

# Workers Struggles, the Americas

1 June 2010

## Paraguay: Bus drivers call work stoppage

Bus drivers in Paraguay's capital, Asunción, struck on May 27, blocking traffic on the city's two main access roads. Picketers impeded passage of the few buses that were carrying passengers to the city center. Riot police, numbering close to 4,000, intervened when some strikers threw rocks at vehicles. "More than 30 people were detained, accused of carrying out acts of violence," commissioner Obdulio Diarte told *infobae.com*.

Seven bus drivers' unions in Asunción and surrounding areas support the strike. It is the first major strike to confront president Fernando Lugo, who was elected last year. The strike takes place in the context of battles between the Lugo administration and the opposition Colorado Party, which holds a legislative majority.

Although the second day of the strike transpired without disturbances, César Ruiz Díaz, director of the transport owners' association, Cetrapam, urged the government not to negotiate with the bus drivers, calling them "delinquents" who vandalize buses and use "asphalt terrorism." Ruiz Díaz added that the strikers "are members of EPP of the streets." The EPP is the Paraguayan People's Army, a guerrilla grouping formed in 2008.

Miguel Zayas, secretary of the Federation of Transport Workers, told AP that "we asked the government for a 15 percent raise in the minimum salary and it did not respond, we want better labor conditions in the enterprises, medical and retirement insurance, and the qualifying of new transport companies."

## Electrical workers' hunger strike continues in Mexico City

Five members of Mexico's electrical workers' union, who are engaged in a hunger strike, were taken to the hospital last week. They are part of a group of 80 workers who have held a collective fast at Mexico City's Plaza de la Constitución since last month in protest over the dissolution of the state-owned Central Light and Power (LFC) by presidential decree in October 2009. In addition, 13 workers in Toluca have joined the hunger strikers.

From the start the union, SME, refused to call for industrial action to oppose the mass terminations, instead staging isolated and ineffective protests.

After the Federal Police closed down LFC on October 10, the government offered the workers a settlement payment to persuade them to accept the liquidation. "However," according to *La Jornada*, "at the end of the year, almost 18,000 workers—out of a workforce of more than 44,000—decided not to collect and to remain in struggle," with some claiming unjustified termination and demanding their reinstatement in CFE, the Federal Electricity Commission, which took over LFC.

The SME challenged the takeover in district court, but the court upheld it. The case is now awaiting a decision by the Supreme Court.

## Argentine motorcycle couriers march, stage protest

A group of more than 200 motoqueros—i.e., motorcycle couriers—marched to the Buenos Aires city legislature on May 27 to protest a proposed law that would require them to wear identification vests when making deliveries in the downtown district. The motoqueros claim that the vests are discriminatory and risky because they could be stolen and used by criminals.

The march was organized by the Independent Union of Messengers and Cadets (SIMECA), an affiliate of the CTA labor federation. A number of other unions and organizations supported the march as well. The march forced the postponement of a special legislative session that was to have passed the law. The session had been pushed by the so-called macristas, a bloc aligned with the city's right-wing mayor, Mauricio Macri.

In addition to the law requiring ID vests—which would be imprinted with the motorcycles' license numbers—the marchers protested a law that prohibits two people on the same motorcycle in the microcentro, where banking activity is concentrated.

## Minnesota and California nurses set June 10 strike date

Some 25,000 nurses in California and Minnesota are scheduled,

separately, to carry out one-day strikes June 10 that would represent the largest nurses' strike in US history if contract issues cannot be resolved. The leading issue for nurses is the establishment of safe nurse-to-patient ratios. Medical studies have shown that increased workloads for nurses have undermined patients' health.

In Minnesota, where 12,000 nurses at six hospital systems are seeking safe staffing ratios, members of the Minnesota Nurses Association have rejected hospital management's demand for "flexibility." Meanwhile, in California, where state legislation has already established guidelines for nurse-to-patient ratios, the 13,000 members of the California Nurses Association want improved ratios.

Nurses in Minnesota are also opposing cuts that would reduce pensions by up to one third of their current value. The union insists that pensions have been a major factor in maintaining a workforce with veteran nurses while attracting new nurses to the field, thereby maintaining quality patient care.

### **Latino drywall workers win class action lawsuit in Minnesota**

Latino workers won a class action lawsuit May 24 against Mulcahy Inc., Minnesota's largest drywall contractor. The 41 workers, employed between early 2004 and the middle of 2009, filed numerous complaints, including being paid below minimum wage, being paid less than their non-Latino counterparts, working overtime without proper compensation, and receiving no benefits.

Under a decision by a US district court judge, if Mulcahy makes payments by January 15, the minimal amount awarded, before lawyers' fees, is \$2.5 million. The award could increase to as much as \$6 million contingent upon the time it takes for the company to make payment.

As much as one third of the award will be allocated to the plaintiffs' law firm and the rest would be divided among the 41 workers. Some of the workers still reside in Minnesota while others have moved to South or Central America in order to find work. Mulcahy has annual sales of \$18.4 million.

### **Minnesota utility workers end strike**

Workers who labor for the Public Utility Commission in Hibbing, Minnesota, ended their three-day strike May 29. The 80 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 94 walked out over wages, medical benefits and management's use of worker evaluations.

The strike left some residents of the northern Minnesota city without water, with management unable to resolve the issue. Details of the final settlement have not been made public.

### **New Brunswick school workers on hunger strike**

Education support staff in Fredericton, New Brunswick, began a five-day hunger strike May 24 to protest the slow pace of contract talks that have dragged on for over a year.

Thirty-three hundred educational and clerical support workers in New Brunswick schools are fighting for an increase in their number of hours, which currently do not provide them with a living wage or sufficient eligibility for Employment Insurance. Their annual salary averages well below the poverty line of C\$17,000, and the government is proposing a wage freeze. Few of the workers have benefit or pension plans.

With the hunger strike, the workers, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are linking their struggle to the plight of schoolchildren, many of whom come to school hungry and can't stay the whole day at school due to cuts to support staff.

### **Newfoundland support workers vote to strike**

Employment support workers in Newfoundland, who assist with job placement and other needs for the disabled, voted to strike last week. Despite the vote, their union, the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE), has postponed strike action pending further talks with the provincial government.

The 34 workers affected have been without a contract since March of last year. New hires make only minimum wage or even less, so one of the key issues in negotiations is wages. They are also fighting for parity in pay and job classifications with their counterparts in Labrador, who have been on strike since November.



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