

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 October 2005

Latin America

Thousands of workers protest in Colombia

On October 12 over 100,000 workers marched in Bogota to protest the reelection of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and the signing of a so-called Free Trade treaty between Colombia and the United States.

Colombia's labor federations, student and native organizations and parties of the left organized the demonstration.

The march took place in an atmosphere of police and military intimidation. Under the pretext that Colombian guerrillas allied to the Popular Armed Forces of Colombian (FARC) were planning a terrorist attack, police and army units virtually occupied the city and broke into the homes of more than 350 people, in a preemptive move against "sabotage," according to Police Chief Luis Gomez Heredia.

On the day of the march a death squad assassinated a native leader as he was readying to participate in the demonstration. Francisco Cuchillo was shot three times by a person armed with a rifle. He had been the object of repeated death threats. His father blamed his death on the Uribe regime.

Marcos Soto, also a native Colombian, had been killed two days earlier in another demonstration in Bogota. The 58-year-old activist appears to have choked on the tear gas that the police used to repress the protest. Fifteen others were injured in the incident, including several children. A police spokesperson confirmed the death, calling it an "accident."

Under pressure from Uribe, the Colombian Senate approved an unprecedented constitutional amendment that would permit him to succeed himself. Though the Supreme Court may yet reject the amendment as unconstitutional, the Senate vote ushered in a political crisis.

Commenting on the protest march, Uribe cynically declared that he did not blame the marchers for opposing his reelection because of the high levels of poverty gripping the country.

Colombian football strike aborted

A strike by Colombian football players did not take October 15 as planned after players were threatened with sackings and received death threats. Many were told that if they went on strike they would be blackballed from first division play.

Union Secretary Carlos Gonzalez Puche reported that he was personally threatened with having his head cut off. Gonzalez insists that the sources of the death threats are well known, as is their connection with Colombian football clubs. In an interview with the Colombian radio network Caracol he indicated that he and other union leaders have had to go into hiding for the last few days.

Four hundred players originally supported the strike, but because

of the above threats the union ended up allowing each player to individually decide whether or not to join the strike. Consequently, the walkout did not take place.

The Player's union had called the strike last Thursday, following a 100-day deadlock in negotiations over medical and pension benefits and players' demand for a share of gambling and television revenues to the clubs.

University strike in Brazil

About 150 university professors took over the offices of the Education Minister in Brasilia to press for a resolution to a 46-day strike by 8,000 professors at Brazil's federal universities. The professors are striking over wages.

The strikers are demanding a 50 percent raise together with changes in the wage scale and the creation of a new category at the top of the pay scale, associate professor. Currently the monthly base salary for a university professor is R\$701 (US\$312, €258); top pay is R\$1,308.

The strike continues while professors consider the government's latest offer, which, if spread across the board would provide an increase of 25 percent. The government proposal would increase the federal university budget by R\$500 million, short of the R\$2 billion initially demanded by the professors. Paulo Rizzo, vice president of the National Union of Docents of Higher Studies (ANDES), indicated that the strike would continue for that reason. The strike has shut down 31 of Brazil's 61 universities and polytechnic institutes.

Argentine oil workers threaten to strike

Last Friday, representatives of the Argentine Union Federation of Private Petroleum and Gas Industries (FASPYGP) threatened to walk out on a strike of indefinite duration this week over wages. The workers are demanding a 260 peso raise (US\$90) in their monthly wages. This would raise average wages to about 3,000 pesos a month.

Union leaders indicate that a recent wage increase for oil workers in the Patagonian provinces of Santa Cruz and Chubut left behind 25,000 workers in other oil-producing provinces, namely Rio Negro, Neuquen, Mendoza, Tierra del Fuego and Salta. The goal of the job action will be to bring those workers up to the higher wage.

FASPYGP Secretary Alberto Roberti indicated that the job action would result in fuel shortages within 48 hours of the beginning of the strike.

United States

Michigan nurses strike over staffing levels

About 445 nurses at the Ingham Regional Medical Center in Lansing, Michigan went on strike October 12 charging hospital management with maintaining low staffing levels that endanger

patient safety. Nurses regularly work 12-hour shifts and forgo lunch breaks. The Office of Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 459 charges the hospital mandates 16-hour shifts.

The union has not made an issue of wages in the current contract discussions. Ingham is offering wage increases of between 11.5 and 19 percent over the course of a three-year agreement. But the hospital is seeking to abolish the defined benefit pension plan for all new hires and replace it with a defined contribution plan. The union says the new plan would have a finite amount of money in it, which, once exhausted, would leave retirees without a pension.

Nurses have been angered by the fact that Ingham CEO Dennis Litos received a compensation increase of 59.6 percent between 2003 and 2004. Ingham is using temporary nurses to staff the hospital during the strike.

Negotiations cancelled in strike by Missouri county workers

Negotiators for Madison County in Missouri cancelled an October 14 bargaining session after 430 county workers from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 799 went on strike two days earlier. The two sides reached a general agreement over wages on a four-year agreement that called for a 3 percent increase in the first year followed by 2.5 percent increases in each of the subsequent three years.

But talks broke down over the county administration's demand that it would only cover 14 percent of health-care premiums, while the union was demanding the county cover 70 percent of the total. Local 799 represents clerical, technical and professional workers in the courts, health clinics and other county offices.

Sprint Nextel workers strike in four states

About 940 workers struck the local phone division of Sprint Nextel Corporation October 9 in Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina and Indiana. The company is demanding cuts in sick and disability benefits, premium pay for Sundays, the 401(k) program and an elimination of the cap on health-care premiums for workers who are members of the Communication Workers of America.

Sprint Nextel is currently using contractors, managers and replacement workers to maintain operations. The company plans to spin off its local phone division to a new company in the first quarter of 2006.

Survey finds high injury rates in poultry processing

A new survey by North Carolina's Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center indicates an increased rate of injuries among United States poultry workers. The report found injury rates as high as 70 percent among the most oppressive companies.

Through interviews with 200 poultry workers, mainly comprised of immigrants, almost half reported having pains in their arms and hands during the past month and 20 percent of that group of workers were unable to work due to pain during the previous year. About 60 percent of the workers reported having illnesses such as respiratory problems, skin irritations and injuries to body parts in the past month. Workers suffering from back and neck pain comprised 36 percent with one out of three workers from this particular group missing work over the course of the last year.

Sara Quandt, a researcher for the study, stated that while poultry processing is a dangerous occupation, "our findings indicate that

companies can take steps to improve safety—which can translate into fewer injuries for their workers." The injury rates from the study, on average, exceeded those rates reported by companies to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration.

Canada

Alberta meatpackers strike

About 2,100 employees at one of Canada's largest slaughterhouses went on strike October 12 in Brooks, Alberta, about 200 km southeast of Calgary. The strike comes after Tyson Foods, the company that owns the slaughterhouse, rejected a provincial arbitrator's settlement proposal. The issues in the first contract dispute that has been ongoing for months are wages, seniority, working conditions and benefits. The union representing the workers, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), is also accusing the company of trying to break the union.

The strike has already become violent when picketers clashed with managers and replacement workers who came by bus and attempted to cross the picket line.

Red Cross Home Support workers walk out

On October 11, Red Cross Home Support workers in Acadian Peninsula in New Brunswick went on strike, joining their coworkers from Bathurst and Cambellton. Workers in Bathurst, New Brunswick have been on strike since August 18 with Cambellton workers joining them October 4. All three groups are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4598. The main issue in these disputes is wages. According to a CUPE representative, the workers are fighting the provincial government's refusal to adequately compensate home care services, "deliberately keeping a group of women on the poverty line by paying low wages."

CUPE Local 4598 represents 300 Home Support Workers in seven municipalities, including the three now on strike. Their last contract expired three years ago.



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