

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 March 2011

Honduras: Teacher killed as police break up protest

A protester died as police broke up a blockade of Tegucigalpa's Centroamérica Boulevard March 19. The victim, Ilse Ivania Velásquez Rodríguez, was a teacher and sub-director of a public school who was participating in protests over continuing government refusal to pay the salaries of over 6,000 educators since last year.

The elementary and middle school teachers, members of the FOM educators' federation, were in their third week of a national strike over salary nonpayment, privatization plans and other issues. President Porfirio Lobo Sosa has adamantly refused to negotiate with the educators, and the Ministry of Education has initiated legal proceedings to fire striking teachers.

FOM called for demonstrations and blockades of major streets on Friday. Ms. Velásquez was hit several times on the head, and as she fell unconscious on the street from a blow by a tear gas grenade, she was run over by a police vehicle that was shooting water at the protesters.

Sub-chief of the national police Rene Maradiaga disavowed any police responsibility for the death, blaming "irresponsible media." Presidential spokesman Miguel Bonilla told a press conference that "the incident was not provoked by the police."

Cofedah, the Committee of Families of the Disappeared, said in a communiqué that Ilse Velásquez was the sister of Manfredo Velásquez, a university student who disappeared in 1981. She had also been involved in the struggle to bring back deposed president Manuel Zelaya. Cofadah blamed her death on "the policy of repression implemented by the present regime" of Lobo.

Musicians continue strike at major Argentinean opera house

Some 125 employees, mostly musicians, at the Teatro Colón, Latin America's most renowned opera house, have been on indefinite strike for months. World famous for its splendid acoustics, the Teatro Colón underwent a refurbishing from 2005 to 2010. However, along with the refurbishing have come cost cutting and attacks on workers' wages and conditions.

The musicians, members of the Orquesta Estable and the Orquesta Filarmónica del Teatro Colón, deny that the strike is only about wage issues. They point out that conditions at the opera

house—including fumes from paint, solvents and other chemicals, "electrical connectors and thermal switches located on humid surfaces and the noise of electric saws, grindstones, planing and woodcutting machines, compressors and polishers," make it difficult and even dangerous to rehearse and perform there.

The condition of the floor is so bad that the ballet troupe refused to practice there after 10 members were injured. In response, García Caffi cut the ballet season short.

The musicians blame the efforts of General Director Juan Pedro Pablo García Caffi to cut costs at the expense of the musicians' wages and conditions since assuming the post in 2009. An ally of Buenos Aires's rightwing Mayor Mauricio Macri, García Caffi has harassed, threatened and fired a number of musicians, calling them "apilables" [stackable, i.e., a dime a dozen], loafers, obsolete and nonproductive.

Last week, García Caffi announced the suspension of season ticket sales, claiming, "the realization of the proposed works cannot be guaranteed."

Other demands by the workers include "the withdrawal of sanctions against 25 employees and of a judicial suit of 55 million pesos (US\$13.6 million) against eight because of losses occasioned by the dispute," according to infobae.com.

Bolivian labor federation calls for 48-hour strike against 10 percent wage hike

On March 15, the Bolivian Labor Central (COB) announced a 48-hour strike to protest the 10 percent wage hike decreed by the government at the beginning of the month. The COB scheduled the strike for March 21 and 22.

The 10 percent raise was decreed for professors, police, military and health professionals. The raise for the minimum wage, currently 679.35 bolivianos (US\$97.00) would be 20 percent, to 815.40 bolivianos (US\$117.50). The government claims that the raises exceed the 2010 inflation rate. However, since the beginning of 2011, prices for fuel and foodstuffs continue to rise sharply.

The COB denounced the unilateral nature of the decree and has called for a raise of 30 percent.

Bolivia's Labor Minister, Felix Rojas, said the strike would be "illegal" and has threatened to dock the pay of striking workers.

Peruvian electrical workers to protest privatization decree

Peru's electrical workers' Light and Power Federation is summoning electrical workers from across the nation to converge on the Congress to protest deteriorating service in the recently privatized electrical industry, and to call for an end to the privatization decree.

The Economic and Finance Ministry published the "Law to Promote Efficiency in State Enterprise Activity," known as DL 1031, on August 19 of last year with the purported aim of increasing efficiency. DL 1031 authorized state enterprises to receive infusions of capital from private investors. "It bears mention," an article in *Adital* notes, "that the majority of the enterprises were privatized and thousands of workers labor in the condition of casuals (*tercerizados*) with diminished rights, nonetheless the transnationals keep charging elevated rates."

DL 1031 has affected other sectors of the economy as well, including petroleum, ports and water. In an interview with *La Primera*, Juan Manuel Castillo More, president of the coalition of unions of state petroleum company PetroPeru, called the decree a move toward privatization "in veiled words." Castillo More likened the decree to the policies of rightwing President Alberto Fujimori, who fled Peru on charges of corruption and human rights abuses in 2000.

Union functionaries and some politicians are opposing DL 1031 on nationalistic grounds, claiming it favors foreign interests and that a previous decree, DL 043, states that 100 percent of the enterprises' shares are state property and nontransferable.

Paraguayan airport workers suspend strike

Airport workers who had called for a strike at three of Paraguay's principal airports over the weekend suspended the action on Thursday, March 17. Instead, they demonstrated outside of the airports.

The strike had originally been planned to pressure the government to reject its project—being studied by the Congress this week—to grant private concessions to the three airports, currently administered by the state, for a period of 30 years with an investment of 100 million Paraguayan dollars (US\$30.2 million). The strikes were to be limited to four hours.

The SOTA airport workers union leadership backed down from the strike because they could not meet all the requirements to keep the strike from being declared illegal.

SOTA Secretary General José Villalba had told reporters earlier in the week, "We're thinking of stopping all services completely without exception." He said on Friday, "We did not close the juridical processes and we prefer to demonstrate in front of the airport, not close it. We don't discount calling a strike in the coming days, but for now we call for a demonstration. Basic services will not be disturbed and passengers will be able to have normal access to the airport."

Pennsylvania hospital workers end strike against threat of open shop

Workers at the Pocono Medical Center (PMC) in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, ended their three-day unfair labor practices strike March 18. The 500 members of the Service Employees International Union called the strike to oppose management's insistence on an open shop, which workers believe will be the first step towards dismantling past gains.

"We refuse to be a mini-Wisconsin," one worker said. "We refuse to let our rights get pulled out from under us."

On March 16, workers left their picket lines and marched on ESSA bank, whose CEO, Gary Olson, is also chairman of the board at PMC. Workers entered the bank and demanded to speak with Olson, but the banker refused to make himself available. When police were dispatched to the bank, workers ended their protest and returned to their picket lines.

In the fall of 2010, PMC workers voted by a large margin to unionize, and negotiations have been ongoing for seven months without any resolution. PMC posted a record \$21.9 million in profits in 2010.

Ontario university facing strike action

Office staff at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, south of Toronto could go on strike this week only days after teaching assistants and staff reached a last minute deal to avert a strike by a different union at the school.

The 240 workers affected include clerical and administrative staff, members of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF). They have been without a contract for over a year. Their union says that a major issue in the dispute is the growth of employment costs coupled with stagnating wages.



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