

General Strike in Bolivia

On March 4 1985, about 50,000 people demonstrated in La Paz, including more than 10,000 miners who arrived in the city by truck that morning. They had come for a direct confrontation with the People's Democratic Union (UDP) government, which they had helped to power by overthrowing the military dictatorship in 1982. The miners, the backbone of the Bolivian Labour Confederation (COB) were joined by massive contingents of La Paz workers and in particular by contingents of the housewives committees. These committees were to play a vital role in the 16 day general strike, organising popular canteens and distributing 20,000 meals per day. Students and white collar workers also collected funds for the strikers.

The general strike was called to demand wage increases of up to 500% and cost-of-living adjustments to meet the hyperinflation that is rocking the Bolivian economy. For the past four years Bolivia has been in the midst of an economic crisis, during which the country's total production has dropped by a third, and inflation is currently running at 2000%. The crisis was sparked by declining prices and demand for Bolivia's raw material exports and rising prices for the manufactured goods and food which the country needs to import. Bolivian governments have tried to bridge this gap through borrowing from foreign banks. Now the foreign debt has risen far beyond the country's capacity to repay, leaving Bolivia at the mercy of the International Monetary Fund and foreign banks.

For the workers the consequences have been falling living standards, unemployment and hunger. A recent United Nations survey showed 80% of the people to be living in poverty. Bolivia's ruling class has attempted to solve the economic crisis by forcing down the wages and living standards of the working class and small farmers. Before 1982 massive trade union resistance prevented the military from implementing such a programme. This convinced the military to turn power over to the UDP coalition, which initially even included the communists. Attempts by the UDP government to impose its own austerity programme on workers were met by general strikes, five since 1982! Significant gains were made: the government gave majority representation to workers' delegates in the man-

photo: Bolivian workers protest in La Paz



agement of the state-owned mining company. Similar gains were made by the United Confederation of Working Farmers. Unable to control the workers' movement the Bolivian bourgeoisie is now calling for the replacement of the UDP government by one of the right-wing parties.

On March 24 the miners returned to work with only a partial victory: an increase of 400%, partly payable in food tickets. But with inflation running at 2000% per year this will not maintain the workers' buying power. The workers and their allies were not politically organised to challenge the power of the government. The bourgeoisie made certain gains during the strike: the power of the miners was temporarily checked and the role of the military was gradually expanded.

In the final analysis the results of the general strike on the economic front were negative, since the wage increases won are small compared with the rate of inflation and in relation to the size of the mobilisation. But there were also gains in terms of the lessons learnt, the experience gained, and in the raising of political consciousness.

(SALB correspondent, April 1985)