

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Deaths, detentions, repression in wake of Panamanian labor law

The recent passage of draconian labor laws by the government of Panamanian President Roberto Martinelli has sparked protests around the country. Police have reacted violently, resulting in deaths, serious injuries and detentions.

Early last week, banana workers blockaded the roads to and from the Atlantic city of Changuinola in the Bocas del Toro Province to protest the laws, one of which removed the obligation of businesses to pay a union wage and allowed the use of scabs in case of a strike.

According to a communiqué by the banana workers union FRENADESO as reported in *El Ciudadano*, police killed at least six (mainstream media say two) and injured more than 100 protesters, some gravely, when they attacked the protesters, who were demanding the repeal of Ley 30 (Law 30). In addition, dozens of protesters were detained.

Ley 30, known as the “Ley Chorizo” (chorizo is pork sausage) “criminalizes the right to demonstrate and further amended labor and environmental aspects of Panama,” according to TeleSUR. Another law, Ley 14, known as the Ley Carcelazo (Jailhouse Law), allows for the arrest and jailing of protesters who block highways.

The FRENADESO communiqué noted that in Colón and Panamá, where expansion of the Panama Canal is taking place, “more than 70 workers striking for salaries, working conditions, and against Ley 30 were fired. Police took the workers off the bus, handed them termination papers and gave back the petitions that workers had given to the “United for the Canal” consortium. Likewise, so far 28 workers on the project against whom the antidemocratic Ley 14 was applied are detained.” The canal workers are members of the Suntracs construction workers union.

Riot police have used tear gas and grapeshot to break up protests.

Samuel Quintero, an official with the Sitraibana banana workers union, told TeleSUR that area residents have complained to the media that police forces have entered and attacked the houses of citizens, including women,

Similarly, the deaths of several children, allegedly at the hands of police, have been reported. “Many, many children have died...we have witnesses where they are recording the dead children,” Quintero said.

The US Embassy in Panama has sent out warnings to US citizens living in Panama: “U.S. citizens already in Changuinola or in any other area where there are demonstrations should exercise extreme caution, keep a low profile, and avoid crowds, public demonstrations and other civil disturbances.”

Martinelli has remained intransigent on the laws, claiming that Law 30 does not affect labor rights. The president stated that “we must seek dialogue and not confrontation, as many leaders have tried to sow chaos in Changuinola and the Government will not allow.”

Shortly afterwards, reported TeleSUR, “the Security Minister of Panama, Jose Raul Mulino, confirmed on Sunday the arrest of over a hundred trade unionists and strikers who were wounded in the streets, after participating without any act of violence in a meeting of social and trade union organizations which called a general strike for next Tuesday.”

Pablo Neruda Foundation workers strike in Chile

Workers at the Fundación Pablo Neruda struck on Friday, July 6. The foundation maintains three homes where the Chilean poet resided—in Valparaíso, Santiago and Isla Negra—as museums.

Workers’ demands include a wage raise, travel allowance, training for all personnel and a raise in vacation pay.

In addition, trade union organizations have criticized the foundation’s lack of “cultural management to develop efficient policies that allow sustainable economic progress” and “poor administration,” which could not overcome the economic losses of the foundation during the past four years.

Fernando Sáez, executive director of the foundation, disputed the mismanagement charge, claiming that “the wages of workers have been adjusted by 22 percent over the past two years, it is not little.” Although the “La Chascona” house in Santiago is not

unionized, the workers there participated in negotiations and struck as well. Neruda's birthday is July 12.

Murder of Mexican journalist sparks protest march

Following the shooting death of editor and reporter Hugo Olivera on Tuesday, several dozen journalists marched to the state legislature in Morelia, the state capital of Michoacan, in protest. Olivera's body was discovered with three gunshot wounds in his pickup truck early Tuesday near Apatzingan.

The purpose of the march was to bring attention to the perils faced by news professionals in the state, where drug cartels are engaged in power struggles over the shipment of cocaine and crystal methedrine. In addition, according to EFE news service, the western state "is also home to sizable plantations of marijuana and opium poppies."

EFE added that "the past eight months have witnessed Olivera's murder and the disappearance of two other news professionals." The murder is the 6th this year of journalists in Mexico and the 63rd in the last 10 years. Four journalists have disappeared in Michoacan alone since 2003.

Although Olivera's death and the deaths of other journalists in Mexico are usually attributed to drug cartels, Olivera filed a complaint last year with the state Human Rights Commission against the police after they dealt him a severe beating.

Olivera's office was broken into and ransacked after his body was found, and the hard drive was removed from his computer.

The National Human Rights Commission stated that Olvera's murder "confirms that freedom of expression in Mexico is experiencing one of the most critical phases in recent years."

Delaware and Maryland power workers end strike over pensions

Utility workers ended their 12-day strike and returned to work June 30 after narrowly ratifying a new three-year agreement with Delmarva Power and Conectiv Energy of Delaware and northeastern Maryland. The 760 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers voted by a 349-321 margin to ratify pension concessions, a margin so narrow that several workers demanded a recount.

Initially, the company had sought to reduce pensions for all workers under the age of 50 or those with less than 25 years seniority. The new contract calls for employees with 20-24 years of seniority to get pension contributions based on 100 percent of base pay and only 75 percent of overtime, while workers with less than 20 years will only receive contributions based on base pay

using a smaller multiplier than more senior workers.

Food warehouse strike ends

Workers at Shaw's Supermarket warehouse in Methuen, Massachusetts, ratified a new four-year contract June 8, bringing a four-month strike by more than 300 workers to an end. Details of the settlement were not available, but according to Shaw's management, the new agreement provided a wage increase while hiking health care contributions for workers.

Members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 791 originally rejected a 4.2 percent wage increase and a health insurance proposal that would have cost an average \$28 a week for workers enrolled in the family option. UFCW officials released a statement saying the new contract would allow management the flexibility to "address changing business conditions."

The UFCW isolated the warehouse strikers from another 5,500 members of the local who work at 36 Shaw's grocery stores in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Maine, limiting support to demonstrations and a consumer boycott.

Strike vote at Loblaw

Some 30,000 workers at Ontario-based Loblaw Companies Ltd. stores voted by a 97 percent margin July 12 to authorize a strike against the supermarket chain if negotiations fail. Conciliation talks facilitated by the Ministry of Labour between Loblaw and the United Food and Commercial Workers broke off in June with no settlement. Workers have been in a legal strike/lockout position since Saturday.

Loblaw is demanding workers accept a 25 percent pay cut and other concessions, including an increase in waiting time for benefits eligibility, a reduction in the number of full-time jobs and the imposition of onerous "availability-for-work-rules" on part-time employees.

A UFCW spokesman said that Loblaw is attempting to reduce pay and benefits to the level of its Real Canadian Superstore. Talks between Loblaw and the UFCW are set to resume July 19.



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