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# UNION KIDS

*Ever since Bolivia's child laborers unionized to defend their right to work, kids as young as 10 can legally shine shoes, clean homes and sell cigarettes.*

*Story by* **Michael Ertl**



POTOSÍ, Bolivia

With hands stained black from newspaper ink, 16-year-old Ruben Gutierrez removes a small wooden box from his worn-out backpack. His brown eyes glance up at the audience

in the dim meeting room at the back of a church here in Potosí, Bolivia, an old colonial town in the south of the country. The sun has set on this evening in late July, and the children sitting around Ruben have crowded together to protect themselves from the cold Andean wind streaming through the leaky windows.

Ruben hesitates for a second, then opens the casket 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," he 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 unusual: All of them are children. "We tried to march onto the main square," he says, looking at pictures of the protest, yellowed images of policemen with riot shields. "But police wouldn't let us."

"Weren't you afraid?" a boy with a dirty white cap asks him, raising his hand as though in a classroom.

Ruben scratches his face. "I was," he answers. "They pushed us back and teargassed us." He looks over the 15 union members gathered in the room. "I would say it was worth it."

Ruben represents Potosí's branch of the Union of Child and Adolescent Workers in Bolivia, or UNATSBO. 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.



About 850,000 Bolivian children work. (Michael Ertl)

Luz Rivera, a social worker with the local parish, is the only adult at the union meeting. She has been helping to organize these weekly functions and attract new child workers to UNATSBO for more than a decade. “Making child labor illegal puts kids at risk of being exploited,” Rivera says. “What can they do if they don’t get paid or are forced to work longer hours?”

Ruben has heard of many cases like this. He thinks the best solution would be to abolish the minimum working age altogether.

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Child labor is commonplace in Bolivia. In 2008, the

government and international groups determined that about 850,000 children work — one of every four kids between 5 and 17 years old.

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They polish shoes on the dusty mountain roads, sell sweets, juice and cigarettes in its bars and street markets, clean as maids and burrow in the mines. In the countryside, they harvest sugar cane. On its lakes, they man the fishing boats.

According to UNICEF, only Peru, Paraguay and Haiti reach similar proportions of child labor in the Americas. While children in other countries have also organized into unions, UNATSBO in Bolivia is the most active among them, and Ruben's group in Potosí is one of the biggest of the 18 regional branches.

Their meeting marks the end of a typical, strenuous day for Ruben. He gets up at 6 a.m. 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's roughly \$6 a day. On weekends more, on cold days less.

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When Ruben leaves the house in the morning, he wears navy blue fingerless gloves his mother knitted for him. Winter is freezing in this city, 4,000 meters above sea level. When it is cold, the shops open later and he has to wait longer, Ruben says as he folds the sports supplements into the local newspaper. Today he is confident: “Sports always sells well.”

After finishing his tour in the early afternoon, Ruben goes to school. Like many child workers, he has chosen to attend afternoon classes at his high school so he can work in the morning. More than 90 percent of Bolivian child workers attend school, according to a 2009 study. “The problem is not that they don’t go to school,” Rivera says. “The problem is that many barely have time to do their homework and show poor performance.”

Ruben believes 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.”

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Street art in La Paz, the capital. (Michael Ertl)

In December 2013, UNATSBO members from across Bolivia protested in opposition to a bill that would have re-affirmed the minimum working age, 14. Social workers like Rivera helped the branches arrange buses to La Paz and a march through the center of the capital.

When the protesters tried to reach one of the main squares, near the presidential palace and the Senate, riot police blocked their way. Police claim the kids tried to enter the presidential palace. But Ruben says all they wanted to do was continue their march. “They used pepper spray and tear gas against children, some as young as 10,” he says.

The demonstration made national headlines. Suddenly, people were talking about child labor.

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 played trumpet on the streets and shepherded from an early age, Morales argued that working contributes to the children's "social conscience."

Juan Carlos Espinoza was at the protest with Ruben. At 14, he is one of the oldest members of the Potosí branch. His mother left the family when he was 4. His father could not afford the bills on their small house in the city's outskirts, so Juan Carlos and his three brothers had to help. Four years ago, he started working at the cemetery in Potosí, where wealthy people pay the children to scrub the brass frames and glass windows of the graves with an acidic paste, put down flowers or pray for the deceased.

"The youngest one at the cemetery is 9. He cannot carry the heavy ladders, but together we all help," Juan Carlos tells me as he waits for customers at the cemetery's stone gate. "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." On some days, Juan Carlos sits at the entrance with his friends



Juan Carlos Espinoza climbs a ladder in the cemetery. (Michael Ertl)

for hours, shouting, “I clean tombstones!”

Just as he tells me he wants to join his friends, who are playing soccer with an empty juice box, an elderly woman approaches him. She has a crimson, embroidered shawl wrapped around her neck and a black bowler hat on her head.

She examines Juan Carlos. “You should be tall enough. It’s in the highest row.”

He smiles and fetches an old ladder with 10 rungs. “No problem,” 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 dollar. “When I clean the frames, I get more, especially when they are very dirty.”

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For many Bolivian adults, it is difficult to find work. Their families rely on the money their kids bring home to buy basic goods. Although under Morales’ government Bolivia’s GDP is growing faster now than it has in the past 30 years, the country remains one of South America’s poorest countries.



In Potosí, the nearby Cerro Rico, the Rich Hill, and its silver mines bankrolled the Spanish monarchy in the 16th and 17th centuries. Now, colonial estates and numerous churches stand as a reminder of the city's past wealth. What was once one of the richest towns in the world is now one of Bolivia's poorest.

Locals say the mountain "devours its children." Historians estimate as many as 8 million miners have died in the Cerro Rico since silver was discovered there in 1545. Although the mountain's resources are almost depleted, companies still send miners scavenging for silver and tin. An enormous crater — 20 meters deep and around 350 wide — has formed at the peak from centuries of tunnel boring. Scientists said the whole mountain could collapse, and the government is planning to close the mines. The miners, however, are worried about losing their jobs.



People in Potosí say the mountain "devours its children." (Danielle Pereira/CC BY 2.0)

The union branch in Potosí started in 1999 when young miners got together to discuss their legal situation. NGOs and social workers supported them and helped to grow the movement. Now it represents 18 categories of child workers: the shoe shiners in the market, the kids at the cemetery, the street sellers, the miners, the tailors and so on. Rivera says this structure allows every member to play an active role. “Obviously every group has its 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 with dignity.”

Every year, the Potosí branch elects a leader to represent them at the national level. Ruben says he never thought this was a role for him. “I am a shy person, but I probably earned everybody’s trust at the meetings.” Ruben does not want to sell newspapers forever. He is saving his money to attend university. He wants to study political science.

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After UNATSBO leaders met with the president, a new round of parliamentary talks started. And this time the child workers’ opinions were taken into account, says Senator Adolfo Mendoza, who is responsible for Bolivia’s new child labor legislation. Mendoza is the type of senator who prefers to wear a T-shirt with Karl Marx’s face on it rather than a suit. He was aware of the child workers’ union long before the protests. His constituency, Cochabamba, in the east of the country, is home to the biggest union branch.

Mendoza’s commission proposed that instead of fixing the minimum working age at 14, the law would add certain restrictions. With permission from their parents and the authorities, children can work independently from the age of 10 and enter employment from the age of 12 if the income is necessary to sustain the family.

Rights organizations say this essentially legalizes the



Ruben Gutierrez, right, sells a newspaper.  
(Michael Ertl)

exploitation of elementary students. But Mendoza's interpretation is different. He claims the law balances the reality of his country and international treaties that set the minimum working age at 14.

Mendoza's parliamentary commission says granting some younger children the right to work as an exemption does not breach international treaties. (The International Labor Organization rejects this, saying the rules in its convention are clear and don't allow any form of child labor under the age of 14.)

"We will never open the door to the exploitation of child labor," Mendoza says, "but we will not be able to eradicate overnight the fact that many children work."

According to the law, employed children will be entitled to the minimum wage and the same health care as adults. They will also have two hours off to do their homework.

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Not far from the grandiose Senate building with its marble halls 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 Babas does not believe the saying.

“I’m wearing a mask so that people can’t recognize me. And I only work here, far from where I live.” Most shoe shiners on the streets of La Paz wear similar balaclavas. Babas says a school friend recognized him when he was 8 and had just started cleaning shoes, a job seen as shameful. After that, 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.”

International organizations have warned that lowering the working age would not only breach international conventions, but also put children at risk. The International Labor Organization says child labor cannot be justified as a “necessary evil” and a means to development. They point to studies showing that when kids work, it has the opposite of the intended effect, creating new generations of poverty.

But here, that message is difficult to get across. Rivera says that “many communities in Bolivia regard working as a part of growing up.”

Now Babas is 32. He is married and has two children. He has taken on occasional construction work, but mostly you can find

him here cleaning shoes on the Prado, La Paz's main avenue. He uncovers his mouth with black fingers encrusted with shoe polish. "My 15-year-old son has to help me cleaning shoes 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 labor law does not allow children to work after 10 p.m., one provision among a list of 20 other forbidden "dangerous activities." Mining, harvesting Brazil nuts and commercial fishing are on the list. Enforcement falls to 78 government monitors to look after 850,000 children.

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Back in Potosí, Ruben tells his local union branch that their action had a real impact on Bolivia's child labor laws. He 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 6. That's what we need to fight for.

"But not today."

Ruben's eyes look 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.”



*Michael Ertl is a freelance journalist and radio producer for BBC World Service.*

*This story was edited by Ben Wolford. Additional editing by Jackie Valley. A version first appeared in [Contributoria](#).*

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## WANDERERS

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