

Workers Struggles, the Americas

28 April 2009

Colombian truckers strike

On April 22, the Colombian Truckers' Association (ACC) went on strike. Over 80 percent of the 170,000 Colombian truckers affiliated with the ACC, which represents people who own and operate their own trucks, are currently observing the strike.

The ACC is demanding that Colombian shippers pay the drivers previously agreed-upon trucking fees. It is also demanding input into the importation of new trucks and the lowering of fuel prices. The government of President Alvaro Uribe has offered to reduce the price of oil by 400 pesos a gallon. This is a far cry from the \$1,500 pesos reduction that the truckers demand.

The business groups that represent the large shippers called on the government on Friday to adopt the necessary measures to re-establish highway transportation. The shippers charged that the strike is harming national industry, the sale of goods and the development of farming activity.

The Association of Colombian Coffee Exporters now fears that there will be major bottlenecks in the delivery of coffee to Colombian ports if the strike goes much beyond next week.

Argentine workers demand higher salaries

Bank employees walked off their jobs on April 22 upon receiving news that the banks refused to grant them a 25 percent salary increase. The walkout lasted five hours, and it affected banks and other financial firms across Argentina.

Eduardo Berrozpe, who heads the Bank Workers Association (AB) said that the banks refuse to fund any salary increases. He also pointed out that no negotiations are taking place. "Our demands are consistent with the very high profits of the banking sector in 2008," he said. "Their balance sheets are the best in 10 years, and their revenue has increased 84 percent. They can't tell us that they don't have any money." An AB press release indicated that 99 percent of the bank employees participated in the strike despite an order from the Labor Ministry imposing mandatory arbitration on the dispute.

Argentina: Oil workers union calls off protest strike

The Argentine Federation of Oil Workers Unions (FSTPA) cancelled a threatened one-day strike to protest thousands of layoffs and suspensions, which were in violation of "a social peace agreement" that had been signed with oil companies. The decision to call off the strike followed a last minute agreement with the oil company YPF and a government decree imposing mandatory arbitration.

In a paid ad published on Buenos Aires' major daily papers, the unions reported that "[S]ince the agreement was signed 120 days ago, 4,000 workers have been suspended and 1,000 workers have been laid off." The unions accuse the oil companies of operating at a fraction of their full capacity. "They feel no obligation with their workers or with the regions and provinces that they serve...these are the very same companies that ignore collective bargaining agreements at the same time that they distribute enormous bonuses that discriminate in favor of management," said the ad.

Argentine oil production is in decline in large part due to the refusal of the oil companies to make the necessary investments to develop new oil fields.

The "social peace agreement" mandated that the

companies maintain the wage levels and protect the jobs of 30,000 oil workers. In return, the union agreed to forgo wage increases and to establish a “dialogue committee” that would resolve management/labor issues throughout this year.

The mobilization and strike was set to take place in 6 Argentine oil provinces. Among the companies targeted were Repsol YPF, Petro Gas, and Total Austral, as well as refineries and oil fields owned by Shell and Exxon.

Government represses protests in Guatemala

On April 24, the Guatemalan government imposed a State of Prevention in the northern city of Huehuetenango in response to popular protests over trash collection and corruption. Several protesters have been wounded and several others were arrested. Workers and students occupied the municipal building demanding that Mayor Daniel Roblero step down for neglecting the provision of public services including trash collection, which they attribute to widespread corruption.

The State of Prevention limits constitutional guarantees such as free movement, public rallies and strikes in public services. President Álvaro Colom imposed the measure last Thursday and it is set to last 15 days.

Ohio machinist strike ends

Workers at the SK Hand Tools plant in Defiance, Ohio, ended their 23-day strike against wage, seniority and benefit cuts after voting to accept a new contract. Few details of the new contract were available, but according to officials of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 1356, which represents the 70 striking workers, the new agreement was an improvement over the company’s initial offer that caused the strike. SK Hand Tools management indicated that 60 percent of the workers would not see wage reductions. However, workers would be required to make contributions to maintain life insurance, and any cost increases to health insurance would require increased contributions from workers.

The return to work by IAM members occurred one day

after management took applications at a local hotel for 70 temporary workers to fill in for striking union members.

B.C. care aides on strike

Sixty workers at the long term care facility the Gardens in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island went on strike last weekend after serving a second strike notice. Their first strike notice had been challenged by their employer, Pro Vita. The management company is subcontracted by the largest housing provider of its kind in Canada, Chartwell Seniors Housing REIT.

The workers, who are represented by the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU), provide personal care to resident seniors at the facility and are fighting for wage parity with similar facilities in the region that pay as much as \$4 an hour more. In addition, the union says that there are serious staff shortages that make proper care almost impossible. Their last contract expired in August of last year.

At the end of March the company issued layoff notices to the workers, prompting the strike vote. The workers then voted overwhelmingly to reject the latest offer from the company, which was the same one they rejected last October.

Negotiations have broken down, with Pro Vita claiming that the funds provided by its contract with Chartwell don’t allow for a wage increase.



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