

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Argentina: Teachers demand justice after beatings by union gang

Teachers and state workers in the southern Argentina province of Santa Cruz marched April 16 to demand justice for members beaten by a gang the previous Tuesday, and to demand the reopening of salary talks with the government.

The attack occurred while the teachers were protesting provincial Governor Daniel Peralta's refusal to discuss the salary demands. The assailants, members of the UOCRA construction workers union, attacked the teachers with clubs, seriously wounding a dozen people.

Peralta denied charges that UOCRA provides him with bodyguards and condemned the attacks. He repeated his claim that the government would not modify its salary proposal.

Tensions are already high in Santa Cruz, where petroleum workers have been on strike since the end of March.

On April 14 the ADOSAC teachers union demanded that the CTERA teachers confederation call a national strike "in repudiation of the brutal beatings that comrades of our association and of the ATE (Education Workers Association) suffered at the hands of the official gang of UOCRA." The statement concluded by referring to previous incidents: "We were already beaten in December of last year by the same mercenaries of the political power, in January we were threatened by the UOCRA local spokesman.... It was not a confrontation between unions; it was repression with coveralls instead of uniforms...."

The march began in front of the House of Government, where teachers have set up a tent, and ended at the Labor Secretariat. Marchers carried "torches of justice" and demanded the reopening of parity talks, the "dismantling of the para-state repressive apparatus incarnated in the UOCRA gang" and the arrest and prosecution of men who beat protesters in a similar incident on November 28.

Honduran protesters attacked, teachers suspended

Honduran police and military forces broke up the second "civic strike" called by unions and the National Popular Resistance Front (FNRP) April 12. Using teargas, water cannon and clubs, police attacked marches, blockades and demonstrations, arresting dozens of protesters. In the department of Olancho, police fired on demonstrators, injuring the Olancho FNRP coordinator and arresting him with 25 others.

In some cases, protesters fought back, throwing rocks and attacking police with sticks.

The FNRP and CUTH workers federation had called the strike in the capital Tegucigalpa and other cities across Honduras to protest the rising cost of living, plans to privatize education, government repression and human rights abuses, and to support the salary and retirement fund demands of teachers. The protesters repeated their call for the safe return of President Manuel Zelaya, ousted by a military coup in 2009.

The Unified Peasant Movement of Aguán (MUCA) participated in the strike as well. Around 2,000 peasants mobilized to demand the fulfillment of agreements reached between the government of Porfirio Lobo and MUCA in April 2010. The government had promised to resolve the agrarian conflict in Bajo Aguán, but has yet to make good.

In addition to the police-military repression, the Lobo government retaliated against teachers who protested in March against privatization plans for public schools. On April 15, General Secretary of Education Anibal Delgado announced the suspension of 5,000 teachers for noncompliance with an emergency decree that would have forced them to return to their schools.

US-Colombia "Labor Action Plan" draws fire

A recent agreement regarding labor and human rights in Colombia has drawn fire from trade unions and human rights organizations for its glaring shortcomings. Crafted to pave the way to a US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the "Labor Action Plan" was agreed to by US and Colombian representatives on April 7, and will ostensibly advance workers' rights in Colombia.

However, according to a report by the US Labor Education in the Americas Project (USLEAP), "While the Plan contains some important measures, it falls far short of what the Colombian and US labor movements, USLEAP, and other worker rights supporters consider necessary as a precondition for a vote on the Colombia FTA. Most distressing, the plan does not require any concrete progress to reduce violence or address impunity before implementation of the Colombia FTA."

Among the critiques that USLEAP leveled against the Action Plan are that it, "(1) does not require an actual reduction in violence against trade unionists or advances on impunity, (2) is limited only to labor issues and does not address a wide range of other concerns, including human rights violations, militarization, impact on agriculture, internal displacement and the rights of Afro-Colombians, and (3) provides no way to ensure compliance once the Colombia FTA is implemented."

Unions like the AFL-CIO, USW, Teamsters and others, as well as Human Rights Watch, the Washington Office on Latin America, the Sierra Club and TransAfrica oppose the Action Plan. Colombia's two largest unions—the United Workers Center (CUT) and the Confederation of Workers (CTC)—are strongly opposed as well. Support for the plan comes from business groups like the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Soybean Association.

Trinidad public service workers demand removal of union president

Members of Trinidad and Tobago's Public Service Association (PSA) have circulated a petition to immediately remove their president, Winston Duke, from office. The petition drive follows Duke's signing of an agreement with the government's chief personnel officer giving a puny 5 percent raise over the next three years, an offer that the PSA had rejected and against which its members had marched and demonstrated for months.

Duke's acceptance of the agreement was a dramatic about-face from his posture over the last several months and his claims that the PSA would never accept the 5 percent. For several months he had engaged in tough talk and grandstanding, leading marches, making bombastic speeches and at one point camping out in front of the Red House, Trinidad and Tobago's parliamentary building.

Duke's cave-in drew fire from other unions as well. Some of them had supported the PSA's position, aware that any erosion of PSA salaries would impact on them. National Workers Union (NWU) officer Gerry Kangalee wrote on the Trinidad and Tobago Newsblog, "The situation smells to high heaven and is quite rightly being labeled as a sellout by all and sundry." National Trade Union Center (NATUC) President Michael Annisette called the 5 percent "a no-no given the high rate of inflation," according to *Newsday*.

The NWU's Kangalee dismissed Duke's claims that the agreement included important gains in medical coverage (in which the premium will double), housing benefit (calling it "an illusion" with a waiting list of 125,000) and death benefit ("How increasing a death benefit helps workers to face the food market is a great mystery.").

However, Kangalee also criticized disunity in the trade union leadership, pointing out that, "The leadership of the trade union movement...refused to mobilize their workers and some union leaders were happy to jump into bed with the government for board positions and other political posts and favors."

The 13-member PSA executive board—which Duke claimed gave him the go-ahead—has distanced itself from Duke, with some board members telling unnamed sources that they had been "set up."

PSA workers held a demonstration outside the PSA's Port of Spain office on Friday. Duke himself is on vacation until May 1.

Locked-out Connecticut workers receive unemployment

Workers at Dichello Distributors in Orange, Connecticut, began receiving unemployment checks last week as the lockout of 95 members of Teamsters members entered its fifth week. Dichello Distributors management had opposed the awarding of unemployment status to the workers, charging they had struck the company.

Meanwhile, the company stepped up its campaign to break the union, taking out full-page advertisements and recently announcing it had already hired 16 replacement workers. No new talks have been scheduled between the union and management.

Boston nurses authorize strike

Nurses at Tufts Medical Center in Boston, Massachusetts, voted by a 70 percent margin to authorize strike action as hospital management and the Massachusetts Nursing Association deadlocked over staffing ratios. The 1,100 nurses are seeking contract language that locks in a ratio of one nurse to four patients as opposed to current working conditions that overload nurses with as many as six or seven patients. Nurses are also worried about the hospital assigning nurses to areas outside of their experience with the resultant dangers to patient safety.

Last week, Tufts Medical Center President Ellen Zane declared, "I will never, ever agree to a nurse-staffing ratio. And I won't put this hospital in a position of financial harm, so some union can get more members." MNA spokesperson David Schildmeier responded, "Administrators are turning hospitals into factories, and making nurses work like Lucille Ball on the factory line. Instead of chocolates going by, these are human beings."

Fast government action ends Edmonton postal wildcat

Postal carriers in Albert, Alberta, outside of Edmonton walked off the job last week and were rapidly ordered back to work by an order from the Canada Industrial Relations Board.

The 15 or so workers who deliver mail in suburban and rural areas with their own vehicles had just received retroactive notice that their pay would be cut by as much as \$20,000 due to a reduction in the number of parcels they could carry. Their union, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), did not sanction the walkout, calling instead for an informational picket.

Canada Post acted quickly to get a ruling from the governing federal body declaring the strike illegal and workers returned to work the following day. In addition to the current cut in income, these postal carriers have not had a wage hike in almost three years.

Halifax housing workers strike for first contract

Thirty-three workers employed by the Metropolitan Regional Housing Authority in Halifax, Nova Scotia, walked off the job late last week after conciliation efforts and information picketing failed to yield a contract.

The workers signed on with the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU) in 2009 but have been unable to negotiate a first contract with their employer. An outstanding issue in the dispute is the fight for wage parity between men and women employed at the Cobequid Housing Authority in Halifax.

The workers, who are mostly women, include clerks, warehouse staff, social workers and others who deliver support to over 26,000 low-income seniors and families throughout the region.

Airline food workers on strike and locked out

Around 55 workers at Gate Gourmet Canada, a subsidiary of a large multinational that supplies catering service to airlines at Edmonton International Airport, went on strike and were simultaneously locked over the weekend.

The workers, who are represented by the United Food and Commercial

Workers Union (UFCW), rejected a final offer from the company that was brought to them by their union for ratification, thereby precipitating the work stoppage. The union had already delivered a strike notice but held off in the hopes that workers would accept the deal.

Details of the failed negotiations have not been released and no new talks are currently planned.



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