

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 January 2011

Bolivian president rescinds fuel price hikes after massive protests

Barely a week after decreeing drastic increases in the prices of a range of fuels, Bolivian president Evo Morales announced the cancellation of the hikes. Morales had made the original announcement—which raised the price of gasoline 57 percent and that of diesel 83 percent—on December 27, shortly before traveling to Venezuela for talks with President Hugo Chavez.

Fuel prices have been subsidized and frozen in Bolivia for nearly a decade, providing a measure of relief for the poor and working class in terms of both transportation costs and food prices.

Shortly after the decree, dubbed the “gasolinazo” by opponents, Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera Garcia, who was left in charge while Morales was away, claimed that “State subsidies cost \$380 million a year; we don’t want this to continue.” Garcia added, “We are bringing fuels up to international levels,” which would give more incentive to producers and discourage smugglers who buy fuel in Bolivia for resale in other South American countries.

The Drivers’ Confederation, Bolivia’s main transport union, called an indefinite strike, which paralyzed traffic throughout the country. Protests broke out in La Paz, Cochabamba and other cities. Protesters erected barricades, burned tires and threw rocks at police, who responded with tear gas. Dozens of protesters were injured and arrested. In La Paz, protesters burned a Venezuelan flag and attempted to set a statue of Che Guevara ablaze.

The coca growers union, Morales’s strongest base of support, denounced the decree and supported the protest actions. Despite attempts by Morales to undercut the protests by announcing a 20 percent increase in the minimum wage on Wednesday, the protests continued and escalated, sometimes getting violent.

Morales returned to Bolivia, canceling plans to attend the inauguration of newly elected Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff. On December 31, he announced the cancellation of the decree, saying, “Answering the wishes of the people, we have decided to rescind Decree number 748 and other measures that accompanied it.”

Guyana Sugar Corporation closes crop while workers stay away

The Guyana Sugar Corporation, GuySuCo, told *KNEWS* January 1 that it “was forced to prematurely close its second crop due to the low turnout of harvesters for the entire week,” which ranged from zero at some plantations to 15 percent at others. The firm will continue its grinding operations until January 7.

Poor weather during the season contributed to low production levels, but the main factor all year was disagreement over wages for the backbreaking work of cutting and harvesting sugar cane.

GuySuCo and the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) battled throughout 2010 over wages and bonuses, with the

company claiming that its heavy debt prevented it from paying the increase demanded by GAWU. GuySuCo president Bharrat Jagdeo got rid of traditional bonuses and incentives and tried to peg wages to production targets. A number of strikes were called during the year, but the company remained adamant. An estimated 500,000 tons of sugar was left uncut.

The *KNEWS* statement claimed that “the Corporation looks forward to a much more positive stance” from GAWU in 2011. Meanwhile, a *Caribbean News Now!* article cited Guyana agriculture minister Robert Persaud, who “said that the problems of last year would help the Corporation to model a “new industry,” which would involve moving more and more into mechanical harvesting to cope with absent cane cutters.”

Panamanian president denounced for attacks against union federation

In a December 27 press conference, the director of Panama’s Suntracs construction workers’ federation, Saul Mendez, denounced President Ricardo Martinelli for threats and attacks against the union.

According to Mendez, Martinelli threatened to send the police against strikers at various construction sites around Panama City. Mendez said that Martinelli had sent more than 300 riot police to confront striking workers at one site, Howard la Corregidora de Veracruz, where the strikers were protesting noncompliance with security requirements and other labor rights.

Mendez also claimed that on December 22, Martinelli called Genaro Lopez, another union top, in an attempt to threaten and bribe him.

On December 23, Rolando Fuentes, an attorney representing Javier Martinez Chiru of construction company Elevadores Gold Star, brought allegations against 13 Suntracs officials before the Judicial Investigation Directorate (DIJ). Fuentes alleged that they were committing outrages against individual liberty.

Mexico: Tampico city hall workers blockade street over end-of-year bonuses

On December 31, city hall workers in downtown Tampico blocked Colon Street, on which government buildings are located, to protest the continued nonpayment of their end-of-year bonus, called an “aguinaldo.”

“We demand that they pay us our salaries, because they (the present administration) are already going to leave and they’re going to leave us without this payment, which we have been waiting for since December 20 and it has not arrived,” Maria del Pilar Gacia, who works for the city’s Cultural Directorate, told *Conexion Total*.

About 60 employees have taken to the streets—protesting, marching and demonstrating—to demand their aguinaldos, which are required by law,

and were over 10 days in arrears.

Slowdowns over Bahamian telecom privatization

Workers at the Bahamas Telecommunication Company (BTC) carried out a slowdown on December 30, leaving service calls delayed or unanswered. The slowdown comes in the midst of a battle over the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham and Cable and Wireless Communications (CWC) that would allow the purchase by CWC of 51 percent of BTC, effectively privatizing the state-run telecom.

The announcement of the MOU brought denunciations from trade unions, which held two demonstrations against the sale. On December 28 a number of Bahamian unions including the National Congress of Trade Unions (NCTU) made known their intention to go through with a general strike over the privatization of the state-run Bahamas Telecommunications Company.

Union spokespeople claim that they know nothing about the slowdown and did not authorize it.

Barbados union calls for increase in minimum wage

The general secretary of the Barbados Workers' Union (BWU), Sir Roy Trotman, has called upon union members to pressure representatives in Parliament to raise the minimum wage, which has not risen for seven years. The current minimum wage is BDS\$200 (US\$100) per 40-hour week.

The major barrier, according to Trotman, was resistance by employers, who claim that they would have to lay off or cut hours of workers if an increase were instituted.

Trotman decried the lack of action by both major political parties, who have done nothing more than commission studies. "Reports have been submitted, but nothing has come forth," he told *NationNews Barbados*. "The governments have put the recommendations on the refrigerator and the workers, in some cases, have been laid off or put on short weeks."

Although the recommendation by economics professor Andrew Downes of BDS\$300 per week is below what the BWU wants, Trotman told *Caribbean News Now!* That "nevertheless his union would go along with it to maintain a good relationship with employers."

One-day strike by nurses at Pennsylvania hospital

Some 400 nurses at General Hospital in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, carried out a one-day walkout December 23 in an unfair labor strike against Community Health Systems (CHS), Inc. Members of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals charge the company with failing to turn over information concerning a proposed health care plan.

"We needed to make a point," registered nurse Carmen Attanasio told WNEP-TV. "We needed to tell CHS we are sick of the way they're running this place and sick of the way they're treating the workers here." The union has been in negotiations with CHS since the Fortune 500 company bought the hospital in May 2009, taking it from a non-profit to a

for-profit operation.

The New York investment firm Forstmann Little & Company purchased CHS in back in 1996 when it owned 38 rural hospitals in the Southeast and Southwest. Since then, CHS has carefully targeted hospitals in small towns within one or two hours of larger cities where it can acquire a new and less expensive hospital staff. Today, it operates 128 hospitals in 28 states.

Federal agency proposes fines in North Dakota industrial fatality

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) announced in December a \$92,000 fine over an industrial accident that took place at a Grand Forks, North Dakota, industrial factory. The federal agency charged Denmark-based LM Wind Power with five violations that led to the death of 42-year-old Joseph Francis Schaff of East Grand Forks, who died after being crushed between two pieces of heavy equipment in July 2010.

One of the violations was for "willful negligence." Three others were deemed "serious," meaning they could lead to death. LM Wind Power, a manufacturer of wind turbine blades, has 15 days to respond to either accept, challenge or request a conference over OSHA's allegations.

City workers strike in Quebec

Four hundred outside municipal employees in the town of Sherbrooke, Quebec, east of Montreal, began a 13-day strike last week that is scheduled to end on January 7.

Their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), has called the strike as a pressure tactic in negotiations. Sherbrooke public employees have been without a contract for three years. A union spokesperson has said that just prior to management negotiators walking away from the bargaining table, the union had agreed to a seven-year contract, which was the major concession the city was seeking. The Canada Summer Games are scheduled for 2013, and their aim was to avoid any confrontation in the lead-up to that date.

When the union tried to launch a limited strike action the city responded by insisting that any strike include all members of the bargaining unit. According to media reports, the number of grievances has more than tripled in recent years, but the union insists that a deal is still possible because they are prepared to accept a wage offer that averages just over 2 percent a year.

Some of the services affected by the strike include skating and skiing facilities as well as snow removal and garbage collection.



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