

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 January 2011

Raids on Argentine agricultural camps reveal exploitative conditions

An early-morning raid on an agricultural camp on January 5 in the Argentine city of San Pedro resulted in the arrests of five people due to slavery-like conditions. The company, Southern Seed, has been closed pending investigation of the owner and four foremen.

According to the Argentine *Independent*, the workers “arrived between the 15th and 29th of December 2010, and were forced to live in unsanitary and inhumane conditions. Working in the cornfields for 12 hours a day, they brought in severely substandard wages and were given minimal food. Perishable food was kept outdoors and water for bathing was carried in pesticide cans. The workers were not allowed to leave the tent and many were suffering from diarrhea and other illnesses.”

Southern Seed lawyer Mario Bentolila, claiming that “the workers are all legally registered and their wages are above the union contract,” complained that profits were being lost due to days in court.

This case “is not an isolated incident,” according to the report. A December 17 article described conditions in Pilar at Nuestra Huella SA, one of Argentina’s largest poultry farmers and supplier of eggs to some of the country’s main supermarkets. There are currently 14 legal proceedings against Nuestra Huella for offenses including human trafficking, child labor, and indentured servitude; conditions were described by labor lawyer Rodolfo Clieto Garcia as “like a concentration camp.” Last month, 7-year-old Ezequiel Ferreyra died from a brain tumor due to constant exposure to pesticides. Ezequiel had worked at Nuestra Huella since at least the age of 4.

However, due to political and family connections—including with the mayor of Pilar and the UATRE Pilar union’s secretary general—the company has yet to face consequences for its crimes.

On January 8, a farm in San Nicolas was discovered where 120 workers, among them children, were living “in conditions of illegality and slavery,” as reported by *El Argentino*.

Mexico: Puebla police, other city workers strike over end-of-year payments

About 6,000 officers, firemen, road maintenance workers and custodians in the state of Puebla walked off the job January 6 to protest the nonpayment of the second part of their end-of-year bonus (aguinaldo) for 2010.

Talks between the authorities and workers’ representatives broke down when the Finance Secretary refused to budge from his posture of paying them on January 11 or 12, despite the fact that the bonus payments were due on January 5.

The police and firemen indicated that they would only work in case of emergency.

The secretary of the Government of Puebla claimed that on January 11 and 12, the amount owed would be paid in full to all the workers and called upon the workers, especially the State Police, “to act with responsibility and attend to the service of public security in all the territory of Puebla.”

As quoted in *Proceso*, Article 87 of the Federal Labor Law establishes that “workers will have the right to an annual aguinaldo that should be paid before December 20, equivalent to at least fifteen days of salary.”

Trinidadian workers protest stalled wage talks

Thousands of public sector workers marched through the streets of Port of Spain on January 4 to protest the government’s inflexibility in wage negotiations. Officials from a number of union federations including the Federation of Independent Trade Unions (FITUN), the Public Service Association (PSA) and the National Trade Union Centre (NATUC) had met with Prime Minister Persad Bissessar in December, but no agreement was reached.

The government refused to budge from its offer of a 5 percent wage hike for 2011, claiming that it did not have the money.

The workers defied Finance Minister Winston Dookeran’s threat to have protesters arrested. PSA president Watson

Duke taunted Dookeran to arrest him, calling him “a crazy man” who has “declared war on us.”

Duke, however, is facing challenges of his own from members of the PSA executive board. The day after the march, the PSA’s first vice-president, general secretary, deputy general secretary and two trustees filed pre-action protocol letters against Duke at the Port of Spain High Court for suspending and rescinding their appointments last year. The five were elected to serve on the board in November 2009.

After first vice-president Rosanna Robinson criticized Duke last July, claiming that he had taken improper actions, Duke suspended her. The other members were suspended following other incidents. The suit alleges that Duke acted improperly and illegally and demands reinstatement for all five members. Duke has 21 days to respond to the claims.

Demonstration for jobs at inauguration of Wisconsin governor

Some 700 workers held a demonstration demanding jobs outside the inauguration ceremonies for Scott Walker, the newly elected Republican governor of Wisconsin. During his campaign, Walker issued a promise to create 250,000 jobs without providing any prescriptions to accomplish the proposal.

“Today isn’t about Scott Walker, it’s about the people standing up to say we need good jobs now,” declared unemployed worker Roderick Caesar. “I’m college educated and I want a job so that I can support my family.” Several church and labor organizations sponsored the rally.

While Walker has provided no blueprint for jobs, he has floated plans that threaten public workers. If state, county and municipal workers do not agree to concessions, he will curtail their bargaining rights. Under a proposed public-private partnership, commerce employees would have to re-apply for the jobs—a proposal that would also prescribe concessions. Wisconsin currently faces a \$3 billion budget deficit and has an unemployment rate of 7.6 percent.

Quebec transit union calls off strike

The union representing bus drivers in Laval, Quebec, just west of Montreal, has called off a one-day strike that had been scheduled for Monday, January 10. Instead, the union

and the employer, the Société de Transport de Laval (STL) will meet with an arbitrator. However, a final decision by the arbitrator is not scheduled until March.

The 500 drivers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been without a contract since July of this year. One outstanding issue in the dispute is pensions, with the union saying that drivers in Montreal are retiring with more than twice the pensions of those in Laval. The pension fund for the Laval drivers is dependent on a defined contributions scheme, whereby the fund, which is controlled by the union, is invested into the stock market.

Talks collapse in Newfoundland bus drivers’ strike

Negotiations have again broken down in a 10-week-long strike by Metrobus drivers in St. John’s, Newfoundland. The 100 transit workers, employed by the city, are organized by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1462. The city is demanding that the union accept a two-tier benefits program that would see massive increases in co-payments for health care benefits for all newly hired workers.

If the employer’s demands are accepted, new hires would be forced to pay 50 percent of the cost of their health care package, which would amount to C\$140 per month. Currently, workers pay 15 percent of their medical plan costs. For their own part, city politicians in December cut another C\$5 million from the budget, further debilitating public services in the area.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact