

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 November 2012

Mexican workers' protests against labor reform bill continue

Workers in Mexico protested November 8 against a labor reform bill that made its way to the Chamber of Deputies (lower house of the bicameral legislature) after modification and passage by the Senate.

The bill contains a number of articles that attack workers' rights, job security and wages, such as provisions for the loosening of restrictions on hiring and firing procedures, legalization of outsourcing and hiring of hourly contract and part-time labor, and restrictions on strikes.

The union bureaucracies particularly oppose various articles that purport to make the unions more transparent by opening their books to scrutiny, making available the contents of contracts to the rank and file before they are signed and changing union election practices. The Institutional Revolution Party, or PRI, which has traditionally been allied with the official union bureaucracies, has come on board with the free-market National Action Party (PAN) to promote the bill.

The UNT (National Workers Union), the Telephone Workers' Syndicate, the SITIAVW Volkswagen workers' union, teachers' unions and various other labor groups joined with the Social Alternative Movement and other social organizations to protest the legislation.

At the Chamber of Deputies building in Mexico City, protesters chanted and carried signs with anti-reform slogans: "In defense of employment stability!"; "Total rejection of labor reform!"; "Deputies traitors to the working class!" A group of workers attempted to enter the Chamber, but they were prevented by federal police.

UNT representatives handed a document to opposition PRD (Democratic Revolution Party) deputy Carlos Reyes Gamiz that enumerated objections to the bill, stating, "By no means can the legitimate demands of greater democracy and transparency in the unions be admitted like bargaining chips to consent to the reduction or elimination of democracy."

Costa Rican hospital workers protest budget cuts, clash with police

On November 7, several hundred hospital workers and their supporters marched on the San Jose headquarters of Costa Rica's

social security system, known as the Caja, protesting budget cuts for some of the nation's public hospitals. At one point, riot police and protesters clashed when the march slowed downtown traffic. At least 36 people were arrested.

In the evening of the same day, confrontations flared again as police tried to remove a group of mostly university students who were blocking a major street.

The first protest was called by the National Patriotic Movement for the Defense of Social Security and the Caja, which includes members of the Social Security Workers Union. A number of lawmakers in the opposition Citizens Action Party (PAC) attended the protests, and at least two PAC legislators were injured during the scuffles.

Protesters tried to deliver a letter to Caja officials, who refused to receive it. Among the demands in the letter were the allocation of more funds for hospitals in some provinces and improvements in the administration of the public health care system.

Dominican student shot and killed at anti-tax reform protest

A tax reform package in the Dominican Republic has sparked protests, resulting in tear gassings, arrests and the death of one protester.

The new tax package, promoted by President Danilo Medina, ups the tax rate on a number of consumer goods as well as services such as Internet purchases, telecom services and vehicle taxes. Small businesses that purchase more than RD\$50,000 (US\$1,250) per month will also see their taxes climb.

The protests were called by various social organizations, unions and opposition parties, who also denounced recent price hikes for fuel and staple foods.

Hundreds of protesters gathered outside the Dominican Republic's national legislature November 7 as the bill was under discussion. Following the four-hour debate—after which the bill was passed—police fired tear gas into the crowd as the lawmakers left the building.

At a November 8 protest at Santo Domingo State University, a student was shot and killed during clashes between demonstrators and police. A bus driver was also wounded by a bullet in the leg.

The protests spread to some of Santo Domingo's neighborhoods. In Capotillo, protesters blocked streets, burned tires and threw stones at police to protest the law and to demand the release of six youths who were arrested earlier.

Guyanese sugar industry workers strike for higher pay

Workers at Guyana's GuySuCo state-run sugar firm downed their tools on November 6 to protest management's low pay offer. The workers are members of the National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE), which has been negotiating with GuySuCo for the last two months.

About 800 workers, including field supervisors, nurses, clerical staff, lab technicians, sugar boilers and foremen, are in NAACIE. The union has called for a 22 percent raise in salary scales and a 10 percent across-the-board increase. GuySuCo offered 1 percent.

Currently, a junior bookkeeper and a field supervisor make about GY\$50,000 (US\$245) and GY\$105,000 (US\$515), respectively, per month.

Cane cutters and some factory workers are covered by the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU), which just sealed a deal with GuySuCo granting a 5 percent raise for cane cutters and 1 percent for time-rated (i.e., factory) workers.

Hostess bakery workers strike in four states

Workers at seven Hostess Brands plants in Kansas, Iowa, Indiana and North Carolina went on strike November 9 after the company unilaterally imposed concessions. Hostess targeted concessions at only some of its 36 plants.

The company, which is in bankruptcy, suspended pensions, cut health care and imposed an 8 percent pay cut. Workers involved in the strike are represented by the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union. The Teamsters union, which represents Hostess drivers, accepted concessions.

Hostess, reacting to the possibility that workers will picket plants not involved in the concessions, issued a statement warning, "A widespread strike will cause Hostess Brands to liquidate if we are unable to produce or deliver products. If that's the case, the company will move promptly to lay off most of its 18,300-member workforce and focus on selling its assets to the highest bidders. We urge our employees to remain on the job to rebuild this company."

Ohio steelworkers rally after one month on strike

Striking steelworkers and their supporters held a rally in Niles, Ohio, November 7 as the strike by 44 members of United Steelworkers Local 4564-02 against Phillips Manufacturing concludes its first month. The strike was triggered after management demanded a 21 percent increase in health care coverage that would bring yearly payments for workers to \$3,900.

New hires at the facility make a mere \$9.90 an hour, while higher-seniority workers are taking wage cuts on top of the hike in health care costs. Phillips has been bringing in replacement

workers to continue production.

Kansas machinists vote to end strike against Bombardier Learjet

Machinists at Bombardier Learjet's Wichita, Kansas, plant ended their month-long strike November 10 after the company altered its concessions contract. About 70 percent of the 825 striking members of the International Association of Machinists voted yes on the new agreement.

Management increased a signing bonus from \$1,500 to \$2,500. The main sticking point involved Bombardier reducing its demand that employees shoulder 30 percent of health care premiums to 20 percent. Participating in a wellness program can save an extra 5 percent. Wages, meanwhile, were unchanged from the earlier proposal, which froze wages in the first year, and follows with 1 percent increases in each subsequent year of the five-year agreement.

Strike delayed at Windsor seating plant

At least 800 workers at the Ingram Seating plant in Lakeshore, Ontario, east of Windsor, were set to go on strike Sunday, but late on Friday, union leaders averted a confrontation by postponing any job action in the hope of negotiating a settlement.

Canadian Auto Workers official Dino Chiodo has said that a strike will be postponed for a full month—this despite a vote of 96 percent in favor of strike action by the membership last month. Ingram builds seats for Chrysler minivans for the Windsor plant and a strike would idle that plant as well.

Key issues in dispute include job security and investment in future production, according to union negotiators.



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