

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Bolivian unions call for a national strike

The Bolivian Labor Central (COB) is calling for a 48-hour national strike this Tuesday and Wednesday to demand that the government nationalize natural gas.

The COB demand comes at a time when the legislature is discussing an increase from 18 percent to 50 percent in royalties required from the transnational companies that extract and market gas. Rather than forcing an immediate nationalization through a two-day strike, COB leaders are pressing for a better deal for Bolivia. COB leader Jaime Solares indicated as much when he declared: "We will carry out a genuine nationalization once the people become conscious enough, once the people hold the power."

The discovery of abundant gas in Bolivia is attracting attention from international companies, including Brazil's Petrobras and Spain's Repsol-YPF. Bolivian President Carlos Mesa favors contracts with foreign producers to export the natural gas through Peruvian ports in the Pacific Ocean.

In an interview with the Brazilian daily *Correio Braziliense* on March 9, Solares threatened to sabotage gas pipelines "because they are all pirates that refuse to pay their taxes." Solares also denounced Brazilian President Inacio Lula da Silva for supporting Petrobras.

The COB has allied itself with the Movement For Socialism (MAS), to press for an eventual nationalization of Bolivian oil and gas.

Mesa, who last week survived a series of municipal strikes demanding his resignation, opposes raising the royalties. Instead, he proposes a negotiable 32 percent excise tax on gas output.

Weeks of protests have threatened gas exports to neighboring Argentina, a country that in turn re-exports the gas to Chile. Bolivia will not sell gas directly to Chile because of a dispute on access to the Pacific Ocean. Argentine authorities have indicated that if Bolivia cuts off gas deliveries, it will stop supplying Chile.

Peruvian doctors' strike in second week

Doctors employed by Peru's health ministry are now on the second week of an indefinite strike over wages. Last week, the strikers rejected as "insufficient" a government offer of between 220 and 460 soles per month. The raise represents about half of what the striking doctors have demanded. Health Ministry doctors are demanding parity with doctors that work for the Social Security department and a higher budget for the 1,400 hospitals and clinics where they work.

Argentine airline workers demand back pay

Seven hundred employees of Southern Winds airlines went on strike last week demanding payment of their February wages. Southern Winds is insolvent due to the decision by the government of Nestor Kirchner not to renew subsidies for fuel and salaries that it was transferring to the private carrier because of its partnership with LAFSA, a state-owned company. LAFSA was created in 2003 after the government took over two insolvent private carriers. It uses Southern Winds airplanes in domestic flights. Southern Winds has a weekly flight to Madrid.

Southern Winds employees are involved in an international scandal after Madrid officials discovered contraband operations involving airline officials complicit in the transfer of cocaine to Spain. Three company officials are under arrest so far. Following that incident, Kirchner ordered an end to the subsidy.

In addition to their back wages, the workers are demanding an accounting from the company of its future plans. On March 11, Chile's LanChile bought LAFSA, which will operate from now on as LanArgentina. However, a question mark still hangs over the fate of Southern Winds. In addition to wages, the strikers are demanding that Southern Winds inform them of its future plans. LanChile flies mainly to cities along South America's Pacific rim. By acquiring the Argentine firm, it will have access to the Argentine domestic network.

The workers have declared themselves in permanent assembly and are occupying the airlines facilities in Buenos Aires. A spokesperson for the striking workers indicated that the strike would continue until the pay issue is resolved.

Tens of thousands protest privatizations in Mexico City

On March 11, thousands of members of the Mexican Electrical Union (SME) rallied in Mexico City's central square, El Zocalo, to launch an SME campaign for a "patriotic alliance" to defeat the privatization of oil, gas and electricity. SME leaders point out that much of those industries, in the hands of the state since the 1940s, has already been transferred to private corporations.

SME leader Rosendo Flores addressed the protest, urging a stop to the "counter reform" that he associated with the current government of President Vicente Fox. Flores identified himself with the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and called for an end to the campaign to vilify and impeach Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. Obrador is considered a strong contender for the Mexican presidency and is very popular in Mexico City.

Mexican presidents are elected to one six-year term. The next election will take place in 2006. Throughout his remarks, Rosendo Flores linked the election of a PRD government to the struggle against privatizations. Flores accused Robert Madrazo, the leader

of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), of betraying past support for nationalized industries to obtain the backing of US President George W. Bush for his candidacy in 2006.

The massive crowd of workers chanted calls for a national strike. There were also calls and signs against the National Action Party (PAN) of President Fox and against the PRI, demanding that they drop their campaign against Obrador. Figures representing the Mexican and US presidents were burned in effigy.

In addition to the electricians, contingents representing the National Labor Union, the unions that represent employees of the National Autonomous University, and the Metropolitan Autonomous University, the Nuclear Workers Union, the Teachers Union, the Health Workers Union, and Communications Union participated in the giant protest. Speakers from these unions called for the “unification of workers struggles to stop this government.”

The day before the protest, World Bank officials called for the privatization of Mexico’s energy sector, claiming that this was the only way to attract new capital to modernize and expand production. The next day, at a ceremony in Tabasco to introduce and sign his new book—*An Alternative National Project*—Obrador declared his opposition to the privatization of the oil industry.

United States

Oregon transit strike over wages and health benefits

Talks between Lane Transit District (LTD) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757 at the end of last week failed to resolve the strike by 200 drivers and mechanics that brought the Eugene-Springfield, Oregon, public bus system to a halt March 7.

LTD management wants to limit health savings accounts to \$700 a year for employees and their families, while the union wants the account to be set at \$1,200. On wages, LTD has offered 5.5 percent over the life of the contract as opposed to the union’s 6 percent demand.

Muslim workers stage work stoppage over attack on Islamic prayers on the job

Thirty Somali Muslim workers walked off their jobs at Dell Inc. last month after they were told by a manager they would have to choose between their faith or working at the computer maker’s plant in Nashville, Tennessee.

The workers, who operate forklifts and load cargo at the plant, are employed through a national staffing agency called Spherion. Initially, the workers had an understanding with Dell that permitted them to take a break at sunset to accommodate their prayer ritual. But in late October and November, the policy came under attack after a new manager, who also works for Spherion, told them they would no longer be able to pray.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act stipulates employers cannot discriminate and must accommodate workers’ religious beliefs as long as the accommodation does not cause undue hardship, such as loss of revenue.

Canada

Ottawa taxi drivers stage one-day protest

On March 9, some 1,300 Ottawa taxi drivers refused to accept passengers in a show of support for their colleagues at Capital Taxi and Blue Line Gloucester, who are in dispute with Coventry

Connections Inc. About 600 cabs participated in a protest convoy from the Ottawa suburb of Nepean to Coventry Connections’ offices in Ottawa. Most of the 65 drivers who work at Blue Line Gloucester have been locked out. They and the 218 drivers at Capital Taxi are fighting company takeaway demands. The employer wants to raise dispatch, license plate and car-rental fees and to gain the right to lay off drivers on 30 days’ notice and hire them from month to month.

Windsor Wal-Mart workers vote against forming union

In a vote held March 8, more than 200 workers at a Wal-Mart store in Windsor, Ontario, voted to reject a union certification bid by a margin of 74 percent. Had the Windsor Wal-Mart workers voted to join the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), their store would have become the third unionized Wal-Mart outlet in North America. Wal-Mart recently announced that in May it will close its Jonquière, Quebec, store—one of two Quebec outlets at which the UFCW has won union recognition. The department store giant claims that it is closing the Jonquière store because it is operating at a loss, but the closure announcement was made only after first-contract negotiations with the UFCW collapsed.

In the case of the Windsor Wal-Mart store, the UFCW has filed unfair labor practices charges with the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB). The UFCW brief notes that a decade ago Wal-Mart busted a union at another Windsor outlet and outlines management harassment tactics in the run-up to the March 8 vote. In 1997, the OLRB certified a union bargaining unit at a Windsor Wal-Mart after determining that management had intimidated workers during a union-organizing drive. However, the Tory government of Mike Harris changed the Ontario Labour Relations Act and removed the power of OLRB to automatically certify a union if employer intimidation is proved. This led to the UFCW unit being decertified.



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