

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 February 2013

## Bolivia: Transit workers in La Paz protest fare hikes

On Tuesday, January 29, La Paz transit workers carried out a protest against fare increases. Groups of workers marched and blocked downtown streets with their vehicles.

Twenty-six thousand transit workers participated in the demonstration.

Despite threats by transit union leader René Vargas of a strike of indefinite duration, buses, jitneys and taxis ran normally once the protest ended. The mobilization was sparked by an announcement by the La Paz municipal government of a plan to increase fares 30 to 50 cents.

Municipal authorities also plan to remove from circulation jitneys that carry six to eight passengers—called “carrys” in La Paz—which the drivers also oppose.

## Wildcat strike by Panama City transit workers

On January 31, bus operators in Panama City carried out a spontaneous strike over wages at Metrobus, a new bus service in this port city. The drivers are demanding a monthly salary of \$800, up from the \$580 that they currently receive. Company officials have refused an increase and offered a \$100 productivity bonus instead. During the protest, striking drivers confronted police, and some 20 buses were allegedly damaged. Several protesters were arrested.

The union that nominally represents the drivers denounced the strike. Inocente Guerra, who led the strikers, admitted in a press conference that the one-day job action had not produced immediate results.

The company that runs the new system, Mibus, a subsidiary of a Colombian bus operator, hired 3,000 drivers to operate 1,000 vehicles.

## Brazil: GM postpones layoffs at the Sao Jose dos Campos assembly plant

Sindimetal-SJC and US Automaker General Motors announced the postponement, for a year, of the closure of the car and truck assembly lines at Sao Jose dos Campos. GM also promised to

invest \$246 million in the region. The union had threatened to strike, but following negotiations it reached sellout agreement to temporarily avert layoffs.

The closure would have destroyed 750 jobs. Those layoffs would have followed the sacking of some 799 workers last August, following the ending of a tax holiday between GM and the administration of Dilma Rousseff.

The concessions by Sindimetal-SJC include “flexible” work scheduling according to oscillations in demand—including up to two hours of forced overtime—and a lower pay scale for newly hired workers. “This is not our dream agreement, but what was possible in this period,” declared union president Antonio Ferreira de Barros.

The postponement will end in December.

## Colombian coal miners take strike vote

Union miners at Cerrejon, Colombia’s biggest coalmine, voted on January 29 to authorize a strike over wages. According to Colombian labor law, workers have a ten-day period in which to begin their strike. Union sources reported that 97 percent of the membership voted in favor of the job action.

The mine, owned by transnationals BHP Billiton, Anglo American and Xstrata, produced 34.6 million tons of coal last year. It employs 4,500 union miners.

## West Chicago teachers strike

Teachers in District 33 in West Chicago, Illinois began picketing Monday after contract negotiations broke down Sunday night. The Elementary Teachers Association had already agreed to a three-year pay freeze for its 284 workers. Approximately 4,120 students attend West Chicago schools.

The district administration has pointed to a deficit projected to swell to \$3.5 million as a pretext for attacking pay and health insurance.

Teachers say workloads have increased substantially over the past few years, requiring hundreds of additional hours of work to implement new programs at the local schools.

## Memphis sanitation strike ends

Sanitation workers in the Memphis, Tennessee area ended their three-day strike January 30 after Republic Services agreed to pay safety bonuses stipulated by their labor contract. The 180 members of Teamsters Local 984 are currently working under an expired contract and several issues in the current negotiations are unresolved.

According to a Teamsters' press release, workers also struck to protest the company's refusal to allow pay for donning safety gear and ending a practice allowing workers to bid on family vacation time.

The Memphis strike follows other Republic struggles that involved a lockout in Evansville, Indiana and a strike in Mobile, Alabama. Republic is the second largest waste management company in the United States, with total revenues of \$8.2 billion and profits of \$589 million in 2011. Former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates is Republic's primary shareholder.

## Workers picket Las Vegas casino to press for first contract

Hundreds of workers picketed in front of the two-year-old Cosmopolitan casino and hotel complex to demand management agree to their first union contract. Cosmopolitan workers unionized 18 months ago under Culinary Union Local 226.

According to workers, Cosmopolitan management has come to agreement on minor contract issues, but is dragging its feet on more substantial issues, such as seniority, health care, pensions and wages. Deutsche Bank, which owns the Cosmopolitan, is hoping to resist a first-time contract in order to better sell the property to another entity and avoid entangling contract issues.

## B.C. Workers' Compensation Board union recommends concessions contract

Following 11 months of negotiations and a 96 percent strike mandate, the Compensation Employees Union (CEU), which represents 2,100 Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia workers, is recommending the acceptance of a concessions contract.

The tentative deal strips job security provisions, offers no improvements to benefits and, via a lower than inflation rate wage increase, implements an effective pay cut. This follows two years of zero-percent wage increases as directed by the right-wing B.C. Liberal government's so-called "net-zero (public sector bargaining) mandate."

Despite identifying job security as the number one issue for its members, the CEU leadership refuses to conduct a struggle to defend it, citing a vaguely worded letter of assurance from the

Board's CEO that there will be no job losses, and the hope the election of a social democratic NDP government will result in the reinstatement of job security language.

Workers vote on the tentative agreement on February 14, 2013.

## Alberta seniors' home strike ends

A tentative settlement was announced last Friday in the five-day-old strike by 130 workers employed by Symphony Senior Living at Aspen Ridge in Red Deer, Alberta.

Workers at the facility have been fighting for a first contract between their union, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), and Senior Living, a Toronto-based company.

The for-profit company recently gave notice to the provincial government that it would be cancelling its agreement to provide 49 publicly funded beds across the province due to insufficient profitability.

## Toronto shelter workers face lockout

Some 70 workers employed by Homes First homeless shelter in Toronto, Ontario are facing a lockout by the company after voting unanimously last October for strike action and then turning down management's most recent offer last week.

The company receives over \$6 million in funding from the city to provide shelter for the homeless and help relocate them to permanent homes, but relations with workers at their facilities have reportedly been toxic for years.

The workers are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), which has filed a complaint with the Ontario Labour Relations Board claiming that the company is bargaining in bad faith.



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