

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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*The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

## **Sugarcane cutters strike in Colombia**

Colombian sugarcane cutters went on strike September 15 demanding better wages and working conditions. The 10,000 strikers belong to cooperatives that sell the cane to large sugar mills located in the Cauca Valley, in the country's southeast.

Workers have blocked access to some of the mills, preventing the distribution of ethanol stored in those facilities. On September 25 workers at two of the mills fought police. The latter claimed that war materiel was being stored at the mill. The union that represents the sugar workers (SINALCORTERO) rejected that accusation.

President Alvaro Uribe has declared that "dark forces," i.e., the Colombian Revolutionary Army (FARC), have infiltrated SINALCORTERO and are driving the strike. SINALCORTERO leader Cruz Montaña declared that there is absolutely no truth to the government's charge that union leaders met with FARC commanders, who told them to strike. Uribe is also demanding that the cooperatives, presently run by the workers, become labor brokers that provide wages and some benefits to the workers.

Government officials and at least one member of the national legislature claim that the FARC is infiltrating other Colombian unions and is prepared to launch mass labor protests in October. Colombian unions are organizing a national march to support striking sugarcane workers and striking court employees.

## **Colombian court clerks' strike continues**

A 29-day strike by 40,000 court employees who are members of the National Association of Judicial Branch workers (ASONAL) continued this weekend. The strikers remain firm in their demand that a never-enforced 1992 law that established parity between wages within the judicial branch be finally enforced.

On Friday, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe met

with union negotiators, but no agreement was reached. As of this writing, the continuation of the strike depends on the outcome of this weekend's vote on a government wage parity offer of \$50 million.

## **Buenos Aires paralyzed by suburban train strike**

Trains that connect the Argentine capital with its suburbs were stopped by a 24-hour protest strike last Wednesday. Train operators are demanding greater security measures in the wake of recent arson fires at stations and attacks from passengers enraged by the poor quality of service. The strike affected more than 1.2 million people that use the A suburban lines every day.

## **Sit-down strike at 132 factories in Uruguay**

Metal workers occupied 132 factories in Uruguay for 24 hours last Thursday to protest lack of resolution of claims for retroactive wage increases. The next day, transit workers carried out a partial strike from 5 p.m. to midnight over the same issue. The government wage council was supposed to make a decision last July.

## **Medical strike in Peru escalates**

In the wake of the collapse of negotiations with the government, public health doctors in Peru, who have been on strike for 11 days, decided on September 25 to escalate their walkout. Julio Vargas, president of the Peruvian medical federation (FMP), announced September 25 that doctors intended to release patients from public hospitals until they were completely empty.

Vargas indicated that doctors had decided on this measure by unanimous vote. Vargas categorized the government's latest offer of 1 million soles (US\$137,000) as an insult. The doctors have demanded 83 million soles to "begin to resolve this conflict."

## **Truckers in the Northwest strike for better health care**

About 600 truckers in Washington and Oregon working for Oak Harbor Freight Lines went on strike September 22 seeking better health care plans. Striking

worker Barney Farrell expressed his opposition to the company's current healthcare offer to KPTV in Portland: "They want to go to company plans that are going to be able to be changed at any time, which is unacceptable to us."

Oak Harbor Freight Lines has 32 terminals across the Northwest and about 1,300 total employees. A company representative indicated that the company would use replacement workers if it deems it necessary.

### **Workers strike Kansas wheat processing plant**

Members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 74D walked out on strike September 26 after failing to come to an agreement with MGP Ingredients, Inc. The contract covering the 148 workers at the company's Atchison, Kansas plant expired on August 31. Talks collapsed following a 17-day extension.

The UFCW has not revealed the issues in dispute. MGP Ingredients management claims that a "single issue" dealing with attendance led to the strike. According to the company, it suffered an \$11.7 million loss during its 2008 fiscal year.

MGP Ingredients operates two other plants in Kansas and a third in Pekin, Illinois that serves as a dual production facility to the struck plant in Atchison, allowing it to continue supplying its wheat products to customers. A company statement declared, "We will ultimately emerge from this current situation as a stronger, more efficient company in the long-run."

### **Edmonton strike against Maple Leaf Foods**

About 325 poultry workers in Edmonton, Alberta went on strike September 21 against Maple Leaf Foods. The company is currently at the centre of one of the largest ever nationwide food recalls. A listeriosis outbreak traced to products produced by the company has so far cost 18 lives.

Maple Leaf Food workers are demanding more paid clean-up time, which the company calls unnecessary. The workers, represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), are also seeking wage improvements on par with workers at a competing plant in the area. Their current base pay rate is \$15.82 an hour.

The plant has been closed as a result of the strike and no talks are currently scheduled.

Health inspectors found deadly listeriosis bacteria at the plant September 18. The company claims to have

since sanitized the plant. Canada's relatively lax standards for food safety are being blamed for this and other recent recalls of tainted meat.

### **Toronto area bus drivers on strike**

One hundred sixty-four drivers employed by a private contractor to the municipality of York Region adjacent to Toronto's north end went on strike last week after rejecting a contract by a margin of 61 percent. The pact had been accepted by union leaders only days before.

The striking drivers are represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and are employed by Veolia Transport, which operates Viva bus service over one third of the municipal routes in the York Region. The drivers are fighting for increased wages. Their pay is 20 percent lower than workers in Toronto. They also want improvements in sick leave and benefits.

The union is blaming the surprise strike, which affects over 35,000 commuters, on the company. However, workers overturned the tentative agreement when they learned that their union had only won benefits by cutting pay.

### **Toronto cemetery workers resume job action**

Two months after workers went on strike for four days, grounds workers once again walked off the job at Elgin Mills Cemetery north of Toronto in protest over the spraying of pesticides.

The 12 grounds workers, who are represented by the Canadian Service Workers Union, called in inspectors for the Ministry of Labour and were subsequently sent home. The company, Mount Pleasant Group of Cemeteries, insists that pesticide use is below "permissible levels."



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