



An open letter to members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the Social Justice Fund, from Michael Ballard, UEW 20147 member.



April 10th, 2010, a small delegation of PSAC members travelled to Bolivia to meet with social justice project partner CEPROMIN. Thanks to the PSAC Social Justice Fund, the small delegation was able to bear witness to the tremendous impact our union is having on small groups of miners in Bolivia. The trip started out with five delegates who are from the furthest reaches of Canada. From the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, North to Ekati diamond mine, two hundred miles below the Arctic Circle, all the way to the center of Canada in Ottawa. I was thrilled to be amongst the delegation who attended on behalf of PSAC and the Social Justice Fund. I am by no means a world traveler so I really have no reference, but I can tell you this, I see through new eyes now, I am changed and I can't go back.



The delegates set out on the 15 day journey arriving on the 12th of April in La Paz, Bolivia one of the world's highest airports at 4006 meters above sea level. We were greeted by representatives of CEPROMIN and after a few sips of coca tea (to combat altitude sickness) and no time to waste, we found ourselves in a meeting with the President of CEPROMIN and CEPROMIN founders Pedro Gomez, retired mineworker, and Pedro Medriobo who is also the former Vice Minister of mines for Bolivia, under the Evo Morales government. For the next several days the delegates learn through stories and through visits to neighbouring mine sites just how CEPROMIN is improving literacy and providing opportunities for health and nutritional programs for the mine workers, in particular the women and children who work and live on the mine sites. Our next stop on the trip was a visit to the historic mining city of Potosi, an emotional experience I will never forget.





Potosí is full of the kind of hustle and bustle you would expect to find in a mining city with one of the worlds oldest and most productive silver mines. Filled with open markets and the constant beep beep of every kind of vehicle that moves, Potosí hums to a chaotic cadence that could only work in this place. It is a city rich with tradition, beautiful architecture and lush garden plazas. Nearby we visited Cerro Rico and met the miners and the women and children who work and live in the mine sites. The conditions are indescribable and we listened to the men and women tell us what they think they need to make the mines more productive.

I kept waiting to hear about the living conditions but we never did, we had to ask. I guess if you're from the north or any other developed country you have seen the commercials, you know, 'pictures of poor children, please send money'... But these people were real, their poverty was real and I was really standing in their place and I felt a deep sense of guilt for every selfish impulse of envy and greed that I ever had. Afterward we visited the newly constructed school and health center located in another area of the mine site. It was almost as though we had left the mine itself and were somehow transported somewhere entirely different. It stood out like a new building in a big empty dirt lot until we opened the door and realized we were still in Bolivia. Four small children sit in a room filled with charts and posters and large chalk board wide eyed at our presence. A young woman welcomes us in and we greet the children our eyes darting around at all the work which was proudly displayed on the walls. Soon more children arrive with several young women. We learn that the women are about to serve a hot meal for all the school aged children which should be arriving soon. It wasn't long before the room was filled with more wide eyed children. A young boy 'Pedro' becomes interested in my camera and we begin to take pictures and isn't long before they are all taking turns laughing at their own pictures. Following the luncheon we talk outside and soon we are all in tears trying to comprehend what we have just witnessed and somehow understand how people who live in such impossible conditions could find such joy. I searched my mind for some possible explanation but there was none. Perhaps the Oasis center created through CEPROMIN and the Social Justice Fund had somehow inspired some new seed of hope, a new realm of possibility. Over the next several days I came to realize that these women had done something truly incredible. They had taken what amounts to less than pennies per member per year and provided three separate

programs in three different mining communities impacting literally hundreds if not thousands of miners and their families. I can not put into words how it felt to be amongst people who were so grateful for everything they had, for their very existence and for their love of the communities they lived in. They were not anything like I ever imagined them to be. They were a proud, independent people who had deep inside them an indescribable almost unattainable joy.

Perhaps the kind of joy one feels when one has the power to change the world.

I cannot thank PSAC and the Social Justice Fund enough for what they have done for this small delegation of members who now see through different eyes. I am a witness to the power of benevolence and to the richness Canadians all take for granted. We can do more than we think and we owe it to all those less fortunate than us to do what we can.

To do what we must, to give thanks for our own fortune and for the honour of helping others like the miners of Bolivia.

I want to thank all the members of PSAC delegation especially staff member Louise Casselman, and PSAC members Barbara Paul, Amanda Brown and Teagen Nelson.

Most of all I want to thank the women and children of CEPROMIN for their dedication and struggle in making the mining communities of Bolivia a better place to work and live.

One world one people.

Yours in solidarity,

Michael Ballard