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From Housewife to Household Weapon: Women from the Bolivian Mines Organize Against Economic Exploitation and Political Oppression

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CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE

**FROM HOUSEWIFE TO HOUSEHOLD WEAPON:
WOMEN FROM THE BOLIVIAN MINES ORGANIZE AGAINST ECONOMIC
EXPLOITATION AND POLITICAL OPPRESSION, 1961 TO 1987**

SUBMITTED TO PROFESSOR NIKLAS FRYKMAN

AND

DEAN GREGORY HESS

BY

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FOR

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Table of Contents

Author's Note	1
Introduction: Women from the Bolivian Mines	4
Chapter 1: The Development of Mining Women's Activism (1961 – 1964)	13
I. Mining Women's Activism during the Revolutionary Period	13
II. Historical Context for Women's Decision to Organize: The Relationship Between the Mining Centers and the State	15
III. Women from Siglo XX Stage Their First Hunger Strike in La Paz	20
IV. Women Earn Respect as Prison Guards	25
V. Their Decision to Act	34
VI. Mothers not Extremists Awoke to New Political Responsibilities	38
Chapter 2: Mining Women's Political Development Under Fire (1964 – 1978)	40
I. Women's Activism When Military Dictatorships Controlled Bolivia	40
II. Military Coups and Repression of Miners and Their Families	41
III. The Partnership Between the Housewives' Committees and the FSTMB ..	51
IV. Women's Work and the Reproduction of Labor	57
V. The Housewives' Committee and Feminism	66
Chapter 3: The Housewives' Committee and Bolivian Democracy, (1978 – 1987)	68
I. The Return to Democracy and the Closing of Mining Centers across Bolivia	68
II. Constructing Democracy after Banzer	69
III. A More Permanent Transition to Democracy	76
IV. The Fight Against 21060	80

V.	Relocation and the Destruction of the Housewives' Committee's Political Power	84
VI.	Democracy's Betrayal of the Bolivian Miners	87
	Conclusion: Remembering the Movement of the Female Miners	91
	Glossary	97
	Bibliography	100
	Photos	104

Author's Note

I first heard about the Bolivian women's mining movement while studying abroad in Bolivia.¹ Inspired by the courage and leadership of those involved, I made it my priority to learn more about their activism. I quickly found and read two books that tell the history of the movement through the voices of the women who participated: *Let Me Speak* by Domitila Chungara and Moema Viezzer and *Nos hemos forjado así (We Were Forged This Way)* edited by María Lagos. The more I learned about their political development during the difficult and violent decades of the 60s, 70s, and 80s the more engrossed I became. When it came time to pick a topic for a month-long project at the conclusion of my time abroad, the mining women's movement was an easy choice.

During this independent project I had the opportunity to meet many of these women (at this point women activists from the Bolivian mines had become celebrities for me). I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to personally interview Doña Zenobia Machicado, Doña Emiliana Reyes, Doña Dora Aporto, Doña Basilia Quiroz, and Doña Zulma Rojas from the mining district Huanuni, Doña Miriam Rojas from the mining district of Cami, and Doña Gumercinda Velasco and Doña Domitila Chungara from Siglo

¹ Mining women or members of the women miners' movement, for the most part, did not actually work in the mines. Usually they were the wives of miners, but miners' daughters and other women who identified with mining centers are also referred to as "mining women."

XX, who died in March 2012 from lung cancer.² Through these interviews, I received firsthand accounts of the enormously influential political activism that these women led and participated in.³ Listening to their stories, I felt profoundly inspired by their solidarity and fighting-spirit in the face of shocking political and economic oppression. My continued fascination with their struggle convinced me to turn this project into my senior thesis.

After spending over a year reviewing their testimonies and piecing together their activism, I feel indebted to them for sharing their oral histories. In addition to recognizing all of the mining women who shared their stories with me, I would also like to acknowledge a few other key mentors from my study abroad program. I would like to thank Ismael Saavedra, my academic director, for his insight into Bolivian history and culture. I also want to recognize Elizabeth Ziade, my project advisor abroad, for connecting me with many of the women I interviewed, and Alejandra Ramírez, for first introducing me to this topic. I am also grateful to my homestay families and especially Alem Maldonado: thank you all for your willingness to help me transcribe interviews for hours on end and for warmly accepting to me into your homes during this inspiring and challenging process.

From the United States, I would like to thank my friends Alicia Hendrix, Ariel Katz, and Ryan Wheeler and my twin sister Julia Raney. You four are rock stars, and all

² I refer to these women throughout my text by their first names only not due to a lack of respect, but because I want to make this text easier to read for English speakers. I also refer to the protagonists in Lagos' book by their first names for the same reason.

³ I also learned about the new movement they are starting called OMMIBOL (*Organization de Mujeres Mineras de Bolivia*, Organization of Bolivian Female Miners), which is trying to unite mining women across the country. When I was there, this movement was having trouble because of lack of financial resources.

of your edits made my thesis so much stronger. I would also like to thank the Berger Institute, the Center for Human Rights Leadership, the Kravis Leadership Institute, and the History Department for helping to make my research trip to the International Institute of Social History (ISSH) a reality. The ISSH is one of the world's largest research centers in the field of social and economic history and includes archives on social movements throughout the world. Fortunately for me, it had an extensive archive on the Federation of Bolivian Mine Workers (FSTMB) and the Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX. Traveling to the Netherlands for research was both a thrilling personal adventure and very helpful for my research. I am so grateful for this experience.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Professor Frykman. Thank you for your humor, spot-on revisions, and for encouraging me to create something that would honor all of those who helped me with this work.

Concerning my finished product I have two hopes for my readers: that they be touched by these women's heroism, and that they finish with a greater awareness of Bolivia's history, struggles, and future.



Doña Emiliana and me outside of the mine's entrance in Huanuni, Bolivia⁴

⁴ Photo by Alem Maldonado.

Introduction: Women from the Bolivian Mines

In late December of 1977, four women from the Bolivian mining center Siglo XX made an irrevocable decision; they would commit themselves to an indefinite hunger strike until the government complied with their basic human rights demands. A leftist political body called The Permanent Assembly of Human Rights of Bolivia in 1978 gave a description of the strike's beginning as well as their demands:

On the 28 of December in 1977 at 6:00 pm, four women and their 14 children began a hunger strike at the Archbishop's offices in La Paz. They were the wives of miners who had been taken prisoner, exiled or fired from their work; one of these women was pregnant. They demanded 1) unrestricted amnesty [for all political prisoners and exiled people], 2) the reinstatement of fired workers, 3) the recommencement of union activity 4) the removal of troops from the mining centers.¹

The four women – Aurora, Nelly, Angélica, and Luzmila – made these four demands to defend their families against the injustices that they and their communities had faced since military dictator Banzer had taken power seven years before.

Then, on December 31, four days after the mining women had initiated the strike, a second group of 11 women joined the strike. They staged their demonstration in the offices of the daily Catholic newspaper *Presencia* in La Paz. This group was made up of

¹ Secretaría Ejecutiva de la Asamblea Permanente de los Derechos Humanos de Bolivia, January 31, 1978, Cronograma de la huelga de hambre en Bolivia: 28 de diciembre de 1977- 17 de enero 78, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000291, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam [hereafter, ISSH].

a diverse group of people including relatives of political prisoners, students, and other female activists from the Bolivian mines. The following day, a third group joined the protest from the Temple of María Auxiladora in La Paz. By the 7th of January, the number of protesters had swelled to 200, and that number jumped to 500 on January 9th. On January 12th, the 17th day of the strike, roughly 1,000 protesters had joined the cause from cities across the nation. The majority of the protesters were working class people from the mines, students, and religious leaders but professionals and members of other sectors of Bolivian society also participated.²

Widespread support for the strike manifested itself in other ways besides the number of people participating in the hunger strike. Starting in the beginning of January, university students performed daily light vigils in La Paz and Oruro to demonstrate their support for the four women's demands. Miners' cooperation showed their alliance to the protests by going on strike. Other groups including the National Confederation of Bolivian Professionals, the radio station called Acuerdo-Prensa, the Union of Bolivian Women, and many other groups declared their support for the protesters, forming a popular coalition in support of democratic change. Religious leadership also came out in support of the protesters. The archbishop of La Paz announced that all religious ceremony would be indefinitely suspended until the government met the strikers' demands.³

In response to the growing demand for political liberty from people of diverse professional and regional backgrounds, the military government fruitlessly tried to stop

² Secretaría Ejecutiva de la Asamblea Permanente de los Derechos Humanos de Bolivia, Cronograma de la huelga de hambre.

³ Jean-Pierre Lavaud. *La dictadura minada: la huelga de hambre de las mujeres mineras, Bolivia, 1977-1978* (La Paz: IEFA, 1998), 10.

the country from devolving into political pandemonium. On the 10th of January, the government decided to ambiguously respond to the demands of the protesters, and the following day the Armed Forces and the police declared a State of Emergency. When these tactics failed the government turned to intimidation. On the 16th of January, the State issued an ultimatum to the strikers: give up the protest or risk forceful removal from their locations.⁴ At 3:30 am the following night, the government raided the buildings in La Paz where most of the prominent protesters staged their strikes and brutally made them leave.⁵

The government's increasingly bold attempts at subduing the strikers did nothing to slow the snowballing protests. Instead, the government's use of force increased the protesters' conviction that the regime needed to be stopped for good. The day after the original protesters were arrested, new protesters quickly replaced those who had been dragged away. The imprisoned protesters also declared that they would now give up drinking in addition to eating, which magnified the urgency of their strike.⁶

Recognizing that it had maneuvered itself into a lose-lose situation, Banzer's military government realized that it had little choice but to agree to the demands of the mining women. At 11:30 pm on January 17th, the government freed the majority of political prisoners. The following day, the state reinstated fired miners and promised no further persecution.⁷ On January 24th, labor unions came out of hiding. However, troops remained in the Bolivian mines. Domitila Chungara, a leading female activist from Siglo

⁴ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 151.

⁵ Lavaud, *La dictadura minada*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las Minas de Bolivia*, 151.

XX who was part of the second group of protesters to join the strike, beamed over the protests accomplishments: “We had four demands. Three were accepted, one was not. But three were. If just one of our demands had been answered it would have been an enormous triumph.”⁸

The radical success of this hunger strike transformed these four women into national icons for social justice. It also brought national attention for the mining women’s larger political movement. Geroma, another activist who came from Siglo XX, emphasized the importance of remembering this strike only in the context of mining women’s greater struggle to liberate their community. She explained:

When they say, thanks to four women we have democracy. Thanks to four women we overthrew General Banzer, it’s not correct. It was not just those four women. For the rest of my life I am going to thank Señora Alicia de Escobar, Señora Domitila Chungara, la Senora Elena de Enriquez and all of the other women who knew how to fight, who didn’t know how to give up, for bringing democracy.⁹

Geroma’s statement, by pointing out that these women did not operate alone but were actually part of a much broader struggle, paints a much more accurate picture of mining women’s activism in Bolivia during this period. Prior to the strike, mining women from different mining centers across Bolivia campaigned tirelessly and at great personal risk to end their people’s oppression under various military dictatorships. Over time, their commitment to defending their communities from extreme exploitation and political oppression enabled them to develop into formidable political actors – political actors that

⁸ Domitila Chungara, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, December 1, 2011.

⁹ María Lagos, ed., *Nos hemos forjado así: al rojo vivo y a puro golpe*, (La Paz: Plural, 2006), 121, trans. by Catherine Raney.

were strong enough to lead a protest that left a seven-year military regime no choice but to call for immediate public elections.

Mining women's experience as hardened political activists may at first seem paradoxical considering the deeply patriarchal nature of mining society and the nation as a whole during this period. Tracing mining women's activism back to the development of male miners' unions in Bolivia helps explain this contradiction. The male miners' movement, which was led by the FSTMB (*Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia* or Union Federation of Bolivian Mine Workers), was the most powerful working class movement in the country starting around the mid-20th century. The FSTMB represented the working class and played an instrumental role in the People's Revolution in 1952. Later, when the revolutionary period began to unravel in the early 1960s, the relationship between the ruling party and the miners' unions became increasingly strained. Then, when Bolivia entered a period of military dictatorships (1964 – 1978), the miners' movement continued to act as the national government's main political opponent.

As might be expected, initially the miners did not allow women to participate in their movement. Due to the fact that most women did not work directly in the mines, the workers movement felt justified in excluding women. Other patriarchal norms that confined women to the home reinforced their conviction that women had no place in national politics.

This traditional assumption came under fire during the end of the revolutionary period. At this time, tensions between the mining centers and the national government escalated dramatically. Starting in the early 1960s the government began implementing

austere economic packages and imprisoning working class leaders to reduce the miners' power and deal with the nation's crashing economy. This conflict between the working class and the national government intensified when Bolivia entered into a period controlled by military dictatorships from 1964 to 1978. When military dictatorships controlled the country, the government often militarized mining centers, imprisoned and deported working class leaders, and used terror and violence in the mining communities to quell resistance to its rule. This backdrop of oppression motivated mining women to become involved in politics for the first time and then develop their own political committees called the Housewives' Committee. Domitila, who became the figurehead of the movement, explained how their communities' suffering caused women miners to break down patriarchal barriers that had previously denied them a voice in public politics and become powerful activists. She reflected:

Every month we cried on payday. There wasn't enough money for anything, not anything. One of my children didn't have any shoes, the other didn't either. We were bundled up but we were cold. And so every one of my children had started to work. In this way my children stopped being children. Aside from this, all the time the military came to the mines and killed their fathers, violated their mothers. My children did not have a good childhood. It was for this reason that we [the women] had to do something.... These injustices gave us our strength. To start strikes, to start marches, protests, it was always this.¹⁰

The women's movement gained membership, strength, and respect until the mid-1980s. By this point Bolivia was again controlled by civilians, and the democratic government decided to shut down mining centers across Bolivia to address the nation's fiscal crisis. This action brought the women's movement, and the male miners' movement, to an abrupt end.

¹⁰ Chungara, interview by Raney.

Despite mining women's relative absence from Bolivian politics for the last thirty years, they helped create a new political culture that recognized the importance of both women's participation in politics and human rights. Today, this culture lives on. Bolivia has not experienced a coup since 1980, and the nation's human rights record has improved dramatically since the 80s as well. Women also continue to occupy critical roles in Bolivian politics. Today, a new generation of women activists has stepped into the political void carved out and then vacated by the Housewives' Committees. A few examples of such movements are UMBO (Union of Bolivian Women), and *Mujeres Creando* (Women Creating), an anarchist feminist group, and Bartolina Sisa, an indigenous women's movement that is perhaps the most powerful Bolivian women's group today.¹¹

To explain the development of this incredible women's movement and its broad legacy, this work is divided in three parts. The first chapter explores the rise of mining women's activism, from 1961 - 1964. This period was characterized by miners' increasing disillusionment with the national government, as well as the return of class conflict between the working class and those who controlled the government. Chapter 2 delves into the Housewives' Committee's development when Bolivia was controlled by military dictatorships. These regimes abused mining centers intensely, but women miners continued to develop strategies for resistance. Ultimately these strategies enabled women to be victorious in the strike of 1977.

¹¹ "Entrevista a Zenobia Machicado Dirigente De Comites De Amas De Casa Mineras Y De Bartolinas," interview by Alejandra Ramirez, July 27, 2011.

The last chapter addresses the women miners' movement once Bolivia began its imperfect transition to democracy. After explaining the disappointing democratization process and the mining movement's abrupt ending, this chapter explores the important successes of the women's movement: not only did they help create a culture that respected people's human rights, but the Housewives' Committee also successfully negotiated space for women in Bolivian national politics.

The bulk of the information in this work comes from personal interviews from women who were part of this movement. Much of its analysis also draws on documents from the Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. This archive has a large section on Domitila Chungara, which held significant information from Housewives' Committees throughout Bolivia. Some of the documents in this archive include declarations about different political demonstrations, letters written by one Housewives' Committee to another, as well as more personal documents including personal testimony about specific brutal experiences. These documents, combined with my personal interviews, helped build an on-the-ground history of these women's political activism and development.

Secondary sources have also been instrumental for the creation of this project, especially in conceptualizing the impact that this movement had both on the women who participated and Bolivian politics at large. Specifically, Moema Viezzer's introduction to *Let Me Speak*, as well as the article she co-wrote entitled "El Comité de Amas de Casa de Siglo XX: An Organizational Experience of Bolivian Women" were crucial to understanding the way that women's activism enabled women to see their own labor as productive. June Nash's article, "The Barzolas and the Housewives' Committee," proved key to organizing the diversity of women's activism, and María Lourdes' book, *Nosotras*

en democracia: mineras, cholos, y feministas (*Women in Democracy: Mining Women, Cholas and Feminists*) helped to explain how women's entrance into politics allowed them to develop a shared consciousness of their subordination. María Loudres's book also contextualized their movement into the broader story of the development of powerful women's organizations in Bolivia, which strengthened the analysis of their movement's legacy.

Remembering the Bolivian mining women's movement is meaningful for many reasons. Firstly, their movement was instrumental in the fight to bring democracy to Bolivia, and undeniably altered Bolivian culture to be more accepting of women's participation in politics. It also led to a number of important personal realizations amongst women that had important replications for the nation at large. Third, their movement serves as an illustrative case study to examine the relationship between gender and class struggle, a relationship that remains enormously relevant to contemporary Bolivian society.

Lastly, this analysis is important for a North American audience specifically because it provides an on-the-ground look at how US foreign policy in Latin America impacted its most vulnerable populations. Both the United States' anti-communist agendas in the 60s and 70s and the "shock therapy" economic recommendations in the 80s had a real (and largely negative) impact on women and their families in the Bolivian mines. While most Americans are likely unaware of their nation's role in recent Bolivian history, members of the Bolivian mining community can never forget.

Chapter 1: The Development of Mining Women's Activism (1961-1964)

I. Mining Women's Activism During the Revolutionary Period

Women from the Bolivian mines entered the unfamiliar world of politics with a bang at the end of Bolivia's revolutionary period. Bolivia's People's Revolution took place in 1952, and many expected this revolution to radically reshape Bolivia's highly unequal society. Despite these high expectations, by the late 1950s it became clear that the political party in power had no intention of completely restructuring Bolivian society. This caused the relationship between the national government and the working class to unravel in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While tensions between the mining centers and the national government spiked, women from the mining center Siglo XX held their first ever organized political demonstration. In 1961, they staged a hunger strike in La Paz, Bolivia's capital, to force the government to listen to their demands. This strike marked one of the first times in Bolivia and even Latin America that women came together in an independently organized political experience.¹ Over the course of their demonstration, women stood up to church authority and state terror and did not return home until the government had acted on all of their demands.

The far-reaching success of their political demonstration opened up debate regarding women's proper role in politics. After the strike, the FSTMB, or the national miners' union endorsed women's participation in politics for the first time. The strike's success also impacted the women personally; after returning from La Paz, the strikers had the confidence to found the

¹ June Nash, "The Barzolas and the Housewives' Committee" in *Women and Change in Latin America*, ed. June Nash and Hellen Icken Safa (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1986), 327.

Housewives' Committee. This organization guided mining women's activism for the next several decades.

As the relationship between the mining centers and the leading political party became increasingly strained, mining women gained experience as activists. Notably, in June of 1963, women from the Bolivian mines again demonstrated their commitment and usefulness to working class politics. After miners spontaneously kidnapped seventeen people – six foreigners and eleven Bolivians – women from the Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX offered to stand guard over the hostages while the miners bargained with the national government. Like in the case of the 1961 hunger strike, this experience showed working class activists that women could be counted on in the violent and unpredictable world of Bolivian national politics. The political development of women participants during this incident also symbolized a widespread shift regarding working class women's role in politics: shortly after the march of 1961, Housewives' Committees began to pop up in mining centers across Bolivia. As this network grew, women activists began to rely on other Housewives' Committees for the success of their own political demonstrations.

Mining women's confrontation with gender norms that traditionally barred women from politics begs the question: why did impoverished women from mining centers, an extremely patriarchal society, initiate these changes? The answer lies in the political and economic oppression of their communities. By the end of the revolutionary period, the disintegrating cooperation between the miners unions and the national government caused many mining women to feel that the mining centers could no longer afford to have women remain indifferent to the broader struggle of the working class. This new political awareness combined with the

horrific working conditions of their husbands' pushed women to break free of their traditional roles.

II: Historical Context for Women's Decision to Organize: The Relationship Between the Mining Centers and the State

The antagonistic relationship between the mining centers and the national government predated mining women's entrance into formal politics by several centuries. Miners had experienced centuries of forced labor under Spanish colonialism, which dated back to the discovery of silver mines in Bolivia in the late 16th century. The exploitation of mine workers continued after Bolivia's independence in 1820 and lasted into the 20th century. During the 20th century, three mine owners Simón Patiño, Carlos Aramayo and Moritz Hochschild, who were known as Tin Barons, controlled two thirds of the country's tin.² The Tin Barons were among the richest men in Latin America (Patiño, who was known as the Tin King, was the fifth richest man in the world by his death in 1947), but their workers lived at or below a subsistence level.³

Faced with these extreme inequalities, miners began to develop a sense of class identity at the turn of the 20th century. By the 1920s, miners began to organize politically and press for better working conditions.⁴ The development of miners' organized resistance frequently led to violent repression by the government and mining companies. Most infamously, on December 21st, 1942, 400 children, workers and women were killed in a confrontation with the company. In this battle, mining woman María Barzola led the march against the armed forces, and eventually

² Kendall W. Brown, *A History of Mining in Latin America: From the Colonial Era to the Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 127.

³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

sacrificed her life in protest for more food and better living conditions for her children.⁵ Over time she grew to be a symbol of the struggle against exploitation, and the field where she died was named after her in 1952.^{6,7} To better protect themselves against future attacks, in 1944 miners founded the FSTMB, a mining labor movement that grew to be one of the most powerful political organizations in the country.

Outside of the mines, middle class Bolivians including intellectuals and working professionals were also growing increasingly frustrated with the political system that was dominated by the old elite. The elite class was made up of landowners and large company holders who frequently lived abroad and held de facto control of the military.⁸ Eager to do away with this unjust system, members of the middle class founded the MNR (*Movimiento Nacionalista Revucionario* or the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement) in 1941, and developed a plan to ignite a people's revolution. In April, the MNR joined forces with the miners' unions and the peasants with the intention of overthrowing the current government. During this uprising, Bolivian miners' militias played a crucial role. In just three days, this grand alliance overwhelmed the military and overthrew the old oligarchy. People across Bolivia understood the revolution to be a momentous win for the common people of Bolivia.⁹

⁵ Rene Santander, Victor Mansilla and Abel Villapando, *Saludos de los Trabajadores Mineros de La Comision de Base del Sindicato Locotarios, Varios Documentos de la Resistencia a la dictaura de Banzer, 1974-1978*, Federaci3n de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 00884, ISSH.

⁶ Domitila Barrios de Chungara, and Moema Viezzer. *Let Me Speak!: Testimony of Domitila, a Woman from the Bolivian Mines*, trans. Victoria Ortiz (New York: Monthly Review, 1978), 15.

⁷ Iv3n Jim3nez Ch3vez and Magdalena Caj3as de la Vega, *Mujeres de las minas de Bolivia* (La Paz: Ministerio de Desarrollo Humano, 1997), 85.

⁸ Merilee Grindle and Pilar Domingo, eds., *Proclaiming Revolution: Bolivia in Comparative Perspective* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2003), 3.

⁹ Herbert S. Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 213 – 216.

The first years following the revolution were indeed ones of victory for Bolivian mine workers and the peasants. Important concessions to the peasants, who made up 70 percent of the population, came quickly: on July 21st the government declared universal suffrage and on August 2nd, the government began to redistribute lands to organized peasant groups.¹⁰ Key victories for the miners came slightly later: on October 31st of 1952, the MNR nationalized the large tin mines previously owned by the Tin Barons.¹¹ The government then granted miners the right to “co-govern” COMIBOL (Corporación Minera de Bolivia), the new state enterprise designed to control the nationalized mines, which gave workers the power to veto all of COMIBOL’s decisions.¹² Domitila discussed what “co-government” meant for the miners:

Worker control by law had been created in 1953 by the MNR, when the mines were nationalized, so that the company’s activities could be controlled: how much tin was taken out, how much profits were taken in, how they were distributed, how marketing contracts were made, or the grocery store contacts, and so on. It meant the mines were in the hands of the people, because worker control functioned through a freely elected representative.¹³

This unprecedented transfer of power to the miners was cause for celebration. It seemed as if the five-century long tradition of exploiting Bolivian workers for mineral wealth was over and that the relationship between the miners and the state would now be characterized by cooperation rather than antagonism. This belief was reinforced by the creation of the COB (*Central Obrera Boliviana* or National Trade Union Federation). The government granted the COB semi-autonomous power with the MNR over the workers of Bolivia. Serious cuts in the size and funding of the military reinforced these new social and economic changes.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹² María Lagos, ed., *Nos hemos forjado así: al rojo vivo y a puro golpe* (La Paz: Plural, 2006), 34.

¹³ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 108.

¹⁴ James M. Malloy and Eduardo Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction: Bolivia, 1964-1985* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1988), 42.

This enormous shift in the balance of power led to the development of a profound class-consciousness and pride in the Bolivian mines. Their new semi-autonomous political status strengthened a sense of shared identity in the mines. However, economic tensions proved that the alliance between the state, the peasants and the miners was sewn together with thin thread. All of the miners' gains would soon be threatened.¹⁵

Relations between the government and organized labor began to unravel starting in 1956.¹⁶ Immediately after the 1952 Revolution, the Bolivian economy experienced explosive inflation; between 1952 and 1956 the cost of living increased twentyfold and the annual inflation reached over 900 percent.¹⁷ Facing a looming economic catastrophe, the MNR had to make a choice between continuing to support increased economic and political freedom of the miners or implementing more conservative economic policies to prevent the urban middle class from turning against them. Domitila articulated the working class' growing disillusionment with the government during this period:

In those years that the MNR governed Bolivia, first with Paz Estenssoro, then Hernán Siles Zuazo, and then again Paz Estenssoro. That government called itself “revolutionary nationalist” and we had put them into office, but it began to not pay any attention to what the people said and wanted.¹⁸

Faced with an increasingly resentful armed worker population and pressured by the United States, which feared another Cuba-style communist uprising, the government decided to rebuild the military.¹⁹ Tensions between the working class and the national government escalated to a breaking point when President Paz Estenssoro was presented with an economic development

¹⁵ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 91.

¹⁶ Grindle and Domingo, *Proclaiming Revolution: Bolivia in Comparative Perspective*, 4.

¹⁷ Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia*, 216.

¹⁸ Chungara and Veizzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 67.

¹⁹ James M. Malloy and Mitchell Seligson, eds. *Authoritarians and democrats: regime transition in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), 97.

plan (called the Triangular Plan) to receive \$35 million in foreign aid from the United States, the Interamerican Development Bank, and West Germany.²⁰ To qualify for this aid, the government agreed to lay off over 1,000 workers, lower wages, reduce worker benefits, take control of the union process – particularly the activities of the mine leaders – and end worker control in COMIBOL.²¹ The strict stipulations designed to reduce the power of leftist labor organizers reflects a wider trend in United States foreign policy. In the early 1950s, the United States began to intervene in Latin American countries to prevent the spreading of leftist and communist ideas. Worker control was the exact type of situation that the United States hoped to stop, and this economic package with strings attached seemed the best way to halt the alliance between the workers and the government.

Seeing no other way to deal with the nation's tanking economy and increasingly disgruntled middle class, the Bolivian government agreed to implement the policies outlined in the economic package. The adoption of this plan, called the "Strangular Plan" by mine union leader Federico Escobar, ignited a sense of betrayal among the now very class-conscious laborers from the mines.²² Domitila discussed how the government's decision to turn to international donors led to a sense of indignation among mine workers across the country. She explained:

Our MNR governments didn't want to listen to us; instead, through the U.S. Embassy, they made plans and imposed their policies. They decreed a "monetary stabilization" and they made the "Triangular Plan," all to their advantage. And when the workers opposed this, immediately there was a crackdown. In those days we suffered quite a lot in Siglo XX because of their policies.²³

²⁰ "The Captive in the Hills," December 20, 1963, Vol. 82 Issue 25, p28, Academic Search Premier (54213937).

²¹ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 7.

²² Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 35.

²³ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 68.

III. Women from Siglo XX Stage Their First Hunger Strike in La Paz

Under these stressful conditions, women of the Bolivian mining center Siglo XX turned to organized political action for the first time. The tipping point of the women's decision to organize occurred in early June when the miners' union of the mining center Siglo XX organized a march to La Paz, a 360 km walk, to challenge the Triangular Plan. Before they could begin, the MNR learned about the march and preemptively captured the union's leaders as well as other workers. The government then sent all captured activists to jail in La Paz.²⁴

In protest, one by one the wives of imprisoned miners traveled to the capital. There, they pleaded with the government to release their husbands. The government ignored their demands. Domitila described the women's initial failure to free their husbands: "But in La Paz the women were treated badly, and [government officials] even tried to put [the women] in jail and abuse them."²⁵ Alone each woman returned, feeling demoralized, and unsuccessful.

Upon hearing about each others' failures, sixty mining women decided to act together. Geroma, a woman who participated in the female miners' movement from its beginning, explained that after these individual failures, they voiced a new idea: "If instead of going like that, each on her own, we all went together and went to claim our rights in La Paz, what would happen? Maybe we could all take care of each other and get better results."²⁶ With this collective mentality, the frustrated women set out to devise a plan.

Just as the women of Siglo XX began to organize an ad hoc committee, all of the housewives of Siglo XX received an announcement over the radio stations La Voz de Minero

²⁴ Ibid., 72.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

(The Miner's Voice) and La Pío III. Radios were the only form of communication that miners could use to communicate with the entire community or other mining centers, and they were frequently used to communicate important messages. The announcement requested that all of the women come for a meeting in the local parish. At this time part of the church's mission was to defeat communism (the church hierarchy did not become allies to the working class movement until the mid-70s).²⁷ As a result, it is no surprise that Monsignor Manrique used this meeting as an opportunity to discourage the women from organizing. Geroma explained that he told the group of women, "Women should stay at home taking care of their children, tending to the home and should not involve themselves in male activities'... [But] the majority [of the women] wanted to intervene. In response to his request, the Monsignor received an emphatic 'no.'"²⁸

After rejecting the advice from the Church leader, the women left the parish for the local radio station called *La Voz Minero*. At the local radio station, they worked with leaders of the male miners' union of Siglo XX and members of the Bolivian Communist Party. Together, they devised a plan, and appointed a president, and left for the capital.

Once in La Paz, the sixty Bolivian mining women began a hunger strike and prepared a manifesto. In this manifesto, they demanded the freedom of their union leaders and husbands, three months' worth of payment for their husband's work, medicine for company-run hospitals and food for *pulperías* or a company-run grocery store.²⁹

Conflict arose when a group of *barzolas*, a political group of lower class women who the MNR used as shock troops to intimidate the masses, came to frighten the strikers.³⁰ The name of

²⁷ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 182

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42 – 43.

³⁰ Nash, "The Barzolas and the Housewives' Committee," 328 – 334.

this group came from María Barzola, the woman miner who had died fighting for her people in 1942. However, MNR *barzolas* did not stand up to social injustices but were actually used as shock troops by the national government to oppress working class activists.³¹ Domitila commented, “That’s why when someone sells out to the government or there’s a female police agent people say: ‘Don’t get involved with her, she’s a *barzola*.’ It’s a shame that this historic figure has been so misused.”³² In this case, the *Barzolas* threw rotten tomatoes and oranges at the women from the mines, threatened them with knives and even attempted to take their children away from them.³³ Eventually the police came to end the fighting.

Acts of state-initiated violence continued the night after the strike began. While they waited outside of the Parliamentary building, San Román, a man known for torturing those who opposed the government, came to threaten the women. Domitila, who did not become officially involved in the committee until two years later, explained what she heard happened between the protesters and the torturer on the first night of the strike:

That night San Román came, that terrible San Román whom no one wanted to meet. One of the compañeras stood in front of him and said: “San Román, you know very well that we don’t have arms to defend ourselves from your hangmen. But if anything happens, we’ll all blow up together, at this very minute. We and you will blow up, because all we’ve got here is dynamite.” And she took something out of her pocket and asked for a match. But while the compañeras were looking for a match, San Román and his group went running out.³⁴

The woman’s threat to blow up the building was a legitimate one. Miners frequently used dynamite to extract minerals from the mountain. This meant members of the mining community always had a significant supply of this explosive. Rather than risk death at the hands of a desperate mother and wife, the infamous San Román decided to run away.

³¹ Ibid., 332.

³² Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 73.

³³ Ibid., 72.

³⁴ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 73.

Women from Siglo XX's presence in La Paz also caught the attention of many other groups; because there were very few women's activist groups at this time, numerous journalist groups came to document their activism the morning after their first night in La Paz.³⁵ Many other groups, including the Union of Bolivian Women (UMBO) and the Federation of Factory Workers upon learning about the strike came to demonstrate their solidarity. In addition, around 150 women and their children from other mining centers in Bolivia traveled to La Paz to lend their aid. These women provided valuable help by preparing food for the children that the strikers had brought with them from Siglo XX.³⁶

For the next nine days the women continued on their hunger strike, consuming only liquids. Then, on the tenth day, the government granted women from Siglo XX all of their demands; their husbands and union leaders along with industrial workers and teachers from different parts of the country were freed from political prison.³⁷ The government also filled the mining center's grocery stores with food, and the mine workers received their last two months wages.³⁸ Reunited with their husbands and union leaders, the women returned to Siglo XX triumphant. María Careaga, a woman from Siglo XX explained, "Everyone was waiting for us when we arrived. We made a barbeque and we celebrated."³⁹ Invigorated with a new sense of confidence and purpose, women from the hunger strike officially founded the Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX shortly after returning from La Paz.

³⁵ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 99.

³⁶ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

The mining women's successful hunger strike and their subsequent decision to create a permanent Housewives' Committee was a novel act in Bolivia, and its success motivated Bolivians to reassess what women were capable of as political actors. Women had only begun to participate in public politics during the rise of the MNR in the 1940s, but after the MNR came to power the women were pushed into unimportant roles in the government.⁴⁰ Women's lack of influence in Bolivian politics meant that having women act communally and independently on a national level – remember that around 150 women from mining districts across Bolivia traveled to La Paz to lend their support – was enormously unusual. The very novelty of their direct participation combined with their subsequent success surprised the country. It further convinced some people, including a few key members of the FSTMB, or the national miners' union, to change their outlook on women's participation in politics.

In reaction to the strike of 1961, the FSTMB adjusted its position on women's activism. On the first of October 1961, the union published a decisive vote saying, "whereas, the participation of women is fundamental in the struggle for better conditions in the mines, like they demonstrated in the last strike; whereas, it is necessary that housewives are organized in all mining centers in Housewives' Committees like they have already done in Siglo XX to guarantee more effective participation in the struggle."⁴¹ This statement marked a huge shift in the miners' union's attitudes towards women. Prior to this date, miners' unions had given women little voice in the movement, believing women's work to be less productive and less important.⁴² These resolutions also demonstrate that at least some members of a leading body of the working class had accepted that women needed to become politicized before their community could overcome

⁴⁰ Nash, "The Barzolas and the Housewives' Committee," 327 – 333.

⁴¹ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 100.

⁴² Brown, *A History of Mining in Latin America*, 147.

its current state of exploitation, an idea that gained momentum during the next several decades.⁴³

Women's success in their hunger strike also had important implications for the women themselves. During the strike women proved that they were capable of holding their ground in the rough world of politics. When the women were developing their plans to stage a protest together, they ignored the advice of a church leader who argued vehemently against their participation. Their determination to aid their husbands also did not waiver at the threat of state violence: when the *barzolas* tried to intimidate them, the women from Siglo XX stood their ground. Later, when the infamous executioner San Ramón came, the women did not disperse from fear of torture. Instead, the women threatened to use dynamite, causing him to run away rather than the other way around! Women's ability to overcome these obstacles and succeed when their male counterparts had failed enabled women to begin to realize their own capabilities: shortly after returning from La Paz, women from Siglo XX had the confidence to establish a permanent Housewives' Committee. Domitila reflected on how the Housewives' Committee enabled women to prove to themselves that they had more political potential than anyone in their communities would have thought possible prior to the strike of 1961. She said with pride: "Many of my sisters have demonstrated by their actions that they can assume an important role alongside the worker."⁴⁴

IV: Women Earn Respect as Prison Guards

As tensions between the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) and the mining centers continued to escalate, women continued to demonstrate their usefulness to the working

⁴³ Moema Viezzer, James Dietz, and Paula Tuchman, "El Comité de Amas de Casa de Siglo XX: An Organizational Experience of Bolivian Women," *Latin American Perspectives* Vol. 6, No. 3. (1979): 80-86, accessed October 25, 2012, www.jstor.org/stable/2633401.

⁴⁴ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 42.

class and to gain political experience. Notably, in 1963 women from Siglo XX agreed to guard six kidnapped foreigners and eleven Bolivians while the miners bargained with the national government. The context for this intense power play began when the government recaptured two important union leaders, Federico Escobar and Irineo Pimental. As soon as the miners from Siglo XX discovered that their union leaders were taken prisoner, they felt outraged.⁴⁵ Then they realized that a number of foreigners were having a meeting with upper-level COMIBOL management in the town's center. Eager to retaliate in this very uneven struggle for power, the miners decided to kidnap those who were participating in the meeting. Ironically, the foreigners were in the area to deliver a \$15,000 check to finance two new schools in Siglo XX.⁴⁶

Once the hostages had been taken to the union building, the workers immediately dispatched a message to the government. They presented a bargain: the workers would free their prisoners in exchange for the freedom of the leaders. Recent repressive policies like the Triangular Plan had taught the miners how influential foreign needs were in the tug-o-war of power between the national government and the mining centers. This time, the miners hoped to use their government's dependence on a working relationship with the United States to their advantage. Surely the government would release their leaders before risking wounding their relationship with the United States.

However, the Bolivian government led by President Estenssoro refused to be manipulated by coercion. Instead, the government communicated the following: there would be no exchange of prisoners. Only after the miners released their hostages would the government consider releasing the union leaders.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 81.

⁴⁶ "The Captives in the Hills."

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

After the government's refusal, the miners heard some more upsetting news; a miner who had been present when Federico Escobar and Irineo Pimental were captured explained that he had heard a great deal of gunfire during their arrest. The witness assumed that the leaders had been killed.⁴⁸

Infuriated, many miners wanted to hang their prisoners. It would be an imperfect retaliation, but that was the best option they had. Amidst the chaos, Norberta Aguilar, the current president of the Housewives' Committee, made a reasoned argument: because they had no proof that the leaders had been murdered, they needed to keep their hostages alive for bargaining power.⁴⁹ She then offered the Housewives' Committee to take the lead on guarding over the hostages. The miners' union agreed, and Norberta delivered the following message over the radio to all women in the Housewives' Committee:

Given the current situation between the national government and the FSTMB, the Housewives' Committee of Silgo XX urgently requests that all compañeras of Miraflores, Socavón, Patiño and Silgo XX help with guard duty in the union building to guarantee the security of the foreign hostages while a General Assembly of Workers decides how to convince the national government to deliver their hostages to us. Meanwhile, the responsibility of the hostages lies in the hands of housewives.⁵⁰

A group of about 20 women and some men responded to the message and volunteered to participate in guard duty. They came to the union building and held a small meeting. They decided to break each day into three shifts, assigning a group of volunteers to different eight-hour blocks. Other volunteers organized who would bring food to those on guard duty and decided how they would feed the families of the guards. Their ability to continue to take care of their households while accepting additional political responsibilities would be crucial in

⁴⁸ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 81.

⁴⁹ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 80.

⁵⁰ Comunicado, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000089, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

overcoming sexism as the Housewives' Committee started to regularly contribute to the union in the years to come.⁵¹

Pleased to again be proving themselves useful to the union, María Careaga, who was just becoming acquainted with the committee, exclaimed: "Now we are going to show them that we women deserve their respect!"⁵² They then armed themselves with dynamite and guns left over from the Chaco War of the early 1930s,⁵³ and then the waiting period began. Some guarded the prisoners during the day. Others took the night shift, chewing coca leaves to keep away the fatigue and hunger.⁵⁴

Women's leadership in the kidnapping of foreigners and Bolivians earned significant national and international attention.⁵⁵ A *Time* reporter described the shocking spectacle:

There the captives sat last week —Martin and three other Americans, a Dutchman, a German and eleven Bolivians — frightened and endangered pawns in a medieval power struggle high in the Bolivian Andes. Dark-featured Indian women, wives of rebellious tin miners, stood guard over them in a shabby union hall at the 14,000-ft.-high Siglo Veinte mine, 135 miles from La Paz. The women cradled tommy guns and tucked dynamite caps beneath their bulging petticoats. On the floor below, just a bullet's zing through the wooden boards should fighting break out, 50 cases of dynamite were stored.⁵⁶

Domitila arrived at the union building the day after the hostages had been taken captive. At this point she was not yet a union leader and had never participated in the committee. She came to the union in search of her husband, who had spent the last night on guard duty.⁵⁷ Norberta, who was in charge of the hostages, asked Domitila if she would like to help the

⁵¹ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 59 – 61.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁴ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 85.

⁵⁵ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 112-114.

⁵⁶ "The Captives in the Hills," *Time* 82 1963. Academic Search Premier (54213937).

⁵⁷ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 81.

committee by taking on a shift. Domitila's husband laughed – she was too lazy and foolish to participate. Impressed by the women's high level of organization and needled by her husband's remark, Domitila volunteered to work all three shifts: the morning, evening and night.⁵⁸

Tensions increased when they heard that indigenous peasant groups from Cochabamba were coming to massacre them. At this time peasant militias from the Cochabamba region frequently allied themselves with Paz Estenssoro, the current Bolivian president.⁵⁹ Despite a commonality of poverty and the fact that the majority of miners had close familial ties to peasant communities, regional, racial, and occupational differences prevented the two groups from seeing each other as *compañeros* in the same struggle until much later on. Facing a potential massacre at the hands of the armed peasants, the guards grew more and more anxious. Geroma explained, "Inside we became psychologically sick. Every one of us became paler."⁶⁰

The looming threat of a bloody peasant invasion combined with days upon days of little sleep and little food created a very tense and emotional atmosphere. If the peasants came, what would they do? How would they defend themselves? In response to this growing tension, Domitila explained how Geroma addressed all of the volunteers: "[She] said the responsibility we had taken was a big one, but that she felt happy and that we had to carry out to the end the task we'd been given. But we couldn't leave our children behind to suffer in the hands of those people. So our obligation was to die with our children."⁶¹ Domitila continued, "Then we decided that all of us, with our children and our husbands, should move into the union building and place

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁹ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 89.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶¹ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 84.

dynamite in such a way that, if necessary, we'd be blown up with the building, but so that no one would come out of there alive, not us or them. That was our final decision."⁶²

While the women plotted their last resort escape, overwrought members of the American government struggled to lend support to the American hostages. Anxious to see the hostages released from the reportedly impulsive "bowler-hatted women"⁶³, President Johnson offered the Bolivian government full US military support to liberate the prisoners. Rumor had it that the US government wanted to deploy a unit of the Special Forces stationed in Panama and equipped with helicopters to the mining center.⁶⁴

Despite the obvious technological advantages of the North American armed forces, the Bolivian military refused all levels of North American aid. President Estenssoro feared that accepting this help would not only put the hostages at risk, but could also instigate a bloody civil war. Instead of allowing American troops to intervene, President Estenssoro sent Vice President and labor leader Juan Lechín to Siglo XX. As the national leader for the miners' union, the national government hoped Lechín would be able to persuade the miners to release their prisoners. President Estenssoro also ordered 3,000 Bolivian troops to encircle Siglo XX in case Lechín failed.⁶⁵ The President then repeated his earlier message: there would be no exchange of prisoners but that the prisoners must be freed.⁶⁶

As the tensions between the miners and the national government continued to climb, Lechín tried to convince the women that they had to release the hostages before their leaders returned to avoid a bloody massacre. The women refused. Geroma told him:

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ "The Captives in the Hills."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ "Free at Last," *Time*, December 27, 1963, Vol. 82 Issue 26, p29, Academic Search Premier (54214013).

⁶⁶ "The Captives in the Hills."

But what about our compañeros? They must be being tortured, they're prisoners too. We know what torturers like San Román and Señor Menacho are like... Señor Lechín, we have been here on guard duty for many nights, without sleeping, without eating, and without a lot of help. But that doesn't matter, we're going to keep going and we're not letting them go.⁶⁷

The Bishop of La Paz also came to talk to the women and he too grew angry when the women refused to concede the prisoners. Domitila explained, "I can see that he didn't understand why we did it, that it was the final resort in the terrible situation in which we lived – you know?"⁶⁸

Furious at their stubbornness, Lechín returned to La Paz and had their imprisoned leaders write to the women. Escobar and Pimental urged the miners to release the foreign prisoners.⁶⁹ Worried that letters were inauthentic (they suspected that their leaders were tortured into signing those documents), the women again denied his request. However, these letters did convince miners from Siglo XX to hold an assembly to discuss their options. Lechín spoke to this assembly. He described how 3,000 troops and dozens of tanks were moving toward Siglo XX.

Convinced that failing to release the prisoners would lead only to bloodshed and possibly realizing that this experience would also result in bad press for their cause,⁷⁰ the assembly voted to free the hostages. They reported the outcome of the assembly to the women, and the women submitted to the union's vote. The women returned to their homes feeling frustrated that the assembly had given into the threats of the government and that their own opinion had not been taken into account in the assembly vote.

⁶⁷ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 92.

⁶⁸ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 87.

⁶⁹ Irineo Pimental and Federico Escobar Zapata, "Compañeros." *Presencia*, December 1, 1963, in *Nos hemos forjado así: al rojo vivo y a puro golpe* ed. María Lagos (La Paz: Plural, 2006), 63.

⁷⁰ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 88.

Despite a sense of failure, many women still felt like they had accomplished something. Domitila discussed her personal growth during this physically and emotionally trying experience: “What I saw and lived during those events, in all those days we spent in the union buildings with the hostages, will help me all my life. And from that experience on I began to participate regularly in the Housewives’ Committee.”⁷¹

The Housewives’ Committee’s participation in this extremely dangerous bargaining attempt demonstrates women’s willingness to support the miner’s union in whatever way they could. Housewives’ Committee leader Norberta’s decision to volunteer the committee to watch over the hostages was especially courageous because at this time the North American government was beginning to acquire an infamous reputation for invading left-leaning countries.⁷² Their refusal to give in also demonstrated their intense commitment to their community. After hearing rumors that peasant militias planned to invade, the women did not give in. When Lechín announced that 3,000 members of the national armed forces were coming to surround their community the women again decided that they would continue to guard the prisoners. By the end, the women even concluded that they would rather sacrifice their own lives and those of their families than let down the union leaders who were imprisoned.

Domitila’s discovery of her own activism also illustrates a national phenomenon that was taking place in mining centers across Bolivia. In this incident, Domitila overcame internalized notions that she ought not to participate in politics after being encouraged by Norberta. This encouragement enabled her to shake off her husband’s taunts by offering to work all three shifts.

⁷¹ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 89.

⁷² Patrice J. McSherry *Predatory States: Operation Condor and covert war in Latin America* (Laham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005), 1-4.

After deciding to participate for the first time, she discovered a passion for helping her community end its suffering through politics. Similarly, across the country women from mining centers were turning to political activism for the first time. Shortly after 1961, women from the mining centers Animas, Seite Suyos, Santa Ana, Buen Retiro, Tasna, Rosari, Tatasi, and Telemayo all created their own Housewives' Committees.

Women also quickly began to develop plans to form a national committee that would link these committees to strengthen their activism. Miners' unions did not believe that there was any need for a national structure, and women agreed to put these ideas on hold for the sake of their relationship with the male miners' union. In the interim, women still leaned on this growing network for support of their own political demonstrations. In August of 1963 women of the Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX wrote a letter asking women from mining centers across Bolivia to send funds and goods – especially foodstuffs – to support the families of the women who were striking.⁷³ Women from all of the aforementioned committees responded to their call through by sending goods or written support.⁷⁴ One woman, Manuela de Sejas, died from complications that arose after participating in the strike. Her martyrdom inspired many more women to join the cause.⁷⁵

A declaration released on the 27th of November, 1963 by the Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX and sent out to mining centers across Bolivia illuminated how much women's activism had changed since the first strike of 1961. It read: "As housewives we are obligated to contest reactionary governments bought by foreign governments that want to exploit us. We are

⁷³ Norberta Aguilar et al., al señor Secretario General del Sindicatro del Peluqueros y Peinadores, La Huelga de 1963, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000078, ISSH.

⁷⁴ Iván Jiménez Chávez, *Mujeres de las minas*, 105.

⁷⁵ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 49-51.

obligated to unite ourselves to ask the government to respect women and children.”⁷⁶ In just two short years, women had already grown from unsure to convinced that women’s proper role in politics was an active one.

VI. Their Decision to Act

Mining women’s decision to create one of the first female groups is surprising considering the deeply gendered nature of Bolivian mining society. In mining centers, like in most of Bolivian society, women and men’s roles were very distinct. Women were not allowed to enter the mines because it was believed that a woman’s presence would upset the *Tío*, the deity that could either protect or end the life of a miner. Instead of working in the mines, women were responsible for typical domestic tasks, including taking care of the household and raising the children. Mine workers’ extremely low wages also necessitated that women work outside of the mines in the informal economy.

Despite the intense labor that women had to perform for the survival of their families, (a topic that will be further explored in the following chapter), women’s work was considered inferior to men’s, and they were consequently excluded from working class politics. Believing that politics was outside of women’s normal sphere, women were instead taught to focus solely on their household. Domitila explained how these pervasive social norms caused women to feel that they were incapable of speaking up in politics:

To begin with, no one really accepted the importance of a women’s organization, for in Bolivia we are accustomed to women not participating. Women are regarded as inferior beings, incapable of taking responsibilities. Actually, we as women underestimated our own capacity, but the stronger compañeras were firm in their decision to make themselves known as human beings capable of achieving something.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁷⁷ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 41.

Justina, who was quite young when the committee was founded, remembered hearing how difficult it was for women to join the committee in its early years because of this patriarchal nature of Bolivian society. She recalled: “There was a lot of machismo. I was young, but I remember the older leaders would say: ‘We did not enter easily. Joining the Housewives’ Committee was dangerous. We often came with bruised eyes to the Housewives’ Committee meetings.’”⁷⁸ Norma, the first leader of the committee in Siglo XX, confirmed this reality. She explained: “A lot of women never participated in the committee because of the questioning of their husbands. For this reason, to be a leader, the first battle was in our homes.... In my house my husband and I were polar opposites. For this reason being a leader caused me a lot of suffering.” She continued, “Many women didn’t join the committee out of fear of their husbands and other things, including criticisms from one woman to another. When I became a leader, my godparents stopped sending me invitations to things.”⁷⁹ Emiliana’s experience in Huanuni confirmed that patriarchy was pervasive in mining centers across Bolivia. She explained, “The discrimination was huge. Workers wouldn’t let us go to their hearings; they threw us out or they wouldn’t let us enter. They always discriminated against us.”⁸⁰ Zenobia, another leader from Huanuni, agreed. She remembered, “They would say to us, Women! To the kitchen. Go home. Go home and cook.”⁸¹

Given the prominence of patriarchal ideas in mining culture, it seems unusual that such radical changes regarding women’s role in society developed in mining centers. This paradox can be explained by first looking at the highly politicized nature of the mining centers. Geroma,

⁷⁸ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 57.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁰ Emiliana Reyes, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 20, 2011.

⁸¹ Zenobia Machicado, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 11, 2011.

an activist from Siglo XX, discussed how her father's long-term persecution by the national government led her to enter politics. "I was born in the house of a worker and I saw how my father was persecuted his entire life, from 1942 until 1952. This is what motivated me to join the women's movement in the mines."⁸² Domitila explained how watching their workers fight for the greater community made her feel that she too had an obligation to act. She reflected: "The mine workers' wives organized a committee in Siglo XX during that very difficult period of Paz Estenssoro. Seeing all the struggles the people were involved in, they couldn't stay on the sidelines... Necessity made us organize."⁸³

Domitila's explanation also alludes to another important reason that women entered politics: the constant lack of basic necessities. The testimony of Geroma emphasizes the importance of the lack of basic goods in women's decision to enter politics. She explained: "Without doubt, housewives were the most affected by the hunger politics of the government [of the early 1960s]. Little by little women became conscious of this fact."⁸⁴ Miram Rojas, a woman from the mining center Cami, confirmed that the wide suffering of her community, and more specifically the suffering of children due to the lack of basic foodstuffs motivated women from her mining district to organize into a committee. She explained, "We joined so that women would have a voice and fight against the hunger of our children. To satiate the hunger of our children. Because during this period our children were dying from hunger."⁸⁵

Lastly, women's position as wives to the exploited miner marked another crucial reason to enter politics. During this time period, miners worked eight hour shifts, sometimes in the morning, in the afternoon, or at night. On these shifts men were not allowed to bring in food. To

⁸² Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 65.

⁸³ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 45.

⁸⁴ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 34.

⁸⁵ Miriam Rojas, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 16, 2011.

keep away the hunger they ate coca leaves, an Andean stimulant, or drank tea made out of the leaf. Once inside the mine, workers performed physically exhausting work in poisonous conditions. All miners eventually developed the lung disease silicosis, caused by inhaling particles. This disease, combined with frequent accidents, caused the average life expectancy of a miner to be about 35.⁸⁶

Despite the incredibly difficult nature of this work, miners received very little in return for their labor. Miners who had enough points (points were given based on years worked and family size) lived in company housing, which was made up of a small one or two-roomed shack. Families who lived in these houses shared a bathroom, got all of their water from a shared pump and had limited electricity. These houses were also not given to mining families but loaned: after a worker died, his family had 90 days to relocate. Despite the incredible unfairness between what a worker gave (his physical health) and what a worker received (horrendous living conditions), the government denied that the miner was exploited. Domitila explained:

Of course, government propaganda makes it seem that we lead an easy life, and when they speak of the miners they even say we get free housing, free drinking water, free electricity, free education, cheap groceries, and other things. But let anyone who wants to come to Siglo XX and they'll be able to see reality for themselves.

Gumerinda, a leader from Siglo XX, in her testimony confirmed this reality. She explained, "The miners don't get anything for free. They give. For us they destroy their lungs."

Julia from Siglo XX articulated how women's recognition of their husband's struggle was enormously important in women's decision to become activists. Her justification also suggests that women's decision to call themselves the "Housewives' Committee" stemmed from the deep empathy and respect they felt for mine workers. She explained:

⁸⁶ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 23-28.

The true housewives were the women miners who on a daily basis stood beside their husbands and saw how some miners entered the mine with a little bit of coca and tea. This housewife knew how to value the miner, knew how to value the sacrifice of this worker. This housewife had the right to fight beside the worker. These women, in my opinion, are true housewives.⁸⁷

VII: Mothers not Extremists Awoke to New Political Responsibilities

Even though patriarchy was a very real concern for women who wanted to join the movement during this period, reviewing the testimonies of the women who participated demonstrates that women's real success in breaking into the public world of politics was not defined by their ability to overcome the prejudices placed upon them by men. Rather, women's entrance into politics was the product of their personal transformation: in a very short time period, mining women across the country went from feeling like they were not capable of participating in politics to believing that they had no choice but to develop their skills as activists: as good wives and mothers in a world where human rights abuses were commonplace and basic necessities were lacking, activism was their only choice. Domitila explained this transformative realization:

There was quite a lot of opposition from our husbands when we started the committee in June 1961. To begin with, no one really accepted the importance of a women's organization, for in Bolivia we are accustomed to women not participating. Women are regarded as inferior beings, incapable of taking responsibilities. Actually, we as women underestimated our own capacity, but the stronger compañeras were firm in their decision to make themselves known as human beings capable of achieving something. So, they persevered and now we have a situation where the women's organization is indispensable.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 237.

⁸⁸ "Bolivia – the struggle continues: an interview with Domitila Barrios de Chungara." Interview by Jane McIntosh. Sage Publications. *Race Class* 22 (1981): 308 – 309, accessed February 24, 2013, DOI: 10.1177/030639688102200306.

As her quotation expresses, once they began to feel a personal responsibility to advocate for their communities, neither taunting or prejudices could stop them.

Looking at their initial reasons for founding the committee demonstrates the unfairness of contemporary rightist discourse. This discourse claimed that these women were brainwashed by communist agents like labor leader Lechín (a self-identified Trotskyite Communist).⁸⁹ Domitila commented directly on the accusation that women miners' activism was based on communist ideology:

In my case, when they beat me in the [prison] cells because I was a “communist” and an “extremist” and all that, they awoke a curiosity in me. “What is communism? What is socialism?”... And then I began to analyze, “What have I done? What do I want? What do I think? I only asked for justice for the people, I only asked that everyone has enough to eat, I asked for education to be better. I asked that there be no more massacres like the terrible San Juan Massacre.⁹⁰ Is that socialism? Is that communism?”⁹¹

Domitila's reflections, like the testimonies above, prove that women's activism came from their position as mothers of hungry children and as wives of husbands who died young from unsafe work, not because they were manipulated by radicals. Elena, an activist from Siglo XX, confirmed that women did not become activists after being brainwashed by political zealots. She vented her frustrations against these types of inaccuracies. She commented, “People already don't know why we went out to fight – it was because there wasn't any bread in the house. Everyone needs to know that. In the universities they have to read about this.”⁹²

⁸⁹ “The Captive in the Hills”

⁹⁰ This massacre will be explored in the following chapter.

⁹¹ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 219.

⁹² Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 264.

Chapter 2: Mining Women's Political Development Under Fire (1964 – 1978)

II. Women's Activism When Military Dictatorships Controlled Bolivia

During the next period of Bolivian history, members of the Housewives' Committee remained conscious of their responsibility to defend their communities from economic exploitation and political abuse. This was a tall order considering the violent nature of this period: in 1964, a military coup led by General Barrientos ended the revolutionary period and plunged the nation into a period of military dictatorships that lasted until 1978. The military governments that rose and fell during this period were among the most anti-labor in recent Bolivian history. Housewives' Committee leader Emiliana explained, "Every time there as a coup - whether it be Barrientos [1964], Banzer [1971] or Garcia Mesa [1980] - upon gaining power every government immediately militarized the mining centers."¹ In addition to sending troops to all mining centers, Bolivia's military governments also resorted to numerous other coercive tactics to control organized labor and other leftist's sympathizers. Some such tactics included curfews, the illegalization of unions, torture, forced disappearances, and even massacres, (all tactics similar to those employed in other Southern Cone countries).²

Against this backdrop of confrontation and conflict, members of the Housewives' Committee continued to devote themselves to the working class' struggle. For the most part, mining women's political activism focused primarily on building a partnership with the FSTMB:

¹ Emiliana Reyes, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 20, 2011.

² Munck, Gerado, *Authoritarianism and democratization: soldiers and workers in Argentina, 1976 – 1983* (Univ. Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1998), 178, 51, 171.

in their efforts to support the national miners' union, women performed a wide variety of tasks depending on the union's needs. At different times, women defended union leaders who had been arrested, sent petitions and other documents to the government and COMIBOL and vocally protested the executive branch of the mining company. They also publically pressured the government and the mining company by performing hunger strikes, demonstrations, protests, marches, and engaging in street confrontations with the army or male strikebreakers.³ Their willingness to take on a wide range of roles and their clear commitment enabled them to win more and more respect and responsibility within the miners' union structure.

Their continued broad participation in politics had profound effects on the women who participated as it had during the end of the revolutionary period. Through spending significant time working with other women, members of the Housewives' Committee began to recognize the importance of their paid and unpaid labor in the mining labor economy. These new realizations expanded the scope of women's activism to include projects that were more directly relevant to women: in addition to building a partnership with the male miners' unions' initiatives and goals, women also began to advocate for a number of women's issues including lobbying for better employment opportunities for women and calling attention to the number of neglected orphan girls in their communities.

II. Military Coups and Repression of Miners and Their Families (1964-1978)

General Barrientos' rise to power in 1964 set precedence for a number of upcoming military coups. To put this decade-and-a-half in perspective, it is important to note that since Bolivia became an independent nation in 1825, it has experienced eighteen coups. Fourteen out

³ Nash, June, "The Barzolas and the Housewives' Committee" in *Women and Change in Latin America*, ed. June Nash and Hellen Icken Safa (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1986), 366- 367.

of those eighteen occurred between 1964 and 1982.⁴ While the number of coups Bolivia experienced during this period was unusual, the country's shift away from democracy followed regional trends: by the 1970s, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay had installed military dictators.⁵ As in the case of these other Southern Cone countries, the Bolivian government immediately sought to control organized labor.⁶ In the Bolivian case, this meant muzzling the mining centers.

The Barrientos regime controlled Bolivia from 1964 – 1969. During this time period, the government frequently resorted to extreme violence to quell dissent in the mining districts. The first massacre took place in September of 1965. The unrest that led to this violent act can be traced back to the Barrientos government's decision to enter stage three of the Triangular Plan in May of 1965.⁷ This meant lowering wages in the mines by up to 40%, firing more than 1,000 miners, and making all mining union activity illegal.⁸ The Barrientos government took this next step because international investors threatened to cut funds unless notable 'progress' was made in the mining centers.⁹

Immediately after these changes were announced, miners across the country reacted with anger. Miners blew up bridges, took technical workers hostage, and set off dynamite in

⁴ Jean-Pierre Lavaud, *La dictadura minada: la huelga de hambre de las mujeres mineras, Bolivia, 1977-1978* (La Paz: IEFA, 1998), 16.

⁵ Klaiber, Jeffrey, *The church, dictatorships and democracy in Latin America* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 1.

⁶ Munck, *Authoritarianism and democratization*, 171.

⁷ Iván Jiménez Chávez and Magdalena Cajías de la Vega, *Mujeres de las minas de Bolivia* (La Paz: Ministerio de Desarrollo Humano, 1997), 126.

⁸ James M. Malloy and Eduardo Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction: Bolivia, 1964-1985* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1988), 11; María Lagos, ed., *Nos hemos forjado así: al rojo vivo y a puro golpe* (La Paz: Plural, 2006), 101; "The Captive in the Hills." December 20, 1963, Vol. 82 Issue 25, p28. Academic Search Premier (54213937).

⁹ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 10.

mining centers across the country.¹⁰ This resistance was met with further repressive policies. On June 1, 1965 the COB was abolished.¹¹ Barrientos' government also sent troops to Siglo XX on September 18th and 20th to try and capture underground union leaders.¹²

Gilia de Caceres, wife of a union activist, described her encounter with the Bolivian troops when they came searching for her husband. When the soldiers threatened to shoot down the door, she responded: "If you shoot, I won't open. I'm only with my children.' Then, on the count of three I opened the door and just as I opened the door they began to shoot from a very close distance. We all jumped backwards and luckily the bullets passed by me."¹³ Other families were not as lucky. Domitila remembered how sometimes entire families were murdered during the military's search for union leaders.¹⁴

After knowledge of these types of encounters spread, the underground miners' union in Siglo XX began to organize an armed resistance to expel the army from the community. This prompted many violent clashes between the armed forces and the miners including an all-out attack on mining centers on September 20th.¹⁵ Domitila described the experience:

The bullets came towards us from everywhere, like rays of light. And not only that, but they also attacked the ambulances, something that can't be accepted in any war, in any battle; it's an international crime, isn't it? There were many dead and there were so many wounded that they didn't fit into the Cataví hospital.¹⁶

¹⁰ Jimenez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 126.

¹¹ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 11.

¹² Lagos et al, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 33.

¹³ Camarada, September 3, 1964, Comité Central de Amas de Casa. Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000110, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

¹⁴ Barrios de Chungara, Domitila, and Viezzer, Moema, *Let Me Speak!: Testimony of Domitila, a Woman from the Bolivian Mines*, trans. by Victoria Ortiz (New York: Monthly Review, 1978), 98.

¹⁵ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 129.

¹⁶ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 96.

Anywhere between 25 and 200 people were killed, the majority of whom were workers and their families. Another 85 people were wounded.^{17,18}

After the massacre, Siglo XX was declared a military zone. A curfew was instated; after 8 pm, no one, not even children, could leave for any reason, not even to go to the communal bathroom, without being escorted by a soldier.¹⁹

The second large massacre of the Barrientos period occurred in June of 1967. During this time, Ernesto “Che” Guevara was in the process of building a guerilla force in the mountains of Bolivia. Little contact was made between Che’s guerillas and the miners, although many miners were sympathetic to his cause.²⁰ In June of 1967, nearly a year after Che had arrived in Bolivia, miners across Bolivia planned to hold a meeting to address Che’s ideology and generate funds for Che’s guerillas. At this meeting, the miners also intended to develop a plan to demand pre-May 1965 wages, the reinstatement of fired workers, and the return of the exiled labor organizers and leaders.²¹ The meeting was to take place on June 25th, the night after San Juan. (San Juan is a traditional holiday in mining centers where the whole community celebrates the shortest day of the year by feasting, singing, dancing, and drinking in front of bonfires until late into the night.)

Before the meeting could take place, however, the government caught wind of their plans. Recognizing the potential threat this meeting held to its control over the country, the national government reacted again with extreme violence. It sent troops to all mining centers, destroyed their radios to prevent communication between mining centers and captured union

¹⁷ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 33.

¹⁸ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 129.

¹⁹ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 98.

²⁰ Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia*, 225.

²¹ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 12.

leaders.²² The most dramatic action took place in Siglo XX. There, the government decided to attack the community while its members took part in the San Juan festivities. Gumercinda, a leader of the Housewives' Committee from Siglo XX, explained how the army descended into the community while they celebrated:

On the Massacre of San Juan, all of the miners from Siglo XX had the tradition of having a bonfire in the Plaza del Minero.²³ On this night lots of workers and their families stood outside and enjoyed the campfire until 4:30 in the morning. I remember that around that time a lot of paramilitaries dressed in green ponchos walked by... And so I asked myself, "What are they doing?" At 4:45 the shooting began. And so many people were still by the fire. And my dad was taken prisoner...And really, so many people died where I lived. Because right where I was they had been building a kindergarten, and that's where the paramilitaries entered. That's where the bullets came from. With automatic weapons they began to shoot at us. And our leaders were taken prisoner. Immediately they took over the *Voz de Minero* [the radio station]. That's what happened on the night of San Juan.²⁴

The Massacre of San Juan, remembered as *La Noche Triste de San Juan* or the Sad Night of San Juan, shifted the public's understanding of the power struggle between the two groups. From this point onward, miners would be viewed more as the victims and the Barrientos government would be seen as the villains in the epic power struggle between the working class and the national government.²⁵

Even though public opinion aligned itself more with the miners than the government, oppression of those who the government deemed as "Che supporters" continued after the massacre of San Juan. Domitila explained:

All of us, who, according to them, had supported the guerillas, were arrested, beaten, mistreated and several were killed. For example, I lost my unborn child in prison because they kicked me in the stomach. So, many of our comrades and even some of our children

²² Ibid., 13.

²³ The main square in Siglo XX.

²⁴ Gumercinda Velasco, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 21, 2011.

²⁵ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 13.

went with Che, because many of us have lost some of our most beloved ones for the sake of Che's guerillas in Bolivia.²⁶

Norberta, the first president of the Housewives' Committee, was also tortured in prison for her supposed connection with Che's guerillas.²⁷ This harassment, along with the mysterious death of Federico Escobar, who was an important advisor to the Housewives' Committee, virtually dissolved the committee for the rest of Barrientos' rule.²⁸ Their surrender, however, was only temporary.

The Housewives' Committee Community and the mining centers more broadly experienced a temporary reprieve after Barrientos' sudden death in a helicopter crash in April of 1969. After the death of General Barrientos, Bolivia experienced three coups in three years. The first two governments, led by General Ovando and General Torres respectively greatly relaxed the restrictions that had served to gag the labor left during Barrientos' regime. Housewives' Committee leader Julia discussed Ovando's positive impact on the working class: "Ovando opened up some space. He was more democratic. He allowed those who had been exiled to Argentina to come back. He also increased the salaries back to what they had been before Barrientos cut them in half and legalized the unions again."²⁹

Despite many changes, General Ovando was also not able to win the support of the miners. With the San Juan Massacre still fresh in the minds of FSTMB's leaders, many working class activists viewed General Ovando's attempts to win their support as unauthentic or at least not to be wholly trusted. Domitila, after reorganizing the Housewives' Committee, wrote: "We cannot forget the massacres, the capturing, or the imprisonment of just leaders like Federico Escobar,

²⁶ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 114.

²⁷ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 133.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁹ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 113.

Rosendo García, César Lora, or Isaac Camacho. Nor can we forget the murder of thousands of other workers, women, and children.”³⁰ These types of memories made it impossible for workers to fully accept a military man as their leader. As a result, even after Ovando continued to pursue populist policies like nationalizing the Gulf Oil Company, the miners offered only their tentative support.³¹

Without any true allies, the Ovando government fell on October 7, 1970. Political chaos ensued and then calmed when General Torres took control. The military agreed to back him because it thought that he was the only one who could hope to win the support of both the labor left and represent the interests of the military.³² After assuming control of the nation, General Torres continued to pursue policies in favor of the working class. After increasing miners’ wages, he traveled to the mines and sought to speak with representatives of the Housewives’ Committee. Domitila remembered that she wanted to believe that the military would now work with the unions, but could not fully trust the institution. She told General Torres, “If you’re our friend, then prove it by arming the people.”³³

Meanwhile, the National Trade Union Federation (COB) organized a political assembly called the *Asamblea Popular* or Popular Assembly in June of 1970 in order to formulate a set of demands to give to the Torres government.³⁴ Peasant groups, labor groups and left wing political groups came together to debate the future of the country, but the Housewives’ Committee was

³⁰ Chungara, Domitila, Archivo de Domitila Chungara, in *Mujeres de las minas de Bolivia*, by Iván Jiménez Chávez and Magdalena Cajías de la Vega, 143 (La Paz: Ministerio de Desarrollo Humano, 1997), trans. by Catherine Raney.

³¹ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 47.

³² *Ibid*, 55.

³³ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 168.

³⁴ Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia*, 228.

not invited to participate.³⁵ This assembly, while very divided, came up with a few demands. Like Domitila, they insisted that the government rearm the peasant and worker militias. General Torres, a military man, refused to grant them this request.³⁶

Ironically, even though the Popular Assembly created very little unity among leftist groups, it was very successful in doing so between the military, rightist groups, and the United States. The United States believed that the Assembly would undo all of the “progress” it had helped initiate with its stipulated aid packages like the Triangular Plan. Similarly, both the military and conservatives also believed the Popular Assembly would undo recent economic progress and lead to chaos. Consequently, these three groups – the United States, conservative civilians who most often came from Santa Cruz, and the military – began to support a coup. This enabled General Banzer from Santa Cruz to lead a successful coup in August of 1971. Housewives’ Committee leader Elena explained the transition of power: “There they were beginning to bring democracy to this country which General Banzer didn’t like. Neither did the United States, and we were already the United States’ puppets.”³⁷ Julia, another leader from Siglo XX, gave her opinion on the failure of Torres’ government and the Assembly to move the country away from military dictatorships. She explained, “I think Torres took too long in arming the people. I think he doubted us, because if he had armed us maybe he wouldn’t have been overthrown.”³⁸

After seizing control, Banzer’s government went on a rampage to crush the power of the labor left. The new government’s use of violence differed dramatically from those of the Barrientos period. Whereas the Barrientos government wanted only to “discipline” the labor left,

³⁵ Chungara and Veizzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 171.

³⁶ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 61.

³⁷ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 114.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Banzer's government hoped to destroy the backbone of the left and its sympathizers. The differences in approach meant that under Barrientos' regime workers died for the most part in direct confrontation with the government, but during Banzer's rule especially in the months following the coup, the government killed, made disappear, or imprisoned miners without any provocation. Banzer's government also targeted the left more broadly instead of just the miners. Students in particular became the target of government oppression. These types of oppressive strategies were common in countries across the Southern Cone.

Emiliana from the Housewives' Committee of Huanuni described the widespread oppression during Banzer's rule:

Banzer's coup was accompanied by death, torture, and disappearances. The government made lots of people disappear, not only miners. People from the middle class, professionals, students, housewives, businessmen, people who worked for oil companies, teachers, everyone paid a very high price with the coup of General Banzer.³⁹

After the initial assault, Banzer's regime continued to implement many strategies to keep the repressive lid on the labor left. The government quickly declared the COB and the FSTMB illegal as well as all leftist political parties.⁴⁰ In 1974 the government issued a decree legalizing the *de facto* ban on all unions. This degree also banned all political parties, including centrist and right-leaning ones.⁴¹ Borrowing from tactics used in other Southern Cone countries including Argentina, the government also created false parallel organizations of both the FSTMB and the Housewives' Committee.^{42,43} Filled with spies, these government-led committees were designed to confuse working class people and enable the government to identify activists.⁴⁴

³⁹ Reyes, interview by Raney.

⁴⁰ Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia*, 230.

⁴¹ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 91.

⁴² Munck, *Authoritarianism and democratization* 47.

At first, the violence was so great that for a time period the demands of the working class were indeed silenced.⁴⁵ Gradually, though, it became apparent that the government could not possibly quell the spirits of the working class indefinitely. Towards the latter half of the 1970s, union groups slowly emerged from hiding and began to challenge Banzer's oppressive control. As the government's control began to wane, the government announced it would hold elections in 1978.

In December of 1977 four women from the mining center Siglo XX took advantage of the government's declining power and began the strike that gained them national recognition. With their fourteen children, they publically announced that they would not eat again until the government met their four demands: unrestricted amnesty, the reinstatement of fired workers, the legalization of union activity, and the removal of troops from the mining centers.⁴⁶ Their commitment to bringing political justice to their communities awoke solidarity among other groups who were similarly fed-up with military rule. With no cards left to play, Banzer conceded to three of these four demands. Bolivia's long-term control by military governments had ended.

The women's strike was not only important for pushing the government to hold early elections: it also put the working class in a powerful position as the nation began its democratization process. Rather than seen as radicals, the strike enabled citizens from all social classes to see themselves as part of the working class' struggle for liberty. The women's role in

⁴³Domitila Chungara, Alicia Escobar, Hortensia Leon, and Felicidad Galarza, September 7, 1978, Circular, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000260, ISSH.

⁴⁵ Malloy and Seligson, *Authoritarians and democrats*, 102.

⁴⁶ Secretaría Ejecutiva de la Asamblea Permanente de los Derechos Humanos de Bolivia, 31 January, 1978, Cronograma de la huelga de hambre en Bolivia: 28 de diciembre de 1977- 17 de enero 78, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000291, ISSH.

bringing down the dictatorship, then, was enormously important in building the public's perception of the working class as the nation moved towards democratic rule.

III. The Partnership Between the Housewives' Committees and the FSTMB

Examining the military dictatorships of the 60s and 70s demonstrates that they ruthlessly went after mining centers – including mining women – when trying to consolidate their control over the nation. During the Barrientos government and especially during Banzer's regime, all means of coercion were fair game in their mission to stamp out leftist activism. This backdrop of intense struggle and suffering hardly seems the right political landscape for women's incorporation into formal politics. And yet, in Bolivia, this was exactly the setting in which women from the Housewives' Committee came to assert themselves as powerful allies to the working class' political movement.

When military dictators controlled Bolivia, women from the Housewives' Committee resisted the government's control primarily through helping miners' unions in a wide variety of tasks. At different times secrecy became an important survival skill of the union, and members of the Housewives' Committee learned how to support the union with its clandestine operations by transporting letters or other documents. Other times when the movement came out of hiding, the Housewives' Committee sent petitions and other documents to the government and the company and vocally denounced the actions of the government and COMIBOL. They also supported the FSTMB by holding their own political demonstrations, or helping miners with their protests by supplying food as well as participating in street confrontations with the army and

strikebreakers.⁴⁷ Their solidarity prompted the gradual incorporation of women into the FSTMB's meetings and structure.

Geroma summarized women's support of the miners' union's clandestine efforts:

Between 1965 and 1968, us women, especially Alicia [Wife of male union leader Federico Escobar, an important mentor to the Housewives' Committee in Siglo XX] and Marta de Velasquez, have participated in a very ferocious struggle, you could say. A clandestine fight, where we didn't have time to take care of the home, or to serve lunch, or food, because we were always traveling somewhere, helping with something or other. The number of times I have traveled to Siglo XX in secret! I carried documents from party leaders who wanted to help union leaders in Siglo XX. And this documentation I didn't carry by plane or by daylight. I traveled by car, usually by bus, and always by night.⁴⁸

Emiliana also described how she and other female activists helped the union in whatever ways possible while the union operated in secret. On one occasion, she remembered helping to disguise a mine union leader as a woman so that he could escape from Huanuni without being recognized.⁴⁹

Even though the risk was high, women also on occasion publically participated in the shared struggle for better living conditions and liberty in the mines. At different times, the Housewives' Committee became a tool for communicating with the general public about the tragedies they endured at great personal risk. For example, even after the massacre of San Juan, women activists from the Housewives' Committee brought attention to the tragic nature of military recruitment in the mining centers. In their manifesto to Bolivian mothers and workers, members of the Housewives' Committee discussed the tragedy and hypocrisy of recruiting sons

⁴⁷ Nash, "The Barzolas and the Housewives' Committee", 366 – 367.

⁴⁸ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 118.

⁴⁹ Reyes, interview by Raney.

from the working class and the peasantry to serve in the army that was a tool to oppress the peasants and the working class.⁵⁰ Their manifesto read:

Mothers from the Bolivian mines cannot forget the massacres brought on by the military. We will never forget the mourning or the pain that they have caused us. Naturally for this reason we worry when we see officials of the military coming to our communities to draft young men to turn them into killers of their own mothers and siblings.... They have no right to come here and take away our sons and orphans. We will not permit them to come back because we did not give birth to our own future murderers.⁵¹

Their position as mothers of soldiers enabled them to build a powerful and persuasive argument against military recruitment of working class men. It also further called into question the morality of the current military regime.

Starting with the massacre of 1964, Domitila Chungara also began to establish herself as a spokesperson for the Housewives' Committee and by extension, all women from the Bolivian mines. After the massacre of 1965, many people were too terrified to report to the press what had happened. Domitila, however, found that she could not stay silent. She explained:

It drove me crazy that people couldn't talk, that people couldn't say anything, even though they were drowning in pain and anguish. But they couldn't talk because everyone was afraid, you know? It made me sad, it made me depressed. Speak. Speak! I'd say... So I stood up and began to speak. And I denounced everything that happened. I explained our whole problem. How we'd wanted them to give us back our wages and how we'd asked for them. How the repression was killing us. And I spoke of all the things I'd seen, including how I'd seen them attack the ambulances. And I told them the whole world must find out about our situation.⁵²

⁵⁰ Flora Garoga and Domitila Chungara, *Manifiesto del Comité Central de Amas de Casa a las madres Bolivianas, a los Trabajadores y Al Pueblo!*, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000167, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 103.

Domitila's willingness to speak up about her people's oppression brought many members of the mining community to begin to respect women's new role in politics.⁵³ Her frequent public denunciations of the national government also got her invited to the International Women's Year Tribunal put on by the United Nations in Mexico in 1975. At this conference, women from all over the world voiced their opinions about the problems they encountered as women. Recognizing that her problems were fundamentally different from those of women from developed nations, Domitila frequently spoke up about the violent repression of her people. Her contributions to the tribunal brought international attention to the Housewives' Committee and to the working class' cause in Bolivia. Domitila's participation also put her in touch with Moema Viezzer, a Brazilian sociologist who interviewed Domitila to create the book *Let me Speak!*⁵⁴ The release of this book brought international interest to the reality of political and economic repression in the Bolivian mines. It also increased Domitila's national and international recognition.⁵⁵ Now under a world spotlight, Domitila's willingness to put the needs of her community above her own gradually won the respect of people throughout the country, including the male miners whom they were trying to help. Other mining women, like Domitila, also won the respect of their communities through speaking up and then enduring the punishment brought on by their resistance.

In addition to raising their voices against the injustices their communities faced, women of the Bolivian mines also continued to host public political demonstrations in defiance of the national government. Two of their largest protests occurred in 1975 and 1976 and were staged in

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Moema Viezzer, June 11, 1977, Estimados compañeros, Varios Documentos de la Resistencia a la dictadura de Banzer, 1974-1978, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000254, ISSH.

⁵⁵ Vilma Ballón, September 1975 (Mexico), Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX. Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000224, ISSH.

response to two large clashes between the left and the national government: in 1975 the government attempted to crack down on the increasingly rebellious mines by closing the church-run radio stations in Siglo XX (by this time the church had changed sides and become a powerful advocate of the left). They also closed San Andres, historically Bolivia's most politically active university in La Paz.⁵⁶ In reaction to these oppressive maneuvers, women from the Bolivian mines traveled to La Paz to help students of San Andres and to protest the oppression of free speech in the mining centers.⁵⁷ This action demonstrated the strong relationship between the left-leaning student-activists and the women's movement, as well as women's courage to openly disobey the national government during a period of intense state-led violence.

The second large clash occurred in 1976. In this instance, women supported the miners' union of Siglo XX in their first serious protest since Banzer's regime had cracked down on activism in 1971. The protest, which took the form of a general strike, challenged the military's decision to shut down radio transmitters in Siglo XX.^{58,59} Members of the Housewives' Committee in Siglo XX helped the strike by shaming workers who were bribed into going back to work before the protest was over.

In the end, the protest did not push the military out of the mining centers, but it did achieve smaller concessions like a minor increase in wages. Importantly, the protest was not crushed by the military. As a result, the demonstration was recorded as an organizational victory for the miners. It further demonstrated that the military had not managed to stamp out resistance

⁵⁶ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 92-94.

⁵⁷ Flora Quiroga and Domitila Chungara, *El Comité Central de Siglo XX – Condena la Clausura de la Universidad Mayor de San Andrés de La Ciudad de la Paz por el Gobierno Fascista de Banzer*, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000342, ISSH.

⁵⁸ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 186

⁵⁹ Nash, "The Barzolas and the Housewives' Committee," 336.

in the mining centers.⁶⁰ Rather, the military's oppression backfired: the mining centers were now clearly the moral leaders in the power struggle between the working class and the national government.

Women's widespread publicity as well as their participation in these two events in the mid-1970s enabled them to win recognition as the nation's moral leaders. Women used this new position in their indefinite hunger strike in December of 1977. In developing their demands for this 21-day-long hunger strike, women leaned heavily on their new position as human rights defenders: their demands included a number of basic human rights including the right to organize, the right to live in a community without a military presence, the right of exiled leaders to return home, and the right of politically targeted miners to return to work.⁶¹ The nature of the strike itself – a refusal to eat and then a refusal to drink after the government tried to stop their strike by using force – further strengthened their cause because it portrayed these women as non-violent justice-seekers.

Their carefully crafted hunger strike won the support of the nation. Thousands of Bolivians from all different social sectors took the hunger pledge with them, and many others demonstrated their allegiance through other means. Amidst so much social unrest, the government had no choice but to announce national elections.

Emiliana reflected on this event: “This was our grand participation of female miners within unionism. Until today, female miners, because of them, are recognized.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 94.

⁶¹ Secretaría Ejecutiva, [January 31, 1978], ISSH.

⁶² Reyes, interview by Raney.

IV. Women's Work and the Reproduction of Labor

Women's diverse political activism during this tumultuous time both changed the miners' union's view on women's activism, and led to many personal transformations among the women who participated. Women's willingness to advocate politically for the community in whatever capacity was asked of them, and especially their success in 1977, slowly won them respect in the miners' union. While machismo by no means died, workers slowly began to incorporate women into their assemblies, especially in Siglo XX.⁶³ For example, when the assemblies of workers discussed issues that mostly affected women, like the price of food, they began to call on women in their assemblies.⁶⁴

Despite these enormous changes, women activists still met some resistance in terms of their activism. For example, while the FSTMB tried to help women organize committees in all mining centers, they refused to incorporate these committees into the union's structure. The women also could not win enough support to create a national committee.⁶⁵

Women's participation held important personal implications for the women who participated. Through spending more time out of the home and in meetings and events with other women, Housewives' Committee members experienced their self-esteem improving, and began to perceive both their paid and unpaid work as productive.⁶⁶ All of these changes impacted women's activism: they became more confident leaders and also began to be conscious of the

⁶³ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 142.

⁶⁴ Domitila Chungara and Flora Quiroga, a los compañeros Victor Lopez y Oscar Salias, April 24, 1976, Cooperación a Comisionadas, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000237, ISSH.

⁶⁵ Nash, "The Barzolas and the Housewives' Committee," 338.

⁶⁶ María Loudres Zabala, *Nosotras en democracia: mineras, cholitas, y feministas, 1976-1994*, (La Paz: ILDIS, 1995), 85.

unfairness of women's subordination. This led women to begin to advocate for issues that were more particular to women.⁶⁷

After spending significant time organizing together, in the 1970s women began to articulate how their work in and outside the home was crucial to the reproduction of labor in the mining centers.⁶⁸ Women's recognition of the importance of their own labor was a novel concept, despite the intense amount of labor women had to get done on a daily basis: during the time period that the Housewives' Committee existed, women were still expected to perform the invisible work of the home and perform other jobs to supplement their husband's income, which meant that women frequently worked 16-hour days.⁶⁹ At home, women were in charge of typical female tasks including buying and preparing food, sewing clothes and taking care of their usually large families. All of these tasks were made especially difficult given their husband's low wages.⁷⁰

Surprisingly, women also worked a variety of jobs outside of the household. Some women involved themselves in the informal economy through selling coca leaves, a stimulant miners used to endure the hard labor underground.⁷¹ Others prepared food, or worked as laundresses for more wealthy families in nearby cities.⁷² Still others grew food for their families and sold the surplus, though mining centers' high altitudes made crop yields very low. Some women also herded llamas and other livestock, participated in sharecropping with local villages or traveled to other villages to buy products to then sell in the mining centers at the local market.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 82-83.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁹ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 34.

⁷⁰ Brown, *A History of Mining in Latin America*, 57 - 58.

⁷¹ Jane Mangan, *Trading Roles: Gender, Ethnicity and the Urban Economy in Colonial Potosi* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.

⁷² Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 29.

Many women also worked directly for the company as high-graders, or *pallaris*. This job entailed searching through discarded mineral piles in search of small pieces of ore. This work was typically very physically challenging, and yet women received only a pittance.

Children often aided their mothers in these diverse occupations. Boys as young as ten or twelve lugged fifty or sixty pound sacks to different parts of the mining site for a very small amount of money.⁷³ In very poor families, some young boys entered the mine as workers at very young ages. This was especially common if their father died young from an accident or silicosis, a lethal lung disease that all miners eventually contracted.

Women and children worked outside of the home because miners' low wages were not enough for a family to survive.⁷⁴ For example, a husband's wage might cover the cost of food, but extra income was needed for all other expenses like new clothes or blankets to keep everyone warm (the mining centers are notoriously cold due to their location at over 14,000 feet). Given the significant disparity between a husband's wages and a family's real cost of living, women needed to involve themselves in the local economy for their family to get by. The testimony of Domitila described a typical day during the mid-20th century. She explained:

In the mines we women have to get up at 4am to make the breakfast for our compañeros. They have to get up at 5am to go to work and when they are in the mine they are not allowed to eat - and they work eight-hour shifts. When they come out, they are so tired that they don't even have the strength to eat. My compañero, who works inside the mine, earns \$1.50 a day. With eight children that is not enough to live on. So every day I make salteñas [spicy empanadas] to sell in the street - to make enough I need the help of all my children - from the youngest to the oldest. In my house ten people have to work in order for us to survive - and we don't even own our house, such as it is.⁷⁵

In Domitila's autobiography she discusses how she prepared salteñas, every day with her

⁷³ Brown, *A History of Mining in Latin America*, 145 – 147.

⁷⁴ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 42.

⁷⁵ “Bolivia – the struggle continues: an interview with Domitila Barros de Chungara,” by Jane McIntosh, *Sage Journals, Race Class* (22): 302, accessed January 18, 2013, doi: 10.1177/030639688102200306.

children to supplement her husband's income. This process was very labor-intensive, but made her around \$1.00 a day.⁷⁶ This work was very labor-intensive and also had significant consequences for her children; they could not play or study until the work was done, which cut down on their quality of life⁷⁷.

Domitila's experience not only demonstrates the long hours that Domitila put in on a daily basis as both a housewife and as a member of the informal economy, but also explains how her work and that of her children was instrumental in the success of her immediate family. It is likely that most women in Bolivia lived lives similar to, if not more difficult, than Domitila: for example, women whose husbands were dead or in exile often had even more responsibilities than did Domitila. Brígida, a woman who acted as vice-president of the Housewives' Committee in Siglo XX right after its founding, explained how she came to work the rock pile: "After my husband was fired from the mines [for his activism], I had to work the rock piles as a pallaris. I worked for 18 years until I became sick from the high pressure and had to move to Cochabamba."⁷⁸

Despite the hard work that all women performed in and outside of the home, women were often unaware of how their labor contributed to the economy of labor in their communities. This began to change after the creation of the Housewives' Committee. Domitila discusses prejudices that prevented women from finding value in their contributions to society. She explained, "At the beginning, we had the mentality that they'd taught us, that women are made for the home, to take care of the children and to cook, and that they aren't capable of assimilating

⁷⁶ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 32.

⁷⁷ Chungara, interview by Raney.

⁷⁸ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 115.

other things.”⁷⁹ Domitila’s discussion of women’s traditionally low self-esteem reveals that mining communities (like most patriarchal societies) gave little value to women’s labor. It also demonstrates how members of mining communities overlooked how women were critical actors in the mining economy at the time. Women felt that they were not capable of participating in activities outside of the private sphere, and yet the majority were already small-scale businesswomen.

Women’s humble acceptance of these unjust and inaccurate assumptions – namely that they were only capable of working in the home – came under fire once extenuating circumstances pushed women into politics for the first time. As soon as women began to congregate regularly, they realized the hypocritical nature of the argument that women could not participate in the labor movement because they were not workers, when clearly they did work and this work was important to the survival of the mining family.

A close examination of the personal transformation of Domitila Chungara provides anecdotal evidence of the consciousness-raising described above. In her autobiography, Domitila demonstrated how she became aware of how her work – and her children’s work – was important in the reproduction of her husband’s labor. After discussing her long days as a worker, she explained:

I sleep four or five hours a night. We’re used to that. Well, I think that all of this proves how the miner is doubly exploited, no? Because, with such a small wage, the woman has to do much more in the home... And by exploiting the miner, they don’t only exploit his wife too, but there are times that they even exploit his children. Because there’s so much work to do in the house that even the little kids have to work; for example, they have to get the meat, fetch the water.⁸⁰

In an interview with Anabel Yáñez, Domitila discussed how this consciousness-raising

⁷⁹ Chungara and Veizzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 41.

⁸⁰ Chungara and Viezzzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 34.

of Bolivian women regarding their exploitation and the exploitation of their children was not unique to her. Instead, it came about as a collective realization. She explained:

In the mining centers, the women have begun to realize that the system not only exploits the workers in the mines, but also the women who support the miners and also the children. While the director of the mining company's children play, our children have to work in order to survive.⁸¹

A publication written by the Housewives' Committee in the mining center San Jose confirmed that women were beginning to recognize their important contributions to the system of exploitation in mining centers across Bolivia. The document read: "The Housewives' Committee are here with the goal of protecting the rights of the women and the workers, given that they both are part of the current system of exploitation."⁸²

As this document suggests, women's awareness of how their work contributed to the economy of their communities enabled them to negotiate space in the broader working class movement; whenever workers denied them from participating by claiming that they did not work, women knew that this was not the case and could challenge them with clear explanations on how their labor propelled the mining community. Evidence of this change can be seen in Norma's explanation of women's important contributions to the national economy. In a recent interview she explained:

Members of the FSTMB argued that we were the wives of workers and so we should always be below them. But I said that yes we were wives of miners, but we were also part of the system of production in the mines because without eating, without having someone wash their clothes, without having our moral support, our workers could not have moved forward. So women have played an important role... she has been an important part of the economic development of our country – the female miner.⁸³

⁸¹ Bolivia – the struggle continues," interview by McIntosh.

⁸² Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 101.

⁸³ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 261.

Women's new awareness of how their work contributed to the production process also made women more aware of their subjugated role in society. This led the Housewives' Committee to broaden their advocacy to include projects that focused specifically on women. For example, in Siglo XX the Housewives' Committee began to advocate for unemployed women. Their decision to develop this project stemmed from the fact that during the Barrientos period there were an unusually high number of new widows who desperately needed work. Despite the great need, there were no jobs for these women. The committee wrote about the current crisis, "In our community there are many single women with children... The majority of these women and their children spend entire days without a single cup of tea or piece of bread."⁸⁴

In light of this situation, the committee developed two projects to provide more women with the opportunity to work. First, the committee asked for sewing machines to provide women with the opportunity to work. Eventually, the government donated a few sewing machines, allowing some unemployed women to form a cooperative. However, the number of women was relatively small.⁸⁵

Secondly, the Committee developed a subcommittee for the unemployed.⁸⁶ This committee had two main goals. The first was to make sure that women who were most desperate for work received work. After the massacres and mass imprisonment of union workers, many women in Siglo XX found themselves with seven or eight children and no source of income. The

⁸⁴ Flora Quiroga and Domitila Chungara, Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, October 10, 1964, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX. Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 00098, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

⁸⁵ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 104-114.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

committee organized these women, and met with COMIBOL management to discuss job opportunities for women.⁸⁷

After a great deal of arguing, women from this subcommittee convinced the managers to listen to them, and the government hired over a hundred women to work the rock pile. This work was very physically difficult as well as degrading. Domitila explained, “Every day [the women] would get home really bruised with their hands very sore. Because they had to do everything by hand; collect the ore, sort it, put it in bags. Absolutely everything by hand.”⁸⁸ However, their reward at the end of the month, a substantial paycheck, made it more than worth it. The next month another five hundred women went to COMIBOL to ask for work. The company hired more women, but the wages dropped significantly.⁸⁹

The second main goal of the Committee for the Unemployed was to secure more rights for women workers. Specifically, the subcommittee campaigned to have women given the same benefits as male company workers. This meant minimal security benefits, grocery discounts, access to medical services and more. Many women who had been working the rock pile for years still did not have any of these rights, and the committee worked to ensure that all workers – veterans and new workers – received these benefits after a three month trial period. After a great deal of advocacy work, women managed to win some rights for female workers including medical benefits. Their children were also given permission to attend the company school.⁹⁰

The Housewives’ Committee’s support for working women continued on into the next decade. In September of 1970, the committee began a campaign in defense of women who worked the rock pile for miserable wages. They wrote that the work of the 200 women who

⁸⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 107.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 108.

worked on the rock pile “denigrated the dignity of Bolivian women and human rights.”⁹¹ Given these horrific conditions they claimed, “No mother, child, or woman from any mining center can be indifferent to this cause.”⁹² Their campaign was meant to bring attention to this “national shame.”⁹³ However, this strategy backfired. Rather than improving the working conditions of the women workers, COMIBOL decided to fire all women who worked in the rock pile. Domitila commented on the firings:

The conditions of [women who worked the rock pile] really constituted a national shame. But it is also a shame for Bolivia to not have work for women, isn't it? Especially for the widows of workers who've died or been deported by the company, who live in misery because they can't find work – isn't it?⁹⁴

The fact that the Housewives' Committee was deeply concerned with the situation of widows for the long-term demonstrates that the committee did not exist solely to serve as an ally for the male workers' union. Rather, women in the committee, in addition to identifying deeply with the work of men from the mining centers, also developed an awareness of the important challenges that women in their community faced.

Further proof of the committee's interest in addressing women-specific issues shines through when examining the committee's advocacy for orphaned girls. After the massacres of the Barrientos period, many children were left homeless. The vulnerability of orphaned girls greatly upset the Housewives' Committee. To help these girls, women wrote letters to the company begging for the establishment of an orphanage. A call to action written in March of

⁹¹ Domitila Chungara and Símona Lagrava, Voto Resoltivo del Comité de Amas de Casa de Siglo XX, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000177, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Jiménez and Cajías, *Mujeres de las minas*, 136.

⁹⁴ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 112.

1965 called on “women’s workers’ civic and sport organizations to announce their support for a girl’s orphanage.”⁹⁵

Mining women’s concern for homeless and impoverished girls demonstrates a form of solidarity along the lines of gender. However, whenever tensions between the military and the mining communities escalated, which was quite frequent during this period, women’s issues were often put on hold so the women could focus more on building a partnership with the FSTMB. After the 1970s the subcommittee for the unemployed virtually stopped all action and their demands for a girl’s orphanage faded away. This shows that women willingly accepted the subordination of their own issues for the sake of class unity and the broader working class struggle.

VI. The Housewives’ Committee and Feminism

Women’s new awareness of their oppression made women more aware of their second-class status, but was ultimately overlooked so that the women could prioritize issues that affected the entire community. The prioritization of class issues over women’s issues in the eyes of the mining women differentiated their movement from other feminist⁹⁶ organizations. Domitila reflected on what she understood as the differences between the mission of western feminism and the goals of the Housewives’ Committee in Bolivia. She explained, I know that there is patriarchy – a machismo as we call it – that we do not accept. We have to fight against it. But for us there is another fight which is more important.” In another interview, she further articulated

⁹⁵ Flora Quiroga, Felicidad Villegas, Domitila Chungara, Felicidad Ridalgo, March, 1965, Voto Resolutivo, Documentos del File Personal de la Ex Dirigente Ama de Casa de Siglo XX, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 000165, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

⁹⁶ When I was interviewing mining women in Bolivia, one of the women I interviewed instructed me to not tell the other women that I was a feminist.

key differences between the goals of the Housewives' Committee and the feminist movement: "The main task isn't to fight against our compañeros but with them to change the system in which we live for another one – one in which men and women have the right to live, to work and to organize."⁹⁷ Domitila's decision to distinguish mining women makes sense given their living conditions: in a world where there was never enough to eat, where the military could come in at any moment to take away a worker and husband and thus threaten an entire family's livelihood, women believed that solidarity between the worker and the housewife needed to be the priority.

Using this ideology, mining women conceded some of their own projects in the hopes of protecting class unity. They reasoned that once they overthrew the bourgeois government, these issues would be addressed. Women's implicit subjugation of women's goals, as well as their rejection of feminism, would come under question during the next stage of the Housewives' Committee's development.

⁹⁷ Chungara and Viezzer, *Let Me Speak!*, 199.

Chapter 3: The Housewives' Committee and Bolivian Democracy

I. The Return to Democracy and the Closing of Mining Centers across Bolivia

Now experienced political actors in a wide variety of roles, women of the Housewives' Committee fought ferociously for their communities during Bolivia's chaotic return to democracy. After the fall of Banzer, political parties multiplied as different interest groups sought to win control over the country. This lurching process resulted in another coup in 1980, and the following two-year regime remains the most notorious in Bolivian history. During this extremely oppressive period, women from the mining communities again fought to bring democracy back to Bolivia. In 1982, civilians regained control of the government, but again the democratic government did not meet the expectations of the mining centers. Over the next three years, the working class tried to reshape the left-leaning democratic government into a socialist one, but the government eschewed their goals as unrealistic. Anxious to be more involved in the political process, women built a nationwide political organization. This had been one of the goals of the movement since its birth. Before women could tap into the power of the national Housewives' Committee, a new more conservative government came to power and their plans came to an abrupt halt.

This new government, led by Paz Estenssoro, embraced neoliberal policies promoted by North American economists, the World Bank, and the IMF. After taking office, this new leadership immediately set out to implement this economic philosophy known today as "shock therapy." Shortly after assuming office, the government issued a decree that severely threatened

the futures of mining centers across Bolivia. Known as 21060, this decree would close government-owned mines and lead to the firing of nearly all national mine company workers within the next several years. Recognizing that if this decree were implemented they would lose their home and source of income, women from the mining centers drew on all of their courage and political knowledge to prevent its implementation. Nothing was successful.

Now unemployed and homeless, miners and their families left the mining centers in droves for different cities across Bolivia. This displacement caused the Housewives' Committee to quickly lose all of its support and power. The abrupt ending of their community activism was made more tragic by the difficult conditions that mining families encountered in the cities that they moved to. Few miners could find work, which left many more families even more distressed than they had been during all of the different dictatorships.

Despite this sad ending, mining women's legacy did not die out after the implementation of 21060. Rather, because of their activism, by the late 1980s, Bolivian political culture was much more accepting of working class women's participation in politics. This must be interpreted as an important victory of the women miners' political movement.

II. Constructing Democracy after Banzer

After the critical strike of 1977 and Bolivia's subsequent return to democracy, Bolivians struggled to undo the political and economic havoc that Banzer's dictatorship had unleashed. Banzer's seven-year rule eroded Bolivian politics to such an extent that when the military set out to organize democratic elections in 1978, there were over 50 political parties. This meant that the parties were not ideologically based but based on individual's and group's personal relationships

with political leadership.¹ Not surprisingly given these conditions, candidates struggled to gain enough support to win the elections. This led to political chaos as groups struggled to use non-democratic means to assert their power over others. Unsure of which political parties really represented the ideals of the working class, the mining centers were unable to build up enough support for any one party.

Against this backdrop of political confusion, over the next four years Bolivia held a number of fraudulent elections followed by military coups. Domitila gave her perspective on the failure of the working class to come together with a coherent set of goals after the fall of Banzer:

Thus began a stage of pseudo-democracy. We call it that because although it is true that some leaders were set free, and others returned from exile, the repressive organizations, the paramilitary groups, the army, continued to operate in the same way. From the beginning of 1978, the people began to reorganize their trade unions, their political parties, and elections were held. Three elections were held in 1978, 1979 and 1980 and each one was brought down by a coup d'état. With each election and each coup the people were more divided, and more and more parties developed. In the last elections, in 1980, there were more than fifty political parties.²

While this political showdown took center stage, the accruing debts and other economic problems brought on by Banzer's regime were ignored.³ By the late 1970s the state was accounting for 70 percent of the Bolivian economy, but the state no longer had the natural resources to maintain its large role: with staggering debt and little tin left in the mines, the government could no longer afford to have such a big role in Bolivian economic development.

¹ James M. Malloy and Eduardo Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction: Bolivia, 1964-1985* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1988), 124.

² "Bolivia – the struggle continues: an interview with Domitila Barrios de Chungara." Interview by Jane McIntosh. Sage Publications. *Race Class* 22 (1981): 308 – 309, accessed February 24, 2013, DOI: 10.1177/030639688102200306.

³ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 157.

Despite this reality, the national government lacked the authority to implement austerity programs, and so the debt grew.⁴

While both the right and the left failed to consolidate power and the national economy continued to worsen, it became more and more likely that Bolivia would soon come under the control of a right-wing military regime similar to those of neighboring Argentina and Brazil.⁵ The political disorder and economic turmoil resulted in a shortage of foodstuffs, which further increased the likelihood of a military coup. As predicted, in July of 1980 Bolivia's lurching process towards democracy came to a halt with the coup of General Garcia Mesa. This coup brought with it a wave of violent acts and repression, quite unlike that of Barrientos or even Banzer. Rather than help solve the current political and economic crisis, this short-lived regime brought a heightened level of human rights abuses and continued political agitation.⁶ It also did virtually nothing to address the nation's plummeting economy, unlike in the case of Chile, Argentina, and Brazil.⁷

One telling example of the new regime's willingness to use terrorism occurred in the private mine Caracoles during Garcia's Meza's rise to power. In an interview with Jane McIntosh, Domitila discussed this event:

The army stormed the encampment and massacred more than 900 people. They got hold of the young men and beat them with ropes; they made them swallow dust. They put broken glass down on the ground and made children lie down on top of it. Then they made the mothers trample on top of their children. That must be the greatest crime - to make a mother do something like that to her own child.

Not content with that, the soldiers themselves trampled on top of the children. Women and girls were raped and many died from hemorrhages. They put dynamite into the

⁴ Ibid., 101-102, 127.

⁵ "Bolivia- the struggle continues," interview by McIntosh, 306.

⁶ *El juicio de la mentira: confesiones de un dictador*, collection of Testimonies from Orlando Encinas y Erick Torrico (La Paz: Librería e Impr. Offset Panamericana, 1986).

⁷ Munck, Gerado, *Authoritarianism and democratization: soldiers and workers in Argentina, 1976 – 1983* (Univ. Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1998), 69.

mouth of one of the miners' leaders and set it off in the middle of the square. And those people who wanted to find the bodies of their dead relatives were forbidden to go and look for them; many of them were also killed. When the army eventually left Caracoles and the people were able to go back and look for their relatives, all they found were a few blood-stained pieces of clothing - there was not a single sign of a corpse.⁸

As stories such as these hurtled from one mining center to the next, members of the Housewives' Committee in Siglo XX developed strategies for resistance. At this time, the Housewives' Committee in Siglo XX was somewhat disorganized in part because Domitila was abroad trying to earn economic and political support for her people. In the absence of this important female leader, Elena Vidal de Enriquez assumed a leadership role; knowing that their community had little time to prepare themselves against the impending militarization of their community, she helped create the Committee for the Defense of Democracy in Siglo XX. This committee worked closely with the male miners' union to help the community prepare for an attack. Together they set up round the clock guard duty, worked with neighboring peasants to create roadblocks, prepared food for the community, and helped build trenches. As the men prepared themselves for war, the woman brought them coca leaves, and coffee to keep them vigilant. Women also painted the following mural: "Soldier: We are your mother and brothers. Don't become their assassin. Soldier: Use your firearm against the people's executioner."⁹ Elena commented on the community's impressive display of solidarity and resistance: "It was a mobilization that the working class should never forget, what we did when Garcia Mesa came to power."¹⁰

⁸ "Bolivia- the struggle continues," interview by McIntosh, 305.

⁹ María Lagos, ed., *Nos hemos forjado así: al rojo vivo y a puro golpe*, (La Paz: Plural, 2006), 142, trans. by Catherine Raney.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

After days of preparation and waiting, the military led an airstrike against Siglo XX. Julia described how there were so many bullets and flares that the night became day.¹¹ With only dynamite and far-outdated rifles to defend themselves, the people of Siglo XX eventually submitted to the rule of Garcia Mesa. Mining centers across Bolivia were forced to do the same.

Following the coup began the most brutal and corrupt regime in recent Bolivian history.¹² This government lacked an economic plan or political ideology but succeeded in intimidating the entire society. Arbitrary arrests, disappearances and torture of people from all socioeconomic classes became the reckless government's main methods of social control.¹³ A bloody example of the regime's implementation of these tactics against members of the middle class occurred on January 15, 1981 when the government assassinated nine members of the political group MIR while they met to discuss politics. This incident shocked the middle class. Aversion to the new regime intensified when Garcia Meza's strong ties to the cocaine trade came to light.¹⁴

Garcia Meza's scare tactics created a national paranoia, especially for citizens who resisted. Norma from Siglo XX described her own anxieties as well as how she learned to cope with the looming threat of state-led terror:

Garcia Meza's coup caused a lot of injustice, pain and also daily trauma. During these times for example, whenever I saw a military man I would tremble. I would think that there was going to be another attack. That's how I felt. But after a while you become a little stronger. You learn to fight until the end. And so later when we did our marches, we didn't have so much fear.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid, 143.

¹² Gregorio Selser, *Bolivia, el cuartelazo de los cocadólaires* (México: Mex-Sur Editorial, 1982).

¹³ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 145.

¹⁴ Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor And Covert War in Latin America*, (Maryland: Rowman and Little Field Publishers Inc., 2005), 197-198.

¹⁵ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 155.

Her reflections on political activism during the reign of Garcia Mesa demonstrate that despite the pain of these experiences, they served her political development. Through living in such a tense atmosphere, she learned how to look fear in the eye and continue to protest.

The psychological impact that this paranoia had on mining children also compelled women to be better activists during Garcia Meza's regime. Believing that the military could enter the mining centers at any moment, many children of the mines became too anxious to go to school or to class. Elena explained how watching her children struggle with the state's terror tactics helped her overcome her own fear and made her into a better leader:

I felt enraged because I had to keep going and coming from the mines, which hurt my children psychologically. And I said: 'Why is the military coming to make our husbands work with a gun pointed at the nape of their neck?... I was crying... I had to calm down. Afterwards I became strong and said to my compañeras: 'Let's organize.'¹⁶

Elena's experience suggests that mining women's position as mothers gave them strength to participate politically even when resistance often led to imprisonment and suffering. Unwilling to watch their children suffer, many women like Elena found the strength to continue to organize even when the stakes were high.

As women built up their courage, they began to reemploy strategies that they had used during other military dictatorships to secretly resist the military regime. An examination of the personal experiences of Emiliana, a woman from Huanuni, shows how the intense suffering inflicted by Garcia Meza's government made her a stronger and braver advocate for the working class. She recounted her struggle, development, and resistance during this difficult time:

[After the coup of Garcia Mesa] they exiled my husband. It was a difficult time with a lot of suffering because there wasn't anyone to provide us with food, anyone who could work for us. So I began to work selling fruit in the market so I would have food for my children. We survived the period of Garcia Mesa. But we also continued to unite, us

¹⁶ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 141.

women. We kept participating, speaking, fighting, even if they put a gun to our heads. For example, I brought bananas from Oruro [a nearby city] and hidden in between the bananas I brought manifestos. Because I went between Huanuni and Oruro with the permission of the police. And I arrived with those manifestos at three in the morning and I went up to the mine's entrance. I went up almost to the top... There's an opening that goes way down deep into the mine, like a chimney. From there I dropped the pamphlets. And the next day the miners would have their manifestos, their pamphlets. I did this because we had to continue resisting. We had to resist Garcia Meza's regime. And so we each found ways to stay keep the people in contact with union leaders like those of the COB and the FSTMB which had to operate in secret.¹⁷

Women also found ways to publically resist Garcia's Meza's government. For example, in Huanuni on November 13, 1981 the Housewives' Committee began a hunger strike to protest the imprisonment of their husbands. For Zenobia Machicado, this was her first time participating in organized politics. She explained her experience:

I joined the Housewives' Committee for many reasons during the dictatorship of Garcia Meza. At this time there were many workers in jail. That's what happened to my husband, he was detained. He was in jail and many of his compañeros were too. Because of this, women made a decision: we organized and decided to hold a hunger strike. It was the 18th of November. My husband was taken prisoner on the 13th of November and on the 18th of November we launched the strike.¹⁸

The women's decision to hold a strike in clear opposition to the military dictatorship immediately caught the attention of the public. National and international journalists came to publicize the strike and lend their support to the strikers. Surprisingly, the government conceded to the women's demands and freed their husbands within a few days. After freeing the women's husbands the military urged the women from Huanuni to return home. Some women refused because they knew that many of their allies, including university students, bankers, factory

¹⁷ Emiliana Reyes, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 20, 2011.

¹⁸ Zenobia Machicado, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 11, 2011.

workers and peasants remained in jail. A few days later the government freed many of these people as well, and the women finally lifted their strike.¹⁹

III. A More Permanent Transition to Democracy

The success of the Huanuni women's strike foreshadowed the decay of the regime. In July of 1982 Garcia's government, which now represented a cross between warlordism and kleptocracy, was taken over by civilians. Pressure from the United States, which included cutting all US-backed aid programs in Bolivia, contributed to the military's decision to withdraw from politics.²⁰ With the military at least temporarily forced into the background of Bolivian politics, an alliance between some of Bolivia's leftist parties, called the UDP, gained widespread support. This alliance helped elect Hernán Siles to the presidency. He had been an important leader in the 1952 revolution and had also been president of Bolivia from 1956-1960.

Another big success for the mining women during this period was the creation of the National Housewives' Committee. This had been a goal of members of the Housewives' Committee since its founding in 1961, but it was not until the mid-1980s that women garnered enough support to make this demand a reality. At first, many men and women including active members of the Housewives' Committee did not think it was necessary to have a national organization; for issues that affected mining centers across the nation, they rationalized that they could turn to the FSTMB for support. Besides this implicit subordination of the women's committee to the national miners' union, social norms supported by both men and women rejected the notion that women could organize themselves at a national level. However, by the mid-1980s, the acceptance of such norms had changed dramatically. Women were eager to

¹⁹ Zenobia Machicado, "Testimonio de una victim de violencia política," *Presente*, March 26, 2003.

²⁰ Raúl Barrios Morón, *Bolivia & Estados Unidos: democracia, derechos humanos y narcotráfico, 1980-1982* (La Paz: HISBOL, 1989).

achieve independence from the FSTMB and local miners' unions.²¹ After finally convincing the FSTMB to approve of their plans to form a national committee, a group of women activists traveled to mining centers across Bolivia for support.²² Norma, who would become the president of the national committee, discussed how many men still rejected the idea of a national women's organization. She explained, "There were some who didn't think there should be a national committee. And so we tried even harder to move forward with our plans."²³

As women traveled from one mining center to the next, relations between the mining centers and the national government again soured. Even though Siles sympathized with the miners, the country's crumbling economy made working with them very challenging.²⁴ In the 1980s Bolivia's growth rate was declining slowly, and the nation's inflation was at an alarming level, reaching the three digits in 1983.²⁵ The working class wanted socialism, but the government argued that implementing socialism was impossible; Bolivia's debt and dependence on foreign nations for development made socialism unfeasible. The left interpreted these arguments to mean that the government had yet again sold them out for their own economic interests.²⁶ Zenobia's description of the years between 1982 and 1985, the three-year period when the UDP controlled Bolivia, in many ways represented the working class' frustration with Bolivia's return to democracy in the early 1980s:

Eighty-two, eighty-three, eighty-four passed, and the neoliberal governments controlled from the outside, from people who send money, again began to mistreat the leaders [of the mining centers]. Not by imprisoning them but through economics. There wasn't

²¹ Ma Loudres Zabala, *Nosotras en democracia: mineras, cholitas, y feministas, 1976-1994* (La Paz: ILDIS, 1995), 83.

²² Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 260.

²³ *Ibid.*, 257.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁵ Herbert S. Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 241.

²⁶ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 173.

food. The private companies, like always, hid what we needed most. There wasn't wheat; there wasn't sugar, or bread to eat.²⁷

As Zenobia's quotation suggests, the left's demand for a socialist government stemmed largely from the widespread food shortages during this period. This phenomenon was not unique to Bolivia but occurred throughout Latin America. The lack of basic goods combined with the COB's increasing ungovernability turned the tide of Bolivian politics against the left. It became clear that something had to be done about the economic crisis (in the first six months of 1985 inflation reached 8,170 percent per annum), and middle-class citizens began to believe that the left-leaning government did not have the strength to stand up to labor.²⁸ They thought that they needed new political leadership to implement the difficult austerity packages that would enable them to receive funding from entities like the IMF and the World Bank.²⁹

Faced with a plunging economy and an openly rebellious working class, early elections were called to find a solution to the government's impotency.³⁰ The COB realized that elections would threaten their current position of influence over the national government, and so the COB began to work against democratization. In March of 1985, thousands of members of the mining community went to La Paz in a political demonstration to try and delay democratic elections. They brought their dynamite with them and tried to demand a transfer of power from the Siles government to the workers. These marches, which would later be called the *Jornadas de Marzo*, or March Days, lasted for nearly a month. An estimated 10,000 men and women participated.³¹

²⁷ Machicado, interview by Raney.

²⁸ Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia*, 241.

²⁹ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 174.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 181

³¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

The March Days demonstrated that the mining communities were not always committed to the democratic process. Zenobia explained what motivated the mining communities to stage this politically disobedient demonstration:

In La Paz, we began a permanent march because all Bolivian governments, whether they be dictatorships or neoliberal governments had psychologically abused the workers by not paying them the wages that they deserved. There wasn't food for their wives. So, in my understanding this is mistreatment, right? Because of this us women had to march.³²

A document released by the FSTMB confirmed that the primary motivation of the march was the hunger of the families in the mining center. Entitled, "The primary reasons for our mobilization," the document outlined the reasons that the entire mining community should participate in the "march for hunger." The first sentence of the document urged entire families to participate to end the "hunger that exists in our families. The hunger that is already destroying us every day and hour."³³ Through stalling a transfer of power, the mining activists hoped to convince the current government – which was at least sympathetic to their plight – to find new solutions to meet their current basic needs.

After nearly a month of unending political demonstrations, the mining activists left the capital defeated. Then, in July of 1985 the Bolivian government held new elections and political control swung in favor of the right. Despite this undesirable outcome, the march did serve to reinforce female miners' public visibility as fierce political advocates for working class rights. In response to women's participation in this event, Bolivian artist Luis Rico wrote a song about the women. The song stated that women from the Bolivian mines were no longer simply housewives (*amas de casa*). Through political demonstrations, they had become household weapons (*armas*

³² Machicado, interview by Raney.

³³ Presidencia Ampliado, April 14, 1985, Verdades que Confirmamos. Relocalizados, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, 00595, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

de casa).³⁴ The strength of these *armas to casa* would be tested again shortly in the upcoming face-off between the Bolivian national government and the mining centers.

IV: The Fight Against 21060

In 1985 Paz Estenssoro was reelected President, and his new government quickly set out to address Bolivia's critical economic situation. This new government embraced the North American economic philosophy known today as "shock therapy" or the sudden liberalization of the nation's economy. This theory argued that the sudden withdrawal of the national government from the national economy would lead to economic stability. The "shock" part of this theory referred to the immediate social unrest that the government's withdrawal would cause, but the term "therapy" explained that this was a necessary evil to righting a country's tanking economy.^{35 36}

Using this theory, the Bolivian government issued a far-reaching economic plan drawn up by Harvard Professor and economist Jeffrey Sacks (who also coined the term Shock Therapy).³⁷ Both the IMF and the World Bank approved, and upon its implementation these institutions began lending to Bolivia again. Most significantly for the Housewives' Committee, the plan ended state control of the most important tin mines, which meant the virtual end to COMIBOL. The plan further stipulated the closing of all non-productive mines, including Siglo

³⁴ Dora Aporto, Basilia Quiroz, Zulma Rojas, Zulma, Emiliana Reyes, interview by Catherine Raney, November 20, 2011.

³⁵ Artaraz Kepa, *Bolivia: refounding the nation* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 17.

³⁶ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 174.

³⁷ Jeffrey Sacks, "Shock Therapy Applied to Bolivia," interview, pbs.org, June 6, 2000, accessed April 10, 2013, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitextlo/int_jeffreysachs.html.

XX.³⁸ These decrees stunned the mining communities because it meant that the majority of mining families would shortly find themselves without a job or a home. According to *Aqui*, a progressive Bolivian newspaper, the implementation of the decree would result in the firing of about eight thousand workers, or about 90 percent of all miners working for COMIBOL.³⁹ The plan included a re-location bonus to help fired workers find new employment, but the bonus was minimal.

Immediately recognizing the threat this decree posed to their communities and families, members of Housewives' Committees across the country began to organize to stop its implementation. Gumerinda explained, "The decree 21060 produced the 'white massacre' that meant that the workers really were going to be without work. This massacre is when us women really demonstrated our value."⁴⁰ First members of the Housewives' Committee began hunger strikes in various locations across Bolivia. The government actively tried to capture all strikers to prevent their resistance from gaining support. To avoid being caught, some women performed their strikes in secret. Others prevented the government from disrupting their strikes by threatening to blow up city blocks with dynamite if the government dared to enter.⁴¹

Their strikes lasted for a total of 18 days. However, they proved ineffective in uniting the working class against the new decrees. After the strike, the women returned to their respective mining districts and began preparing for their next political demonstration. Recognizing the life-threatening consequences that the government's new decrees would cause the mining

³⁸ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 175.

³⁹ Lobaton Mendoza, Gaston, Reportaje al hambre y la desocupacion. Semanario Aqui. Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, ISSH.

⁴⁰ Gumerinda Velsasco, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 21, 2011.

⁴¹ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 182.

communities, mining activists rightly called this demonstration the *Marcha por la Vida*, or the March for Life. Domitila explained the factors that premeditated the March for Life:

The government had decided to dissolve the mines. They had told us that there was a mineral crisis, that our minerals no longer competed with minerals abroad... that the mines had to be closed but they hadn't paid us for six months. For six months we were dying of hunger... We didn't want this, so we began to walk to La Paz and this was called the March for Life.⁴²

The March for Life was organized by the FTSMB in August of 1986. Men, women and children from mines across Bolivia participated. The miners' federation also asked for support from many different groups, especially other sectors of the labor movement. Arguing that the closing of the majority of the Bolivian mines would greatly reduce the power of organized labor, the miners urged teachers, factory workers, and gas workers, for example, to come out in defense of the miners' source of income. Many responded to the miners' plea; a total of 11,000 people participated.⁴³

In this pivotal working class demonstration, women played a key role. Norma from Siglo XX commented on the importance of women's participation: "Women especially took the lead because we saw the situation from our position as mothers. We wanted it to be solved because in the mines, women typically have four, six even ten children. To raise ten children without a job source, jeez! It was painful."⁴⁴ Miriam Rojas from the mining center Cami reiterated the importance of women's participation in the March for Life. "Other female leaders and other organizations are not as battle-hardened. Women miners say we're going to do something and

⁴² Domitila Chungara, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, December 1, 2011.

⁴³ La Marcha recordó Huelga de Marzo. Reportaje al hambre y la desocupacion. Semanario Aquí, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, ISSH.

⁴⁴ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 189.

we do it, without fearing the consequences. With this mentality we participated in the March for Life.”⁴⁵

After meeting in Oruro, the marchers set off for La Paz. They walked for six days before arriving in Calamarca. There, they were met by the military. Zenobia explained the experience, “They attacked us in Calamarca. We were defenseless: workers, housewives, without arms or anything. The military surrounded us like a concentration camp. We couldn’t move forward or backward.” Emiliana explained how she fought against the military:

“When they surrounded us in Calamarca, the military began to let off shots. The women had little kitchens, with pans to boil water for breakfast. And so we turned these on. Then when the police came to kick us out, we used a ladle to get out the boiled water and threw it at them. With boiling water!”⁴⁶

Despite their high tolerance for fear, the marchers realized that were they to continue forward with their plans, there was a very real possibility that the military would choose to massacre them. Defenseless and exposed, the leaders struggled to decide whether or not they should move forward or turn back. After much deliberation, they decided to go back to their respective mining districts.⁴⁷

This initial failure did not mean acquiescence. Shortly after the failed march, women from mining districts across Bolivia came together to host another hunger strike to protect their incomes and their style of life in the mines. Women from Huanuni, Siglo XX, Cataví, San Jose, el Sud Bol, Kiri and more participated. Again their demonstration was interrupted by the

⁴⁵ Miriam Rojas, interview by Catherine Raney, trans. by Catherine Raney, November 16, 2011.

⁴⁶ Reyes, interview by Raney.

⁴⁷ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 191.

military. After three days, the military men came in and gassed everyone.⁴⁸ After this additional failure, strikes continued, but none were successful in stopping 21060.

The fear of losing their jobs was compounded by the fear of losing their community. Mining centers were very close-knit because of the communal set-up as well as the fact that many of their members participated in unions. Emiliana described the increasing desperation of mining women as they realized that they would likely soon lose not only their families' only sources of income, but also their way of life:

We had lost the March for Life. We had no other option. But what were we going to do in the streets? We didn't know how to live in cities. In the mines sometimes we would knock on the door of our neighbors, and would say, "lend me sugar, lend me rice, lend me bread," that's what it was like. And so we couldn't live in the cities. For this reason we didn't want to leave.⁴⁹

Afraid of losing their social networks and ignorant of city life, the Housewives' Committees continued to spearhead demonstrations against 21060. All of their attempts met only limited success.

VI. Relocation and the Destruction of the Housewives' Committee's Political Power

Starting in late 1986, the fear of losing their community and being forced to live in unfamiliar and hostile neighborhoods became a reality for most mining families in Bolivia. They accepted their small compensation packages – a part of the relocation plan designed by the government – and set off for different cities across the country. The majority went to Cochabamba or La Paz, but others went to places with hotter climates including Santa Cruz and La Chapare. The psychological stress and loss of income caused by this forced migration

⁴⁸ Rojas, interview by Raney.

⁴⁹ Reyes, interview by Raney.

frequently resulted in tragedy. Norma remembers how one worker killed his wife and children because he refused to watch his family die slowly from extreme poverty.⁵⁰ This type of story was not unusual.⁵¹

Miners who left the mining centers soon found life in the cities to be everything that they had feared it would be; as they expected, the term “relocation” was a euphemism for their future unemployment. There were no jobs for ex-miners or their families. Domitila explained the desperate situation:

Sanchez de Lazado [the Planning Minister] had said it was going to be a relocation. Relocation meant they were going to take you from one type of work and give you another. But they didn't do that, that's not what happened. Miners were thrown into the street without anything, without anyone. Then they forgot about the miners.⁵²

In the cities, miners struggled to find new work for a number of reasons. First of all, they had no working experience other than mining, meaning that they had no marketable skills. Secondly, due to the fact that so many miners had worked in the mines for 10 or 20 years, they were often too old or too sick to develop expertise at a new trade. On top of that, prejudices kept miners from finding work or even housing. Domitila explained how challenging it was for miners to find work:

It was difficult because when you told people you were “relocated” the employers didn't give you work. Our children were not accepted at the schools and we were refused even renting a house, with the excuse that we were ill with “the mining sickness” and that we could be contagious. That's why many families had to live in tents outside of the city.⁵³

⁵⁰ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 208.

⁵¹ Reyes, interview by Raney.

⁵² “The first battle Bolivian women have to win is in the home: Interview with social leader Domitila Barrios de Chungara” by Ricardo Herrera Farrel, *Latinamerica Press*, November 10, 2009, <http://www.lapress.org/articles.asp?art=5936>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

An article written in *Aquí* confirmed that many mining families were “treated like lepers” by private companies, employers and entire communities upon arriving in new cities.⁵⁴

The implementation of 21060 not only severely impacted the living conditions of miners and their families, but also led to the disintegration of the Housewives’ Committee’s political power. Emiliana explained the impact 21060 had on the mining women’s political presence: “Women miners no longer participate in larger politics. We were totally made to disappear. Now we don’t participate in anything. We are not taken into account.”⁵⁵ Zenobia also discussed how women from the mines lost their power and unity after leaving the mining centers:

In the mines us women developed class consciousness, a conviction to fight for everyone else, for people who don’t have anything....The only thing that pains me is that women miners, because we were forced to leave the mines, are not occupying any political space.⁵⁶

Zenobia’s reflections suggest that even though female miners’ personal identification with the mines continued long after they had moved from the mines, the physical distance between them prevented the women from ever finding enough unity to reestablish a mining women’s committee with any real influence. This did not mean that women leaders from the mines returned to their homes and removed themselves from the political sphere. To the contrary, women continued to fight cohesively for different issues relevant to their new communities. However, their lack of unity and the space between them kept their activism in the background of national politics, and it has stayed there ever since the late 1980s. Zenobia spoke about this unsettling reality: “There just aren’t any opportunities.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Mineros Relocalizados Abandonadas a su Suerte*, Semanario Aquí. Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, ISSH.

⁵⁵ Reyes, interview by Raney.

⁵⁶ Machicado, interview by Raney.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

VI. Democracy's Betrayal of the Bolivian Miners

The last stage of women miners' political movement demonstrated that democracy was at best a fickle friend to the mining communities of Bolivia. In 1977 the women miners' movement won fame and respect for risking everything for the return of democracy. But then, once the military government rescinded control, miners realized that Bolivia's democratization process would not necessarily develop into the political system that the miners had imagined. Quickly following Banzer's withdrawal from politics, it became clear that the long period of military rule had greatly corrupted Bolivia's already weak democratic foundations. Political parties multiplied, and the nation (especially the right) became increasingly disillusioned with the democratic process. The coup of 1980 in many ways reflected the nation's frustration with Bolivia's unstable democracy.

During Garcia Meza's two-year dictatorship, the mining centers fought bravely in defense of human rights and political liberty. But once democracy returned in 1982, members of the mining community again did not receive what they expected from the new civilian government. The new government, led by the leftist coalition the UDP, was supposed to represent the interests of the working class. However, the miners became frustrated when the government refused to commit to its radical agenda. The UDP argued that its hands were tied: the country's growing debt and need for foreign aid made the implementation of socialist policies impossible. The miners interpreted the nation's dependence on foreign aid as evidence that the government had again sold out to international interests and consequently became less willing to compromise. As the left turned its back on the UDP, the majority of Bolivian voters

interpreted this growing divide as evidence that the left was incapable of addressing the nation's needs.⁵⁸

By 1985, the mining centers actually channeled their activism against democratization. During the March Days, ten thousand members of the mining community traveled to La Paz and rioted to try and stop the government from holding early elections; they did this because they knew that if elections were called, a candidate of the right would win, and they knew that a right-wing government could threaten their livelihoods (which it did).

In less than ten years, women of the mines went from staging an indefinite hunger strike for early democratic elections to protesting continuously to stop early democratic elections. Despite this radical swing, it is likely that the women from the mines saw no contradiction between these two actions. This is because in Latin America, the term "democracy" can mean different things; some people use definitions that are outcome-based, and some people use definitions that are process-based.⁵⁹ In the United States, the definition of democracy is process-based: a country is democratic if it holds fair elections, etc. But in other parts of the world and especially Latin America, some people understand democracy as outcome-based; they think a country is not a true democracy unless resources are distributed fairly among citizens. The following quotation by Domitila suggests that women from the Bolivian mines interpreted democracy to mean just that. She explained:

Bolivia is such a rich country, oh there are so many minerals. There are vegetables, there's gas, there's fruit and so many vegetables. It's so varied and so beautiful. And so Bolivians have so much wealth, we should live well. But there are so many children who don't have a home, who live under bridges taking drugs. There are poor people who don't have anywhere to sleep, who don't have a house, who don't have anything. For this reason we fought for democracy for so many years.

⁵⁸ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 173.

⁵⁹ Roderick Camp, *Citizen Views of Democracy in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001).

Recognizing these two divergent definitions of democracy not only helps explain the mining center's seemingly hypocritical activism, but also illuminates both the failures and the successes of the movement. The implementation of 21060 prevented the women's movement from achieving long-term "democracy" in the outcome-based sense of the word; different strikes successfully improved living conditions in the short-term, but ultimately they were unable to stop the central government from shutting down their communities' primary source of income. As a result, most mining families moved to cities. In these new locations, the majority continued to struggle to survive.

On the other hand, their movement did play an important role in making Bolivia a more democratic country in terms of the process-based definition. Firstly, female miners were important protagonists in the nation's struggle to build a democratic nation that respected the human rights of their people. Their strike in 1977 was clearly very crucial in Bolivia's return to democracy. Their long-term resistance against military rule was also critical in the struggle to bring democracy back to Bolivia.

Mining women also made their nation more democratic through improving women's representation in politics. From virtual absence in the 1960s, by the late 1980s women's political role was clearly respected. Testimonials from women mining activists confirmed how mining women reshaped social norms regarding gender and politics. María from Siglo XX reflected on how many prejudices women faced when they first joined the committee and how that changed over time:

A lot of husbands didn't want their wives to go to meetings with other women or go out and fight. They just wanted their wife to stay at home in the house and take care of the children and fulfill other household responsibilities. But we overcame this wall, this

barrier that was put on us by our husbands... Along with fighting in the committee, we also had to fight with our husbands so that we could take a step forward.⁶⁰

Zenobia's experience in Huanuni also expressed women's success in changing social norms through demonstrating their usefulness to the working class. She explained that over time, "the men realized that women can fight, without their help, without anyone's help."⁶¹

Various articles written in Bolivian newspapers also highlighted how women miners had become publically accepted as important advocates in the working class struggle by the implementation of 21060. Dramatic headlines like, "The Women will fight: we're staying where we are!"⁶² and, "Housewives would rather die fighting alongside their compañeros before accepting the destruction of our income"⁶³ demonstrated that social norms no longer confined women to the home. Rather, it was widely recognized that mining women would use their entire political prowess to stand alongside their husbands and fight to preserve their communities and way of life. Clearly these women had carved out a new place for women in national discourse and by doing so changed the way that Bolivians understood gender, leadership, and politics.

⁶⁰ Lagos, *Nos hemos forjado así*, 246.

⁶¹ Machicado, interview by Raney.

⁶² Gaston Lobaton Mendoza, *Las Mujeres Lucharemos; Estemos Donde Estemos*, Semanario Aquí, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

⁶³ Gaston Lobaton Mendoza, *Las amas de casa prefieren morir peleando al lado de sus compañeros*, Semanario Aquí, Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Bolivia Archives, ISSH, trans. by Catherine Raney.

Conclusion: Remembering the Movement of the Female Miners

Throughout the entirety of the women miners' movement, women organized and acted collectively to challenge political oppression and mitigate the effects of extreme poverty. Near the end of the revolutionary period, women staged two important hunger strikes in 1961 and then again in 1963. In both cases, women risked their physical health to protest the imprisonment of workers and the lack of available food. During the military dictatorships, women's activism came to focus more exclusively on human rights abuses and slightly less on economic repression. Especially after the massacres during General Barrientos' regime and the methodical targeting of activists during General Banzer's regime, women relied heavily on the language of human rights and liberation to win support for their protests. Then, when Bolivia began its unpredictable and disappointing democratic process, the rhetoric of women's activism changed from an emphasis on political liberties to protecting their husbands' right to work.

Throughout this period, women also employed compelling tactics to win attention for their issues. Their hunger strikes were often their most powerful tool because they highlighted women's commitment to using non-violent strategies to win humanitarian support for their cause. On the other hand, women were also not afraid to use dynamite, an explosive used in the excavation of minerals, to protect themselves from being forcefully removed from their strikes. On many different occasions women wrapped themselves and even their children to prevent the military from ending their demonstrations prematurely; they would then threaten to blow themselves up, and the entire building up, if the government did not listen to their demands.

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Despite the fact that their tactics did not ultimately protect their communities from the implementation of 21060, their movement was not a failure. Rather, the movement played an instrumental role in bringing democracy to Bolivia. The most famous example of their role in establishing civilian rule was the strike of 1977, but numerous other actions also were significant in the return of democracy. Chapter 2 explored the numerous tactics, ranging from publishing manifestos about human rights abuses to raising their voices at great personal risk against the militarization of their communities. To this day, Bolivians still enjoy the political liberties that these women fought to establish. Bolivians still complain of the government's lack of transparency, but those who experienced the coups of the 60s, 70s, and 80s know there is much to be thankful for.

Of equal importance, the movement also led to a number of personal transformations that continue to affect community activism and women's activism. Chapter 1 explored how women's participation in politics awakened a political consciousness of mining women across Bolivia. Once women became aware of this responsibility, it enabled them to stand up to social norms that confined women to inferior, subordinated roles.

Another important product of this movement was women's realization of the importance of their paid and unpaid labor. Chapter 2 explored how women, through participating in politics, came to recognize how their labor was critically important to the reproduction of labor in the

Bolivian mines. This new categorization of their own labor gave women increased confidence, and also challenged the traditional hierarchy which categorized female work as less important.

Chapter 3 addressed another important change that the women miners' movement caused: the new political culture that was receptive to women's participation. Chapter 1 showed how their early activism convinced the miners' unions to rethink their position on women's activism. Chapter 2 demonstrated that mining women's commitment to their people's struggle allowed them to receive increasing responsibilities in their local unions. The third chapter demonstrated that political culture had changed so much, that male and female activists finally recognized the importance of building a nation-wide Housewives' Committee.

Even though it has been over 30 years since women from the mines held national political influence, these changes that ultimately led to the acceptance of women as political activists are still evident. Domitila in an interview in 2009 reflected on women's role in contemporary politics under the current indigenous president, Evo Morales. She commented, "[Women] have more participation in every area these days. Evo Morales has appointed women as ministers and that shows we're gaining ground."¹ María from Siglo XX agreed: "Of course there still is machismo. But things are changing; women have taken an important step forward."²

A final important change caused by women's activism was how it changed women's understanding of how women's oppression fit into the broader struggle of working class activism. At first, women willingly subordinated their own interests for the sake of the working

¹"The first battle Bolivian women have to win is in the home: Interview with social leader Domitila Barrios de Chungara" by Ricardo Herrera Farrel, *Latinamerica Press*, November 10, 2009, <http://www.lapress.org/articles.asp?art=5936>.

² María Lagos, ed., *Nos hemos forjado así: al rojo vivo y a puro golpe* (La Paz: Plural, 2006), 246.

class as a whole. This was seen in chapter 1 when women willingly gave up their goal of having a nation-wide movement because the FSTMB was not ready for such a radical idea. This was also seen in chapter two when women frequently prioritized community-wide initiatives over ones that were more specifically designed to address women's needs. However, this changed in the final stage of the struggle, when women decided that now was the time to build a national movement. This shift showed that by the end women were no longer convinced that their subjugation could be addressed only after the system was changed. Rather, they came to see a deep connection between women's liberation and the process of their communities' liberation.³

This transformation in political thought regarding the relationship between women's activism was permanent. In an interview with the Latin American Press in 2009, Domitila reiterated an important lesson that her movement had learned through its activism: women need to free themselves before they can fully defend their communities. She explained, "That's why I think that the first battle Bolivian women need to win is in the home."⁴

The development of this relationship between gender and class has important implications for Bolivia's current government, which is now struggling with issues regarding its colonial heritage, multi-ethnic citizenry, class conflict, and lack of economic development. To address these issues and empower citizens, the government might first think to address its machista culture, which, while improved, still prevents many women from raising their voices to facilitate change.

³ Moema Viezzer, James Dietz, and Paula Tuchman, "El Comité de Amas de Casa de Silgo XX: An Organizational Experience of Bolivian Women," *Latin American Perspectives* Vol. 6, No. 3. (1979): 80-86, accessed October 25, 2012, www.jstor.org/stable/2633401," 86.

⁴ "The first battle Bolivian women have to win is in the home" by Herrera Farrel.

Studying the mining women's movement also reveals some of the ways that the United States impacted Bolivia's political and economic trajectory. During the Cold War, the United States backed anti-communist coups and regimes like that of Banzer and looked the other way when these governments committed human rights abuses. The only time that the United States sided with the people was during Garcia Meza's regime. Later, North Americans played an instrumental role in Bolivia's shift towards neoliberal economic policies. This change appears more forgivable given the country's fiscal crisis, but the real impact of these policies deserves close scrutiny. On one hand, "shock therapy" effectively addressed the nation's inflation⁵ (in just a few years, Bolivia's four digit inflation rates dropped to a more reasonable number), but the failure of neoliberal economic policies was also great. In the next decade, unemployment rates rose and economic growth faltered. The only industry that thrived was the production of cocaine.⁶

This work does not look at the comprehensive effects of the United States' influence in Bolivia, and therefore cannot make any normative statements about the United States' role there. However, by looking closely at the detrimental effects US foreign policy had on women from the Bolivian mining centers, this work serves to remind us that as United States citizens we must be very critical of our nation's impact; because of our ability to enormously affect small land-locked countries like Bolivia, we must also hold ourselves accountable to understanding our historical impact so that we can make informed decisions in the present.

⁵ Jeffrey Sacks, "Shock Therapy Applied to Bolivia," interview, pbs.org, June 6, 2000, accessed April 10, 2013, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/mini_textlo/int_jeffreysachs.html.

⁶ Herbert S. Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 246.

Today the cocaine industry remains dominant, and US-Bolivia relations are currently structured by the War on Drugs.⁷ In the same way that vulnerable mining groups were targeted to stop the spread of communism during the Cold War, impoverished coca farmers who often have tenuous connections to the cocaine industry are now the ill-chosen targets of the our nation's intervention in Bolivia. The study of the women's mining movement makes us consider, what fragile communities might we eliminate without knowing?

⁷ Ibid, 248.

Glossary

Political Figures

Victor Paz Estenssoro: A key political figure in the political group the MNR, Paz Estenssoro was president of Bolivia from 1952-1956 and 1960-1964. He was overthrown in 1964 by a coup led by General Barrientos. Estenssoro became president again in 1985 through 1989. During his presidency, the government implemented the decree 21060.¹

Hernán Siles Zuazo: Another important figure in the MNR, Hernán Siles Zuazo was president of Bolivia from 1956 to 1960. He was reelected President in 1982 as a member of the UDP party and led the country until 1985.²

Juan Lechín Oquendo: Lechín led the FSTMB from 1944 to 1987. He was vice president of Bolivia from 1960 to 1964. While Bolivia was under the control of dictatorships, he was frequently forced into exile and tortured.³

René Barrientos: A grand orator with indigenous heritage, Barrientos led a military coup in 1964. His regime ended in 1969 when he died in a helicopter crash.⁴

Alfredo Ovando Candía: A military populist, Ovando tried to win the support of the left during his short dictatorship from 1969 – 1970.⁵

Juan José Torres: Also a military populist, Torres led Bolivia from 1970 – 1971. He was a victim of Operation Condor in Argentina in 1976. Operation Condor was a repressive program supported by the United States. This program was used to stamp out communist and left-leaning ideas from the Southern Cone.⁶

Hugo Banzer Suárez: From Santa Cruz, Banzer led a military coup in 1971 and controlled the country until 1978. He was also elected president in 1997 and served as president until 2001.

¹ James M. Malloy and Eduardo Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction: Bolivia, 1964-1985* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1988).

² Ibid.

³ Lupe Cajías, *Historia de una leyenda: vida y palabra de Juan Lechín* (La Paz: Ediciones Gráficas EG, 1988).

⁴ César Soto, *Historia del Pacto Militar Campesino* (Cochabamba, Bolivia: CERES, 1994.)

⁵ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*, 41-54.

⁶ Patrice J. McSherry *Predatory States: Operation Condor and covert war in Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005), 26.

Luis García Meza: One of Bolivia's most corrupt and violent dictators, García Meza led a coup in 1980. His regime ended in 1982. He has been tried and convicted for his role in the cocaine trade, but not for committing human rights violations.⁷

Important Acronyms

MNR: *The Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* or the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement was founded in 1941. This movement led the People's Revolution of 1952.⁸

UDP: The *Unidad Democrática y Popular* or the Democratic and Popular Union was an umbrella political party that united different leftist parties.⁹

COMIBOL: The *Corporación Minera de Bolivia* or the Mining Corporation of Bolivia is the name of Bolivia's nationally-owned mines. COMIBOL was created in 1952 after the People's Revolution.¹⁰

COB: The *Central Obrera Boliviana* or National Trade Union Federation was created in 1952 and was granted semi-autonomous power with the MNR over the workers of Bolivia. This federation is still enormously important in contemporary Bolivian politics.¹¹

Decrees and Terms

21060: Issued in 1986, this degree greatly reduced the state's role in the local economy. Part of the decree ordered the closing of the majority of mining centers in Bolivia.¹²

Shock therapy: This economic philosophy was developed in the United States and argued that the swift liberalization of the economy would lead to economic stability. The decree 21060 employed many of the recommendations outlined by this philosophy.¹³

MINING CENTERS

Siglo XX: Located in the department of Potosi, this mining center along with Cataví was the most politicized and most organized during the mid-20th century.¹⁴ It was closed after the implementation of 21060.

⁷ Para que no se olvide: la dictadura de Luis Garcia Meza (La Paz: Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos y Mártires por la Liberación Nacional, 1997).

⁸ Herbert S Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1-2.

⁹ Malloy and Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹² María Lagos, ed., *Nos hemos forjado así: al rojo vivo y a puro golpe* (La Paz: Plural, 2006), 175.

¹³ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 174.

¹⁴ June Nash, 335

Huanuni: Located in the department of Oruro, this was another highly politicized mining center. It did not close after the implementation of 21060.

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Photos¹

The Protagonists of My Investigation



Doña Emiliana



Doña Zenobia

¹ Photos by Catherine Raney.



Doña Domitila



Doña Miriam



Doña Gumercinda

The Mining District Huanuni



Mural in Huanuni



Statue in Huanuni



The Radio Station of Huanuni



Male Miners



Women Miners Working the Rock Pile



Inside the Mine



The Diety of the Mines – el Tío

