

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Chilean pharmacy workers union ends month-long strike

After 32 days on strike, negotiators for pharmacy chain Farmacias Ahumada and the pharmacy workers union, FASA, reached an agreement on November 5. The agreement will raise the base monthly salary of CLP 32,000 (US\$65) plus sales commissions to CLP 172,000 (US\$355), the legal minimum wage, but with a lower commission rate. In addition, the company will offer 24-month “soft loans” to its workers.

The accord was signed two days after a march by the workers through downtown Santiago to mark their 30th day on strike. The march was joined by Monticello Casino workers, who have been on strike since October 26 over wages and other issues. Almost every day during the strike, the pharmacy workers picketed over 200 stores, passed out literature and talked to customers.

Farmacias Ahumada was acquired in early 2010 by the Mexican pharmacy giant Casa Saba. According to the *Santiago Times*, “Last year, the chain made US\$9 billion in profits, of which the union says its demands would take up 6 percent.”

Casa Saba advertises heavily on Chilean TV, and the striking workers complained throughout the strike that there was a virtual media blackout of their struggle. In addition, workers were feeling the pinch, since union funds were inadequate. FASA recently sent out a message asking for aid from other organizations. Furthermore, the workers were subject to periodic harassment by the carabineros, Chile’s national police force.

FASA General Secretary Fidel Leiva told terra.cl that the corporation “didn’t accede to paying the legal bonus, which was our strong demand” and “neither was equality of benefits concretized; they only equalized certain bonuses.”

Leiva added, “We had to end the strike because of the workers’ lack of resources ... the struggle is going to continue, now through the means of parliamentarians so that they change the law.”

Chile: Collahuasi mine workers go on strike

Some 1,550 mine workers at the Collahuasi mine, the world’s third or fourth largest producer of copper, went on strike November 5 after contract negotiations failed. The mine, located southeast of Iquique in the Andes 4,400 meters (2.7 miles) above sea level in southern Chile, is jointly owned by Swiss company Xtrata and South Africa’s Anglo American.

AméricaEconomía.com reported on November 6, “The workers, who together with the union leaders maintained themselves in a job site encampment because of doubts about the legality of the replacement operators that the company brought in, anticipated going to the coastal city of Iquique at noon.”

On November 6, Bloomberg.com reported, “Unionized workers plan street protests today in Iquique. Hundreds of miners dressed in black jackets with the company’s logo protested yesterday by blowing horns and whistling at traffic.”

The main bone of contention is parity with other mineworkers. “The company offered a bonus of 11.5 million pesos (\$24,000) and 2 million pesos of soft loans, [Collahuasi spokeswoman Bernardita Fernandez] said. Workers at BHP Billiton Ltd.’s Escondida copper mine in northern Chile were paid a 14 million peso bonus last year.”

Honduran unions, National Front call for general strike

With the government of Porfirio Lobo Sosa continuing and escalating its attacks on the Honduran working class, the country’s unions, the National Popular Resistance Front (FNRP) and other organizations have called for a general strike to take place on November 11.

The coalition’s October 30 statement names four immediate issues that have precipitated the strike call. One is the national minimum wage, which the government announced would be raised by 3 percent, an amount described as “like a joke” by CUTH labor federation leader José Luis Baquedano, in view of the desperate economic situation in which the Honduran working class finds itself.

According to a report in kaosenlared.net, “Lobo did not have the guts to appear before the cameras and sent one of his collaborators, Labor and Social Security Minister Felicito Ávila, to announce the Pyrrhic raise.”

Another demand is the rejection of the proposed Law of Temporary Work before the Congress. It would allow the use of temporary or part-time workers for 40 percent of an enterprise’s workforce, allowing business to reduce benefits and undermine their full-time workers.

The coalition calls for the repeal of a law passed on October 27 suspending a 1993 law granting automatic wage increases for teachers. The new law also suspends raises for other public sector workers, the fourth issue. Teachers in Tegucigalpa have been protesting in the streets three days a week since the passage of the law.

The call for a general strike is taking place in a climate of increasing tension and terror in Honduras. Under the Lobos administration, which was “elected” following the overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya, repression and violence have increased dramatically. According to the Committee of Relatives of Detained and Disappeared in Honduras, there are at least 157 Hondurans currently in exile who fled political persecution, and at least 83 members of the FNRP assassinated since January of 2010. As of August, eight journalists have died violent deaths.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has done everything it can to legitimize the current regime. The US Labor Education in America Project reports that the US has committed itself to getting Honduras back into the Organization of American States, has convened a “security cooperation agreement” with Honduras and has called the inauguration of Lobos “a step forward for democracy,” claiming that “US aid is enabling the administration to improve its human rights record.”

Mexican public transportation drivers on “technical stoppage” over fares

An average of 150 buses in Tamaulipas stand idle every day as a result of the inability of drivers to rent their buses at the standard legal fare of six pesos—about 50 US cents—and cover minimum operating expenses. The secretary general of the Workers Federation of Mexico (CTM), Roberto Martínez Balderas, told Conexión Total that public transit authorities have not obtained official approval for fare increases and said that drivers would be pressuring the authorities to finalize it in November.

“We can no longer stay with these obsolete fares, 5 percent of our force are carrying out technical stoppages owing to the fact that they do not have enough even for gasoline; they cannot keep working like this.”

About 3,000 public transportation concessionaires in Tampico, Madero and Altamira affiliated with the CTM are asking for the fare increase in order to be able to weather the economic crisis. “We want the increase this very month, because we cannot be struggling with the increases that keep going up without stopping and the drivers stay at six pesos,” said Martínez.

The majority of buses are on a 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. schedule. Ridership has fallen 40 percent in recent weeks during that time period.

Martínez added that the drivers cannot keep waiting, because fuel prices will continue to rise for the rest of the year and into 2011. “For now, they will keep insisting that not one day more passes without the state directorate making an announcement on the matter, since they will not wait for it to stretch out for the rest of the year,” reported Conexión Total.

Delta Air Lines flight attendants reject unionization

Delta Air Lines flight attendants will remain nonunion after a vote last week in which they rejected unionization by a narrow 1.7 percent margin. The vote was 9,544 to 9,216, with some 93 percent of flight attendants participating.

The 20,000 flight attendant workforce at Delta was augmented as a result of the 2008 acquisition of Northwest Airlines. Delta’s attendants

were nonunion, while the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) represented Northwest’s attendants.

The AFA is challenging the vote as unfair, charging the company used mailings, emails and direct intimidation. The AFA is also questioning the use of company computers for a portion of the vote. Whatever intimidation and vote rigging may have taken place, the vote by Delta workers to reject unionization is largely explained by the fact that the Delta attendants earned higher salaries than AFA-represented attendants at Northwest Airlines.

Back in August, a government board found that Delta used a pay increase and “coercive” one-on-one meetings involving an election of its 91 flight-simulator technicians. But in a new election, even fewer technicians cast ballots in favor of representation by the International Association of Machinists.

Chicago area worker killed in industrial accident

A worker at a Nabisco plant in Oak Lawn, Illinois on Chicago’s Southwest Side was crushed to death in the early morning hours of October 13. A medical examiner ruled 62-year-old Patrick Lynch died as a result of compressional asphyxia. Officials of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, who are investigating the accident, did not disclose details about the causes of Lynch’s death.

According to records, the Nabisco facility has been cited for safety and health violations over the past five years, including two serious citations. In October 2005 the plant had three violations and was fined \$7,800. Last January, the plant was hit with what was termed a “serious” violation and fined \$7,000.

Newfoundland transit on strike

Around 100 bus drivers, mechanics and staff at Metrobus in St. John’s, Newfoundland went on strike last week, halting public transit in the region.

The workers, Members of the Amalgamated Transit Union, voted 97 percent against the latest contract offer, with the main point of dissent being a proposed cost-shared benefit plan that would see drug and other costs triple for workers. Management of the publicly owned company is offering a wage increase of over 15 percent over four years, saying the existing benefit plan is no longer affordable, as the city tries to cut \$5 million from its budget before year’s end.

Metrobus says it has no plans to hire replacement drivers and there is no indication of when talks may resume. The last Metrobus strike in 2004 lasted two weeks.



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