



Rock Bottom

Exploitation runs deep in Potosí, a small city about 330 miles southeast of La Paz, Bolivia. Spanish conquistadors founded it in the 16th century to hunt for treasure in Cerro Rico (Rich Mountain), which towers nearby. First mined for silver, Cerro Rico also became famous for its bounty of tin and zinc. Centuries of digging, however, have put the mountain at risk of collapse: In 2015, the Bolivian government started to plug a massive sinkhole at Cerro Rico's summit that has put miners' lives in danger since it appeared in 2011. Today, some 15,000 workers—known as *peones*, or pawns—extract ore at hundreds of sites. Here, a miner arrives for an early-morning shift.

Jobs at Cerro Rico can exact a terrible toll. Mine shafts cave in, injuring or killing those inside. Men who toil underground suffer from silicosis, a scarring of the lungs caused by inhaled dust particles. Belgian photographer Cédric Gerbehey, who visited Potosí for a project on the disturbing legacy of mining across Latin America, says the industry is destroying the environment alongside human lives. “The adverse effects,” he cautions, “are not only substantial, but also inevitable.”



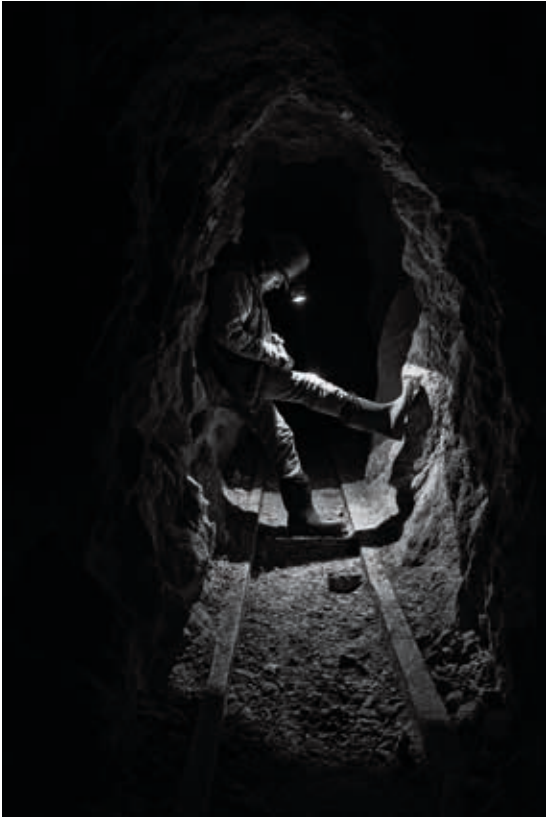


Outside one of Cerro Rico's mines, known as Reveka, workers lean over a carriage filled with excavated zinc ore.



A man enters a mine called Pailarivi, which is run by the Unificada Cooperative. The mountain has divided management: Some areas are controlled by private companies or Bolivia's state-operated mining corporation, while others are under the purview of miners' cooperatives.





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A worker from the Pailarivi mine changes clothes in a hut after a long day underground.

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Some peones are paid a set day rate; others are compensated according to how much ore they find.



↑ In La Paz, the Potosí Civic Committee, an umbrella organization of unions and social groups, supports miners who travel to the capital to fight for improved working conditions and greater government investment (such as hospital upgrades). Here, miners queue to receive free meals provided by the group.



↗ Back in Potosí, miners drink locally brewed alcohol after work.

→ Before beginning yet another day at the Pailarivi mine, a man eats chicken soup prepared by a Potosí street vendor.

