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ARTICLE

Child labour in Bolivia: "Let us work"

By
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The kids who clean shoes and sell cigarettes on Bolivia's streets are not your typical political lobbyists. Yet after the child workers set up their own trade union and took to the streets to campaign for their "right to work", Bolivia has become the first country to allow children as young as 10 to work. Will this help

to protect them from being exploited?

With his hands black from newspaper ink, Ruben Gutierrez takes a small wooden casket out of his worn-out backpack. His brown eyes glance up at the audience in the dim meeting room at the back of a church in Potosí, Bolivia. It is dark outside and the children sitting around Ruben have moved together to protect themselves from the cold Andean wind streaming through the leaky windows.

Ruben hesitates for a second, then opens the box and pulls out some carefully folded papers, newspaper articles. A timid smile flickers across the young man's lips. "This was the moment when everything changed," the 16-year-old says. His voice trembles.

Ruben now has everybody's undivided attention. The inconspicuous boy with his pimpled face is one of Bolivia's many union leaders, but the workers he represents are different. All of them are children. "We tried to march onto the main square", he says, looking at pictures of the protest, "but police wouldn't let us."

"Weren't you afraid?" a boy with a dirty white cap asks him, raising his hand as if he was in

class.

Ruben scratches his face. “I was”, he answers. “They pushed us back and teargassed us.” His voice sounds shaky again, this time in condemnation for the yellowed newspaper pictures of Bolivian policemen with riot shields. He takes a moment to look at the 15 union members who are gathered in the room. “For all I can say now, it was worth it.”

He is disappointed that so few of them have shown up today, Ruben says, still proudly holding the articles about last year’s protest march. He represents Potosí’s branch of UNATSBO, Bolivia’s union of child and adolescent workers. In this city of 150,000 people, an estimated 7,000 children work, many of them illegally because they are too young or because they have jobs that, according to the law, are too dangerous for them.

“Making child labour illegal puts kids at risk of being exploited”, says Luz Rivera, a social worker who has been helping the children in Bolivia for more than a decade. “What can they do if they don’t get paid or are forced to work longer hours?” Ruben agrees. There should not be a minimum working age at all, he thinks.

A typical day for child workers

The union meeting marks the end of a strenuous day for Ruben, a typical day. He gets up at 6 am to collect the newspapers he will later sell in the bustling streets and markets. He says he earns 1 boliviano per newspaper and usually sells between 40 and 50. That makes roughly €5 a day. On weekends more, on cold days less.

Child labour is commonplace in Bolivia. A study conducted in 2008 by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Bolivian government and the United Nations Fund for Children (UNICEF) found that 850,000 children between the ages of five and 17 were working, or one in four.

Children clean shoes on the Andean country's dusty roads, sell sweets, juice or cigarettes in its bars and street markets, work as maids or in the mines. In the countryside, they harvest sugar cane or work on fishing boats.

I work because I want to, but it's

important to look at the individual stories of child workers.
Ruben Gutierrez

In the morning, Ruben wears navy blue fingerless gloves his mother knitted for him. Winter can be freezing in the city, which is at an altitude of more than 4,000m. When it is cold, the shops open later and he has to wait longer, Ruben says while sorting the sports supplements into the local newspaper. But today he is confident: "Sports always sell well."

He thinks his union can make a difference: "For a long time nobody listened to us, but after the protest the press reported our cause and the politicians had to hear our arguments."

Meeting the president

The reason why they protested last December was a bill that would have fixed the minimum working age at 14. After clashing with the police in La Paz, the capital, Ruben and other UNATSBO delegates were invited to meet

Bolivian president Evo Morales.

They discussed the bill and Morales, the country's first indigenous president, promised them his support. Having worked as a trumpet player and shepherd from an early age himself, the head of state argued that working contributed to the children's "social conscience".

Ruben proudly shows a picture he took at the president's palace with his mobile phone. Some of the younger union members, who have not seen the photo yet, gather around him. "Is that the president?" Luz, the social worker, tells them not to push.

Juan Carlos Espinoza nods; he knows the story. The 14-year-old started working at the cemetery in Potosí almost four years ago. His brother brought him to the first union meeting. "I didn't know so many children were working as well. It really surprised me, that's why I stayed", he remembers. Juan Carlos' mother left the family when he was four years old. His father could not pay the bills for the small house in the city's outskirts, so Juan Carlos and his three brothers had to help.

The youngest one at the cemetery is 9. He cannot carry the heavy ladders, but we all help together. Juan Carlos

"The first days at the cemetery were really hard. I didn't know how to clean and I didn't know how much to charge", he says, waiting for customers at the cemetery's stone gate. In Bolivia, a predominantly Catholic country, children are said to have a close relationship to God because they have only been on earth for a short while. Wealthy people pay the children to scrub the brass frames of the graves with an acidic paste, put down flowers or pray for the deceased.

It has been a good day so far for Juan Carlos. It is sunny and many of the cemetery visitors have brought empanadas and are playing a mix of *cumbia* and Latin American pop songs on their mobile phones. On other days, Juan Carlos sits at the entrance with his friends for hours, shouting, "I clean tombstones". He just wants to join his friends for a football match

with an empty juice box when an elderly woman approaches him, a crimson, embroidered shawl wrapped around her neck. Like many indigenous women, she wears a small black bowler hat, originally imported for rail workers in the 1920s but now an indispensable feature of traditional Bolivian clothing.

She examines Juan Carlos for a couple of seconds. “You should be tall enough. It’s in the highest row.” He smiles and fetches an old ladder with 10 steps. “No problem, that will do”, he says and follows the woman. This time, he only has to put flowers and small offerings, a miniature coke bottle and a key ring with a car pendant, behind the small glass window of the family’s grave. There are hundreds of these little windows next to and on top of each other. The woman pays Juan Carlos a little less than a euro. “When I clean the frames, I get more, especially when they are very dirty.”

The mountain that devours its children

It is hard to find work for many Bolivian adults and their families rely on the money their kids

bring home to make a living. Although **the economy picked up speed under Evo Morales' government**, Bolivia remains one of South America's poorest countries. Potosí is a special case. It once was one of the richest towns in the world. The nearby *Cerro Rico*, the "Rich Hill", and its silver mines bankrolled the Spanish monarchy in the 16th and 17th centuries. Nowadays, only colonial estates and numerous churches stand as a reminder of the city's past wealth.

Up to 8m miners have died in the *Cerro Rico* since silver was discovered in 1545. The locals say the mountain "devours its children". But miners still risk digging for silver and tin, although the *Cerro Rico's* resources are almost depleted. After centuries of mining, a huge crater has formed at the peak and scientists fear <a>the whole mountain could collapse.

The union in Potosí started when children and young people working in the mines organised themselves. Now the union represents 18 different groups of child workers: the shoeshiners on the market, the kids from the cemetery, the street sellers, the miners, the tailors and so on. Luz say it is a very bottom-up process: "Obviously every group has their own

demands for their line of work, but they managed to find a consensus – here in Potosí and on a national level. What unites them is that they want to work in dignity."

Ruben does not want to work in the mine. "It pays well, but it's too dangerous", he says. "You have to respect the kids working there, they do a very hard job". He does not want to keep selling newspapers either. "We are all responsible for our own future." His voice now sounds firm. Being a union leader has given him confidence. Before that he was very shy, Ruben admits. He wants to study political science and is saving all his money to go to university.

After the UNATSBO meeting with the president, a new round of parliamentary consultations started. And this time the child workers' opinions were taken into account, says Senator Adolfo Mendoza, who is responsible for Bolivia's new child labour legislation. Mendoza is the type of senator who prefers to wear a T-shirt with a Karl Marx print on it rather than a shirt. He was familiar with the child workers' union way before the protests. His constituency, Cochabamba, in the east of the country, is home to the biggest union branch.

The changes Mendoza's commission proposed were signed into law this August. The new legislation does not officially lower the minimum working age of 14 years, but adds some exemptions. With the permission of their parents and the authorities, children can work independently from the age of 10 and enter employment from the age of 12 if this is necessary to sustain their family. NGOs say this practically means legalising child labour from that age.

Dilemma or balance?

Mendoza's interpretation is different. He says the law strikes a balance between international treaties that set the minimum working age at 14 and the reality of his country. "We will never open the door to the exploitation of child labour, but we will not be able to eradicate the fact that many children work overnight."

According to the law, children in employment will have two hours off to do their homework. They will be entitled to the minimum wage and the same healthcare as adults. "It is essential that working does not harm our children's physical or mental health or their education",

Mendoza says.

Child labour is a cultural topic as well. Many communities in Bolivia regard working as a part of growing up.
Luz Rivera, social worker

A five-minute walk from the impressive Senate building in La Paz, a man wearing a balaclava cleans a policeman's leather boots. His name is Javier, but everybody around here knows him as Babas. "Done, like new." He takes a few bolivianos in coins. People say there is no job without dignity, but that is not the reality, he says. "I'm wearing a mask so that people can't recognise me. And I only work here, far from where I live." Most shoeshiners on the streets of La Paz wear similar balaclavas. Babas says somebody recognised him when he was eight years old and had just started working. As a result, he dropped out of school and started to work full time. "When I didn't earn enough, I was afraid my mother would yell at me and

beat me", he says, "so I decided to live on the street when I was 12."

Now Babas is 32. He is married and has two children. Apart from occasional construction work, he still cleans shoes on the *Prado*, La Paz's main avenue. He uncovers his mouth with his dirty fingers, encrusted with shoe polish: "My son has to help me as well when I can't make ends meet. I don't feel good about it because it can be dangerous, especially at night when drunks refuse to pay."

Bolivia's new child labour law does not allow children to work after 10 pm, alongside a list of 20 other forbidden "dangerous activities". Mining, harvesting Brazil nuts and commercial fishing are on the list. However, the country employs only 78 child labour monitors to control 850,000 child workers.

International organisations have warned that lowering the working age would not only breach international conventions, but also put children at risk. The ILO says child labour cannot be justified as a "necessary evil" and a means to developments. "Numerous studies and analyses show the intergenerational cycle of poverty and child labour", **the ILO said in a statement**.

Worldwide, 167 nations, **equally industrialised and developing countries**, have ratified the ILO convention, 138 setting their minimum working age at 14 or older. Mendoza says Bolivia does not infringe any convention by adding exemptions to the working age. He hopes that Bolivia's new model will serve as an example for other countries.

"We will continue to fight"

In Potosí, Ruben tells his local union branch that their action had a real impact on Bolivia's child labour laws. The newspaper seller holds a small book in his hands, the union's manifesto. "All of us have the right to work in dignity – no matter if they are 16, 12 or six. That's what we need to fight for."

"But not today." Ruben's eyes looks tired. He puts his newspaper articles back into his treasure box.

"Are you going home?" Juan Carlos asks.

"Yes", Ruben answers, "I have some homework left".

He has to get up in a few hours – to work.

About the writer

I'm a freelance journalist and filmmaker based in London. I specialise in global politics, social issues and technology. Most of the time I cover stories from around the world as a producer with the BBC World Service, but I also write about more light-hearted things like films and documentaries for Empire.

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