

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 August 2010

## Mexico City marchers demand end to violence against journalists

About 1,000 people marched in Mexico City on August 24 to demand an end to threats and violence against journalists, including kidnapping, murder, and disappearances. The march was the latest in a number of protest actions organized in various Mexican cities by the National Journalists Front for Freedom of Expression (FNPLE), which includes four media unions, as well as press foundations and attorneys. A statement by the group decried the "atmosphere of affronts and violence" and urged the administration of Felipe Calderón to take forceful action to defend freedom of the press.

Since the coming to power of the Calderón government in 2006, "violent aggression" against journalists has "multiplied in an alarming fashion," with more than 60 journalists murdered and 11 missing since 2000, the group claims. In July alone, Reporters Without Borders reported the murders of two journalists, the disappearance of one, the kidnapping of four, and the fleeing to the US of one who feared for his life.

"Threats, intimidation, kidnappings and attacks on communications media...have become a common practice, mainly among the security forces and serving politicians," the FNPLE statement noted. "Organized crime, especially, has shown no mercy" toward reporters in Michoacán, Guerrero, Chihuahua, Coahuila and Durango, among other states."

Last week, in Ciudad Juárez, known as the nation's murder capital, UN special rapporteur Frank LaRue met with 20 media workers to discuss the crisis. He was asked by the group to declare journalism a "high-risk occupation."

Mexico is not alone in Latin America as a dangerous place in which to work as a journalist. In post-coup Honduras, as well as in the US client state of Colombia, government forces and paramilitary death squads have often singled out reporters for violent reprisals.

## Puerto Rican teachers carry out one-day strike

A 24-hour teachers strike August 26 stopped classes throughout Puerto Rico's school system. Called by the teachers' unions UNETE and FMPR, the strike was supported by parents and students who stayed away in large numbers. The strike was followed by a march on the capitol building, where various union functionaries spoke.

The strike takes place in the context of the implementation of Law 7, legislation backed by Governor Luis Fortuño that is ostensibly aimed at spurring Puerto Rico's economic growth. In reality, Law 7 has been used to undercut and override labor laws, lay off public sector workers and

speed the privatization of public services, including education. The law has already resulted in massive layoffs in the school system's non-teacher workforce.

UNETE and FMPR, which are aligned with the opposition Popular Democratic Party, "warned that if the government does not meet the teachers' demands they will call for an open-ended strike starting in October," according to *Efe*.

## Chile: Public employees strike to protest layoffs

In an action called by the public employees' union ANEF, some 80,000 Chilean public employees struck for 24 hours on August 26 to protest the dismissal of over 2,500 public sector workers by the right-wing government of Sebastián Piñera since it took office last March.

According to the news service *Efe*, "The ANEF protest enjoys support from Chile's biggest labor organization, the CUT, as well as from teachers and associations representing high school and college students." Raul de la Puente, ANEF president, told *Efe* that contrary to government claims, "clerks, messengers, drivers, technicians and professionals," and not only political appointees, were affected by the layoffs.

Actions in support of the strike included a protest by civil aviation and customs employees at Santiago's international airport, and a work stoppage at the Palacio de la Moneda, seat of the Chilean presidency, where Piñera had previously announced plans to lay off about 100 employees. Workers at the Contemporary Art Museum in Santiago raised a giant sign and waved flags before marching.

## Honduran teachers union, government sign accord after month-long strike

Negotiators for the COLPROSUMAH teachers' union and the Honduran government of Porfirio Lobo Sosa reached an agreement on Saturday, after a strike involving tens of thousands of teachers.

Among the outstanding issues reportedly resolved in the 17-point accord was the payment of approximately \$194 million in past due payments to the teachers' pension and benefit fund, known as the Inprema. Negotiations had broken down numerous times over the Inprema, as well as the teachers' demand for the dismissal of Minister of Education Alejandro Ventura and other officials.

After the latest breakdown, the situation turned increasingly violent when Honduran police tear-gassed and beat teachers who attempted to blockade streets in Tegucigalpa. The confrontations, which involved over 4,000 teachers, lasted two days.

The weeks of the protracted strike saw attempts by the media to discredit the teacher' action, accusing educators of intransigence and disregard for children's welfare. Violence and vandalism, as well as agent provocateurs—one of whom confessed before a group of thousands—were used against the teachers. On Friday, a gang of thugs known as the Cobras brutally beat a group of teachers.

Details of the agreement had not been revealed as of Saturday. According to *hondurasweekly.com*, "Public school students affected by the strike are scheduled to return to their classrooms on Monday."

#### **New talks slated in strike by Washington State Coca-Cola delivery workers**

Coca-Cola and the union representing drivers who deliver Coca-Cola to stores around Seattle and Tacoma, Washington, are slated to resume talks this week. The 500 members of Teamsters Local 117 are entering the second week of a strike in protest over Coca-Cola's attempt to eliminate health care for retirees and increase health insurance costs for current employees.

At the end of last week, Coca-Cola yanked health care coverage for strikers and their families, claiming that since workers refused to work, they were not obligated to continue coverage. The union has filed a class-action lawsuit against the move. The strikers involved work out of Coca-Cola operations in Aberdeen, Bellevue, Bremerton, Fife, Marysville and Tacoma.

#### **California garbage haulers strike in support of clerical workers**

Some 400 solid waste drivers and other personnel walked out in a sympathy action to support the demand that Allied Waste Industries begin serious negotiations with recently organized clerical workers. The 48-hour strike, which began August 25, halted garbage collection for 11 cities in San Mateo County, California.

Teamsters Local 350, which represents all the striking workers at Allied Waste, says that the 40 clerical workers are predominantly female and that the company refuses to offer wages and benefits comparable to that received by their male counterparts. The union has been negotiating for eight months in an effort to reach an agreement.

Allied Waste Industries is a Fortune 500 company that operates in 37 states and Puerto Rico. It is the second largest waste management company in the United States, with annual revenues over \$5 billion and assets of nearly \$14 billion.

#### **Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians authorize strike**

Members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) voted Saturday to reject management's contract proposals and authorize a strike if necessary. The contract for the 84 musicians expired at midnight on

Sunday. No further talks are set.

The players face draconian concession demands. Management presented two contract proposals— Proposal A and Proposal B. Under Proposal A, musicians would take a 29 percent cut in their base salary, along with reductions in their health care coverage and pensions. Proposal B, to be implemented if Proposal A is rejected, would impose even more drastic cuts. The musicians union has proposed its own pay cut of 22 percent.

Haden Mckay, a DSO cellist and spokesman for the musicians, said that a strike would not take place immediately. According to a statement posted on the musicians' website, because management failed to file notices required by the National Labor Relations Board, the DSO will be required to continue terms of the expired contract until September 23.

#### **New Brunswick hotel workers strike**

Around 100 workers at the Delta Brunswick hotel in downtown Saint John went on strike last Saturday when talks broke down the day before.

The workers who won their first contract four years ago under the United Steelworkers union have been without a contract for almost two months. Workers affected include housekeeping and kitchen staff, as well as maintenance workers who are facing demands for increased workloads from management. The striking employees are seeking improvements in wages and benefits, as well as fair union representation in the workplace.

Fortis Properties, which owns the hotel, has vowed to keep it open during the strike. No contract talks are currently scheduled.

#### **Malt workers strike in Calgary**

Sixty-nine workers at Canada Malting in Calgary, Alberta, went on strike last week in a bid to keep their existing pension plan, under attack by the company as it prepares to close the plant.

The workers, who are members of the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW), voted 80 percent against a contract proposal, which would significantly reduce the pensions of many of the workers slated to lose their jobs.



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