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(Un)cooperative Labor? Mining Cooperatives and the State in Bolivia[1]

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Abstract

In 2019, Bolivian cooperative miners, once staunch allies of MAS and Evo Morales, helped inflame the crisis that toppled the Morales government. This paper explores the roots of the confounded, often explosive relationship between cooperative miners, nationalization, and MAS. Tracing the history of cooperative mining and its relationship to ore theft since the colonial period, this article shows how cooperative mining and salaried miners' unions emerged as twin responses to the precarity of labor and production in the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, cooperative workers emerged as a shadow on the nationalized mining economy, competing for space and political influence with salaried workers. After the closure of COMIBOL in the late 1980s, cooperatives absorbed laid-off workers as well as migrants from the countryside and expanded into claims once belonging to state and union workers. When Morales reopened Bolivia's national mining company in 2006

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and sought to increase state participation in the mineral economy, he set the stage for a direct confrontation between the interests of *cooperativistas,* the vast majority of mineworkers at the time, and the state itself. This underacknowledged conflict of interests between different kinds of mineworkers has haunted MAS, culminating in the crisis of 2019 that drove Morales from power and from Bolivia.

Keywords
Mining, cooperatives, labor, Evo Morales, nationalization

Resumen

En 2019 los mineros cooperativistas bolivianos, otrora aliados incondicionales del MAS y Evo Morales, contribuyeron a inflamar la crisis que derrocó al gobierno de Morales. Este artículo explora las raíces de la confusa y a menudo explosiva relación entre los mineros cooperativistas, la nacionalización y el MAS. Tras rastrear la historia de la minería cooperativa y su relación con el robo de mineral desde el periodo colonial, este artículo muestra como la minería cooperativista y los sindicatos de mineros asalariados surgieron como respuestas gemelas a la precariedad del trabajo y la producción en el siglo XX. En las décadas de 1950 y 1960 los trabajadores cooperativistas surgieron como una sombra sobre la economía minera nacionalizada, compitiendo por espacio e influencia política con los trabajadores asalariados. Tras el cierre de COMIBOL a finales de la década de 1980, las cooperativas absorbieron a los trabajadores despedidos, así como a los emigrantes del campo, y se involucraron en reivindicaciones que antes pertenecían a los trabajadores estatales y sindicales. Cuando Morales reabrió la empresa minera nacional de Bolivia en 2006 y trató de incrementar la participación estatal en la economía minera, preparó el terreno para una confrontación directa entre los intereses de los cooperativistas, la gran mayoría de los trabajadores mineros en aquel momento, y el propio Estado. Este conflicto de intereses entre diferentes tipos de trabajadores mineros ha perseguido al MAS, culminando en la crisis de 2019 que lo expulsó del poder y de Bolivia.

Keywords
Minería, cooperativas, trabajo, Evo Morales, nacionalización

Evo Morales won the presidency in Bolivia's 2005 election with support from a powerful collection of social movements that had coalesced amid

several years of protests. Cooperative miners, with their dynamite-assisted marches and roadblocks, took a starring role in these protests and formed a key component of Morales's base of support. Since 2005, Morales has politically favored cooperatives, arguing that they are one of the four pillars of the Bolivian plural economy dedicated to a collective quality of life. However, during the 2019 political crisis, many of these same groups found themselves calling for Morales's resignation, prominently among them the *Federación Nacional de Cooperativas Mineras* (FENCOMIN) [National Federation of Mining Cooperatives]. This paper contends that the breakdown of trust between the mining cooperatives and the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) [Movement Toward Socialism] represents a new iteration of a long-standing contradiction in Bolivian mining policy that has its roots in the colonial period. Mining evolved in Bolivia as a dual system, with a formal economy of forced and wage labor supplemented by the illegal but tacitly accepted mining economy of the *kajchas* that enabled colonial officials to underpay *mita* and wage laborers.[2] I argue that not only has the modern mining cooperative movement evolved out of this tacitly accepted *kajcha* economy, but the cooperative movement has also served a similar function for the Bolivian state and private mining companies, as *kajchas* did in the colonial era, allowing them to inadequately compensate salaried miners without consequence. After the creation of a nationalized mining company in 1952, cooperatives actively competed against salaried workers for space in the mines, and these two groups of mine workers no longer shared a vision of what the future of mining or minework in Bolivia should look like. In the twenty-first century, when cooperative mine workers represent the overwhelming majority of the mine worker population, and the MAS party explicitly speaks of a dual economy that combines cooperatives with communitarian, private, and public enterprises, the MAS government has failed to consider mining itself as an industry that operates on a dual economy of formal labor supported by informal and contractual labor arrangements.

Although the Bolivian state has characterized mining cooperatives as an Andeanization of the organizing principles of the English Rochdale Pioneers of the 1840s, cooperative laborers themselves trace their roots to the ore thieves of the seventeenth century, taking their modern form during the 1930s (Absi, ICA). Combining traditions of ore theft and family migration, debt, and reciprocity, cooperatives have used their autonomy from state supervision to

[2] *Kajchas* is usually translated as ore thieves. My use of this term includes both theft and work outside of formal periods of employment.

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survive economic crises and sustain themselves under deeply exploitative conditions for centuries. Rossana Barragán notes that colonial officials referred to *kajchas* as ore thieves, but she defines them as "self-employed workers" and traces a lineage between colonial and twentieth-century *kajchas* (Barragán 194). As this paper will suggest, *kajchas* were sometimes embraced as cooperative or contract workers but at other times denigrated as thieves. In each case, the physical practice had not shifted, but its political context determined whether these workers were understood to be thieves.

The first federations of cooperative miners, still referring to themselves as *kajchas,* formed in Potosí in 1938 and participated in the national mine worker federation from its beginnings, although cooperative workers soon found their political goals diverging from those of the rest of the union. Today, cooperative miners form the vast majority of Bolivia's mining population, whereas salaried miners in public and private mining companies form a minority. Salaried and cooperative workers organized for similar rights at the beginning of the twentieth century, but after the Revolution of 1952, these two groups developed vastly different political visions. Although mine workers themselves may belong to both groups over their lifetimes, as a bloc, cooperative workers prize political autonomy, while salaried workers want negotiated regulation by the state. When fighting against foreign or private mining companies as before the Revolution of 1952 or during the anti-globalization campaigns of the 1990s, the political visions of union and cooperative miners aligned more closely, given that both groups fought against a hostile state. In both cases, nationalization created a wedge between unionized salaried workers, now more powerful as agents of the state, and cooperative workers on the margins. Morales's policy toward resource extraction, however, sought to expand state control over the conditions of mineral production and sale, competing directly with the cooperatives.

Morales and the MAS party made promises to both salaried miners and cooperatives that exacerbated existing tensions between the communities. Salaried miners demanded the state reopen mines nationalized under *Corporación Minera de Bolivia* (COMIBOL) [Mining Corporation of Bolivia] during the 1950s and provide good benefits, preferential treatment against foreign mines, and protections for workers, whereas cooperatives wanted free access to these same veins as well as protection from the kinds of state regulations (environmental, labor, taxes) that might reduce their profit margins. As MAS asserted more state control over the conditions of mineral production—often with the support and encouragement of many sectors of

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the Bolivian public—it moved ever more inexorably toward confrontation with cooperative miners as a group. As long as commodity prices were rising, which they did in the early years of Morales's government, these contradictions remained latent, only showing themselves in local fights between miners themselves. Nonetheless, these two groups' different needs and interests haunted Morales's government, contributing to cooperative workers' call for him to resign during the 2019 crisis. The inevitable clash between cooperative miners and the state highlights the limits of resource-dependent development visions inherited from the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR) [Revolutionary Nationalist Movement] and the limits of cooperative economies to provide true alternatives under capitalism. Although MAS envisions cooperatives as a core component of its plural economy, made up of "communitarian, state, private, and social" economic organizations (with cooperatives forming the social component), the mining cooperatives themselves prefer to distance themselves from state control. It is unclear whether mining cooperatives themselves see their economic role as "oriented toward the improvement of quality of life and living well for all Bolivians" as specified in article 306 of the *Nueva Constitución Política del Estado* [New State Political Constitucion]. It was only after the government tried to increase oversight of the cooperative sector as a whole in the name of this plural economy that the coalition between the miners and MAS fully broke down.

A History of *Kajcheo*

Unauthorized and informal labor has a history as long as the exploitation of the mountain of Potosí itself. Smelting technologies and mineral markets were controlled by Indigenous intermediaries in the early days of the Spanish empire. In 1545, an Indigenous trader and smelter named Diego Guallpa found a conical mountain with vast outcropping of silver while delivering supplies to the miners at Porco. Mentioning nothing to his traveling companion, Guallpa loaded his bags up with silver and sold his lucrative cargo, only admitting his find to Spanish officials when the scale of his windfall could not be hidden.[3] Legally, all silver mined in the Spanish colonies was to be registered and subject to royal taxation, but the first silver to be mined at Potosí was unofficial. When the Spanish adapted the Andean *mita* system into a colonial coercive labor structure, forcing Indigenous men from communities across modern day

[3] This version of the Potosí discovery story comes from Mangan and Lane.

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Bolivia and Peru to work yearly shifts in the mines at Potosí and Huancavelica, they relied on the illicit but accepted economy of ore recovery and ore theft as a cheap wage subsidy for these drafted workers. As early as the 1590s, the town council of Potosí fretted about the practice of allowing workers to take home "unstamped" silver found during shifts or on weekends but decided it was more practical for the council to tolerate this unsanctioned mining than to give better benefits to the mita workers and other wage laborers at Potosí (Assadourian; Cole 14; Bakewell 1984, 141; Bakewell 1988; Tandeter 1981; Tandeter 1993; Larson et al.)

Enrique Tandeter and Rossana Barragán have shown how the practice of theft and unofficial exploitation grew as the silver mines transformed, representing a substantial minority of production by the eighteenth century (Tandeter 1993; Barragán 210). Rescate mining, the practice of recuperating ore from waste heaps and selling it back to the mines, and *kajcheo* (the practice of illicit mining itself) withstood independence, as well as the collapse and revival of the silver economy and the nineteenth-century transition to tin, as just one among many worker survival strategies. Rescateros and *kajchas,* often miners or their relatives, would keep whatever ore was found over the weekend or could be smuggled out during shift breaks (Barragán 195). Until the twentieth century, such practices could supplement wage contracts and subsistence agriculture but were rarely sources of primary employment. Workers remained tied to extended kinship networks in the countryside and tended to use windfalls to return home and invest in land and family wealth rather than stay in the mines intergenerationally.

It was only during the industrial expansion of tin and copper mining that mine owners were willing and able to impose "modern" practices on workers including 24/7 mine operation with three daily shifts, wage contracts without ore-sharing agreements, and a stable, proletarianized mine force that could not decide its own holidays (Langer; Rodríguez Ostria 56). Even so, mining companies and the state continued to authorize groups that they called *kajchas* to engage in ore exploration of abandoned mine shafts until 1952 (Flores Castro). Such authorization implies that the companies themselves did not always see these groups as thieves but rather independent contractors. Organized bands of *kajchas* emerged during the successive mining crises that followed World War I and the 1929 stock market crash. In the 1930s, some of these *kajcha* bands organized themselves as unions: by 1938 the *Sindicato de Trabajadores Kajchas* [*Kajcha* Workers Union] in Potosí counted several hundred affiliates (Rodríguez Ostria 181).

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The Revolution, the Union, and the Cooperative Movement

In the early twentieth century, there were signs that the cooperative movement might find a political home within the union movement, as salaried Bolivian workers experimented with anarcho-syndicalist and socialist ideologies as alternatives to capitalist resource extraction. In mining camps, cooperative organization appealed to activists' desires for autonomy in the context of battles for the eight-hour workday, higher wages, and pensions (Smale; Cajías de la Vega; Rodríguez Ostria). For a subset of workers, the right to control working conditions was as important as the fight for protections from bosses. It was during the 1930s that groups that had previously been called (or called themselves) *kajchas* found recognition by formally adopting the principles of the international cooperative movement (Absi 18). Meanwhile, the state saw consumer cooperatives as a cheap way to encourage self-help among salaried mine workers. For example, in 1925, the *Asociación de Industriales Mineros de Bolivia* [Society of Bolivian Mining Industrialists] recommended that the Corocoro United Copper Mines, facing bankruptcy after a crash of copper prices and a decade of reckless spending, try to recruit new workers and reduce costs by turning the company store into a workers' purchasing cooperative. In this way, the report hoped to direct cooperative profits toward a workers' assistance fund without using money from the company. From the first decades of the twentieth century, the idea of a "cooperative" seemed like the solution to the needs of workers and mining companies alike (Asociación de industriales mineros de Bolivia 32).

The Revolution of 1952 brought together workers, peasants, and middle-class reformers under the banner of nationalizing Bolivia's tin mines, enacting a sweeping agrarian reform, and granting universal suffrage to all Bolivians.[4] At first, this call to nationalization appealed to both cooperative and salaried workers. The MNR expropriated privately held mines across Bolivia and granted the new COMIBOL exclusive rights to production in expropriated veins and to the control of the mineral purchasing market throughout the country. Mine workers had organized militias in support of the MNR revolution, and in the lead up to nationalization in 1952, they organized security forces to prevent embittered mine owners from destroying infrastructure or stealing equipment

[4] In this they were pushed by popular protest and the insistence of mine workers and peasant militias. (Burke and Malloy; Dunkerley 1984; Lora; Cajías de la Vega; Rodríguez Ostria; Young).

(Movimiento de Mujeres Libertad 186). However, these patrols also had an interest in keeping unauthorized workers out of the mines to protect both national prosperity and the profit sharing the mines were supposed to enable. Cooperative workers and independent contractors were now, once again, seen as ore thieves because they stole from the collective profits of the nation and the rest of the workers. In a system where workers were fairly remunerated and all profits went toward the nation, *kajcheo* could be considered treasonous.

Though salaried workers saw ore theft as treason, the MNR government believed that cooperatives could provide a cheap alternative to investing in new state-operated mines. By 1958, the MNR government was looking for ways to reduce the salaried labor force without causing a worker uprising (Decreto Ley Nº 5035). By formally authorizing cooperatives to operate in unexplored mineshafts, the government hoped to absorb laid-off workers as well as to inculcate an entrepreneurial mentality among sectors that might then be less susceptible to the radicalism of the *Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia* (FSTMB) [Syndical Federation of Bolivian Mineworkers]. As in the colonial period, the state once more encouraged a dual economy, this time in the form of formally recognized cooperatives alongside salaried workers. The first national legal recognition of mining cooperatives came in 1958 as part of the MNR's attempts to walk back its commitment to worker radicalism. As the MNR negotiated a series of economic plans designed to curb inflation and cut state spending, and especially when the government sought to reduce the number of miners employed by COMIBOL, cooperatives became both a check on the power of COMIBOL miners and a useful way to respond to unemployment (CEPROMIN, COMIBOL). From 1958 onward, the MNR saw cooperatives as a safer way to express a rhetorical commitment to worker revolution while ceding less power to actual workers.

Decreto Ley [decree law] 5035 established the right to informal groups, now exclusively recognized as cooperatives, to work under certain mining concessions that COMIBOL could not afford to exploit because of the high cost of infrastructure and the decreasing profitability of Bolivian tin. Cooperatives had to sell their ore through the state mineral purchasing market, so the state still made a profit from ore production but shifted all the risk and the social costs onto the members. The law also gave cooperatives a privileged place in the productive economy, in theory committing the state to contract with cooperatives for industrial provision and resource extraction in cases where COMIBOL would not be working (COMIBOL; Michard).

Legally and officially, the MNR cast mining cooperatives as part of both COMIBOL and the interests of the Bolivian revolution and its mine workers. Article 13 of Decreto Ley 5035 specified that cooperative members could not be part of anti-union groups or groups "contrary to the interests of the working classes." However, Article 34 stipulated that cooperatives, going forward, would be the preferred form of organizing and administering state-owned industries such as energy production, mines, and factories. In practice, cooperatives and COMIBOL competed for space in Bolivia's mineshafts from the beginning. As COMIBOL mines across the country such as Bolsa Negra (La Paz) and Kami (Cochabamba), as well as historically important mines such as Pulacayo (Potosí), became less productive, they ceded more of their holdings to cooperatives. Functionally, cooperatives also exacerbated COMIBOL's tendency to underfund research, exploration, and technological development, because its directors focused on personal enrichment and the expanding oil economy. At a moment in which Bolivian tin was becoming ever more expensive to produce, selling marginal concessions to cooperatives who would, in any case, sell their ore back to the state was cheaper than hiring union workers (Ford, Bacon, and Davis).

When the MNR of the 1950s regularized the formation of cooperative organizations, it attempted to do the same as COMIBOL had with union workers: grant some privileges to cooperative miners as a negotiating group but render their political power dependent on state priorities. Unsurprisingly, cooperative workers have always resented this dependency on the state (Widerkehr 154). This political bloc, which took autonomy from the state very seriously, increasingly found support in a state and international development climate looking to divest itself from its responsibilities to protect poor Bolivians and foster self-help. By 1958, cooperative miners were a minority of the mining population but a useful wedge in the political power of mine worker unions. Over the next few decades, however, transformations in both state policy and the economic landscape of mining reversed this dynamic. Today, cooperatives form the vast majority of the mine workers in Bolivia, but the Bolivian state still seems to treat cooperatives as supplements to the nationalized mining economy. Cooperative miners, by contrast, do not want to be part of the nationalized mining economy. The Bolivian state has never learned how to tame a political group it once rewarded for its independence.

Organizing Worker Cooperatives

The basic structure of cooperative mining has not changed radically since the cooperative law of 1958, although the political and economic context has shifted considerably.[5] Initially, a fixed group of miners bought into a joint venture where each *socio* [shareholder] gained usufruct rights to a particular section of mineshaft, which they could choose to work themselves or through employing peones (hired workers) and *maquipuras,* a kind of invested apprentice. Each *socio* participated in collective decision-making for the cooperative through semiannual mandatory meetings at which *peones* and *maquipuras* had no voice. Thus, some cooperative miners are equal shareholders and decision-makers in a joint enterprise (*socios*), and others who work for the mining cooperative (*peones*) are excluded from both profit sharing and decision-making, whereas others may hope to someday ascend to *socio* (*maquipuras*). The elected cooperative leadership and hired accountant interfaced with local state/private mining companies, coordinated a local football team, and often organized a cooperative store, where workers bought on credit. Each socio received the profits of their section of mine, minus fees and taxes. No worker was guaranteed to make any money under this system, but the cooperative was also supposed to invest part of its earnings into emergency funds for workers and families in case of disaster. In practice, the cooperative also loaned money to *socios,* who bought their place in installments and may have had other up-front expenses such as equipment.

Although cooperatives are explicitly egalitarian in design, there are several ways in which they can easily become vehicles for exploitation and inequality and mimic the tacit labor practices of the colonial period. In contrast to *socios, peones* and *maquipuras* do not own their tools or receive any profits but instead make a daily wage. In theory, these workers are protected by laws governing social security and worker protection. In practice, however, the rights of *peones* are rarely enforced. When the MAS government tried to introduce legislation protecting the rights of peones, the cooperative movement as a whole, led by *socios,* rebelled against MAS (Bolivia 2016; Absi 30-32). Because the number of *socios* is fixed in each cooperative, demand for access exceeds supply. This means that *socios* have the power to control lists of potential *socios,* extending networks of hierarchy beyond the cooperative itself. For example, *socios* often hire family members or poorer friends as

[5] See the descriptions of cooperative organization from 1972, 1998, and 2008 in Ansi; Widerkehr; and Michard.

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peones, which also creates hierarchy within mining families and neighborhoods. Over the decades, the pressures on access to cooperatives have only increased. In 1972, a worker had to spend two years as a *maquipura* before applying to become a *socio* and buying in for 6,000 bolivianos (about $500 in 1970s US dollars), paid in monthly installments (Widerkehr 156). In 1998, the cost to join was $5,000 US dollars, and competition remained fierce for spots in the cooperative (Absi 28). Whereas *socios* can vote, *peones* and *maquipuras* are entirely dependent on their supervisor for both pay and opportunity. It is very difficult, therefore, for a *peon* or *maquipura* to make demands against their *socios.* New *socios* have to be voted in, so *maquipuras* need to keep good relationships with the cooperative generally and the leadership, in particular (Nash et al.; Absi; Michard). Finally, while elected leadership is subject to democratic will, cooperative regulations stipulate that only those *socios* who have been debt free for several years of membership can hold office (Widerkehr 157). This means founders and those with lucky breaks can accumulate and maintain power over those more vulnerable.

Cooperative Workers under de facto government and dictatorship

The relative political thaw of the Alfredo Ovando Candia (1969-1970) and Juan José Torres (1970-1971) de facto governments brought out latent competition between the FENCOMIN and the FSTMB for reasons that foreshadow twenty-first century struggles between cooperatives and MAS. Torres, like Morales after 2005, attempted to govern in coalition with a workers' movement dominated by salaried mine worker unions but found that mine workers were not a unitary block. Torres's government did not last long enough for the latent divisions between cooperative and salaried miners to erupt into violence, however, as they did under the MAS government.

By the 1960s, it was clear to workers, union leaders, managers, and economists alike that COMIBOL was not economically viable as it currently functioned. The last years of the MNR government had been spent dividing blame between the union and the management over the rising cost of mining tin and other ores, with both groups using an audit by US firm Ford, Bacon, and Davis to score points against the other. Management accused labor leaders of wasting money and blocking decisions that would increase productivity, whereas workers accused management of trying to personally profit off COMIBOL rather than invest in the future.

General René Barrientos Ortuño, vice president of the MNR government when he launched his 1964 coup, beginning a cicle of military dictatorships that lasted until 1982, cast himself as a redeemer of a revolution gone astray, with COMIBOL as a prime exhibit of the MNR's "irresponsible political demagoguery" (Decreto Ley Nº 07187). Arguing that COMIBOL had hired too many workers, Barrientos moved to curb the influence of worker control, instituting layoffs, and exploiting tensions between peasant militias and mine workers. Mine workers, laid off at gunpoint and suffering military occupation, called this a white massacre. Meanwhile, Barrientos signaled his concern for the mining industry by censuring the previous government for failing to explore new veins and assuring workers that the "military junta could not condone the privation of [fired] workers and their families."[6] Barrientos opened up abandoned COMIBOL mineshafts in December 1964 to cooperative exploitation, thus creating a new generation of cooperative miners supported by government claims that free labor would solve both political demagoguery and MNR inefficiency during the 1960s.[7]

Although still part of the formal union movement, cooperative miners experienced increasing alienation from the FSTMB and the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (COB) [Bolivian Workers' Center], eschewing both the radicalism of the major leftist parties and the centrism of the MNR. Cooperative miners resented the way the FSTMB lobbied as if the union's interests were the same as cooperatives', putting all miners at risk of repression but sidelining cooperative demands and remaining suspicious of communist influences within the union. They also resented COMIBOL's control over ore prices and markets (Absi 26; Widerkehr). In 1968, several cooperatives split from the official mine workers federation, forming FENCOMIN to better represent their own interests. This group included many cooperatives working in COMIBOL holdings as well as the *Federación Regional de Cooperativas Mineras Auríferas* (FERRECO) [Regional Federation of Mining Cooperatives], which had started moving into the Bolivian lowlands at this time (FENCOMIN).

[6] Decreto 07187, May 24, 1965, (cited in COMIBOL 60). This decree also limited cooperative expansion only to those who could prove they lived in the region of exploitation and limited *socio* membership to a single representative of each family.

[7] FSTMB leader Juan Lechín Oquendo, in an early attempt to collaborate with Barrientos, had signed off on the decree opening up cooperative mining in COMIBOL veins (COMIBOL).

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Under General René Barrientos Ortuño, both cooperative and salaried miners experienced hardship and state repression. The structure of cooperatives fostered dependency on COMIBOL and limited collective organizing, both of which divided cooperative workers from the FSTMB and heightened resentment against state management. Functionally, COMIBOL set both production goals and market rates, only allowing the cooperative democratic control of internal task distribution. COMIBOL also levied a 4 percent surcharge on profits for technical support and charged rent for the use of COMIBOL-built company housing and buildings (Widerkehr 154). Despite these limits on autonomy, however, COMIBOL argued that cooperatives would foster a more entrepreneurial spirit and "improve the *individual* situation of the workers by encouraging them to be more directly involved in production as producers rather than wageworkers" (COMIBOL 12; italics are mine).

Torres in particular promised to be more responsive to workers' needs, and the FENCOMIN successfully lobbied for an end to COMIBOL administrative charges and the ability for cooperatives to market ore independently. The FSTMB, which was a key supporter of Torres, saw this request as a threat to its interests and the viability of COMIBOL. When the Torres government fell to Hugo Bánzer's coup in August 1971, the cooperatives lost this right as well as any certainty about ongoing access to their veins (Widerkehr).

Although both salaried and cooperative miners experienced the Bánzer years as a return to insecurity, dependency, and scarcity, Bánzer himself saw value in encouraging the cooperative sector. A 1974 law (Decreto Ley Nº 12008) recognized cooperatives in Bolivia as the "third sector" of the economy under the *Instituto Nacional de Cooperativas* (INALCO) [National Institute of Cooperatives]. Bánzer's INALCO law recognized the growing strength of producer, consumer, and housing cooperatives, but it also marked a shift in state policy away from direct provision of services and protections, instead encouraging poverty reduction from below, financed by development loans and international nongovernmental organizations. Cooperatives were key to Bánzer's vision of a leaner state built on the privatization of risk and the internationalization of poverty reduction.

It was in this context that some FSTMB miners began to see cooperative formation as a betrayal of the revolution. The miners in these unions saw cooperatives not as exerting increased worker control over the means of production but as evidence of the state turning away from its role in subsidizing and guaranteeing a living for productive use of Bolivia's natural resources. To

union miners, encouraging cooperatives could only undermine the idea that Bolivia's government owed its miners a safe, healthy, and well-regulated workplace in exchange for the national wealth produced (Escobar). This was not just a matter of ideas and political values: cooperatives were replacing union miners in terms of jobs and space in the mines (CEDIB, Canelas Orellana; Díaz). Widerkehr argued that by 1972, even when cooperative miners were sympathetic to the labor demands of the FSTMB, they viewed "COMIBOL as an absentee landlord that is supporting its retinue, the bureaucracy, with the fruits of its labor" (154). They also noted that these workers had little incentive to work harder because pay was dependent on attendance, not output. This mutual resentment, whereby COMIBOL miners lamented the lack of ideological orientation among cooperatives, and cooperatives saw state workers as entitled and lazy, was a major cause of labor's disintegration of solidarity in the face of structural adjustment in the 1980s.

Miners in Democracy

In 1985, Victor Paz Estenssoro became the first president since 1964 to both win and serve out an elected term. Paz inherited an economy in tatters, with the price of tin falling internationally, inflation peaking at 23,000 percent, and a political system at war with itself. With the help of economists Jeffrey Sachs and Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, the Bolivian government agreed to a US-backed International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan and its accompanying economic shock program.

Paz Estenssoro devalued the peso, reduced salaries, removed price controls, and began a series of layoffs in nationalized industries, particularly the mines. These measures created a deep recession and a significant decline in quality of life for many Bolivians, but they did reduce inflation and stabilize the peso (Comisión Andina de Juristas 22; Dunkerley 2007, 106). For salaried miners, the triple shock of salary reduction, mass firing, and the end of price subsidies at company stores represented a policy of starvation—both literal and figurative—of their communities (CEBIAE and CEDLA 7). Workers staged a massive March for Life in 1986, walking hundreds of miles to the capital to demonstrate their plight, but were met by tanks and lukewarm sympathy from many members of a public that had been living in austerity since Bánzer. Nearly all of COMIBOL's mines closed between 1985 and 1992, leaving 25,000 workers and their families to find new livelihoods in the coca growing valleys of the

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Yungas, the urban shantytowns, and among the cooperatives that remained in mining centers.[8]

Both the FSTMB and cooperative miners fought to restore democracy in the 1970s and early 1980s, and both saw the neoliberal turn of civilian governments in the 1980s and 1990s as a threat to their interests (Salman et al.). The closure of COMIBOL reduced tensions between both sets of miners, now unified against a common enemy: the encroachment of foreign-owned, private mining companies. Cooperativists, now the majority of miners in Bolivia, embraced many of the political tactics that union workers had used to confront a violent and repressive state: occupations, roadblocks, and occasionally taking hostages in the face of this new enemy. For many observers, both groups seemed ideologically aligned as well. At FENCOMIN's National Congress in 1987, the cooperativists began by affirming their commitment to class struggle and the tenets of socialism (Congreso Nacional de Cooperativas Mineras… 1). This is what the *Centro de Promoción Minera* (CEPROMIN) [Center for Mining Promotion], an NGO that worked extensively with the FSTMB, argued in a 1987 study on cooperative formation entitled "El cooperativismo minero: ¿paliativo, engaño o solución?" CEPROMIN observed that cooperatives were neither an inherent threat to revolution nor some kind of miraculous "third economy," as the government claimed. Rather, cooperatives depended on the relations of production around them: in a capitalist economy, cooperatives would necessarily prioritize profit over communal ownership, whereas under socialism cooperatives would function as worker organizations. In this context, CEPROMIN argued, the cooperative was a lesser evil, but one that offered future hope for the struggle for socialism, worker democracy, and a sustainable mining economy (CEPROMIN).

Each time the Bolivian government revised national mining codes to encourage foreign investment, both sets of workers protested. In 1991, at a time when COMIBOL employed barely 7,000 workers and had reduced its operations to the few mines it could operate profitably, FENCOMIN's 20,000 cooperative workers demonstrated against private concessions by occupying fifteen COMIBOL mines (Fox 51). For these workers, cooperative access still relied on state control of mineral rights; they wanted to preserve

[8] *Dossier: Estadísticas del sector minero metalúrgico 1980-2013* (Government Publications. Bolivia 2014) shows that, in 1984, COMIBOL employed 30,000 workers. By 1988, this number was just under 4,000. Conversely, in 1989, the *Registro Nacional de Mineros Relocalizados'*89 found just over 16,000 *relocalizados,* with 80,000 dependents (see also Government Publications. Bolivia 1989).

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COMIBOL's marginal status rather than compete against highly capitalized foreign concerns.

In 1995, cooperative miners rejoined Potosí's *Central Obrera Departamental* (COD) [Potosí's Workers Council], and in 1996, cooperative workers and the FSTMB alike battled the Bolivian military to resist the sale of the Amayapampa and Capasirca mines to the Vista Gold mining corporation. Workers protested both the sale of the mines to a foreign company without public consent and Vista Gold's moves to control worker practices at the mine. In a move that brought back the worst years of the military dictatorships, the army not only invaded the contested areas of Capasirca and Amayapampa but also the historic union stronghold of Llallagua. The resulting conflict left ten dead, and the COB called a general strike, forcing the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada to sign a peace agreement on December 22, 1996, with some concessions for workers. The "Christmas Massacre" became part of the wave of militancy against neoliberal privatization of Bolivian resources that spread to Cochabamba's water reserves in 2000 and exploded nationally in the Gas Wars of 2002-2003 that brought down Goni's second presidency (Tarcaya Gallardo).

Socios or Bosses? The Morales Years

Evo Morales's election brought high expectations among miners throughout the country, both salaried and cooperative. Like the members of the FSTMB during the MNR revolution, cooperative miners from Huanuni marched on La Paz in the October protests that toppled the government of Snchez de Lozada in 2003. The cooperative miners became anti-globalizing heroes and key players in the MAS coalition. Morales won the elections of 2005, promising a decolonization of the state as well as a rejection of neoliberal privatization, with the expansion of COMIBOL at the center of his strategy, although often in practice in the form of public/private partnerships. Morales appointed Walter Villarroel, a former cooperative miner himself, as minister of mines. Almost immediately, latent tensions between cooperative and salaried miners resurfaced.

Throughout the 1990s, cooperative workers often defended COMIBOL as the guarantor of their rights to particular shafts, and many cooperative workers welcomed a return to salaried work. But by the early 2000s, rising mineral prices were bringing thousands of new miners into cooperatives and increasing the competition for veins. Furthermore, several private companies, granted

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rights to operate existing mines but lacking the funds to do so profitably, had also contracted out to cooperatives. In this atmosphere, some cooperatives saw COMIBOL workers and further nationalization as a threat to their position, even as expelling foreign companies or renegotiating their contracts remained popular among Bolivians nationally.

In 2006, tensions between salaried workers and cooperatives reached a breaking point at Huanuni's tin mines, where cooperative miners outnumbered salaried workers four to one. Cooperative workers wanted more access to the lucrative Posokoni hill, whereas salaried workers accused cooperatives of exploiting too much ore without considering the future sustainability of the mine ("Dos grupos luchan…"). In October, cooperative miners attacked a neighborhood of salaried miners with dynamite, and marches and fights left seventeen dead and over one hundred wounded ("Dos grupos luchan…"; Andean Information Network; Howard). The Bolivian government sent in police but not the army, prompting accusations of government favoritism toward cooperative miners by the COB. In response, Morales replaced Villarroel with FSTMB leader José Guillermo Dalence and tried to shift focus to foreign mining corporations rather than the conflict between Bolivian workers ("Destituyen a ministro"; Mokrani and Uriona).

Over the next several months the conflict simmered, with FENCOMIN demanding government mediation of the conflict and both groups marching on La Paz, sometimes with dynamite. In 2007, Morales tempered the Huanuni crisis by expanding COMIBOL operations to include Posokoni, while hiring many former cooperative workers in salaried positions and agreeing to invest 10 million bolivianos in mine development. Morales also appointed two cooperative miners, along with two FSTMB leaders and two government representatives, to the COMIBOL board. Yet this did not entirely resolve the conflict: at the end of August 2007, Morales sent troops back to Huanuni to control ore theft after a mining accident killed four unauthorized miners ("Bolivian Government Sends"). He did not, however, formulate a consistent policy for dealing with cooperative, state, and private mines, preferring to resolve problems piecemeal by nationalizing or reopening production in response to public pressure. Six years later, the same conflicts reemerged in Potosí with a few new dynamics at the Mallku Khota mines and at Colquiri. The resolution of Huanuni showcased Morales's attempts to appease conflicting groups in a way that maximized state control and pitted the government against foreign corporations. Morales's response to mining was also characteristic of his approach to development more generally: encouraging

state-controlled extractivism, whether undertaken by nationalized or private industry, and facing local conflicts by co-opting the most convenient side when possible and negotiating, when pushed, with the side most likely to offer future political support (Mokrani and Uriona).

By 2012, Bolivia had about 100,000 cooperative workers and 17,000 salaried mine workers, with just 7,000 of these working for COMIBOL (Achtenberg 2012). In April 2012, the Canadian mining corporation South American Silver (SAS) was expanding its operations in the north of Potosí at Mallku Khota, in an area that had been used by local Indigenous communities for grazing lands. In a meeting with the governor of Potosí, community leaders at Sacaca and San Pedro de Buenaventura demanded rights to prior consultation and asked that SAS leave the region over concerns of water contamination. In May, these protests escalated into battles between community members and mine workers. Simultaneously, the Bolivian government released a study pointing to existing water contamination caused by cooperative gold mining in the region, not SAS ("Denuncian contaminación"). This report angered members of Indigenous communities who sometimes engaged in gold mining to supplement income. By the end of May, anti-SAS protestors marched on La Paz, demanding community control over local resources, including nationalization of the Mallku Khota mines and creation of salaried jobs. The situation was complicated by other local Indigenous communities who had been promised jobs by SAS and wanted their holdings respected and protected by the government (McNeish). At first, Morales seemed prepared to support SAS, but the optics of battling Indigenous groups and miners threatened this position.

As competing factions of Indigenous communities marching from Mallku Khota approached La Paz, another conflict was brewing at Colquiri, a former COMIBOL mine operated by the powerful multinational mining company Glencore under the name Sinchi Wayra. On May 30, workers from the *Cooperativa Minera "26 de Febrero"* [26 February Mining Cooperative] occupied mineshafts and demanded greater access to veins, better equipment, and state support. The national salaried mine workers' union, the FSTMB, squared off against the "26 de Febrero" workers. As in the case of Huanuni, a specific mine section—the lucrative Rosario vein—was at stake. Sinchi Wayra and COMIBOL initially granted all rights to the Rosario vein to cooperatives on June 8 as a way to diffuse the conflict, but the FSTMB demanded full nationalization. On June 10, the government signed an accord with the FSTMB to have COMIBOL operate Colquiri. Both actions provoked protest, but the

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government pledged to respect cooperative rights to the Rosario vein even under nationalization (Mokrani and Uriona 1229).

On June 12, hundreds of community members and cooperative gold miners opposed to the SAS at Mallku Khota fought with local Bolivians who supported SAS and occupied a mining camp. As the police moved in, workers at Colquiri cut off the major highway between La Paz and Oruro, and the next day, the salaried miners and cooperative miners battled for control of Colquiri. Meanwhile, at Mallku Khota, community members held SAS mining engineers hostage, accusing them of espionage. By the middle of July, the Morales government had nationalized both mines, although not before state security forces killed a community member at Mallku Khota. At Colquiri, one salaried miner, Héctor Choque Gutierrez, was accidentally killed in a dynamite misfire.[9] Conflicts continued through the rest of the year in both cases as union workers and cooperatives hashed out an agreement over the Rosario vein at Colquiri, communities demanded that Morales create more jobs at Mallku Khota, and cooperatives fought to protect their shares. The latter conflict also highlighted a new dynamic that caused increasing violence in rural areas: gold mining cooperatives moving into Indigenous-controlled lands outside of traditional mining regions.

After these two conflicts, Morales finally decided to address cooperatives and ore theft directly. The newly drafted cooperative law framed cooperatives as an integral part of the plural economy. With a guiding principle of the primacy of social interests over those of the individual, the law also protected all of the legal agreements that had given cooperatives the right to mine before the new constitution (Bolivia 2013a). In May of 2013, the Bolivian legislature also passed Ley Nº 367, which criminalized both violent occupation of the mines and ore theft/illicit marketing (Bolivia 2013b). This law criminalized many of the political tactics that both cooperative miners and union miners had used in the previous year to make demands on the state but, in theory, maintained a pro-cooperative stance.

Over the next few years, negotiations over cooperative law and local control of mines continued, but it was in August 2016 that cooperatives believed MAS had declared war on their sources of income with a new policy of reform to the cooperative industry. The 2016 reform proposals recognized

[9] Most of this discussion comes from timelines from Jiménez and Campanini, as well as Mokrani and Uriona. Thank you also to Carwil Bjork-James for sharing a database of violent conflicts involving miners since the 1990s. See also Achtenberg 2012.

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the rights of *peones* and *maquipuras* to unionize and sought to impose environmental regulations on mining concessions. Cooperative workers immediately protested, demanding greater mineral access, the right to contract directly with foreign companies, exemption from environmental regulations, and subsidized electricity (Achtenberg 2016, "Bolivia: por qué los mineros…"). In short, mining cooperatives protested to prevent the government from recognizing unions, a far cry from the egalitarian politics of the 1930s that saw cooperative miners help form the first national mine worker union in Bolivia. This conflict over labor fundamentally shifted the way the organized cooperative movement saw MAS: as an enemy, rather than a potential ally. The ensuing protests also saw several miners die in clashes with the police as well as the killing of Rodolfo Illanes, a high-ranking government official in the Morales administration.[10] The government responded by denouncing the murder and arresting the executive secretary of the Oruro branch of FENCOMIN, Feliciano Mamani Ninavia ("Cooperativista minero lamenta…"). In an interview with *BBC Mundo*, Esteban Ticona argued that cooperative miners "misled the country because they are business owners camouflaged as workers" (cited in "Bolivia: por qué los mineros…").

The death of Rodolfo Illanes marked a nadir in the relationship between MAS and the cooperative movement, and in the years since, the organized cooperative movement has sought new sources of political support. Because cooperative mining is one of the major sources of economic activity for Potosí and Oruro, this represented a serious blow to the MAS coalition in areas that had previously been strongholds of Morales support. However, no clear contender has been able to replace Morales among cooperative miners and their extended communities.

For a time, it appeared as though the crisis of 2019 heralded a new political axis for cooperative miners in the form of the leader of the Potosí Civic Committee, Marco Pumari. As Morales's disastrous 2019 election devolved into nationwide protests, the son of a miner and the former cooperative *peon* from Potosí emerged as the voice of frustration in this mining region. As the

[10] Although several miners also died in clashes with the police, the killing of a high-ranking official in the Morales administration alarmed the country and confused the rest of the world. The *BBC* ("Bolivia Minister Killed…") and *Al Jazeera* ("Bolivian Minister…") alike noted that miners had traditionally been allies of the Morales government but had recently turned against him and were protesting to demand "greater union representation." In fact, the cooperative miners were not striking against but protesting a law that would allow their workers to unionize. They also demanded exemption from environmental regulation and restrictions on contracting with foreign mining concerns.

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leader of the Potosí Civic Committee, Pumari argued that Morales had been detrimental to both mining interests and the regional autonomy of Potosí ("Potosí vive aún de la producción y la exportación de minerales"). In October 2019, before the election, Pumari also began a hunger strike, demanding that the government renegotiate a lithium deal with the German company ACI Systems on terms more favorable to the department of Potosí ("Líder cívico cumple…").

Pumari was never active in the cooperative movement, but his actions as a representative of the regional business and mineral interests of Potosí meant that his political alliance with Luis Fernando Camacho, the leader of the Santa Cruz Civic Committee, offered a potential bridge between the insurgent cooperative miners of Potosí and the far-right Christians and lowland agricultural interests in Santa Cruz. When Camacho named Pumari vice presidential candidate for his right-wing *Creemos* [We Believe] party, the two men spoke in terms of regional business interests that chafed against taking direction from La Paz. When Camacho and, later, Jeanine Áñez imposed themselves as the leaders of the post-Morales government, it was an alliance between Camacho and Pumari that most signaled a credible nationwide threat to MAS's political coalition (Corz). Ultimately, the civic committees of Potosí and Santa Cruz could not find much common ground, and the *Creemos* coalition splintered before 2020's national election amid allegations of payoffs and corruption. However, the rise of the civic committee politicians may have signaled a new political opening for cooperative miners. Whereas at the beginning of the twentieth century, cooperative mine workers saw themselves as workers and allies of other unionized laborers, in the twenty-first century, they may organize primarily as business owners.

Marco Pumari no longer has any association with mining, and the political coalition with *Creemos* has since splintered. In December 2021, Pumari was placed under preventative detention in connection with his activities during the 2019 crisis. As of March 2024, he remains in custody alongside Camacho and Áñez ("De Ocho Implicados…"). The organized cooperative movement has instead tried to chart its own political path. Since his election as secretary general of the national federation in 2018, Feliciano Mamani has led FENCOMIN further from the once-powerful alliance with MAS ("Cooperativistas mineros descartan…"). In 2020, he ran for president under the banner of the *Partido de Acción Nacional Boliviano* (PAN-BOL) [Bolivian National Action Party] with lawyer and activist Ruth Nina Juchani ("Pan-Bol postula…"), gaining less than 1 percent of the vote in a crowded field. The PAN-BOL party, which

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formed in Tarija to unify various sectors of the Bolivian public under a vision of democracy and "national syncretism," seems to be positioning itself as a competitor to MAS but without the national social base (PAN-BOL). The Mamani-Nina ticket only received 31,000 votes, although PAN-BOL received about twice as many for its legislative slate in the same election, suggesting that the majority of rank-and-file cooperative workers preferred to vote MAS for president, even if they supported PAN-BOL locally (OEP). This political estrangement is reflective of a larger trend in Bolivian politics in which social movements that feel constrained by MAS seek new political articulations but have not yet found a credible alternative that can unite multiple conflicting interests in the way MAS has.

Conclusion

The dual economy spelled out in the Bolivian Constitution and promoted by MAS sees the cooperative movement as one pillar of a more just and prosperous economy. Similarly, *kajcha* labor began as a tool of Bolivian Indigenous communities to adapt and survive colonial exploitation, allowing families to minimize risk in the face of abusive bosses, market collapse, and a precarious climate in which relying too much on a single resource, whether crop or mineral, could spell disaster for a community. For a time in the twentieth century, some saw cooperative mining as a revolutionary answer to scarcity and inequality in the country, one that would require less state investment than in nationalized mines and a vast state bureaucracy. Since Bolivia became a Republic, however, mine owners and the Bolivian state have used a tacit acceptance of informal labor to avoid committing to the well-being of all workers. This other kind of dual economy relies on the unacknowledged exploitation of precarious *peones* and *maquipuras.*

As currently organized, cooperative workers call themselves workers, but they are also business owners, although many also carry the insurgent memory of the unions, and they do not welcome state intervention in their own labor or environmental practices. By taking seriously the distinct political vision of the cooperative miners, we can better see that the struggle for worker freedom has sometimes come at the expense of worker control over production and labor. It remains to be seen whether the MAS government after Evo Morales can honor demands for local control while protecting the interests of community members, ranging from Bolivia's soil and water health to those of the *maquipuras*, whose labor enables the cooperative economy to continue.

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So far, Morales's mining policy has been unable to provide a concrete solution to these concerns, instead treating cooperatives as just one more negotiating block to be placated, alongside salaried mine workers, neighborhood organizations, and other social movement groups. Will the post-Morales MAS be able to negotiate an economy that appeals to the needs of cooperative workers, their *peones,* and salaried workers, or will cooperative workers move further toward a political stance as business owners?

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