

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 October 2010

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## Chilean pharmacy workers in third week of strike

Over 3,500 employees of Chilean pharmacy chain Farmacias Ahumada continued their strike and pickets at store locations nationwide. Holding banners and picket signs, striking employees demonstrate daily and talk to customers about their demands.

The strike, which began October 5, was launched to demand that the company pay the legal minimum wage, about US\$350 per month. Currently, the starting base salary is about US\$65 plus commissions. In addition, as employee Valerie Oremos told the *Santiago Times*, “We have worked for many years without bonuses and without the benefits that the company gives its managers.”

Farmacias Ahumada made about US\$18.5 million in profits in 2009 and garnered US\$14 million in the first half of 2010, according to the website of the Unión Nacional de Empleados de Farmacias Ahumada No. 1.

Farmacias Ahumada is owned by the Mexican chain Casa Saba, the largest pharmaceutical chain in Latin America, which advertises heavily on Chilean television channels. The union claims that the strike has gotten little TV coverage because of the advertising revenue they receive from the drugstore chain.

The company did receive some media attention last year when it was exposed for engaging in price-fixing.

## Guyana: Sugar workers carry out one-day strike

Sugar workers at the Guyana Sugar Corporation (Guysusco) plantation in Guyana walked off the job for one day on October 18. The workers, members of the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU), were demanding a 15 percent wage hike. According to AP, “The nationwide strike by

Guyana’s sugar workers is the fourth walkout over wages since August 2008.”

The strike involved over 10,000 employees of the state-run firm, according to GAWU. The sugar industry in Guyana has been hit by a number of setbacks in the last few years, among them severe flooding in 2005, the fall in the price of sugar from US\$830 to US\$530 in recent years and severe weather this year. Earnings from sugar exports have declined since 2008 from US\$57 million to US\$47 million in 2009 and a continued decline in progress for 2010.

GAWU’s president Komal Chand criticized the company for breaking with custom by not telling workers this month whether there would be a wage increase. Referring to the workers’ “dilemma” between wage concerns and worrying about the strike’s impact on the sugar industry, Chand told demerarawaves.com, “I am worried, but what do we do?... We cannot fold our hands and allow the workers’ interest and rights not to be recognized; we have to have a balance.”

Guysusco management has refused to discuss salaries with the union, instead demanding that the workers fulfill production quotas first before any talks can proceed.

## Panamanian journalists protest threats by government

Chanting “Journalists united will never be defeated,” a group of Panamanian journalists formed a human chain along Panama City’s Calle 500 to denounce recent threats and sentences against media workers. The journalists were protesting in particular the sentences handed down to journalists Sabrina Bacal, Justino González and Rafael Antonio Ruiz by the Second High Court.

Bacal and González were sentenced to one year in prison for reporting on corruption in Panama’s Immigration Department and were prohibited from practicing journalism for a year. The journalists had been acquitted in a lower court, but the attorney general’s office appealed the verdict. President Roberto Martinelli later pardoned the two.

Ruiz was sentenced to 500 days and a fine as a result of a “calumny and injury” lawsuit brought by an ex-bodyguard of former president Martín Torrijos. Ruiz had claimed that the ex-bodyguard, Juan Ángel De León, was connected to drug

dealers.

“The protesters also questioned the statement by the prosecutor in charge, Giuseppe Bonissi, calling for the criminal prosecution of offenses against the honor of government officials,” according to a *Newsroom Panama* report.

The report notes that in addition to the journalists, organizations such as Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Inter-American Press Association and others have denounced the court’s and government’s actions.

Panama is not the only country in Latin America where news media workers are under attack. Bolivian journalists have voiced concerns about the recent passage of a law that would allow the government to shut down any media outlets it deems guilty of “racism.” In Mexico, dozens of journalists have been threatened, beaten and killed in the midst of the Calderón government’s drug war. In post-coup Honduras and in Colombia, journalism is a dangerous occupation, with threats, kidnappings and murders of reporters committed with impunity by rightwing paramilitaries.

### **Oregon transit workers protest concession demands**

Portland, Oregon, transit workers picketed outside the Portland Hilton as contract talks between TriMet and the ATU (Amalgamated Transit Union) Local 757 have failed to resolve benefit issues. The 2,040 drivers, mechanics and other transit personnel are opposed to TriMet’s demand for a wage freeze and the first-time imposition on workers to pay health insurance premiums.

The protest took place outside the Hilton, while transit planners, architects and officials from across the country held a conference. Originally, workers had planned a slowdown for October 13 to oppose TriMet’s concession demands, but the transit agency threatened “discipline up to and including termination” against transit workers. ATU President Jonathan Hunt disowned the action, declaring, “Neither I nor the officers of ATU 757 have ordered a sanctioned work slowdown.”

### **Massachusetts school district awaits labor board decision on job action**

Union and school board officials for the King Philip Regional School District in Norfolk County, Massachusetts, are awaiting a decision by the Massachusetts Department of Labor over whether recent actions by teachers constitute a strike. Under

Massachusetts law, teachers are barred from striking.

District teachers have declined to give students recommendations to colleges required for early admission and have refused to hold independent studies. Teachers are also not using a grading system that allows parents to monitor student progress.

In early October, the King Philip school board filed a strike petition with the state’s Department of Labor to ascertain whether these actions could come under the definition of a strike. The school district and the teachers’ union contract negotiations are currently deadlocked over pay, class sizes and a flawed grading system. The two sides are scheduled to resume mediated talks October 29.

### **University strikes loom**

Maintenance and trade workers at Cape Breton University in Nova Scotia are poised to go on strike this coming Monday after being without a contract since July of last year. The University president has warned other staff that they will be disciplined if they honor their picket line. Only 13 workers with the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU/NUPGE) are in a position to strike so the university is determined to continue operations uninterrupted.

At the same time, support staff who are members of the same union at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, will hold a strike vote this week after rejecting a contract offer last week, which could mean that 151 workers there will soon be in a strike position.

Also, at the University of Western Ontario in London, 1,400 full- and part-time faculty have set a strike deadline for November 3 after being without a contract since June.



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