

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 September 2010

Colombian flower workers maintain strike in face of police violence

Last week, workers at the Agrícola Guacarí flower plantation in the Colombian town of Tocancipá—in the central department of Cundinamarca—entered the third week of their strike over a number of issues including the company’s nonpayment of benefits and salaries and the firing of workers. They have maintained their strike despite a violent attack by police on September 18.

Agrícola Guacarí—also known as Sunburst Farms—is owned by Colombia’s powerful Nannetti family, which purchased it from Dole Fresh Flowers in 2009. The firm is one of the world’s largest exporters of flowers, mainly to Europe and the US. Despite reporting strong profits this year, the company has recently delayed payments of pensions, family allowances, social security and salaries.

Workers’ grievances came to a head on September 7, when the company fired seven workers who were members of the flower workers union Sintraguacarí. The employees, most of whom are women, walked out. There are now about 1,500 workers engaged in the strike.

On September 10, delegates of the CUT federation and a number of floral workers’ unions met with Colombia’s minister of social protection, a meeting that produced no results.

On September 18, about fifty police dressed in riot gear approached a picket line at the plantation and attacked picketers with clubs, tear gas, pepper spray and fists. A number of the predominantly female strikers were handcuffed to fences and some were reportedly beaten while handcuffed. The police then cleared the road and escorted plantation trucks onto the property (follow link to see video of confrontation).

In a recent communiqué, Aidé Silvia Mateus, president of Untraflores, a group of independent flower workers unions to which the Agrícola Guacarí workers belong, denounced the attacks. She pointed out that the police commander of the department of Cundinamarca, Fabio Alejandro Castañeda, had told Caracol Radio that the strike was peaceful and was not obstructing the road, “the fallacious pretext utilized by the police to attack the defenseless workers.”

Argentina: Paraná Metal workers return to blockades after talks fail

Paraná Metal auto parts factory workers went back to blockading thoroughfares in and around the Buenos Aires and Rosario areas after the failure of negotiations on September 24. In a September 25 statement, spokesperson for the UOM metalworkers union said that they waited for over two hours at the Labor Ministry headquarters for company representatives to show up to sign a “pre-accord” that had been reached on September 24. The company negotiators never came.

The conflict at Paraná Metal began in August when the new owner, casino and oil speculator Cristóbal López, fired 600 of the plant’s 960

workers and unilaterally slashed wages. Since then, workers have carried out blockades of sections of the Buenos Aires-Rosario freeway while negotiations between employees’ delegates and the company have gone through fits and starts. On September 16, UOM workers joined a “National Day of Struggle” mobilization that included a number of unions (See: September 21 Workers Struggles).

The union’s website had announced on the morning of September 24 that a one-year agreement (pre-accord) had nearly been reached, and negotiations would continue during the life of the temporary agreement. The pre-accord would have included “rotating suspensions” of 600 workers and a required training course (paid for by the workers). The announcement was tempered by the admission of “pessimism” in the union negotiators’ ranks and a Labor Ministry official’s expressions of “doubts about the viability” of the plant.

The September 25 statement said that, “[I]n the face of this irresponsible attitude of management, which implies a mockery of the good faith of the workers and ministry functionaries, we are resolved to maintain and deepen the blockades.”

Mexican university employees union calls for strike

The Union of National Autonomous University of Mexico Workers (STUNAM) has called for a strike on November 1. The union, which represents more than 24,000 workers, is demanding changes in clauses in their collective bargaining agreement and a 20 percent salary hike.

The call for a strike is a response to the deterioration of purchasing power and is being put forward at a time when the national congress is discussing the federal budget for 2011.

Earlier this month, STUNAM General Secretary Agustín Rodríguez Fuentes denounced the labor policy of the government, which has cancelled labor contracts, such as those of airline workers, electricians and miners.

Mexico: Fired steelworkers begin hunger strike

Three ex-employees of Altos Hornos de Mexico (AHMSA), a steel maker based in the northern state of Coahuila, began a hunger strike on September 24 to protest the pressure that the company is putting on the

company's employees to abandon their current union and join one promoted by AHMSA. The firm currently has around 6,000 employees.

Over 40 workers have been fired for their support of the current union, SNTMMSRM, according to one of the hunger strikers. SNTMMSRM is headed by Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, the embattled general secretary who currently lives in Canada after fleeing corruption charges, which his supporters claim were fabricated and politically motivated.

The hunger strikers, ranging from 16 to 24 years of age, blamed the company for the violence that has broken out between the rival unions in the last three years. Miguel Cuéllar, one of the fasters who was fired on September 20, claimed that he and other "napistas" (supporters of Napoleón) have been attacked by workers who are egged on by the company.

In 2008, Alonso Ancira Elizondo, the steel mill's owner, made known his rupture with Gómez Urrutia and SNTMMSRM, and the company has attempted to dislodge the union and install another one ever since. Cuéllar claims that AHMSA's management has rewarded anti-SNTMMSRM workers with bonuses and payments of up to 50,000 pesos (US\$4,000).

The hunger strikers have sent letters to Coahuila's Governor Humberto Moreira and to President Felipe Calderón asking for support. They resolved to continue fasting until they are heard. According to *Proceso*, "[T]hey fear for their safety and need the citizenry to observe the situation and find out about the excesses that occur at the steel mill."

Talks to resume in Pennsylvania teachers' strike

The Allegheny Valley School District and the union representing its 94 teachers have agreed to a mediator's request to resume negotiations September 27. Members of the Allegheny Education Association (AVEA) have been on strike since September 16 after rejecting two proposals from the school district.

The school district says it has offered AVEA members average annual raises of 3.5 percent over the span of a four-year contract. It claims the union is pressing for a 6.2 percent annual raise. The AVEA disputes the board's characterization of their offer, but has declined to make its bargaining position public.

The two sides are also supposed to have differences over teachers' contributions to healthcare. A state fact-finder has proposed that teachers keep their contribution towards healthcare at the current rate of 2 percent of their salaries during the first year of a new agreement, with subsequent annual increases of 3 percent, 5 percent and 6 percent.

According to Pennsylvania State Education Association official Butch Santicola, the strike will continue while the two sides resume discussions. "I would not categorize this as a bargaining session," Santicola told the *Valley News Dispatch*. "The mediator called the meeting. That's all this is—a meeting." Pennsylvania state law requires that teachers end their strike by October 15 in order to conform to the state's requirement that students receive 180 days of instruction by June 15 of next year.

Twin Cities Transit workers reject contract offer

Transit workers in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, voted by 61

percent to reject a new concessions package offered by negotiators for Metro Transit. The Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 did not set a strike date for its 2,300 members, as both sides waited for a mediator to propose new negotiations.

According to Local 1005, the most recent offer is only a slight improvement over last month's offer that was voted down by 98 percent. WCCO radio reported that besides a wage freeze, management's new two-year proposal reduced workers' contributions from last month's increase of 14.5 percent down to 11 percent.

Management is also demanding the right to reopen the contract in the second year and reconsider the amount that they contribute to health care premiums. Metro Transit is pointing to a \$5.8 billion state budget deficit to back its demands for concessions.

Saskatchewan college staff on the picket line

Ahead of any further job action, workers at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIASST) in Saskatoon took to the picket line last week to protest the slow pace of negotiations and the terms they are being offered in a new contract.

Academic and support staff in two bargaining units have been without a contract at the Kelsey campus for 14 months. They are being offered a four percent wage increase over four years, which their union, the Saskatchewan General Employees Union (SGEU) says still leaves them well below what their counterparts are paid at the University of Saskatchewan. The union was asking for wage increases totaling 18 percent over the same period.

SGEU is saying that an all out strike may yet be called, but that they hope a deal can be reached in ongoing negotiations.



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