

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 February 2011

## Mexican university employees strike

Employees at the Benito Juarez Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO) staged a 12-hour walkout on January 27 over lack of progress in talks between university negotiators and their union STEUABJO. In a press conference January 25, union secretary general Mario Ruiz Cervantes demanded the intervention of the state's governor, Gabino Cue.

At issue are over 48 alleged labor violations, only one of which UABJO administrators have addressed, according to Ruiz Cervantes. The strike followed a blockade and march on January 24 that temporarily held up traffic on some main streets. Faced with continuing intransigence by the University directorate, the union called the strike to pressure it to address the issues.

On January 28, workers at the No. 3 Preparatoria (high school) in Huajuapán, northwest of the city of Oaxaca, walked out in support of STEUABJO. This was the second time this month the “prepa” employees have struck. They had previously stopped work because of their own demands, which include a 25 percent wage increase, expansion of positions and a collective bargaining contract.

## Honduran interns on strike over stipends and conditions

Medical interns at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) are continuing their strike, which started on January 18. The students are demanding areas to rest and shower after their shifts end, defined hours, and an increase in the stipend they receive for the seventh year of their studies, which includes the rotating internship.

The rise in the cost of living spurred the demand for a

higher stipend. In addition, there are complaints of sexual harassment, of funds by some doctors and mistreatment by professors.

The rector of the university, Julieta Castellanos, claimed the increase was impossible, since it was a grant, not a salary. She chastised the students, telling them “they should be conscious of the country in which they live and the university in which they study.”

The interns face sanctions for their action, but according to *EL Herald*, “The discipline commission named to apply the sanctions to the strikers has not pronounced on the issue” yet.

## Argentine natural gas employees end weeklong strike

After a week on strike, employees at Camuzzi Gas Pampeana and Camuzzi Gas del Sur returned to work January 28 after a meeting the day before at the provincial Labor Ministry. Workers will continue to work until at least Thursday, February 3 while management and the union attempt to close the gap between their wage proposals.

The strike affected service to over 1.3 million customers from La Plata to Tierra del Fuego.

The salary dispute has been going on for over a month, with the union originally calling for a base monthly wage of 3,000 pesos (US\$750) plus a scale by category of 1,500 to 1,700 pesos.

Carlos Soria, secretary general of the la Plata branch of the natural gas workers union, told reporters that the union has lowered its demands “as a gesture of goodwill, because we want to reach an agreement.”

US-based Sempra Energy and Camuzzi Argentina control the gas company through the Sodigas Pampeana consortium.

## Grain port workers strike Argentine terminals

Port workers in Argentina's northern Rosario terminals walked off the job on January 26 over pay issues. The workers, members of the CGT federation, are demanding a 5,000 peso (US\$1,208) minimum monthly wage, which is equal to the wage soy-crushing workers recently wrested from crushing plants after a two-day strike in December.

The wage demands have been impelled by Argentina's inflation rate, which has reached about 25 percent so far this year.

Argentina is the world's largest exporter of soybeans and soy oil and meal, and the export of soy products accounts for about one fourth of the country's export earnings, estimated to reach US\$22 billion this year.

Workers at soy-crushing plants, while not officially on strike, have so far honored picket lines, slowing or halting production of soy products. The strike has spread upriver from Rosario to terminals in Timbues.

On January 28, exporters asked the government to intervene to get workers back on the job and impose compulsory talks. Exporters say they will not negotiate with the CGT, but only with individual unions.

## Colombian coal miners vote for strike

On January 27, workers at the Cerrejon mining complex in Guajira voted overwhelming in favor of a walkout as negotiations for a new labor agreement have dragged on without results. The complex is north of the La Preciosa mine—where a January 26 explosion killed 21 mineworkers.

According to a Reuters report, under Colombia's repressive labor laws, workers "are not allowed to stage a walkout in the first two days after a vote, nor on the last day of a mandatory 10-day period. After that, workers would need to take another strike vote. The union will hold a meeting on Saturday to ratify the strike vote, but it will be a syndicate committee that will decide on the timing of any walkout—which can only happen between Jan. 30 and Feb. 6."

The main issues in dispute are a salary increase—with the union counterpoising a nine percent raise to 9 percent

to management's 6 percent proposal—a signing bonus and other bonuses for meeting production targets.

Cerrejon, which is jointly owned by mining giants Xstrata PLC, Anglo American PLC and BHP Billiton, is Colombia's largest mining company, accounting for about one third of total coal production and export.

## Strike hits at BC mining operation

Twenty-five hundred coal mine workers struck Teck Resources Elkview operations in southeast British Columbia on Sunday. The workers, members of the United Steelworkers union (USW), are employed at five open pit mines and 700 have been without a contract since October of last year. The main issue in the dispute is the employer's contribution to retirement and benefit plans.

Teck, which is one of the world's leading producers of coal used in steel production, has also faced recent mechanical failures at its operations but has said contingency plans are in place for a strike.

## Deal ends Labrador nickel strike

The 18-month-old strike by nearly 200 mine workers at Vale Inco in Voisey's Bay, Labrador was ended after workers ratified a tentative deal by a margin of 88 percent. The struggle, which has long been isolated by the United Steelworkers (USW) leadership, was ineffective in shutting down operations with the Brazilian mining giant using strikebreakers to maintain operations.

Details of the five-year deal have not been made public but it is likely that it will contain greater concessions than those already proposed by a recent government commission.



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