

## *From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist's Life.*

Benjamin Kohl and Linda C. Farthing, with Félix Muruchi

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### RESEÑA

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Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing's translation of Félix Muruchi's *testimonio*, or oral history, *From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist's Life*, provides a rich and accessible text on Bolivian history, society, and culture since the National Revolution of 1952, told through the eyes of a Bolivian tin miner and labor activist. Coming on the heels of a number of books that focused on labor movements and politics in twentieth-century Bolivia, *From the Mines to the Streets* (which was recently translated as *Minero con poder de dinamita. La vida de un activista boliviano*, Plural Editores, La Paz, 2009), portrays the daily life and personal struggles of miners against exploitative mining companies and repressive governments. Muruchi describes his life and the Bolivian labor movement during the dictatorships that ruled from 1964 until the early 1980s, and the challenges that miners faced during the neoliberal era since the 1980s and under the current administration of Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president. We learn the difficulty of transforming poor mining communities despite the many changes of government, which explains the seemingly continuous social movements to pressure the state alongside vibrant community activism that defines present-day Bolivia. The reader learns how ethnic and racial constructions in the Andes shaped Muruchi's activism and the labor movement more generally, an important topic in the literature on social movements in the Andes. Muruchi, of Quechua origin, has self-identified not as indigenous, but as a miner for much of his life. The activist comes across as a deeply compassionate and committed individual, which makes for an engaging testimony.

*From the Mines to the Streets* builds on earlier works about Bolivian mine labor written in the latter half of the twentieth century that include anthropologist June Nash's seminal study *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us* (Columbia, 1993) and James Dunkerly's *Rebellion in the Veins* (Verso, 1984). Recent works on Bolivian labor history and society in the first half of the twentieth century include Laura Gotkowitz's study of highland indigenous peasants *A Revolution for Our Rights* (Duke, 2007) and Robert Smale's *I Sweat the Flavor of Tin* (Pittsburgh, 2010). Like these works, *From the Mines to the Streets* reveals the trajectory of the ideological development of Bolivia's dynamic working classes

that gained national stature and international attention as the vanguard of the National Revolution in 1952. Bolivian labor unions emerged later than in other Latin American states, but the labor movements became some of the most radical in the region after the 1930s Chaco War. Miners, who confronted the harsh reality of death in the mines from accidents and silicosis, gained a reputation in Bolivia as fearless organizers for workers' rights. Middle-class veterans of the Chaco War led armed miners and peasants to overthrow the military government in 1952. The revolutionary state instituted sweeping social reforms that included universal education and suffrage, nationalization of the largest tin mines, and agrarian reform. The overthrow of the Revolution in 1964 by the military led to decades of military dictators who disarmed and repressed the radical miners.

While the book is replete with accounts of committed struggle and hope for a better future for Bolivia's working classes, it also illuminates the difficulties activists faced to achieve reforms. Miners struggled for basic rights and humane living conditions while facing the repressive apparatus of the state, deeply entrenched poverty in the mining camps, and union politics and corruption. The book begins in the late 1940s shortly after Muruchi's birth in a rural community near the mining camps in the Bolivian altiplano. The first part explores rural life and the primarily indigenous communities that inhabit the altiplano as part biography of Muruchi and his family, and part anthropological study. The family moved to the mining camp at the Siglo XX mines while he was still a child. Muruchi began working as an illicit miner, called a *juk'u*, who enter mines after hours to remove ore. At age 17, he joined the army to fulfill his obligatory military service, a requirement to work in the state mines. Part two moves to life inside the mines and mine camps where Muruchi became educated and politicized as a union activist during the dictatorships of the 1960s and the *banzerato*, the rule of Operation Condor accomplice Hugo Banzer (1971-1978). The third part of the book follows Muruchi's life in exile in Chile and Holland, where he networked with international activists and began to explore his ethnic identity. The fourth part of the book examines life in the mostly indigenous city of El Alto, which overlooks the La Paz basin. Muruchi continued his activism with the neighborhood organizations that built the city and were a main force behind the election of Evo Morales in 2005.

Kohl and Farthing provide a running commentary between and within the chapters that summarize Bolivian history for those unfamiliar with the landlocked Andean country. These summaries place Muruchi's testimony within larger historical context (when he does not do so himself) and help maintain a linear flow to the narrative. But it is the testimony itself that engages the reader as Muruchi describes the work and living conditions in the mining camps, the prisons and torture chambers of the dictatorships, and exile in places as distinct as Augusto Pinochet's Chile and democratic socialist Holland. He gives compelling narrative as a committed activist, at one point describing an attack against state security forces that were firing on protesters during the Gas War of 2003: "Moments later the demonstrators torched the large wooden entrance doors and it gave us great satisfaction to see those killers fleeing from the smoking building. The air was filled with energy, passion, political commitment, and determination, and I was hopeful that this time we would win" (p. 204). The election of Evo Morales in 2005 gave the activists similar feelings of hope for social justice. The country's first indigenous president promised to nationalize the hydrocarbons sector to fund social programs and rewrite the constitution to guarantee a role for indigenous populations in a national project from which they had been mostly excluded since independence from Spain.

*From the Mines to the Streets* is an accessible testimony of a committed labor activist in late twentieth-century Bolivia that helps us to better understand the daily struggle of Bolivia's working classes and the ethnic dimensions of class identity. The book covers the major events of late twentieth-century Bolivia, while explaining the larger contexts of Bolivian politics and Andean life through an individual testimony. Kohl and Farthing's translation of Muruchi's autobiography has produced a book that would complement most modern Latin American studies survey courses.