Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Chile: Santiago Metro system workers strike over salaries

About 700 workers in Santiago's subway system went on strike Monday, November 29, after talks failed to reach agreement over salary increases. The subway workers, members of Union No. 3, voted Friday to strike if Metro management refused to meet their demand for a 1.5 percent increase over two years. The company instead proposed a 0.75 percent increase — which it later raised to 1 percent — over four years.

In anticipation of the strike, Metro trained more than 400 administrative personnel to operate the trains, a measure criticized by Union No. 3's president, Mario Acuna, who told the *Santiago Times*, "We believe that Metro lowered the safety standards by putting in place non-professional drivers. We understand the need for the company to operate the lines, but we question the low level of safety under which the Metro is functioning."

Although a Metro spokesperson claimed the strike's impact was minimal, with 90 percent of commuter traffic still being carried, service was suspended for 24 hours on Sunday. Instead, according to Publimetro.com, "The authorities elaborated an emergency plan that includes the use of 400 buses to reduce the effects of the closure." However, they said that service was to be resumed on Monday.

"Meanwhile, union representatives plan to go to the labor committee of the Chamber of Deputies to discuss their situation, but there is still no end planned for the strike," noted the *Times.*

Colombian flower workers' strike spreads

Striking flower workers at the Guacari plantation in Zipaquira, Colombia, who went out on November 16, were joined by workers at two other locations — the nearby Fragrancia and Splendor plantations — on December 1. These workers are demanding the payment of their salaries, which they did not receive on November 15 or 30. In addition, benefit payments have been held up for months.

Guacari workers organized a union on September 7 of this year after repeated failures by the company to pay wages and legally required health and social security benefits. Shortly afterward, seven members of the union, Sintraguacari, were fired. When the workers went out on strike on September 18, several workers were injured by police, who attacked them with tear gas and physically assaulted them.

According to a USLEAP report/action alert, in tripartite meetings between the union, parent company Floramerica and the Labor Ministry on September 22, "the company refused to give a timetable for paying workers and would not accept the union's demands. Floramerica maintains that it is unable to pay workers as a result of the appreciation of the Colombian peso, and that it is incumbent upon the Colombian government to take action to address the issue."

Floramerica-Sunburst Farms is owned by one of the most powerful families in Colombia, the Nanetti family, which purchased it in 2009 from Dole Fresh Flowers. "Union leaders are concerned that the company will use the current crisis as an opportunity to replace permanent workers with contract labor," the report adds.

Wave of strikes engulfs Uruguay

Strikes and work stoppages have continued across Uruguay over wages, overtime, working conditions and other issues. As of Friday, workers in a number of sectors including banks, health and medical services, education, courts, air traffic control, customs houses, public transit, various other municipal services and state administration remained off the job. In Montevideo, trash collection has slowed, street inspections have halted and zoos have closed. Lifeguards are staying away from the beaches as summer approaches.

The actions are being called by several unions, including the public sector union Adeom and the PIT-CNT labor federation. These and other unions — as well as the Stalinist Communist Party (PC) — strongly supported Broad Front (FA) presidential candidate and former guerrilla Jose Mujica, who was elected in March, raising expectations that he would bring progressive change to the country's working class. Among the FA platforms, Mujica "promised to focus on the development of new housing projects for the country's poor, reactivate the train system, expand the access and quality of education, and participate actively in regional integration with other South American nations," according to a March 4 *Upside Down World* report.

These illusions were shattered shortly after Mujica took office. Despite an 8 percent growth rate in the economy, expected wage raises and other improvements have yet to materialize. Workers' dissatisfaction compelled union bureaucrats — reluctantly — to call for work stoppages and strike actions.

The response of the Mujica administration to numerous mobilizations involving temporary stoppages, strikes, demonstrations, occupations, and marches in the last eight months has ranged from dismissive to repressive. He has characterized some demands as "infantile," told the press that "work stoppages come and go" and chastised workers for affecting Uruguay's image. He ordered the breaking of a strike by customs officers in November, and last week issued a decree prohibiting occupations of public offices after separate occupations of a municipal government building in the city of Tacuarembo and the Supreme Court building in Montevideo.

Guyana distillery workers walk out over pay cap

Three unions representing workers at Demerara Distillers Limited (DDL) in Guyana have called out about 300 workers over a company proposal to limit their monthly wages to GUY$50,000 (US$248). DDL is a major producer of bottled and bulk rums with operations in North America, Europe and Asia.

For the past six months, negotiations have been ongoing between DDL and the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU), the Guyana Labour Union (GLU) and the Clerical and Commercial Workers Union (CCWU). The unions are demanding a 20 percent across-the-board increase in wages and salaries; DDL countered with 16 percent. GLU head Carville Duncan claimed that “the unions were not opposed to DDL’s proposed wage increase of 2 to 3 percent plus inflation but the talks broke down over the planned ‘red-circling’ of 128 of the 800 workers who are currently working for GUY$50,000.” He added, “This would mean that during the next five years, everybody would be red-circled.”

In a company statement, DDL downplayed the action, claiming that production has continued as normal “after some employees did not show up for work.” The statement says, “Some of the absent workers were seen earlier in conversation with union leaders outside of the compound,” and charged the unions with bad-faith bargaining because they did not give DDL 72 hours notice before striking, a requirement under their existing agreement.

While the DDL characterizes its proposal and policies as entirely reasonable, picketers interviewed by Kaieteur News (KNEWS) told a different story. One complained that management staff is not included in this agreement since they are being “treated differently” and that “it is not fair that 128 staff of the company would not be getting any increases for the next five years with the implementation of DDL’s proposal.” He added that each staff member works “very hard.”

Another picketer noted that dissatisfaction goes beyond the wage issue. An employee called Mr. Dulai told KNEWS that the company is supposed to provide a new pair of safety boots every year to certain employees. He, as well as other picketers, told the news outlet that the company has pushed back the date repeatedly and has yet to provide the boots in December. “Now that December is here, they do not know what the company will say next.”

Alabama industrial workers strike over seniority rights

Workers walked off the job December 5 at the US Pipe and Foundry Company in Bessemer, Alabama, to protest the company’s demands for overhauling seniority, health insurance and pensions. Some 250 members of the United Steelworkers Local 2140 voted by a 116-to-53 margin one day earlier to strike the company’s most recent proposal.

According to the steelworkers’ union, the company’s demand to assign workers to jobs without regard to seniority is the most pressing issue. US Pipe also wants to consolidate job categories across the plant, which could lead to the assignment of workers to jobs and supervisory position in areas where they are not properly trained. “We feel like it is unsafe,” said Ronnie Woods, Local 2140 president.

Contracts for boilermakers and electricians at the Bessemer plant have also expired and are currently being extended. Members of the machinists’ union recently concluded their contract.

Wisconsin workers launch informational pickets as Kohler and union discuss concessions

Workers at Kohler Company operations in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, were slated to carry out informational picketing December 6 as the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 833 and company officials continue negotiations through to a December 12 deadline. According to the UAW, they will submit whatever agreement is lying on the table at that time to a vote by the 2,000 union members.

Negotiations began in August as Kohler revealed it was seeking a five-year wage freeze, big hikes in workers’ contributions towards health care premiums and a two-tier wage and benefit scale that will cut pay for new hires and workers recalled from layoffs by 35 percent. Neither side has revealed the current status of negotiations.

Quebec supermarket workers strike

Workers at the Valu-Mart store in Shawville, Quebec, northwest of Ottawa, went on strike December 2 in the face of what the union is calling intransigence on the part of the company.

The 32 workers are represented by a small union affiliated with the with the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN), who say they are fighting for coordinated demands consistent throughout the province, and the only local demands are for work boots. The employer says it cannot agree to a “one size fits all” contract and is demanding a six-year contract. It is also reportedly offering wages that do not even keep pace with the cost of living.

Airport drivers locked out of cars

More than 200 limousine and other drivers at the Toronto airport have been denied access to their cars by three companies that own the vehicles, effectively locking them out of their jobs at the outset of the busiest season of the year.

The company has taken this action after walking away from first contract negotiations with the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) in November. The union has set up picket lines at company offices and says it will consider further action if the company does not return to the bargaining table.

According to the CAW, the terms that are imposed on the drivers, who are mostly first-generation immigrants, are highly exploitive, requiring them to pay for vehicles, registration and insurance at highly inflated prices.