

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 January 2013

## Haitian migrant workers protest over unpaid wages

Several hundred undocumented Haitian workers, some of whom have labored in the Dominican Republic for more than a decade, have staged protests to demand payment of back wages from a former employer. The Haitians workers were employed in the border province of San Cristobal in a coconut packing plant called “Kilometro 5.”

According to a report in *Dominican Today*, several dozen of the workers were smuggled into the Dominican Republic in 1999 by a Haitian “recruiter” and worked for 2,500 pesos (US\$61) a week, peeling coconuts and enduring “sun, lack of shelter and exhaustion from the inhumane conditions under which they affirm they have been surviving.”

The Dominican owner, Rafael Emilio Alonso Luna Villo, greatly increased his wealth in the following years, but when the business closed last September, he refused to give workers severance pay.

The workers have since staged protests at the Labor Ministry and blockaded the Masacre River border bridge. They have also demonstrated in the two border towns of Ouanminthe (Haiti) and Dajabon (DR).

Following a promise from president Danilo Medina to allow 1,080 Haitians into the country, the protests ended and traffic was back to normal on January 10. There is now a heavy military presence at the bridge.

The case has been brought to the San Cristobal Labor Court for mediation. One of the Haitian workers, however, expressed the fears of his colleagues that Luna Villo “has a lot of power and is able to turn the authorities against them.”

## Peruvian health department workers strike for compliance with accord

Administrative workers for southern Peru’s Andahuaylas Health Directorate (Apuurimac) went on indefinite strike January 10 to demand that the department comply with an agreement signed last November. The workers are represented by the Minsa health sector workers union.

Among the demands are: salary improvements; the removal of *funcionarios de confianza* (“trustworthy functionaries”), i.e., nonunion workers, and their replacement with Minsa members; the formation of a committee for the acquisition of land destined for the construction of a new institutional location.

The last demand has to do with the upcoming construction of a branch of a hospital in Andahuaylas, with a budget of more than 100 million soles (US\$39 million). A Minsa official has said that without resolution of the outstanding issues, the workers will not accept any transfers to the new location.

## Chile: Pablo Neruda Foundation workers strike

Employees of the Pablo Neruda Foundation, who work at the late Chilean poet’s three properties of Casa La Sebastiana in Valparaiso, Isla Negra and La Chascona in Santiago, struck January 8 following the breakdown of contract negotiations. The three sites now serve as museums and are visited yearly by over 250,000 tourists.

Among the striking workers’ demands are increases in travel and meal allowances—currently US\$0.40 and \$0.20—plus a bonus of US\$416 at the end of the conflict. The workers dispute the claim that the foundation’s management is open to dialogue, stating that management has not communicated with them.

On January 9, about fifty of the striking workers marched from La Chascona to a nearby television station to dramatize their demands.

## 96-hour strike launched by workers at Argentine Culture Secretariat

On January 11, workers at Argentina’s Secretariat of Culture began a 96-hour strike to protest the nonpayment of their traditional end-of-year bonus. The workers denounced the denial of the bonus by the culture secretary, Jorge Coscia, for the second year in a row. In the previous decade and a half, the only time the bonus was not paid was in 2001 during Argentina’s economic crisis.

The striking workers noted that workers in other government departments were paid either in the form of payments or credits at supermarkets. Demonstrators at Secretariat headquarters told reporters they “demand a meeting and an immediate response.”

## Argentine lifeguards strike over pay, understaffing, and

## equipment shortages

Lifeguards at Argentina's Pinamar beach resort area struck January 10 over a number of issues. By January 11 the strike had spread to the nearby coastal resort cities of Carilo, Valeria del Mar, Ostende and Mar de Ostende.

Fernando Espinach, secretary of the Pinamar Lifeguards Association (AGP), explained the reasons for the strike. For one, over twenty resort areas have not provided the legally required number of lifeguards. In addition, 80 percent of lifeguard posts are not adequately supplied with security and safety equipment.

The AGP head denounced the employers association for not attending parity talks to establish salaries and working conditions for the seasonally employed lifeguards. "More than two years ago, they were summoned by the [labor] ministry and they refused to present themselves." They finally came to a meeting at the end of 2012, but "the only proposal was to define conditions once the season was over."

"Nowadays a lifeguard is paid whatever they want to pay, because there is no collective agreement in effect," Espinach added. The average monthly pay for a lifeguard is about 7000 pesos (US\$1400) for working 10-hour days, seven days a week.

## Labor board to drop spying charges against Port of Los Angeles operator

The National Labor Relations Board announced January 11 that it will not pursue charges by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) that APM Terminals, the largest terminal operator at the Port of Los Angeles, spied on the union during a six-month period leading up to last year's strike. An NLRB spokesperson said the dismissal of charges was due to a lack of cooperation by the leadership of ILWU Local 63.

The union complaint, filed back on November 14, alleged APM "conducted secret surveillance, eavesdropping and snooping and listening in on confidential communications between and among union representatives ... concerning ongoing contracting negotiations, bargaining strategies and labor-management issues."

According to the APM, the management figure involved in the spying is on administrative leave. The case will remain open for another 10 days in the event the ILWU decides to reverse their position and cooperate with labor board lawyers.

## Toronto airline workers strike

Ground crew for Porter Airlines at Toronto Island Airport went on strike last Thursday after months of fruitless negotiations for a first contract.

The 22 striking workers, who fuel aircraft for the local carrier,

voted last August to join the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union (COPE) but have failed to win a contract with the low cost airline. Main issues in dispute include wages as well as health and safety provisions. The company has not budged from its refusal to increase wages for the highest paid workers who make \$14.50 an hour and is offering only 25 cents an hour more for others making \$12 an hour.

Porter has brought in replacement workers and says that its service and schedule will not be interrupted by the strike.

## Ontario school unions retreat in face of ruling

Following a similar climb-down by the union representing elementary public school teachers in Ontario, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation has cancelled a planned one-day protest on January 16 against recently passed anti-union legislation (Bill 115).

These retreats are in response to an Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) ruling last week declaring the one-day walkout that Ontario's elementary school teachers were to hold last Friday illegal.

Last month, teachers across the province participated in regionally limited one-day walkouts to protest the sweeping concessions the provincial Liberal government is imposing on them. Under Bill 115, the government gave itself the power to impose concessionary contracts on the province's teachers by decree if they didn't "voluntarily" agree to a two-year wage freeze and other concessions by January 1.

The OLRB justified its ruling of last week by declaring the threatened elementary school teachers' walkout illegal on the grounds that the teachers have binding contracts—that is, the contracts imposed on them by the government.



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