Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 January 2011

Venezuelan Coca-Cola strike spreads

A strike by 1,380 workers at a Coca-Cola bottling plant in the Venezuelan city of Valencia has been augmented by 1,450 workers at a plant in Maracaibo. The workers are demanding a 55 percent wage raise, while management is offering about a third of that amount. The raise would equal about US$10 per day. In addition, the workers want medical insurance for extended family members.

Sixto Materan, secretary general of the Caracas Coca-Cola union, told El Mundo that representatives of workers at these and two other plants, Antimano-Caracas and Barcelona—with 750 workers—as well as from dozens of distributors will meet to analyze the situation and decide on a course of action.

Materan stated that "The parties are negotiating and there's no rupture in the dialogue; therefore we're confident of an agreement." Meanwhile, Coca-Cola en Venezuela, which is owned by FEMSA de Mexico, has continued to denounce the strike and warn of shortages, "indirect" job losses and "economic damage" for tens of thousands of workers employed in distribution as well as the production of bottles, bottle caps and labels.

Citing "social sensitivity," Materan emphasized that production of bottled water, a "vital product…continues to be produced at Valencia and Maracaibo, despite the strikes at those two plants."

Salvadoran judicial workers strike over salary levels

Employees in El Salvador's judicial system went out on strike over unresolved salary issues on January 17. The walkout followed the cancellation of a scheduled meeting on that date with the president of the Supreme Court, Belamino Jaime.

The 10,000-member Judicial Organ Workers Syndicate (Sittoj) claims that for the last two years upper-level judicial magistrates have received disproportionate raises and benefits while the rank-and-file employees have not gotten a raise for six years. The union is demanding raises of US$100-US$150 per month.

The strike put several court-related functions on hold, such as sentencing of prisoners, holding of hearings and identification of cadavers in morgues. A march in the capital San Salvador coincided with one being held by teachers—also demanding raises—resulting in congestion along some of the city's main streets.

Chilean gas hike protests end

Delegates for residents of Chile's southern region of Magallanes reached an agreement on January 18 after a week of protests over the Sebastian Piñera government's announced intention to get rid of natural gas subsidies. The cut would have meant a nearly 17 percent rise in the price of gas in an extremely cold region that is heavily dependent on natural gas for heating and—due to its remoteness—has a higher cost of living than other parts of Chile.

The Magallanes Citizen Assembly (AMC) called a general strike shortly after the announcement, and protesters set up roadblocks throughout the region. In the far south city of Punta Arenas, the ferries to Tierra del Fuego stopped operating, stranding thousands of residents and tourists. Police arrested more than 200 protesters. Two young women were killed by a truck driver who rammed through a barricade.

Initial attempts at dialogue broke down, with neither side giving any ground. Piñera's poll ratings plummeted, and a number of members of his cabinet were sacked or resigned. Newly appointed Mining and Energy Minister Laurence Golborne took an offer of a 3 percent rise to Punta Arenas, but was surrounded by residents who shouted insults and denounced the government.

However, the next day, the AMC announced that it had agreed to the 3 percent figure. To offset the increase, subsidies will be granted to 15,000 low-income families. Although AMC members called the agreement "historic" and claimed victory, the compromise is only in effect until

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the end of August, when a government "technical board" will propose legislation for a permanent price structure.

One factor that may have influenced the AMC backdown was the Interior Ministry's announcement that it will invoke the State Security Law (*Ley de Seguridad del Estado*)—a 1975 law passed during the Pinochet dictatorship and never repealed—against protesters who block roads. The *Santiago Times* reports that the law "punishes actions normally not considered criminal, such as interrupting the normal functioning of basic roadways or services, or threatening the State's internal or external security. Those indicted under this law may receive stiff maximum jail sentences."

Guyana sugar workers strike called off, but some remain out

A five-day-long strike by some 1,000 Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) workers was called off on January 20 after a meeting between the company and Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) reps. Workers at GuySuCo's Albion estate had demanded extra pay for harvesting cane from the second crop of 2010, which was delayed due to frequent strikes and bad weather. "The meeting concluded with an amicable agreement between the workers rep(s) and management," according to the company, with harvesting and grinding to begin the next day.

However, about 300 harvesters at the Rose Hill estate refused to return to work, demanding $4,000 (US$19.64) per bed as opposed to GuySuCo's offer of $1,000 (US$4.90). "In addition," reports the *Guyana Press*, "a few sugar workers from Skeldon (grinding factory) are protesting dam conditions and did not turn out for work."

2010 was Guyana's worst year for sugar cane production in nearly two decades, with workers and GuySuCo frequently at odds. Conflicts between GuySuCo and sugar workers appear likely to continue through 2011.

Rochester teachers picket school superintendent speech

More than 500 teachers, parents and their supporters turned out to protest at the state-of-the-school speech by Rochester School District Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard, who has proposed closing two high schools and pushing seventh and eighth graders into some nine elementary schools.

Teachers were angered by Brizard's unilateral proposal that rejected any input from them. "As with his earlier proposals for school closings, this too comes as a total surprise to parents and teachers," Adam Urbanski, Rochester Teachers Association president told the crowd. "It's as if they didn't matter to him at all."

California teachers picket schools to protest imposed contract

Teachers for the National City school district, outside of San Diego, California, held pickets last week at several schools to protest imposed working conditions. The 354 members of the National City Education Association picketed and leafleted at El Toyon, Las Palmas, Palmer Way and Ira Harbison elementary schools.

In June 2010, the school board rejected a compromise proposal submitted by a state mediator and imposed its contract terms in July. In December of last year, teachers authorized a strike and the district responded by advertising for strikebreakers and raised the normal daily rate for substitutes from $100 to $250.

CN rail workers set to strike

Nearly 4,000 workers at the Canadian National Railway Company (CN) across Canada could be on strike this week if an agreement isn't reached between the company and their union, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), before a strike deadline Tuesday.

The workers affected at the country's largest rail carrier include mechanics, clerical workers and drivers whose contract expired at the end of 2010. The company has said it has made contingency plans to continue operations in the event of a strike.

Rival Canadian Pacific Railway (CP) could soon be facing a similar strike action after workers there also gave a strike mandate to the CAW.

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