

# Child Workers of Bolivia, Unite!

*Nearly 1 million children work full time in Bolivia's tin mines, in cemeteries, on buses, or in the markets. It's a tough life, but at least they're unionized.*

BY HELEN COSTER

**POTOSI**, Bolivia—Edwin Choquevilla is the primary breadwinner in his family, earning \$7 a day pushing a wheelbarrow inside Bolivia's Cerro Rico mine. He spends his money on food and clothing for his mother and three siblings, who live in a 600-square-foot cement hut that doubles as a storage shack for wheelbarrows, canisters of gasoline, and clusters of dynamite. But unlike most of the other 15,000 miners who work in the Cerro Rico mine, Choquevilla wants to be a soccer star when he grows up. He is, after all, only 14 years old. "I need to help my family," Choquevilla says. "Hopefully next year, I can go back to school."

Choquevilla is one of an estimated 1,000 children who work in Cerro Rico -- "the hill of wealth" -- Bolivia's most famous and fertile mine. In the 16th century, silver from Cerro Rico bankrolled the Spanish empire, and at one point, Potosí was one of the wealthiest towns in the world. But production peaked in 1650 and then went into a century-long decline when Mexico entered the market. Over the next 200 years, demand for silver and other minerals ebbed and flowed -- and with it, miners' fortunes. The Bolivian government nationalized the mining industry after the 1952 revolution. The state mining company, Corporación Minera Boliviana (Comibol), controlled the mines until the government privatized the industry in the 1980s. Today 36 private cooperatives control Cerro Rico, where miners risk their lives to extract silver, zinc, tin, and lead. But child miners aren't just doing their boss's bidding: They're also organizing to defend their rights.

Across Bolivia, 10,000 working children -- employed by the mines, but also cemeteries, markets, and buses -- are unionizing and working with the government to rewrite labor laws. "We're asking the government to come up with laws not because they sound good, but because they're realistic," says Ernesto Copa, the 17 year-old president of UNATSBO, Bolivia's largest union of child workers. "We're in a state of mobilization."

Bolivian children entered the workforce en masse in the 1980s, when the privatization of national industries forced more than 100,000 adults out of work. Today child labor is ubiquitous; an estimated 800,000 children in Bolivia work full time jobs. In the capital city of La Paz, children shine shoes while wearing ski masks -- to protect their lungs from pollution, or their identities out of shame, depending on whom you ask. In Cochabamba, they collect money on minibuses. In Uyuni, on the edge of the spectacular Salar de Uyuni salt flats, they work in the market selling bottled water to tourists. In the jungle outside Riberalta, they harvest Brazil nuts for several months of the year, risking malaria, snake bites, and wounds from machetes.

In 1995, NGOs like Caritas and CARE started offering education and other services for working children, who soon began organizing on their own. Children who work in cemeteries unionized in 1999, and children who work in the markets and bus terminals soon followed. Today UNATSBO -- which includes children from many different sectors -- has chapters in seven of Bolivia's nine states and 600 members in Potosí alone. While some children in Bolivia begin working as early as age 5, most who join unions do so when they're 11 or 12, often at the encouragement of older friends. "That's when they understand what's going on around them and that their human rights are being violated," says Luz Rivera Daza, an educator with Caritas, an NGO that works with unionized children.

The Bolivian labor force is organized, to a point. Some groups -- like coca farmers, truck drivers, and miners -- began unionizing in the 1970s in response to military and political repression. They experienced pushback from the government, and occasional violence. When the government privatized industries in the 1980s, the mining union in particular grew in influence and exerted its power over the cooperatives.

Now is a particularly opportune moment for the unions to pursue new legal protections. Encouraged by President Evo Morales, a coca farmer and the country's first indigenous president, Bolivians approved a new constitution last year, and legislators are currently in the process of rewriting existing laws to conform to the new legal code. The children's unions are pushing lawmakers to reform the Code of Children and Adolescents, which governs child labor. In its current form, the code sets the legal working age at 14, and it doesn't distinguish between labor and exploitation.

Unionized child workers and their advocates argue that because child labor is a necessity born of poverty, it can't and shouldn't be eradicated. But they want the government and NGOs to differentiate between child labor -- which they see as an economic necessity -- and exploitation, which is how they characterize children working in dangerous jobs, like mining, and harvesting Brazil nuts and sugar cane. "We need to focus on eradicating abusive work," says **Jorge Domic**, a child psychologist and director of social education at Fundación La Paz, a Bolivian NGO. "If we propose to end all forms of child labor, we're not going to do it. We'll just have more clandestine labor in an even worse form than it currently exists."

Instead, child-workers unions want to ensure that children earn the same wages and have the same financial tools as their adult counterparts. In some sectors, they earn less than half the salary of their adult colleagues. Moreover, children don't have access to savings accounts and often give their earnings directly to their parents.

Union members also lobby for safe work environments. The mines, in particular, are notoriously dangerous. Sixty adolescents died in Bolivia's mines in 2008 alone, according to Roberto Fernandez, coordinator of NGO Yachaj Mosoj ("New Knowledge" in Quechua), which runs education programs for children in Potosí. "One of our fears is that Cerro Rico is going to crumble like the Twin Towers, floor by floor," says Fernandez.

The unions are also pushing for better medical care, especially for children whose jobs present a health risk. Most miners eventually develop silicosis, a lung disease caused by

inhaling large quantities of silica dust. According to Gualberto Astorga Quiróz, a pulmonologist at the state-run lung clinic in Potosí, many workers show symptoms of silicosis after only eight to ten years of working underground. Miners tend to work for an average of 15 or 20 years. A child who starts working in the mines when he's 8 or 10 years old would likely need supplemental oxygen to breathe by the time he's 20. There's psychological damage, too. "The problem is that in the long term every miner adult or child knows that when they go to work, they may not come home that day," says Astorga. "Every day you say goodbye to your family. Psychologically, this creates an acceptance of death, both for the workers and their families."

But just as important as the unions' political goals are the tangible social benefits they offer their members: the opportunity for the children to develop confidence, a sense of community, and the chance to joke around with kids their own age. At a recent evening meeting of a regional union of child workers in Potosí, eight young attendees -- who work in the markets, cemeteries, and mines -- showed up. The majority live with their parents, most of whom don't belong to unions. All the children attend school. They were tired, more interested in teasing their adult supervisor than in focusing on the night's agenda: selecting a member of their union to represent the group at an upcoming meeting with the Ministry of Health. They listened to music and played computer games while they waited for the supervisor to call the meeting to order. But in only a few hours, they will have to report to work.

Tomorrow, a couple of them will rejoin Thomas Delgado, who is 11 years old. He earns \$21 a day pushing a wheelbarrow inside Cerro Rico, working from 7 a.m. until 4 p.m. He attends school from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. His father, a miner, died when he was 2, and Delgado uses his earnings to buy food for his mother and six siblings. Every morning he chews coca for energy, sharing a bag of leaves with colleagues who tower over him. Then he enters the mine. "I realize it's dangerous," he says. "It's very dark. There's no light except for the head lamps. I'm not scared now, but the first time I went in, I was scared. It's better to work outside, sweeping the entrance to the mines, because inside people die."

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