

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 January 2013

## Colombian coal miners hold strike vote

Some 4,500 workers at the giant El Cerrejon open-pit coal complex in northern Colombia finished casting their votes January 29 on whether to strike or send their complaints to arbitration. El Cerrejon is an integrated production-transport-shipping facility, with port workers beginning the voting on January 20.

The workers, members of Sintracarbon (National Coal Industry Workers Union), have waited for over 40 days of negotiations without the parties arriving at a collective work contract.

Sintracarbon's demands include a nine percent wage raise, improved health benefits, transportation and education. Management's counteroffer has a five percent raise and ten other points, which the workers have rejected.

An additional demand is that the company better compensate communities forced to relocate as operations expand. The military and police have forced indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities off their land without compensation in previous expansions.

A pro-strike vote will not result in an immediate walkout. According to Reuters, "If laborers vote for a walkout, under Colombian law, they cannot leave their posts on the first day after the vote or the last day during a ten-day window they have to start it."

## Brazilian bus drivers strike to protest nonpayment of overtime

Bus drivers in the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo struck on January 21 to protest the nonpayment of overtime wages. The drivers are employees of the Transpass company, which has put off paying the extra pay—including work done after eight hours and during holidays—for the last six months.

Some 366 buses covering 52 bus routes were idled as workers stopped work and demonstrated on Avenida Presidente Dutra to begin the strike action.

On January 22, Transpass and the bus drivers' union announced that the company would pay the monies owed and

the drivers returned to work.

## Two-day strike by Peruvian hospital workers

Health care service workers at the El Carmen Maternal and Children's Hospital in Huancayo, in the central Peruvian region of Junin, struck for two days, January 21 and 22, to demand the removal of the hospital director, Hector Millan. The striking workers accuse Millan of not supporting them and of not arranging with the Ministry of Finance and Economy to pay benefits due them.

On the second day of the strike, about 50 employees, members of the National Health Sector Workers Federation, marched to the headquarters of the Junin Regional Government, where a delegation met with the regional director.

## Trinidadian city workers protest nonpayment of back pay

Some 200 city workers in the Trinidadian coastal city of San Fernando marched on City Hall on January 24 to demand payment of back wages agreed to last November. The protesting workers carried signs and chanted for about two hours.

Ansley Matthews, president general of the Contractors' and General Workers' Trade Union, told the *Trinidad Express* that the workers had expected to begin getting nine percent raises in December after the signing of the agreement.

"Up to now they have not been told when they will be getting the back pay and to make things worse, they have not even assigned people to work on the back pay and I myself have made enquiries with the management at the San Fernando City Corporation as to when the back pay will be given."

The workers say they will hold the protests daily until the raises come through.

## Honduran registry workers union ends strike, signs accord

## with government

On January 23, a strike by workers for the Honduran National Persons Registry (RNP) was ended when the Finance Secretariat signed an agreement with their representatives promising payment of overdue wages. The RNP workers had walked out on January 15 to demand unpaid overtime, vacation and benefit payments.

The agreement that the RNP workers' union, Sitrarenape, signed, however, fell far short of the workers' demands. Union president Eddy Moncada told *La Tribuna*, "They were seven days of struggle for 75 million lempiras [US\$3,765,000] that they owe us, but we have accepted the payment of 19 million lempiras [US\$953,815] and today the payments will be credited to the accounts of each of the employees to whom it is owed."

The RNP directorate will meet with the Finance Secretariat January 30 to determine when the rest of the debt will be paid.

## Mexican university workers strike continues

A strike begun January 16 by workers at the University of Michoacan of San Nicolas de Hidalgo (UMSNH) in the Mexican state of Michoacan was still in effect as of January 27. The workers' union, SUEUM, called the walkout after an overwhelming vote in favor of strike action. Some 2,800 workers are in SUEUM.

The union is calling for 15 and 5 percent raises in salaries and benefits, curbing of the practice of hiring nonunion personnel and an end to violations of the collective labor contract (CCT). After some no-shows and mutual accusations, the parties renewed negotiations on January 25.

"SUEUM commits itself to not breaking off talks, to maintaining them, to debating... let's keep on the road to resolve a strike that nobody wants," secretary general Eduardo Tena Flores told reporters. However, university authorities have little reason to move on negotiations, since they have been awaiting a Local Conciliation and Arbitration Tribunal ruling this week on the strike, which they claim is illegal.

## Nova Scotia University faculty to strike

Over 400 teachers and staff at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia are set to go on strike this week after talks broke down last Thursday.

The strikers include teaching faculty, librarians, researchers and other staff who are represented by the St. FX Association

of University Teachers and who have been without a contract for over eight months.

Negotiators for the union say they could not accept the latest offer, which included wage hikes that were below increases in the cost of living and below gains achieved at other maritime schools. In addition to wage improvements the union is seeking better benefits, pensions and working conditions. The University is claiming that further improvements were beyond their financial capability due to deep funding cuts by the provincial NDP government.

## Strike action looms at Ontario nickel mine

Eight hundred sixty workers at Xstrata Nickel in Sudbury, Ontario may go on strike this week if a deal is not reached before the current contract expires on Thursday.

The workers involved are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) whose leaders have said that there are indications that Xstrata plans to use replacement workers and house them on site in the event of a strike. Workers have given their union a strong strike mandate with 96 percent favoring strike action.

Details of negotiations have not been made public but the union says they are hopeful that a deal can be reached before the strike deadline February 1.

## Vancouver stadium workers set to strike

Up to 500 workers employed at the BC Place, a stadium complex in Vancouver, British Columbia, could be on strike this week following a 72 hour strike notice delivered last Friday by their union, the BC Government and Service Employees' Union.

While the stadium employs only 38 full-time unionized staff, another 460 event specific staff would also be involved in any job action. The main issues in the dispute include job security, contracting out and wages.



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