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By Andrea Lobo
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Bolivia's biggest mine and public health sector go on strike

The 834 workers at the San Cristobal mine, the largest in Bolivia and the third-largest producer of silver in the world, went on an indefinite strike Sunday to demand that the Japanese-based transnational Sumitomo comply with an August 9 ruling by a labor court that it pay overtime for Sundays, holidays, extra and night-shift hours, which it has not done since it bought the mine in 2006.

Miners have denounced having to work 12-hour days of strenuous work for the last 12 years without being compensated fully. Facing growing unrest, the Mixed Union of San Cristobal Miners (SMTMSC) appealed in August 2018 to the Ministry of Labor and the labor courts, which handed down their ruling a year later. In March, the union transported 600 miners and family members to march in the capital of La Paz to appeal to the government of Evo Morales, which effectively controls the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) that the San Cristobal union belongs to.

Unable to contain the anger among miners after ordering them to work without full compensation for another year, the SMTMSC called a strike after the company failed to comply with the ruling. On Sunday, about 600 miners, family members and supporters carried out another march in La Paz. As of this writing on Monday, the company had not given a response.

The strike coincides with an indefinite national strike in the public health sector launched on Monday. Doctors, nurses and other health care workers are demanding a major increase in spending, from 6.5 percent to 10 percent of the government's budget and to fulfill unpaid benefits for state employees, while improving the conditions at public hospitals. This follows a 47-day strike last year violently repressed by police that forced Morales to cancel a malpractice law intended to scapegoat doctors for the decrepit state of the state-run health care system. Morales still denounced “the political strike that has caused so much harm to thousands of sick people.”

In July, after two doctors died from a virus contracted at work, health care workers carried out another two-day strike. At the time, the leadership of the COB threatened strikers with “mobilizations,” i.e., deploying thugs, and firings, while they were being threatened by the Morales government with arrests, including an arrest warrant filed against the president of the Medical Union in La Paz.

Facing mounting unrest from below, Morales and his Movement toward Socialism (MAS) are veering sharply to the right, adopting authoritarian forms of rule to defend the profits of the transnational corporations and financial vultures. If the Sumitomo Corporation gathers that it can ignore the court ruling, it’s because it has taken the measure of the pro-corporate MAS government and its unions.

At the same time, feeling the wind from Japanese, European and US imperialism in his sails as the preferred party for bourgeois rule in Bolivia, Morales is pursuing a fourth term in the October 20 elections, defying a 2016 referendum result, the Constitution and frequent demonstrations.

On Saturday, at a mass campaign rally, Morales boasted that “a group of private businesspeople has joined us, and what do they tell me? ‘I’m not a MAS member nor in the process of becoming one, but I’m profiting more from it than with my own party’. They say that sincerely.”

Morales is comfortably polling ahead of the despised right-wing former president and vice-president Carlos Mesa Gisbert, who had overseen the military repression that killed dozens during the mass uprising in 2003 in support of the nationalization of natural gas.

Miners in San Cristobal, striking doctors and the increasingly restive working class in Bolivia need to draw conclusions about the class character of the Morales government, MAS and the trade unions.

The coming to power of Morales—and Hugo Chávez, Néstor Kirchner, Lula da Silva before him—represented the response by the capitalist ruling elite to a series of mass uprisings with revolutionary prospects during the turn of the century across Latin America.

This movement from below developed in opposition to the fast growth of social inequality from continued privatizations, austerity, subsequent economic stagnation and repression, after promises of prosperity and democracy during the transition from the military dictatorships that ruled between the 1960s and 1980s.

Between the 2000 “Cochabamba water war” against privatization of the water, through to the 2003 “natural gas war,” and the 2005 elections, Bolivia saw the downfall of five presidents. MAS, with the backing of dozens of pseudo-left organizations across the region, was able to channel this upsurge behind the 2005 presidential election of Morales.

The limited nationalizations and increases in social spending under the so-called “Latin American pink tide” were only agreed to by globalized finance capital to protect most of their property and profits , given that the latter were undergoing a massive expansion from a boom in commodity prices fueled by Chinese growth.

Like to his regional counterparts, Morales’s priority has been the payment of the foreign debt, which has dropped from 52 percent to 24 percent of GDP, while opening up the country for a mass expansion of mineral and oil extraction, more than tripling the country’s GDP.

The end of the commodities boom in 2014 and the current downturn of the global economy accelerated by the US economic war against China have undermined Morales’s ability to balance between social spending and ties with rival powers. Transnational corporations are demanding the cheapest and most exclusive possible access to Bolivia’s vital minerals. At the same time, competition for investments has led to greater friction with neighboring Chile, which rejected last year the sovereign right of land-locked Bolivia to access Pacific ports.

Three fourths of Bolivia’s exports are petroleum and mining products. Virtually all silver, zinc and lead, which are the minerals produced in Santa Cristobal and account for one-fifth of Bolivian exports, are transported through Chile and Peru to Asia and Europe.

Miners in San Cristobal have already seen the subservience of the Morales government and COB to a company like the Sumitomo Corporation, which controls 931 companies in 66 countries with 65.662 employees, and whose assets amount to $69.1 billion, compared to Bolivia’s GDP of $40.3 billion.

In 2010, a group of local indigenous and activist organizations in San Cristobal formed the “Roundtable 18” to demand the nationalization without compensation of the mine. They pointed out that Sumitomo was paying a pittance in taxes that were not benefiting the region. Morales denounced the group as “a tool of the right wing” and instead met Sumitomo’s president at the time to praise the firm as “very important for the development of the country.” A year earlier, Sumitomo had decided to increase its shares in the mine to 100 percent after Morales had vetoed the nationalization of existing mining concessions.

In response, 600 indigenous demonstrators brought the mine to a standstill by blocking the railway between San Cristobal and the port in Antofagasta, Chile, demanding the full electrification of the region. Protesters occupied and burned the local offices of the company a few days later, with the major unions and the MAS siding with the company.

A year later, a miner was killed in a traffic accident in an ambulance, unleashing a two-week strike, with workers demanding air transport to hospitals in La Paz for themselves, their families and neighbors. The company refused, leading to growing demands of nationalization among workers and local supporters, but the COB union sold out the struggle.

Now, the transformation of entire industries toward solar energy, electric vehicles, portable electronics and other new technologies are rapidly increasing the demand for silver, zinc and particularly, lithium, which is being called the “white gold” and whose largest global deposits are in southern Bolivia and along its borders with Chile and Argentina.

In a recent trip to Beijing, Morales boasted cynically that he had “recovered the fatherland’s natural resources” as he negotiated a $2.3 billion concession to the Chinese firms Xinjian Tbea Group and Boachent to exploit the vast salt flats of Coipasa and Pastos Grandes for lithium production. The previous month, Morales had signed another major deal with the German ACI Systems to exploit the Uyuni salt flats jointly with the state-owned Bolivian Lithium Deposits (YLB). The economy minister of the German state of Thuringia, Wolfgang Tiefensee, applauded the deal: “This partnership secures lithium supplies for us and breaks the Chinese monopoly.”

US imperialism undoubtedly views these developments with grave preoccupation. The Washington-based think-tank Stratfor wrote an analysis last year calling for the US to challenge Chinese “control of a majority of the lithium-ion battery market, giving the country a significant advantage in a sector of growing geopolitical importance.”

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