

World of work

Bolivia's child workers unite to end exploitation

- 1 Rodrigo Medrano Calle is a Bolivian labour leader who meets and lobbies top government officials. That's not surprising in a country where pay is often low, working conditions harsh and unions powerful. What's unusual is that Rodrigo is 14 years old, and his union's members are all children.
- 5 "I started working when I was nine, and I've done everything, shining shoes, bus driver's assistant, selling," said Rodrigo, who now sells chewing gum and cigarettes in bars at weekends, making \$7-\$8 for a night's work.
- "I lived on the street for a time and was going in the wrong direction, but then I found the movement, and it gave me a reason to be. I'm going to fight for my compañeros' [comrades'] rights, not just my own."
- 10 Rodrigo's organisation, the Bolivian Union of Child and Adolescent Workers (Unatsbo), represents thousands of under-18s. There are similar chapters in Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru and Colombia, often funded by international donors. In Bolivia, successes include organising pay rises for children who sell newspapers on the streets of Potosí from 6 cents to 12 cents a paper.
- 15 Many international campaigners advocate an end to all child labour, but Unatsbo argues that, in a region where child labour is rife, it is more important to ensure young workers are not exploited. On paper, Bolivia bans under-14s from working, but nearly 750,000 children aged between five and 17 are involved in sometimes dangerous jobs.
- Luz Rivera Daza, an adult counsellor for Unatsbo in Potosí, says many child workers are in a legal blind spot: their work is prohibited and so they have very little defence if employers exploit them through long hours, abuse them or refuse to pay a decent wage. "If you have to work, then you have to work exploited,"
- 20 she said of those situations.
- Rolando Mamani started working on his mother's market stall in El Alto when he was 12. Now aged 17 he works two long days a week and earns enough for his transport to school. In fact, most working children in Bolivia go to school.
- 25 Rodrigo believes that instead of attempting to end many forms of child and adolescent work, the goal should be ending exploitation by creating parttime, safe and better-paying jobs for young people who want them. "The work of a child or adolescent is not bad – it helps society, it helps a family, and it helps us grow as people," he said.

By Sara Shahriari La Paz

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Glossary

child labour (noun) the employment of children in regular work

ban someone from doing something (verb) to say officially that someone must not do something

adolescent (noun) a young person who is developing from a child to an adult

decent wage (noun) fair and adequate pay

on paper (expression) when something is written down but isn't put into practice

1. Read the text and answer the following questions and tasks on the text in your own words.

1.1 State briefly what employment is often like in Bolivia.

1.2 Explain what Rodrigo means by saying,“(I) was going in the wrong direction”. (line 7)

1.3 Name the specific improvement Unatsbo has achieved.

1.4 Point out the differences between Unatsbo's ideas and those of international campaigners.

1.5 According to Luz Rivera Daza, why do child workers have little protection?

1.6 State the reasons for Rodrigo's opinion that work can be positive for young people.

2. Do you think Rodrigo is right when he states that, “The work of a child or adolescent is not bad – it helps society, it helps a family, and it helps us grow as people.”? (lines 26-27) Discuss and write a comment of about 250 words.