

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 May 2012

Bolivia: Strikes and protests in various sectors

Bolivia has experienced a number of strikes and protest actions recently. On May 2, members of the COB (Bolivian Workers Federation) protested and marched in rejection of the May 1 Presidential Decree 1213, which raised the monthly minimum wage by 1,000 bolivares (US\$145). COB denounced the raise as both insufficient and unilaterally imposed and has called for a 72-hour strike May 9-11.

Public sector doctors, paramedics, health workers and medical students rejected a May 4 announcement by President Evo Morales suspending a March 15 decree that lengthened the doctors' workdays from six hours to eight.

A director of the Health Workers Confederation, José González, said that the suspension was "not a guarantee," nor did it have juridical standing. Alfonso Barrios, president of the Medical College of Bolivia, voiced the suspicion that "it could be a distraction" to demobilize the striking workers.

Barrios recalled Morales's abrogation of a promise to indigenous inhabitants to halt construction of a highway through an Amazon reserve. The medical unions have called on Morales to annul the decree once and for all. Meanwhile, the strike has continued and escalated, with blockades of highways and confrontations with anti-riot police occurring in some cases.

Also on May 4, public transportation drivers in the capital, La Paz, called a 48-hour strike for May 7 and 8 to protest a municipal ordinance doubling fines for traffic violations. Indigenous protesters, meanwhile, are on a 600-km (370 mi) march to La Paz against the aforementioned Amazon highway.

Striking Brazilian dam project workers return to work after court order

Striking workers at the Belo Monte Amazon River hydroelectric dam project have gone back to work following a judge's ruling declaring the job action illegal. On May 1, a judge for the regional court of Pará, the state where the project site is located, declared the contract signed between the Norte Energia consortium and the workers' union, Sintrapav, valid and threatened the union with a 200,000 reais (US\$106,000) per day fine if they did not return to work.

At first the workers defied the court order, but Sintrapav called the 7,000 workers back to work May 4.

The issues that led to the strike remain unaddressed. Workers want better food, living conditions and transportation facilities, as well as shorter periods between vacations. Since the cost of flights to and from their hometowns eats up a large portion of their earnings, they demand free airfare be provided.

The Brazilian government plans to construct twenty hydroelectric dams by 2020. The projects have generated protests and resistance from indigenous peoples and environmentalists, and strikes and other job actions from workers. A 26-day strike at the Jirau Dam construction site ended last month only after the torching of 30 buildings by enraged workers and the deployment of elite forces to quell the outbreak. Soldiers still patrol the work site, where some 17,000 workers live and work.

Mexican teachers march for labor rights

Teachers in the city of Oaxaca, capital of the Mexican state of the same name, demonstrated on May 1 to demand respect for labor rights. The action, in which section 22 of the SNTE national educators union and 30 independent unions participated, included a march by some 50,000 teachers to the main square. A delegation went to the Government Palace to present a petition to state governor Gabino Cué Monteagudo.

A SNTE spokesperson told Milenio that the union demanded "satisfactory and punctual responses in the educational category, of social and political justice, and the recognition of the Plan for the Transformation of Education in Oaxaca no later than May 15 of this year." The Plan, agreed to between and an SNTE executive committee and Cué, was presented to the public in February as a means to improve education.

Other components of the petition called for the rejection of President Calderón's privatization scheme, investigations into the disappearances and murders of teachers and the prosecution of officials, including ex-Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, responsible for the repression of protests in 2006.

The unions have given the governor until May 15 to respond to their demands, after which they will call an assembly to decide on further actions, including a general strike.

Trinidadian bank employees march in support of striking cement workers

On May 1, workers at several branches of Republic Bank in Trinidad and Tobago closed down operations as they joined marchers to a Trinidad Cement Limited (TCL) workers' strike camp in Claxton Bay to show their support.

The TCL workers have been on strike since February 27 over pay and conditions. However, the bank employees have issues of their own as well. Banking, Insurance and General Workers Union (BIGWU) president Vincent Cabrera complained to the assembled crowd of poor pay for over 2,000 bank workers despite profitable business. The BIGWU has rejected Republic's wage offer of 9 percent and wants the raise to be more in line with the 15 percent recently secured by workers at the Caribbean Communications Network.

Oregon teachers set to strike

Teachers and staff workers for Eagle Point School District in southern Oregon were slated to walk off the job May 8 should the final bargaining session fail to produce an agreement. Teachers are against any tampering with time allotted for class preparation while custodians and bus drivers oppose the districts demand to subcontract out transportation and janitorial services.

Tensions have been building in the negotiations as parents and teachers have held rallies. During negotiations last week, the district had security guards present. On May 3 students launched a walkout in support of teachers. The district has responded by ordering that the schools should be shut down one day prior to the strike. Republican State Representative Dennis Richardson called the action by students "despicable" and also threatened that teachers "should not be surprised or complain when the School District hires new teachers."

The school district, meanwhile, spent \$600 to rent a parking lot across the street from its offices that has been a focal point for rallies, thereby forbidding demonstrations there for the next three months. District administrators have turned to advertising for replacement teachers online after being rebuffed by substitute teachers who normally fill in during the academic year and who don't want to cross picket lines.

Ontario nuclear workers vote to strike

The skilled workforce at Candu Energy Inc., the nuclear reactor division of engineering giant SNC Lavalin, could be on strike this week after voting overwhelming in favor of strike action on May 3.

Nine hundred scientists, engineers and technologists at the company's nuclear plants in southern Ontario and overseas were in a legal strike position as of Monday but could be locked out if stalled talks are not resumed. Issues in the dispute include wages, benefits, pensions and travel compensation at the troubled

corporation.

SNC Lavalin has been recently embroiled in a corruption scandal involving \$56 million in improper payments to two executives. Both the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) and the Communications Energy and Paperworkers Union have set aside millions to finance a possible work stoppage.

Nova Scotia lobster fishermen strike

Up to 1,600 lobster fisherman across the province went on strike last week in protest over the low prices they are being paid for their catch.

The leadership of the Professional Lobster Fishermen's Association had predicted an early end to the strike but were surprise by the determination of a majority of their members to remain off work in a fight to get at least \$5.00 a pound before the season finishes at the end of May.

According to fisherman the expenses of going out don't make it worth their while to continue at the prices they are getting from the buyers associations.

Ontario social workers on strike

Six hundred workers at Ontario Works in Peel Region just west of Toronto, Ontario went on strike May 3 after rejecting what management termed their "final offer."

The striking workers are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) who work with the elderly and vulnerable delivering a range of services from health and childcare to employment and skills assistance.

According to union officials, the employer is asking for a range of concessions in a new contract, including a zero increase in wages that would create a lower pay standard for unionized workers compared to non-unionized workers. Most of those involved in the strike are women and new immigrants who are already struggling to make ends meet.



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