

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

## **Colombian teachers protest**

Tens of thousands of urban public school teachers in the Department of Sucre, Colombia, took to the streets last Thursday against a government proposal to downgrade their health benefits. The teachers are represented by the Sucre Educators' Association, whose leaders oppose new legislation that would abandon the teachers' health program and instead affiliate them to a network of clinics.

The teachers are protesting recent teacher layoffs in Sucre. They are demanding government-paid uniforms for workers who earn less than two times the monthly minimum wage and for teachers who work in areas that are difficult to access. Sucre authorities claim the layoffs were made necessary by nationally mandated wage increases for education workers.

Sucre teachers also reject a decree that is supposed to evaluate teachers' competencies, but has resulted in wage cuts for new teachers.

The demonstration by Sucre teachers was part of a national day of protest organized by the Colombian Educators' Federation. At the same time, teachers rallied in front of municipal buildings across Columbia to demand the administration of President Alvaro Uribe and local authorities end attacks on their rights.

Sucre educators say they have been singled out for particularly harsh treatment. They point out that departmental authorities are out of control and routinely disregard labor rights and ignore public education.

On October 23, Colombian educators will join the rest of the labor movement in a 24-hour strike against the economic policies of the Uribe government and to demand decent health services for all.

## **Sugar cane cutters strike in Colombia**

A strike by 9,000 sugar cane workers in Colombia's Cauca department is now a month long, affecting the ethanol industry, the food industry, and paper production. The strike began on September 15. The sugar cane workers are demanding better wages and working conditions.

Cauca is located in southwest Colombia. Jose Oney Valencia, head of the July 14 Organization that is leading the strike, said the strikers are demanding sugar mills contract the workers directly. He said the workers are seeking transparent wage schedules and all the benefits provided for workers under

Colombian law. The strikers are also demanding a 40-hour workweek, with no overtime hours.

The cutters are currently paid by the ton. The monthly wage averages 450,000 pesos (US\$200), the Colombian minimum wage. Oney indicated that it is not unusual for workers to labor 13 hours a day, plus weekends and holidays.

A study done in Brazil, where workers work under similar conditions, concluded that on average a cane cutter makes 72,000 machete swings per day. According to the study carried out by the Episcopal Conference, this work has significantly increases the death rate for cane cutters compared to other workers.

On October 14, Colombian officials arrested and deported two French activists who were reporting on human rights violations in the cane fields. On October 18, Uribe denounced these journalists, as well as a German citizen deported on October 1, for "inciting violence ... being apologists for crime and for distorting truth."

"Instead of deporting them, we should have thrown them in jail," declared Uribe.

The journalists had been denied the right to a lawyer or to assistance from their consulate and were simply put on a plane and deported. Colombian union officials voiced their concern that the deportations signal an escalation in human rights violations against the strikers.

## **Antofagasta dock workers strike for 36 hours**

Four hundred longshore workers in the northern Chilean port of Antofagasta walked off their jobs for 36 hours last Wednesday and Thursday. The strike paralyzed the loading and dispatching of four ships. The strike ended when port officials agreed to negotiate with the stevedores over their wage demands and granted what union leaders claim was a 33 percent wage increase. Originally the port had made an offer of 17 percent. The port, located 1,400 kilometers north of Santiago, specializes in copper exports.

The work stoppage took place in the context of a dramatic fall in world copper prices, a consequence of the global financial crisis.

## **Ohio manufacturer issues ultimatum to strikers**

Management at American Standard Brands plant in Salem, Ohio issued an ultimatum over the weekend for striking workers to return to work on October 20. An official company statement read, "All employees who are interested in continuing to work are welcome to work and should report to

the plant at 8 a.m. on Monday regardless of their current shift. Employees who report to work at 8 a.m. on Monday will continue to receive wages and benefits as defined in the Company's last, best and final contract offer."

About 340 members of United Steelworkers Local 1538 rejected the company's final offer, which slashed wages by 5 percent, reduced the company's matching portion to 401(k) plans, and increased health care contributions to 25 percent. The addition of a profit-sharing plan was characterized by a union staff representative as possibly resulting in workers recovering 6 cents an hour after suffering \$1.60 an hour losses in wages and benefits.

The workers' three-year contract with the company expired September 30, 2008. Since then, local politicians and a federal mediator have gotten involved, but with no progress. The Steelworkers union plans to file a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board accusing the company of failing to bargain in good faith.

American Standard Brands was established last year after American Standard Companies sold off its kitchen and bath products division. The new owner, Bain Capital Partners LLC, then merged it with two other plumbing fixture companies—Crane and Eljer—to form a new entity.

#### **Strike at Kansas plant ends with contract extension**

Workers at the MGP Ingredients plant in Atchison, Kansas voted October 10 to end their two-week strike and return to work under the old agreement that expired last month. Under the procedure, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 74D agreed to extend the old contract covering the plants' 148 workers until August 31, 2009.

A company spokesman said the contract extension, "keeps the door open for ongoing communications between the company and the union local." While full details are not known, one of the proposals that led to the strike was MGP's attempt to implement new rules governing attendance policies.

The problems facing the grain products company appear to be much deeper than attendance. MGP lost \$11.7 million in the last year. At the company's annual meeting of stockholders last week, CEO Tim Newkirk revealed the company had faced "rising cost inputs" and "reduced selling prices" for ethanol. "Improving profit margins through cost cuts and business process improvements alone will not ensure our long-term viability," he said. "For each of our three business segments we will seek to retain only those 'links' in the value chain where we truly create value. Other areas will be considered for possible outsourcing."

#### **Fire department scapegoats dead worker for Hawaii oil tank explosion**

A fire department investigator last week assigned responsibility for a massive oil tank explosion at the Philip Services Hawaii facility in Honolulu to the 23-year-old welder who was killed on the job. A statement from the Honolulu Fire Department said that Sean Norva accidentally set off the

explosion October 7 while welding a metal footbridge atop a tank containing 8,000 to 9,000 gallons of reconditioned motor oil.

The blast hurled the tank over a concrete wall where it landed some 30 feet away. Norva was thrown 100 feet by the blast and died from internal injuries. Three other workers were injured in the explosion.

The fire department's report came out before Hawaii's Occupational Safety & Health division had determined the procedures that had been followed by Philip Services and the contractor hired to do the welding.

#### **Winnipeg Free Press workers on strike**

Workers at Winnipeg's largest daily newspaper went on strike October 13—a day before the Canadian federal election—over wages, benefits and job security.

Over 1,000 members of the Communications, Energy and Paper Worker Union, from editorial staff to carriers, are preparing for what their union says could be a long strike if a deal is not reached soon. Union members returned a strong strike mandate of 84 percent after their contract expired on October 1.

Some editors and reporters contributed to maintaining the newspaper's web site to cover the election. The publisher says the web site will operate throughout the strike. The strike also affected printing and distribution of the *National Post* and other community papers in the region.

A union spokesperson says workers are facing as many as 40 layoffs in the near term, as well as wage cuts for night shift workers because of pressure from majority shareholder interests.

#### **Aluminum workers strike in southern Ontario**

Eight-five workers employed by Accurcast Inc. in Wallaceburg, a few miles across the border from Detroit, Michigan, went on strike last week against a range of concession demands from the company.

Accurcast supplies aluminum die castings to the automotive and other industries and has been demanding wage cuts and other concessions from Canadian Auto Workers negotiators, who represent the striking workers. The workers have been without a contract since August 2007.



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