

CISEP, Bolivia



CISEP is a non-profit civil society organisation that promotes the economic, social and cultural development of the urban, mining and rural population of the Department of Oruro, Bolivia. Their vision is of a just society with equality of opportunities and fairness, based on solidarity with the poor and marginalised.

Tin is a crucial element in solder for electronics, and it is found in the supply chains of computers, smartphones and more. With the growing demand for electric vehicles, and the lithium-ion batteries they require, the use of tin is forecast to surge. Bolivia ranks fifth among tin-producing nations. There are more than 130,000 Bolivian workers employed in mining, the majority in cooperatives run by the miners themselves. But despite the long-term importance of this industry to Bolivia's economy, miners continue to work and live in precarious conditions.

What are the top issues facing the workers you support in Bolivia?

Firstly, working conditions. Accidents, minor injuries, major injuries or even death of miners is commonplace. Being mainly artisanal mining, there is little technology or site planning. Miners who work in tunnels have little technical knowledge and are unable to predict cave-ins or the presence of gases. They often lack adequate ventilation systems.

We talk to **Jesús Alberto Rea Campos**, Executive Director of the Centro de Investigación y Servicio Popular (CISEP), who support cooperative tin miners in Bolivia's Oruro region.



Jesús Alberto Rea Campos, Executive Director, CISEP

Secondly, the issue of fair prices in the sale of their minerals. Tin miners sell their minerals under unequal conditions: there is a hugely asymmetrical relationship. They can only sell through the official mineral trading companies, intermediaries who standardise ore quality and sell it on in large volumes to the smelters to be turned into metal.

The smelters control market prices, and manage the laboratories which analyse ore grades to determine how much they will pay for it. The smelters have guaranteed sales quotas in the external market, which allows them to plan their ore purchases. They even have links with the wholesale companies where cooperatives buy mining tools and materials. Often the miners do not have capital, so these companies provide materials on credit, charging interest until miners manage to sell their ore. The power imbalance is very marked, and the low price paid to the cooperative miners reflects this.



Cooperative miners in Oruro attend health and safety training

What specific challenges do women miners face?

In Bolivia, women work in the mines for one reason: necessity. They generally go into mining work to replace husbands, fathers or brothers who have been killed or suffered injuries that prevent them from working, and they have become the family breadwinner. This contributes to the number of accidents in mines, as women start mining without prior knowledge.

Another challenge is to receive more equal treatment from the cooperatives, where the ratio between men and women is 5 women for every 100 men.

Tell us about a workers' rights success story or achievement that you are most proud of.

Setting up a functioning health and safety committee in a mining cooperative. Together with the miners, we have developed courses on mine rescue and action plans that are now being put into practice. They are currently taking preventive measures and raising awareness among their fellow miners about their health and safety.

Thanks to their training, in one mine they managed to avoid a catastrophe by putting out a fire caused by a short circuit near explosive material inside the mine.

What are the biggest challenges in your monitoring work right now?

Building trust with miners who don't know about our work. They are unaware of the role they play in the electronics supply chain, and fear that information they provide may provoke some kind of retaliation from actors higher up in the chain, or lead to sanctions by government entities.

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What are CISEP's objectives for the next 2 to 5 years?

To carry out a two-pronged approach to mining: firstly, to help the mining cooperatives to accept that they must develop environmentally responsible mining and reduce labour rights violations; secondly, to develop socio-economic alternatives in mining areas. Mining is cyclical and when prices start to fall, miners and their communities will need new sources of income.

Another equally important objective is to contribute to the Global North's understanding that the local realities of Bolivian mining are strongly influenced by their attitudes and the decisions they take. We need more dialogue between stakeholders to search for solutions with an emphasis on "Accion sin Daño" (action without harm).

How does the partnership with Electronics Watch support your work?

Electronics Watch strengthens and supports dialogue between miners and other supply chain stakeholders. It contributes to the analysis and search for solutions to violations or risks of violations of rights, and helps to generate contacts with organisations working on responsible mining. The partnership also allows us to have a broader platform where we can highlight the local situation, and how decisions made downstream in the supply chain can improve conditions for workers upstream.

What changes would you like to see for workers' rights, in Bolivia or internationally?

We'd like to see economically stable work for mine workers. Safe workplaces with appropriate equipment and trained miners who work together to curb the number of accidents and deaths in mining, and who have both short- and long-term health insurance, covering both illness and accidents while they work, and retirement in old age. Worldwide, zero child labour in mining.

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