

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 October 2008

Colombia: National strike supports cane workers

On October 23, Colombia's central trade union federation (CUT) called a one-day national strike to support nine strikes by cane cutters and court employees. The CUT accused the Colombian government of declaring war on striking public and private sector workers.

About 9,000 sugar cane cutters in the Cauca region in southwest Columbia struck September 15. They are demanding improved wages and working conditions, including transparent wage schedules and a 40-hour workweek with no overtime.

On October 20, 32,000 court workers reached a tentative agreement after waging a 42-day strike. They are demanding improved wages and the independence of the judiciary from the executive branch.

The strike by cane cutters is part of a mobilization of indigenous people in the region who are demanding the government respect their territorial and human rights.

President Alvaro Uribe has denounced the protests in Cauca, claiming they are controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Earlier this month, Colombian security forces killed three indigenous people and injured hundreds of others involved in protests. Colombian officials also arrested and deported two French human rights activists reporting on conditions in the cane fields.

Puerto Rican teachers reject government-backed union

Vote totals released last week show Puerto Rico teachers voting by an 18,123-14,675 margin to reject a bid by the Puerto Rican Teachers Union (SPM), an

affiliate of the US-based Service Employees International Union (SEIU), to represent them.

The Puerto Rican government decertified the teachers' former union, the Teachers Federation of Puerto Rico (FMPR), after it launched a 10-day job action last February in defiance of anti-strike laws.

The FMPR actively campaigned for rejection of the SPM, which had the backing of the Puerto Rican government and the SEIU. FMPR leaders claimed the SEIU and SPM spent some \$20 million on the campaign. The government denied FMPR the right to a spot on the ballot and barred its observers from polling places.

Pittsburgh-area transit board imposes concessions contract

The Port Authority of Allegheny County unanimously voted to impose a concessions contract on the 2,200 drivers, mechanics and clerical staff that serve the greater Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area. The new agreement will slash labor costs by \$13 million over three years and will cut an estimated \$100 million-plus in coming decades through reductions in healthcare costs.

Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 85 President Pat McMahon declared, "I believe what they just did is illegal." The union plans on filing unfair labor practices charges with the state labor board.

Negotiations between the union and transit board began in the fall of 2007. The old agreement expired in June 2008, but the terms remained in place and the two sides failed to come to an agreement. The Port Authority estimated that it would run out of funding by early 2010 under the pressure of current wages and benefits. But Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato

withheld the \$27 million annual subsidy to the authority, which threatened to empty the coffers of the transit board as early as January 2009, bringing service to 220,000 daily riders to a halt.

Protests over low wages for janitors at Virginia Freddie Mac offices

Members of the SEIU picketed outside the offices of the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation's office in McLean, Virginia, to protest the low wages paid by its cleaning contractor, Golden Gate Services. Last month, SEIU Local 32BJ of New York filed an unfair labor practices charge on behalf of 40 workers at the Freddie Mac facility against the office-cleaning contractor.

Last year, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors approved a living wage of \$12.75 an hour for county employees primarily involved in janitorial work. Golden Gate Services pays some 100 workers on its payroll a mere \$7.00 an hour.

Construction worker killed in "homemade" aerial basket—OSHA

Investigators for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) called the aerial basket involved in the death of an immigrant construction worker last month "homemade." The basket was used to transport workers off the fourth floor of a Greenwood, Indiana, hotel project.

Jose Delgado, a 31-year-old tile worker, was riding in the basket when it came off the forks and fell to the ground. Delgado later died from his injuries. Accompanying Delgado at the time was his 13-year-old son, who survived

Antonio Torres, the driver of the forklift, told police he used a knife to start it.

represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which has more than 9,000 members in the province.

The union is seeking parity with other stores in the region owned by Loblaw on issues such as wages, seniority and scheduling. Many of the workers now on strike had their wages frozen in their last collective agreement eight years ago and are seeking wage increases of 3 percent in a new contract. Loblaw narrowly averted a strike at its stores in Saskatchewan earlier this month.



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Quebec grocery workers on strike

Close to 800 workers at 13 outlets of Maxi stores near Quebec City and in eastern Quebec went on strike October 22 after two-and-a-half years of unsuccessful negotiations for a new contract.

The Maxi stores forced to close as a result of the strike are owned by Loblaw Co. Ltd., the largest supermarket chain in Canada. Striking workers are