1951. It called on the Trotskyist parties to dissolve into the “mass movements” dominated by Stalinist parties and bourgeois nationalist leaderships in each country. The POR offered “critical support” to the MNR government instead of fighting for workers’ power. The COB was placed under the control of the MNR. As a result, the army the MNR rebuilt brought the right-wing Gen. René Barrientos to power in the 1964 coup.

In 1971, the Popular Assembly emerged under the bourgeois nationalist government of Gen. Juan José Torres. The COB, the Stalinists and the Pabloite POR presented it as a “soviet,” while subordinating the working class to Torres. Lora sowed the illusion that Torres would arm the workers against the fascists. Torres armed no one, fleeing the country in the face of the August 1971 US-backed coup led by the fascist Gen. Hugo Banzer, who imposed seven years of dictatorship.

The lesson of these experiences is the need to build an internationalist revolutionary party in Bolivia, opposed to all bourgeois nationalist, Stalinist and Pabloite organizations, and based on a genuine socialist program for the working class to take power at the head of the poor

peasants and other oppressed layers.



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