

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 October 2012

Workers, students protest throughout Colombia

Last week protests erupted in a number of cities across Colombia over working conditions, education policy, taxation and other issues.

In Bogota, a student protest outside the National University on October 3 against privatization plans for Colombia's universities led to clashes with riot police. It was followed the next day by a march against recent tax reforms that would cut funding for the government-run SENA technical institute.

In Cali, bus drivers have held strikes, marches and protests since mid-August against plans to reorganize the MIO public transit system that would squeeze out several transport companies and leave scores of drivers out of work. Unidentified people have attacked some MIO buses with gasoline firebombs, resulting in some injuries and property damage. Police have arrested dozens of protesters.

Also in Cali, over 200 people marched and blocked roads in separate protests against the deterioration of their living conditions.

In Medellin, police arrested 39 protesters on October 1 during a demonstration for improvements in education and working conditions and against tax and pension reforms. The next day, workers, students and faculty members marched through downtown and past three universities. Some downtown street vendors took to the streets and fought pitched battles with police.

Chilean dockworkers union, terminal operators reach accord after two-week strike

On October 5, port workers' union representatives in major import/export hub San Antonio, Chile announced that they had reached an agreement with the government after two weeks on strike. The strike was called over a number of issues deriving from the privatization drive taking place at the nation's terminals.

Principal among the issues was the insistence of terminal owners that the retirement age for dockworkers be upped from 55 to 65. Workers resisted the demand because dockworkers, who often begin working on the ports at 18 years of age, are usually incapable of carrying on their strenuous and hazardous duties by the time they have reached 55.

Other issues were the amount of pensions, payments to widows and technological improvements of machinery and facilities.

Cargo traffic was paralyzed at San Antonio, which moves more than a million tons per month. After ten days with no movement on the issues, the union called for solidarity actions at other ports, affecting operations up and down the nation's coast. On October 3, Labor Ministry and union officials met and emerged two days later with the agreement.

A union official from the Norte Chico region told reporters, "Among the points that were achieved is a pension for workers over 53 of twice the minimum salary for those port workers who today have a physical problem or infirmities and cannot work." So far, other aspects of the deal have not been revealed.

The final agreement was set to be taken to the rank and file this week for a vote.

Peruvian teachers end month-long strike

After a month on strike, teachers in the Peruvian SUTEP state teachers union agreed October 6 to return to work the following Monday. The teachers walked out September 5 to demand a 30 percent salary payment for class preparation at the beginning of the school year, and an increase to the Ministry of Education's budget to 6 percent of the country's GDP, up from the current 3.3 percent.

On October 3, SUTEP had announced that government proposals were insufficient and resolved in a general assembly that the strike would continue. However, on October 6 SUTEP secretary general Rene Ramirez told reporters that the union, in calling members back to the classroom, was responding to the pleas of parents who feared that the school year would be canceled.

The union decided to accept the government's last offer: a one-time bonus of 300 soles (US\$110) and the postponement of permanent raises that the teachers had demanded until the passage of an education reform bill. Ramirez said that the union must be consulted on the nature of the reforms.

As of October 6, union locals in five of Peru's 24 regions rejected the back-to-work call and declared that they would continue to stay out.

Mexico: Acapulco teachers return to work after strike over security issues

Teachers' union officials in the Mexican coastal city of Acapulco in southern Guerrero state called off a strike in six school zones after a meeting with state education and public safety ministry officials October 6. The teachers had been out since September 13 due to concerns for their safety from attacks by criminal gangs, who have demanded money and threatened them.

The teachers held a number of demonstrations and marches during the strike to bring attention to their situation. On the day of the meeting, over 400 teachers marched to the city's tourist zone to urge authorities to agree to address their issues and to demand that their salaries not be docked for their participation in the strike.

A teacher spokesperson, Maria Edith Zurita, told Milenio after the meeting, "Among the accord's 13 points, the fact that there will be no docking of any of the teachers who were in the movement, there will be patrols, surveillance 30 minutes before and 30 minutes after entering, and permanent troops at the accesses of Renacimiento and Zapata [colonias or suburbs] stand out."

The strike action was taken because authorities had not fulfilled previous promises to the educators' satisfaction. After the announcement, the state governor, Angel Aguirre Rivero, made a brief statement to reporters that the conflict was over and that teachers would return to work on Monday. He left immediately, not staying for questions.

Dairy strike reaches four-month mark

Workers at Potomac Farms Dairy locations in West Virginia and Virginia are nearing the end of four weeks on strike over pensions, retroactive wages and holiday pay. Members of Teamsters Local 453 walked off the job on September 12 after voting by a 90 percent margin to strike.

Last June the dairy's parent company, Galliker Dairy Company, imposed its final offer. That contract discontinued company contributions to pensions. The old agreement expired in February of 2011 and there is no provision for retroactive pay or holiday pay for the period during which negotiations has taken place.

The strike has affected Potomac Dairy's operations in Cumberland, Culpepper, Broadway, Virginia, and Oakland and Moorefield, West Virginia.

One-day walkout at nine Los Angeles Walmart stores

Over 70 retail workers from nine separate Walmart stores in Los Angeles walked off the job October 4 to protest low wages and oppressive working conditions. The one-day strike, backed by Organization United for Respect (OUR Walmart) was the first multi-store walkout Walmart has faced in North America during its 50-year history.

Walmart workers filed more than 20 unfair labor practice

charges recently with the National Labor Relations Board protesting the company's firing and reductions of work hours over participation in OUR's campaigns. Walmart dismissed the strike as a "publicity stunt" by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, timed to take place during a conference in Los Angeles of UNI Walmart Global Union Alliance, a federation aimed at organizing Walmart workers.

The walkouts last week come on the heels of strikes at warehouses that house and distribute Walmart products.

Job actions hit British Columbia universities

Twelve thousand support staff and teaching assistants at the five largest universities in British Columbia served strike notice last week leading to job action ranging from overtime bans to all-out strike action.

Workers involved in the actions are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and were joined by workers from other unions including members of the Canadian Office & Professional Employees Union. The schools affected include Simon Fraser University, the University of Northern BC, Thompson Rivers University, the University of Victoria, and the University of British Columbia.

The main issues in dispute include wages, job security and protections against inflation for the workers who have been without a contract since 2010.

British Columbia transit workers to strike

Six hundred fifty bus drivers, mechanics and maintenance workers in the Greater Victoria area on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, are set to go on strike this week after their union served a 72-hour strike notice last Friday.

The workers are members of the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) whose negotiators say they were forced to call a strike after BC transit left the bargaining table despite the union's offer to continue negotiations through the weekend. The workers had previously voted nearly unanimously in favor of strike action.

Overriding issues in the dispute include wages, benefits and contracting out of work. The striking workers have not had a wage increase for over two years as a result of the provincial Liberal government's wage freeze for public sector workers.



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