

Bolivian Mining Radio

By Martin Butera martin_butera@yahoo.com.ar

Radio Mineras Bolivianas are unique in the world, because they belonged to the unions of mining workers, and were created to defend the interests and the struggle of the workers' movement.

Mining was fundamental in Bolivia long before the country reached its independence in 1825. When the Spanish conquistadores began to exploit the silver of Potosí in the 17th century they never imagined that there was such a quantity under the "silver mountain". Bolivia's exports were mainly based on silver and then tin, until the country's economy was transformed in the last decades of the 20th century. For three centuries the silver extracted from Potosí was taken to Spain, until the mountain lost its original shape and gradually collapsed. It has been written that six million Aymara and Quechua Indians, plus a considerable number of African slaves, lost their lives in the mines during that period. Potosí was then one of the great cities of the western world. In 1625 it had a population greater than London or Paris, and more churches than any other city in the new world. Although isolated in the altiplano, at an altitude of 4,200 meters, in Potosí the most luxurious goods imported from Europe could be found.

From the independence of Bolivia in 1825 until the mid-1970s, mining continued to be the main economic activity generating income. Silver gradually became less important, but the country became the world's second tin producer. In the mid-1950s minerals accounted for 70% of exports. A few thousand workers in the mining centres had on their shoulders the responsibility of sustaining the economy of the country and its five million inhabitants. No government could afford to ignore the political opinion of the miners, especially when their unions were reputed to be the most democratic and politically advanced in Latin America.

Station Resistance

The 1980 military coup of General Luis García Meza had triumphed in Bolivia, many citizens who resisted were killed or imprisoned, others escaped into exile. The army managed to completely control the cities. The first military objective was the media: all the radios, television channels and newspapers were closed and when they came to light again, it was under strict military censorship. Actually, not all radio stations ...

The chain of approximately twenty stations in the mining districts of Potosí and Oruro, in the Bolivian highlands, continued transmissions under very high pressure. In order to know what was really happening in Bolivia after the coup, people searched the radio for the frequency of La Voz del Minero Radio Animas or Radio Pío XII. Even foreign correspondents based their news radios on mining radios. The army knew, that is why every day the troops came closer to the mining districts, breaking little by little the resistance of the workers who defended their stations with their lives.

Photo: The radio station door shattered by bullets, during the military coup of Garcia Meza



One of the last mining stations to fall under military control was Radio Animas. This is the transcript of the dramatic final live broadcast: *The troops are approximately five kilometres from Siete Suyos and very close to Santa Ana ... so we are preparing to defend ourselves ... The number of detainees reaches 31, who have been moved to the city of Tupiza according to the reports that have reached us ... This is Radio Animas for all the south of the country ... We are in this crucial hour, we are in constant mobilization, women have contributed greatly in the preparation of the defence ... We will be to the last comrades, because that is our mission, to defend ourselves ...*

That was near the end. Minutes later there shooting heard at Radio Animas. The last thing the announcer managed to transmit was a message to the other stations, Pío XII and Radio Nacional de Huanuni, to take the signal and continue with the live broadcasts of the mining chain. Others continued until the army silenced the last one, destroying the equipment and killing those who defended their right to communicate.

La Voz del Minero, Radio Vanguardia de Colquiri, Radio Animas, Radio 21 de Diciembre, Radio Nacional de Huanunison are some of the radio stations created, financed and controlled by the mining workers of Bolivia.

In the Beginning

It all started around 1949, with a station that settled in the mining district of Catavi. During the following 15 years, other districts followed suit: they bought equipment, trained young people from the camps, financed by workers who gave a percentage of their salary to support the radio stations.

The stations started precariously, equipped with the bare minimum. Some managed to obtain international support and became more sophisticated broadcasters, with better equipment and facilities. Several even built an assembly hall next to the station, in order to broadcast the union meetings live. Radio Vanguardia decorated its living room with a large mural that tells the story of the Colquiri mining centre. A scene in the mural depicts the bombing of Bolivian Air Force aircraft in 1967, when the country was subjected to a military dictatorship.

At the beginning of the 1970s there were 26 stations in operation, almost all of them in the mining districts of the Bolivian highlands. At that time, the miners' unions were still very important, considered as the political vanguard in Latin America.

In times of peace and democracy - which were not the most frequent - mining radios were integrated into the daily life of the communities. They functioned efficiently as alternatives to telephone and mail services. The people of the mining centres received their correspondence through the radio and sent messages of all kinds, which were read several times a day: calls for meetings of the Committee of Housewives, messages from the union leaders about their negotiations with the Government in the capital, messages of love between young people, sports activities, funerals, births and local festivities.

In times of political conflict, trade union radios became the only reliable source of information. While the military attacked newspapers radio and television stations in the cities, the only information available came through the mining radios. All of them joined in the "mining chain" until the army penetrated the mining districts and stormed the facilities, defended to the last by the workers. A movie of Jorge Sanjinés, *El Coraje del Pueblo*, rebuilds the army attack in June 1967 in the mining district of Siglo XX and the seizure of union radio.

<https://youtu.be/6ZzRW0mqc7w>



The mining radios were important insofar as the miners were important in the economy and politics of Bolivia. But also the influence of the miners grew during the decades in which they had at their disposal this powerful means of communication to express their ideas. As the importance of mining declined in the 1980s, trade unions weakened and many of the stations disappeared, at the same time the mines were closed.

Participatory Communication

The radio stations played a preponderant role in strengthening the mining unions in the struggle for unity. All unions were affiliated with the Bolivian Trade Union Federation of Mining Workers (FSTMB), which for four decades (1946 to 1986) was the vanguard of the powerful Bolivian Workers' Central (COB). It is not simply coincidence that unions and radio stations shared premises in most of the mining districts, and that the union's Secretary of Culture was usually the director of the radio station.

The social impact of the radio stations of the mines was also important in the process of construction of a cultural identity in the mining centres and in the surrounding peasant communities. On a daily basis, the mining radios were open to participation. The visits to the stations were very frequent, whenever people needed to express themselves on any topic that affected their lives.



The most innovative in the experience of mining radios in Bolivia is community participation. The characteristics of this participation constituted a revolutionary event in the 1950s, as they still are today. Very few experiences of participatory communication have reached a level of total appropriation of a means of communication in terms of technology, day-to-day management, content and service to the community.

One of the most interesting aspects is that of training. The mining stations gave rise to new generations of journalists. The training was usually done locally, with the support of other organizations. Some journalists and broadcasters who began their professional activity in the mining radios later became well-known radialistas when emigrating to the cities.

The end of mining radio stations

Although the mining radios were oriented by the ideology of the unions, this did not represent an obstacle to participation insofar as they reflected the will of the workers. In the positions of responsibility of the union, leaders of different political parties were elected, but none of them intended to break the sense of unity that was reflected in the radio programmes.

The real challenge of the mining radios was political repression, the same one that affected the mining class as a whole. Some stations were destroyed by the army six or seven times in the course of their existence. Several chose to preserve the traces of resistance on their walls: the bullet impacts received. Again and again, destroyed equipment was replaced by new equipment purchased with the contribution of the workers. Impoverished but worthy, they offered one day of their salary to their station.



Martin Butera with mining radio journalist (La Paz, Bolivia)

From the technical point of view, the mining stations suffered material deficiencies. The equipment of most of them was very elementary, although sufficient to carry out the work. When equipment was damaged it was repaired by local technicians who lacked the necessary replacement parts but were abundant in creativity. The low capacity to pay salaries to producers made the quality of programming low, especially in terms of educational content.

What finally caused the mining radios to end in the 1980s was the abrupt change in the country's economy. Traditional mining ceased to be central in exports and the cost of producing tin was higher than the international price. The government closed state mines; workers moved to cities in search of employment, leaving ghost camps behind. The influence of the unions decreased, and few stations survived the transition to the new century.

On 28 August 2017, the Ministry of Mining presented a decoration to the directors of the mining radios that are still in force. The award also recognized the "high level of awareness of workers to convey their ideals against the editorial position of the commercial media that did not take into account these struggles."

The Bolivian government recognized the mining radios for their contribution to the democratic political history, the defence of human rights and their consequences in defence of the working class and workers.

"One of the disastrous actions was when several military radios intervened in the military coup, the equipment was destroyed, many journalists and journalists were imprisoned, because the network of mining radios constituted a whole subversive network of communication for revolution and liberation. , that is why this type of media is important, "said the current Minister of Mining, Cesar Navarro Miranda, when he offered the tribute.

Likewise, he indicated that the political participation from the chain of mining radios in dictatorial processes was decisive for the return of democracy and that is why they constitute a political and democratic history, thanks to the sacrifice of the workers. Among those that stand out: Radio 21 December, National de Huanuni, Vanguardia de Colquiri, 16 March of the Bolívar mine, Ánimas and Chichas de Siete Suyos, among others. The event was nuanced with musical participation achieving great emotion among the participants.

One of the few survivors

On 24 June Huanuni National Radio will be 60 years old. The historic National Radio of Huanuni, one of the first miner-union radios in Bolivia, recognized for its active participation in the country's social struggles, is ready for its re-launch with a powerful team and state support.

Now with a modern FM equipment (and on 92.5 MHz), it will be a witness to the new Huanuni radio that emerged to the ether in the 1950's and was a faithful witness of the struggle of the mining unions and the popular classes.

Respondent since its birth, Radio Nacional de Huanuni became the inseparable companion of the workers of this mining centrw who bled tin for the benefit of the great powers and the so-called "tin barons".



Since then, the union radio station has written an unprecedented story in Bolivia, as an inseparable companion of the workers' struggles and vanguard of the resistance of the miners against totalitarian regimes between 1964 and 1982.

Also as a school of Bolivian broadcasting, by the passage of the brightest speakers and budding journalists by their microphones. Because of the station's irrefutable identification with the social movements it suffered several attempts to silence its voice, through dictatorial governments that destroyed equipment and assassinated several miners.

Like the one perpetrated in 1967 in the ferocious massacre of San Juan when military forces razed all their equipment and looted their nightclub when the radio accompanied and encouraged a mining protest against the government of President René Barrientos Ortuño.

www.radionacionaldehuanuni.com

Documentaries

First documentary about one of the most important historical experiences of participatory communication: the radio stations of the mining workers of Bolivia. Made in 1983 for UNESCO by Eduardo Barrios and Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, in 16 mm. https://youtu.be/-c3_g5jrMTI

Voices of the Socavón Two Argentines produced a documentary that highlights the struggle of mining radios in Bolivia during the dictatorships. Voces del Socavón, a production made by Argentine filmmakers Julia Delfini and Magalí Vela Vázquez and is about the radio La voz del minero from the Siglo XX mine in Potosí, which was the first station financed and controlled by workers, and a pioneer in America Latina

The voices of the tunnel tells the story of Bolivia's mining radios, led by La Voz del Minero, and its role in the workers' union struggle during the second half of the 20th century. The protagonists of this story, union leaders, women of the Housewives Committee, miners and announcers, relate the historical events they went through in search of the Bolivian workers' revolution. The film links the culture within the mining camps, accompanied by the poetry and stories of the famous Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, in what is one of his last interviews.

Here you can see his trailer <https://youtu.be/HUM40UGEQTA>

Martín Butera is a journalist, documentary maker and founding member of Radio Atomika 106.1 MHz (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

www.radioatomika.com.ar

He lives in Brasilia, Brazil.

Photo: Martín visiting Radio Club La Paz Bolivia CP1AA



Mining Radio Stations Today

By Martin Butera

Currently of the more than 20 mining radios that operated in the country of Bolivia, only three of them are on air. These are Radio Nacional de Huanuni (Huanuni-Oruro), Radio Vanguardia (Colquiri-La Paz) and Radio 16 de Marzo (Bolívar-Oruro).

National Radio of Huanuni (Huanuni-Oruro), that used to transmit by short wave, is on FM (94.5 MHz) and online www.radionacionaldehuanuni.com/

Radio Vanguardia of Colquiri, owned by the mining workers of that district, currently has a new transmitter on medium wave 1270 kHz with a power of 3 kW and an FM transmitter, 98.3 MHz with a power of 1 kW. The AM signal can be heard in the remotest corners of the department of La Paz and even nationwide.

Photos are of Radio Vanguardia's building and transmitter.

