

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 February 2011

Bolivians oppose transit fare and food price increases

On February 12, hundreds protested in the Department of Oruro in western Bolivia against increases in the price of sugar and other basic foods and against increases in public transit fares.

The protest took place as President Evo Morales attended a parade in commemoration of the 230th anniversary of Bolivia's independence. The protest forced Morales to cut short his participation and return to La Paz. A government spokesperson denounced the protesters for having chosen an inopportune moment to publicize their grievances. Government authorities insist the Morales administration is taking measures to prevent rises in food prices and transit fares.

Two weeks ago, Morales rescinded measures that ended price controls on fuels. The immediate result was an increase of 57 percent in the price of gasoline and 82 percent in the price of diesel. At the same time, the Bolivian government raised the minimum wage 20 percent. The new fuel prices drove food and transportation prices higher and resulted in massive protests against the regime. Morales was forced to rescind the fuel increase as well as the increase in the minimum wage.

Protests continued against food prices and transit fares.

Brazilian unions demand a higher minimum wage, threaten mobilizations

Paulo Pereira Da Silva, leader of the union federation Força Sindical (FS), who is also a member of the House

of Deputies for the Democratic Workers Party, denounced President Dilma Roussef for her plans to reduce government spending and her proposal for a minimal increase in the monthly minimum wage to R\$545 (about \$324), way short of the R\$600 the unions have called for.

Pereira also denounced Roussef for proposed austerity measures that would slow the economy in order to cool inflation. The Roussef government is imposing a budget cut of \$29,668 million.

Da Silva reminded Roussef that the unions had collaborated with President Inacio Lula de Silva, agreeing to rein in workers demands. However, he said, the unions did not have the same "historic" relationship that they once had with Lula.

Philadelphia workers strike college food service

Food service workers at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine launched a strike February 8 to protest low wages, low-quality health care and harassment by management for organizing a union. Workers accuse Sodexo, the French-owned food service giant whose operations span 80 countries, of issuing threats and subjecting workers to coercive interrogations.

Josh Glasstetter's *SEIU Blog* quoted striker Stephen Duncan: "I'm a father of four kids, ages twelve, ten, six, and one. I can't afford to provide for them. I struggle just to pay my basic bills every week."

Pierre Bellon, the founder of Sodexo, maintains a family fortune estimated at \$1.8 billion. Sodexo, whose revenues surpassed \$19.8 billion in 2009, has seen its businesses falter in certain areas as corporations and

institutions have cut or eliminated food services.

Transportation Security Administration head threatens to fire workers who strike

Transportation Security Administration (TSA) head John Pistole told a House subcommittee hearing that he would fire TSA employees who engage in strikes or other workplace actions such as slowdowns. In response to a question from Alabama Republican Mo Brooks who worried that any collective bargaining rights would encourage strikes, Pistole responded, “They have no right to do that, so if an individual wants to risk losing their job by not showing up, they would be subject to discipline and possibly termination.”

When the TSA was established in 2001, its 40,000 workers were denied the right to collectively bargain. On February 4, Pistole issued a decision to allow extremely limited bargaining rights. But they will be barred from negotiating over pay, pensions, proficiency testing, job qualifications, discipline standards, security policies, or deployment of personnel and equipment.

Tennessee legislature considers altering teacher tenure, banning collective bargaining rights

The Tennessee Senate Education Committee is set to begin consideration of a bill to abolish collective bargaining for the state’s teachers. Other bills coming up before the state legislature are calling for an alteration in tenure regulations, prohibiting payroll deductions for union dues and removing Tennessee Education Association representatives from the board of trustees for the Tennessee Consolidated Retirement System, the state-run pension system to which teachers contribute 5 percent of their paychecks.

The bill to change the tenure law will limit the period of eligibility for tenure to between the third and tenth year. Previously, a teacher was eligible at any time after their third year. The new bill would eliminate the right of teachers to judicial review for suspensions or firings.

Previously, the board of education would have to show just cause and provide due process for teachers with more than three years seniority who faced discipline.

Toronto area bus strike

Two hundred and fourteen bus drivers and mechanics in the York region, which constitutes a substantial area of Metropolitan Toronto, are poised to strike this week failing any last-minute agreement between the municipality and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) representing workers.

Outstanding issues reportedly center on working conditions and sick-day provisions, but wages have apparently not been discussed yet. The union claims it has been forced to take strike action by the French-owned and notoriously anti-union Veolia Transportation company that owns the regional transportation service.

These workers were only recently organized with the ATU and were transferred to Veolia when their previous employer lost the contract. According to the union, they are by far the lowest-paid transit workers in the region and work longer shifts, as well.



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