

Women's Unions in Bolivia

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Women workers' unions in Bolivia were formed in the 1920s as part of the anarcho-syndicalist Federación Obrera Local (FOL), at that time the leading trade union organization in the country. (The FOL was actually a national trade union center, but the anarcho-syndicalists considered themselves to be merely the "local" (Bolivian) branch of a world-wide organization: the syndicalist International Workers' Association formed in 1920).¹

In 1927 a group of anarchist women workers, led by Catalina Mendoza, Rosa Rodríguez de Calderón, Susana Rada, Felipa Aquize, and others, created the General Women Workers' Union (Sindicato Feminino de Oficios Varios (SFOV)) under the auspices of the FOL. The (male) FOL leadership considered that the basic principle of the First International, that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves", also applied to women and fully supported this initiative. Relations between male and female unions remained mutually supportive, in this case probably because of a serious commitment to a shared anarchist philosophy.²

On the other hand, the anarchist trade union women soon came into conflict with the women's rights movement, dominated by women from the creole oligarchy. In 1929, a delegation from the SFOV participated in the National Women's Convention where it submitted a document entitled "Ignorance is the mother of slavery", denouncing the social situation of working class women. They got a hostile reception and withdrew from the Convention. According to Petronila Infantes, later a leader of the Cooks' Union, "the ladies were upset because the "cholas" (working class Indian women) came to mix with them."³

The SFOV included cooks working in households, laundry workers, dairy workers, flower vendors and other street and market vendors. As membership grew, separate unions were established for the different categories of workers and the SFOV was eventually reorganized as the Women Workers' Federation (Federación Obrera Feminina (FOF)). At its peak, the FOF had sixty unions the most important of which were the Cooks' Union (Unión Sindical de Culinarias (USC)),

¹ Zulema Lehm Ardaya, Silvia Rivera Cusiconqui: *Los Artesanos Libertarios y la Etica del Trabajo*, Ediciones del THOA (Taller de Historia Oral Andina) La Paz, 1988

² See interview of Catalina Mendoza and Petronila Infantes, in Lehm and Rivera, op.cit., p. 163

³ Lehm and Rivera, op.cit, p. 37

founded in 1935, and the Flower Vendors' Union (Unión Feminina de Floristas (UFF)), founded in 1936.

Both these unions were the outcome of specific struggles. The USC originated in a struggle against discrimination in public transport: middle class ladies had objected that cooks, with their bags of purchases, were taking too much space in the streetcars. The municipality then prohibited the cooks from using streetcars; in response, the cooks held a mass meeting at city hall and got the prohibition rescinded. Subsequently, a raise in streetcar fares was also cancelled after another mass demonstration of the cooks at city hall. The USC was organized shortly after these incidents and met with a mixed response from the employers (the middle class ladies): some refused to hire USC members, others on the contrary preferred to hire union cooks because "they were guaranteed by the union" and more responsible in their work.

The main demands of the USC were: recognition of cooking as a skilled trade, the eight-hour day for domestic work (later the five-hour day, from 09:00 to 14:00, with cooking only, to the exclusion of other domestic tasks), the establishment of public child care centers, freedom of expression (the right to say what they pleased, at work and off duty, without reprisals), the abolition of the "health certificate" imposed by the municipal authorities and increased wages.

The UFF became organized after a flash flood at the end of 1935 wiped out the street markets in La Paz. The flower vendors and, through them, other street vendors became organized to demand the establishment of municipal markets. In 1938, several municipal markets were opened, but they turned out to be far too small, with a capacity of 600 places, although 2,000 were needed for union members alone. On the grounds that "official" markets now existed, the police started repressing vendors selling elsewhere in the city. Violent clashes took place, with police beating and arresting the vendors and destroying their property and produce. In 1940 and 1941 the FOF lodged complaints with the authorities against police abuses and demanded that street vendors be recognized as a "social function." As they were getting no response, they threatened a general strike and obtained the resignation of the mayor. They also sued 25 policemen known for harassing vendors in different street markets and, although they did not obtain the destitution of the policemen, the abuses ceased for a time.

In 1943, the UFF again led a protest action of the FOF against another mayor held responsible for the arbitrary conduct and the abuses of the municipal authorities. The FOF now also demanded municipal price controls of basic commodities, the punishment of abusive policemen and an end to favoritism at the markets.

The women workers' unions of the FOL not only confronted municipal authorities but, as Indian women ("cholas"), also the creole upper class, in the households and in society, as shown in the streetcar incident, which raised basic civil rights issues. The markets became spaces of communication where social relations were cemented, not only among vendors but also among cooks who would do their shopping there and thus break out of the isolation of their workplaces. Because of their strong roots in specific social and cultural struggles, the women's unions outlasted their male counterparts. In the 1940s the FOL went into decline because of the combined effect of repression by successive authoritarian governments and the competition from new unions led by political parties of the radical Left. By 1947 it had practically ceased to exist. The FOF however, continued, still under anarcho-syndicalist leadership, and eventually joined the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) in 1953.

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