

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 February 2011

## Honduran teachers march in Tegucigalpa over unpaid salaries

About 1,000 teachers marched through downtown Tegucigalpa on February 4 demanding overdue payment of wages before the start of classes on February 7. The teachers—members of the Federation of Educators' Organizations of Honduras, Fomh—later gathered at the Hibueras Institute of Tegucigalpa to discuss actions to pressure the government to resolve their grievances.

The Ministry of Education agreed to pay the back wages last August but have only paid a fraction of them. In addition, it has lagged on paying back money taken from the teachers' pension fund.

Teachers have been among the victims of repression following the coup that installed the government of Porfirio Lobos. According to a November Idea Network report, "The violations of the August agreement are just the latest maneuvers in an ongoing campaign of intimidation, retaliation and violent repression against teachers since the military coup in June 2009. A dozen teachers have been murdered in overtly political assassinations since the coup, and many teachers have been beaten or detained."

Joel Almendares, president of the College de Pedagogy of Honduras, told *La Prensa* that the board of directors had decided—through recommendations of the rank and file—to call the assembly to discuss the buffeting that the government is dealing the teaching profession.

"Therefore, the board is meeting with the base of the 18 departments of the country and there will touch on the matter of the federation of the municipal and departmental organization, until we agree to a grand federation of parents that is legitimate, that has the goal of being vigilant so that the learning process has better conditions."

Teachers returned to work on Monday. The teacher unions have agreed to complete the 200 days of classes that the law requires for the academic year.

## Government forces suspension of Argentine port workers' strike

After eight days on strike, port workers at terminals near Rosario returned to work on February 2 after being ordered back by the administration of Argentine President Cristina Kirschner. The workers, members of the CGT labor federation, had gone out on January 25 over salary demands. Union negotiators and management began talks the next day.

The Labor Ministry ordered the suspension of the strike with outstanding issues to be submitted to compulsory conciliation. The suspension will hold for 15 days while negotiations continue.

The port workers had demanded an increase of 5,000 pesos (US\$1,250) to starting salaries to bring them into line with soy crushing plant workers. Exports of soybeans, soy oil and meal as well as corn and wheat were halted as between 7,000 and 9,000 truck drivers and other port workers shut down ports, including the key port of San Lorenzo.

With over a million tons of food exports remaining on the docks, the Rosario Stock Exchange, fearing a broader crisis if the strike continued, pressed Kirschner for "urgent intervention."

## Colombian truckers strike against "free market" pay scheme

Some 180,000 members of Colombia's National Truckers Association (ACC) began an indefinite strike against a government decree that will change the payment structure for overland shipping of merchandise. The current "fleet table" (tabla de fletes) of minimum freight rates that truckers receive for delivery of the more than 500,000 items that circulate daily in Colombia will be replaced by a system of fluctuating prices subject to market forces of supply and demand. The new system is set to take effect on February 28.

Transport Minister German Cardona claimed the measure would "improve and modernize the operation of highway transport" and would benefit Colombians because they would be able to "buy products at more competitive prices and the country will be able to be more competitive in the international market."

Ricardo Viviescas, ACC secretary general, told Telesur that "nobody is unaware that when the World Bank sets its eyes on

a business it is because...the big millionaires see that for them it is a business that can be profitable by means of operating it directly.” He added, “This business, this industry, is the only one that is in the hands of the people, therefore we call on all the truckers to support us, to all those that are outside of Colombia, that they voice their encouragement.”

About 80 percent of Colombia’s small owner operators are ACC members. Truckers have already been hard hit this year by recent rises in fuel prices and a growing inflation rate.

Although Cardona told the press that the government is willing to discuss the new pricing structure with the striking truckers, he is adamant that it will not be overturned. President Juan Manuel Santos has criticized the truckers for “a certain selfishness” and said, “The government will not respond to these types of threats.”

### **West Virginia chemical workers near six-month mark on strike**

Workers are concluding six months on strike at the Braskem chemical plant facility in Kenova, West Virginia, with no resolution in sight. The 72 members of United Steelworkers Local 721 struck the Brazilian-owned plastics manufacturer over higher health insurance costs, cuts in pensions for current workers and the elimination of pensions for new hires.

The contract expired on June 28 of last year. The union launched its strike August 15. The company insists that its last offer is final and has told the union it will begin to hire temporary replacement workers.

### **California teachers strike**

Teachers in the La Habra school district of Orange County, California, went on strike February 3 over the failure of contract negotiations to secure a new agreement. Some 90 percent of the 225 members of the union honored the strike.

The tensions between the school district and the La Habre teachers go back to June 2009, when the old contract agreement expired. The district imposed a salary freeze. In December 2010, the teachers called a strike over the current negotiating impasse. In January, an Orange County Superior Court judge heard arguments from the union and school district over the legality of the 2009 wage freeze.

### **Laborers’ union strikes West Virginia manufacturer**

Fifty workers at ABB Process Analytics in Lewisburg, West Virginia, went on strike February 1 over demands for increased wages and pensions. Laborers International Union Local 1182, which represents the striking workers, indicated that the company was using “underhanded negotiating tactics that prevent workers from benefiting from the company’s success.” According to the union, workers are in part involved in the production of materials for US combat forces.

### **Newfoundland fishermen strike**

More than 90 trawler men employed by Ocean Choice International (OCI) in Marystown, Newfoundland, went on strike last week. The company has responded by laying off over 200 other workers at their processing plant.

In January, workers overwhelmingly voted in favor of strike action and then rejected a proposed contract offer that their union, the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union, had recommended.

### **British Columbia miners on strike**

Seven hundred workers at Teck Coal’s Elkview open pit mining operations near Sparwood, British Columbia, went on strike January 30 after voting 98.2 percent in favor of strike action.

Key issues in the dispute include employer’s contributions to worker retirement savings plans (RSP) and benefits for retired workers. The workers, who have been without a contract since the end of October, are members of the United Steelworkers Union (USW).

Striking workers include equipment operators, skilled trades and maintenance workers. Production at the mine has halted as a result of the strike, and no new talks are currently scheduled.



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