



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Bolivian salaried workers win higher wages, 2011

7 April

2011

to: 18 April

2011

Country: Bolivia

Goals:

To attain a pay raise of 15-20% rather than the government's proposal of 10%

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 104. Professional strike › by teachers and health workers

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › thousands blockaded roads in major cities

Notes on Methods:

All protest activity was halted by leaders of the COB on April 9th-11th during negotiations.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- health workers
- salaried mine workers
- teachers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Bolivian Workers Central (COB), Pedro Montes

Partners:

Oruro Departmental Workers Central

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:**Groups in 2nd Segment:****Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:****Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**

Joining order not known

Segment Length: 2 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Bolivian government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Police beat and arrested campaigners who participated in roadblocks. Although one violent encounter was widely publicized, others may have taken place.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaigners received a 3 for their partial success- although they did not meet their original demand of 15%, they did achieve a 12% wage increase and a guarantee of participation in future legislative processes

In December 2010, Bolivian president Evo Morales announced that the government would be unable to continue subsidizing fuel prices. In addition to changes in the cost of fuel, which increased by more than 80% without subsidies, the price of food and other commodities also skyrocketed in the same period. Morales reinstated the fuel subsidies after a week of widespread protest, but the price of food remained high.

While the spiraling inflation was not simply a product of Morales' policy—global food shortages and rising world prices played a significant role—his decision to cut subsidies made the inflation worse. Between March 2010 and March 2011, food prices increased by 18.5%, which was more than the 11.1% general inflation rate for the year.

In early March the government expected to adjust wages upward because of the inflation, through Decree 0809. The Central Union of Bolivian Workers (COB), the country's main union federation, opposed the decree as insufficient. The federation's two-million-person membership included teachers, health care workers, coca farmers, and women's groups, many of which had participated in the resistance to the fuel subsidy cuts in December.

Under the contested Decree 0809, wages for teachers, health workers, and members of the police and armed forces would be increased by 10%. The COB argued that the increase would still not be enough to cover basic living expenses. It should also be noted that the decree would only apply to a minority of the working population, given that 70% of workers operated in the informal sector and thus did not receive a fixed salary.

From 7 to 18 April health workers and teachers across the country struck with the goal of attaining a 15% wage hike. The strike was accompanied by demonstrations in front of government buildings and highway blockades, which lasted through this period.

One of the protesters' most common tactics, nicknamed the "snake", involved groups of people blocking off a series of strategic corners of cities and then quickly shifting to new streets to generate chaos, rather than set up permanent blockades. Protesters also blocked the roads linking the central city of Cochabamba with other major cities such as Trinidad. Although the protests consisted mainly of teachers, health care workers, and miners, they were later joined by university students.

On 9 April the COB initiated negotiations with the government, which lasted for two days. The negotiations included an 18-hour meeting in which Morales participated. During the negotiation period, the COB paused the campaign, effectively halting all protest activity for the weekend.

On 11 April the COB announced that they had reached a provisional agreement with the government. Under the terms of the agreement, two commissions would be created to address separate problems.

One commission, consisting of government officials and COB representatives, would draft new mining, forestry, banking and electricity laws. The second commission would focus on industrialization projects. In addition, the government agreed to keep the COB updated with information on food production, distribution and consumption. Although the miners' federation and some

health workers lent their support to the final proposal, most of the COB's affiliated unions rejected the agreement for keeping the 10% increase, and the strikes resumed the next day.

On 12 April members of the National Coalition for Change (CONALCAM) initiated protests to counter those of the COB. The group, which served as an umbrella coalition for indigenous and peasant organizations, denounced the COB for destabilizing the government with roadblocks.

During the strike both Morales and Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera made multiple speeches on television in which they accused the protesters of having violent intentions, despite their commitment to nonviolent methods. In one speech, Morales warned the public that the protesters would surely dynamite the Legislative Palace if the police let them enter the grounds of the Plaza Murillo. In a separate statement, Morales also said that increased wages for teachers and health workers would translate into deep cuts in social services, given that cities had to contend with the country's \$880 million budget deficit. In this way, Morales framed the protesters as members of an entitled minority whose wage demands would force the government to reduce subsidies for the poor.

On 15 April hundreds of riot police attacked a group of 5,000 rural teachers who had occupied the La Paz-Oruro highway. At least nine people were wounded in the encounter. During the confrontation, members of the police attacked journalists and photographers on the scene and confiscated their cameras. One teacher was brutally beaten by several policemen, but the journalists were unable to record the beating. The duration of the teachers' occupation is unknown.

That same day, salaried workers in Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Tarija, and other cities initiated their own marches in solidarity with COB members. The marches consisted of workers from a wide variety of sectors, including air traffic controllers, health workers, and thousands of retirees who called for across-the-board wage increases. Given the absence of the air traffic controllers, the government was forced to send the military to the airport in La Paz to keep it running.

On 17 April COB leader Pedro Montes initiated a new round of talks with the government, which were largely propelled by COB leaders' fears that the protests would turn violent after the police encounter two days before. The negotiations resulted in an additional 2% pay raise for teachers and health workers. The government's final offer of a 12% increase was announced after 36 hours of negotiations.

In addition to the wage increase, Linera announced that the government would include the COB in the process of drafting new laws to regulate the mining, forestry, banking, and electricity industries. These reforms would be accompanied by the repeal of Decree 21060. The decree, which was passed in a period of economic crisis under President Víctor Paz Estenssoro in 1985, imposed neoliberal measures that would ensure much-needed loans from the IMF and the World Bank. The decree not only dissolved major state enterprises, but also allowed the government to end all subsidies to the public sector and privatize certain industries.

Under the terms of this new agreement, the COB would work in conjunction with the Legislative Assembly to submit draft legislation for the repeal of Decree 21060. Although the annulment of the law would not be enough to stop its implementation, Morales' decision to include the COB in the legislative process represented an important first step in terms of gaining a stronger influence over government policy.

Research Notes

Influences:

The campaign for a greater wage hike was influenced by previous campaigns, such as the the COB's protests against Morales' decision to eliminate fuel subsidies in December 2010. Before the April campaign, the group had also organized a series of one-day general strikes to protest rising food prices. These past mobilizations informed the demands and methods of the April

campaign. (1)

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Carmen Smith-Estrada, 04/12/2011

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