

Workers' Struggles: The Americas

6 December 2011

Chilean public employees hold 48-hour strike

On November 29 and 30, members of the three main public sector unions in the country struck for 48 hours to demand job security and reject the government's wage offer. The walkout involved the National Association of Fiscal Employees (ANEF), the Teachers Association and the National Federation of University Professionals in the Health Services.

The government originally proposed a 4 percent wage increase in opposition to ANEF's demand of 9.8 percent. This was later increased to 5 percent. Public workers are also demanding the automatic renewal of employment contracts—a key job security issue—improved working conditions and an adequate retirement incentive policy.

The government has reportedly fired more than 1,500 public workers in retaliation for the strike.

Chilean copper miners return to work

On November 30, workers at the Collahuasi copper mine in northern Chile ended a strike called two days earlier to protest the firing of 62 workers. The workers returned after Collahuasi issued a statement that 30 of the dismissals would be maintained, but that it would "review the situation" of the other 32 victimized workers.

Although production was slowed, Collahuasi spokespeople claimed only 10 percent of the miners struck. The workers have held two one-day strikes this year at Collahuasi—a joint venture involving Anglo American Plc, Xstrata Plc and Mitsui—over wages, profit sharing and working conditions.

Three-week strike by Costa Rican banana workers ends

Around 600 banana workers in three plantations in Costa Rica's Sixaola region, near the border with Panama, returned to work after a strike that lasted 22 days. The plantations are run by Bandeco, a subsidiary of Del Monte, which operates in nearly a dozen Latin American countries.

The workers, mostly indigenous Guaimíes from Panama, walked out over wages, working conditions, union rights and other issues. The banana workers were often subjected to 14-hour workdays, including Sundays, with no overtime pay. Bandeco refused to recognize their union and, when they struck, retaliated. According to an *Inside Costa Rica* report, "The company reduced their wages, did not recognize

their overtime, blocked their credit in the company store, and applied wage deductions for days on strike."

A mediator with the Labor Ministry called the two sides to talks, resulting in an agreement. Edgar Morales, head of the SITEP Public and Private Enterprise Workers Union, told prensa.com, "An accord was reached with the enterprise in which the union is recognized as representative of the interests of the workers. Also they are consenting to negotiate the collective labor contract and there will be no reprisals against the striking workers."

"Other benefits which the strikers won included a decent place to eat on the plantations and temporary loans of CRC80,000 (US\$160)," according to *Inside Costa Rica*.

Costa Rican anesthesiologists hold two-week walkout

Anesthesiologists employed by Costa Rica's CCSS social security agency have returned to work after two weeks on strike. The anesthesiologists, members of the UMN medical union, were joined by other medical professionals after the firings of two of their colleagues last week. The accord was reached on December 2 after several hours of negotiations with CCSS bargainers.

The main points in the agreement were immediate restitution for the fired anesthesiologists, a commitment by the anesthesiologists to make up for all delayed surgeries within a six-month deadline, and the establishment of a system for calculating vacations based on seniority and extra time. The last point was a key demand due to the stressful nature of their work.

Mexican technical institute employees strike over back pay

Members of the Uruapan Superior Technological Institute Teachers and Employees Union in Michoacán, Mexico, began a strike on November 30 over the late payment of wages and benefits. The strike ended on December 2 after meetings between the union, government representatives and the administration resulted in the signing of an agreement.

The overdue payment demands included a transportation bonus, a five-day *aguinaldo* (Christmas bonus) and a retroactive pay increase. Union secretary general Jesús Omar Overa Venegas told *Quadratín* that the transportation bonus, the *aguinaldo* and a 700 peso (US\$51.50) extra bonus would be paid December 5 per the agreement, but that the retroactive raise was "still pending."

Turk and Caicos: protests and strikes over government job cuts

Civil servants in the British Caribbean territory of Turk and Caicos Islands (TCI) have protested in the last two weeks against looming job cuts. On November 22, some 200 teachers, immigration agents, doctors and government clerks stopped work and marched in the largest city, Providenciales, to protest the cuts and to demand bigger severance packages. The government workers held another strike November 28.

The protests were in response to the announcement by the British governor of TCI, Ric Todd, of the planned elimination of around 300 public sector jobs by December 9, ostensibly to trim costs and eliminate overlapping positions. Todd claimed that the reforms would provide “a better-equipped and resourced public sector.”

The cuts are part of a number of austerity measures—among them increases in the Customs Processing Fee and import duty tariffs on alcohol and tobacco—being imposed to cope with revenue shortfalls.

American Crystal CEO denounces locked-out workers

Speaking at the annual shareholders’ meeting on December 1, American Crystal Sugar CEO David Berg likened the wages and benefits won by the company’s workers to a “disease.” Berg, who is overseeing the lockout of 1,300 workers in North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa, told shareholders “we can’t let the labor contract make us sick for ever and ever and ever. We have to treat the disease and that’s what we’re doing here.”

The company’s net revenues for fiscal year 2011 have risen by 25 percent to \$1.5 billion, while Berg, the president and CEO, saw his salary rise by 23 percent to \$2.4 million. American Crystal has offered members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers a five-year raise of 17 percent, just barely above the rate of inflation. In exchange, the company is seeking radical changes in health care coverage that would more than double out-of-pocket costs for workers.

The company’s drive to lower labor costs comes as the pressure of international sugar prices and moves in Congress to alter or eliminate the sugar tariff threaten the previously insulated sugar beet industry of the upper Midwest.

Clerks strike over outsourcing threat at southern California ports

More than 600 clerical workers went on strike December 2 at terminals in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach after 20 months of negotiations failed to reach an agreement. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), whose Office Clerical Unit represents the striking workers, charges that shippers are moving clerical jobs to Omaha, Denver and Salt Lake City.

Dockworkers, members of ILWU Local 13, honored picket lines of clerical workers. However, an arbitrator ruled the strike “not bona fide” and ordered longshoremen back to work. The two sides are contesting wages and benefits, as well as technology the union says

will be used to outsource ILWU clerical jobs.

Crane workers strike in Wisconsin

Two hundred workers at Manitowac Cranes have been on strike since November 15 against efforts by management to restrict workplace rights. The Wisconsin-based multinational, which manufactures construction cranes and employs 12,000 workers in nearly 30 countries, added a last-minute “freedom to choose” clause that would require that workers vote each year on whether they want to pay dues and be members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM). Workers rejected this demand by 180-2 margin and voted overwhelmingly to strike.

The company appears to have been inspired by Republican governor Scott Walker who imposed similar measures on the state’s 375,000 teachers, municipal workers and other public employees. Like the public employees’ unions did with Walker, the IAM has pledged its willingness to work with Manitowac Cranes to cut labor costs but insists that it be able to continue to collect dues and maintain its position as bargainer for the workers.

“While there was agreement on many issues, the company proposed new language toward the end of the negotiations that was absolutely unacceptable,” said IAM District 10 business representative Benito Elizondo. “The company proposed eliminating long-standing contract language requiring any employee who benefits from negotiated wages and benefits to become a member of the union that negotiated those benefits.”

Maritime bus workers locked out

In response to threatened strike action, Acadia Coach Lines has locked out 59 workers in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, affecting bus service throughout the region.

The workers last week voted overwhelmingly to reject the company’s latest offer after a near unanimous vote for strike action the week before. The workers, who include drivers and maintenance staff, have been working without a contract for nearly a year and, according to their union, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the company is offering only 1 percent annual wage increases—despite a 4 percent rise in the cost of living.

The company says it is seeking concessions in driver costs because of falling ridership and increased competition. Along with cost cutting through wages, Acadia negotiators are asking for changes in driver assignments that would adversely affect senior drivers at the company.



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