

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 February 2013

Colombian coal miners maintain strike

As of February 15, a strike by miners at Colombia's Cerrejon coal mining and export complex was still in effect. The miners walked off the job on February 7 after management and the Sintracarbon mineworkers union failed to reach agreement on a number of issues. About 3,800 miners are out.

In addition to salary and benefit demands, health services, recognition of job-related maladies, the definition of minimum conditions for contracted workers, formalization of 1,200 workers and problems relating to displaced communities and the environment are issues in negotiations.

Cerrejon, jointly owned by BHP Billiton, Anglo American and Xstrata, is Colombia's largest mining complex. The strike is the first at Cerrejon in over 20 years. Coupled with the suspension of mining at the nation's second largest mine, Drummond, over an industrial near-accident, the stoppage has cut coal production and export by 85 percent.

President Juan Manuel Santos sent his vice minister of Labor, Jose Noe Rios, to Cerrejon to hold tripartite talks. On February 14, Cerrejon announced that renewed negotiations were scheduled for February 15.

Conflict in another mining area is heating up as well. In the northeastern department of Arauca, some 2,000 residents clashed with police and the military over blockades of entrances to four oilfields last week. In the February 15 edition of *Colombia Reports*, radio journalist Emiro Goyeneche pointed out some of the reasons for the locals' anger.

"For 30 years multinationals have been mining in Arauca," Goyeneche told the reporters. Promises by the oil companies and the government of investment in the region were never kept. Goyeneche added, "The people want social investment, like health care, education and the creation of jobs." *Colombia Reports* notes that Goyeneche has received death threats over his reportage.

President Santos labeled the strike "illegal" and alleged that it was "supported by guerrilla groups."

Argentine truck drivers strike, block supermarket chain warehouses

Truck drivers in five Argentine cities struck and blocked the gates of distribution centers belonging to the MaxiConsumo supermarket chain beginning February 13. The Truck Drivers Union, a member of the CGT labor confederation, called the action to demand that the company comply with terms of a labor accord signed in December.

According to the agreement, workers in the logistics department were to be integrated into the union, but were not. A press statement by the Argentine Chamber of Wholesale Distributors and Supermarkets (CADAM) rejects the claim as baseless.

Pablo Moyano, truck drivers union head and son of CGT boss Hugo Moyano, denied that the drivers were carrying out a blockade, calling it a "workers' strike." Moyano told reporters that the issue was not confined to MaxiConsumo. "This is happening in Diarco, in Vital, in Jaguar and in

a bunch of wholesalers, where the workers are in the same conditions; there are in total about 20 supermarket chains in the whole country."

Moyano blamed the administration of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and her labor minister for the impasse, "because we had agreed to this at a meeting at the very ministry two years ago and they're taking away the possibility for those workers to earn a mango more." The CGT was a staunch supporter of Fernandez until recently, when relations soured.

On February 15, Moyano called for strikes at all 37 MaxiConsumo warehouses, to begin Monday, February 18.

24-hour strike by Buenos Aires health workers over parity talks

Six days after the breakdown of parity talks, medical and health workers at 77 hospitals in Argentina's Buenos Aires province carried out a 24-hour strike February 14 to demand that they be reopened. Emergency and security services were not affected.

A press release from the Buenos Aires Health Professionals Association (CICOPS), which called the strike, stated, "The Friday the 8th parity meeting was a true fiasco. The provincial government refuses to make a proposal that contemplates, for the salary of the Buenos Aires workers, compensation more than out-of-pocket costs, the deterioration of inflation surely over 25 percent, aggravated by the salary tax and the family allowances that we cannot be paid either."

The health workers are demanding, in addition to a 40 percent salary increase, the end of the "profit" tax on higher paid workers and the universalization of family allowances. Another demand is greater security at hospitals, due to the increase in robberies and attacks against health professionals in recent months. Finally, they call for an end to shortages of supplies and equipment.

A number of actions, primarily marches and demonstrations coordinated by the FESRPOSA national health workers federation, took place at the National Congress, the provincial government building and the Labor Ministry headquarters.

Mexico: protests against education reforms continue

Teachers in Mexico continue to express their opposition to proposed education reforms, which they fear will undercut their wages, conditions, rights and job security. On February 13, mobilizations were carried out throughout the nation.

In Mexico City, about 1,200 members of the National Education Workers Coordinator (CNTE) marched through the center of the city, blocking traffic at some points. They arrived at the Chamber of Deputies in the afternoon and awaited a commission to meet with them.

At the beginning of the march, Francisco Bravo, leader of CNTE Section 9, claimed that "a little more than 20 states, such as Oaxaca,

Chiapas, Veracruz and Tlaxcala ... are going to demonstrate against the misnamed education reform.”

Members of the National Education Workers Syndicate (SNTE) and the Ceteg Guerrero state education workers federation blocked the Autopista del Sol, the main freeway. In the municipality of Tlapa, Ceteg members blocked the highway to Chilpancingo.

Teachers in Michoacan, Mexico held a 24-hour strike on February 15 and took over tollbooths along the Siglo 21 and Occidente freeways, preventing the collection of tolls.

Protest by laid-off Bahamian hotel workers

Carrying picket signs and chanting, Bahamian hotel ex-employees and supporters marched to the parliament building in Nassau February 14 to protest the layoffs of 140 workers from the Wyndham Nassau Resort. The ex-employees were given no advance notice and were informed of the layoffs the previous Friday. Management did not inform their union, the Bahamas Hotel Catering and Allied Workers Union (BHCAWU), of the layoffs either.

The laid-off workers were also told to sign a promise that they would not apply for any jobs at the resort for 18 months.

The Wyndham Nassau Resort is owned by Baha Mar Ltd., a Chinese firm which is currently building a giant \$3 billion resort/casino complex on New Providence Island, with funding by the Import-Export Bank of China. Completion of the project is set for late 2014.

Officials from the Bahamas Hotel Catering and Allied Workers Union (BHCAWU), the National Congress of Trade Unions Bahamas (NCTUB), the Bahamas Union of Teachers (BUT) and others were present at the rally, where they urged the protesters to appeal to the government to “do whatever they have to do.”

When BHCAWU head Nicole Martin approached Prime Minister Perry Christie as he climbed the parliament steps, he told her that he had scheduled a meeting with Baha Mar to discuss the matter. “He also met with the union president briefly after the House sitting, but neither party would disclose what was said in the meeting,” according to a *Tribune* 242 report.

Barbados Today quoted Labour Minister Shane Gibson as saying that, though the layoffs were unfortunate in view of the concessions the government had given Baha Mar, there was only so much the government could do. Gibson added, “You don’t want me to tell them something today to make them feel good and tomorrow I can’t deliver on it. I don’t own Baha Mar.”

Ohio teachers assail school board, authorize strike

The 385 teachers in the Strongsville, Ohio school district carried through a near unanimous strike authorization vote February 15 to prepare for a possible walkout against a concessionary contract. School board vice president Ruth Brickley declared the district “would never allow” a strike to impact the school and confirmed the board had a contingency plan but would not elaborate.

The vote followed a boisterous protest at the previous week’s school board meeting where 350 teachers along with community members packed the auditorium with an overflow crowd that backed up outside into the parking lot. Board president David Frazee ordered the doors to the auditorium closed and police to remove anyone “who cannot control

themselves.” Meanwhile, teachers outside took up the chant, “Let us in.”

Neither the Strongsville Education Association (SEA) nor the board has revealed the details of the current talks. Back in March 2011, the SEA approved a \$2 million concessionary package that included a salary freeze and elimination of educational and step increases, a hike in health insurance premiums, and reductions in planning time.

The SEA’s web site indicates that teachers want to reconquer lost planning time and ensure manageable class sizes. The union is also seeking to retain music, art and physical education programs in place at the elementary level. Future negotiating sessions are scheduled for February 22 and 25.

New England grocery chain hires replacement workers in anticipated battle over health care

The New England grocery chain Stop & Shop opened 14 recruitment centers last month that aim to hire replacement workers for five local units of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union. Currently, the UFCW is negotiating on behalf of 40,000 workers at more than 250 Stop & Shop stores in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire.

The union and company management have been unable to come to agreement over how health care provisions will be implemented under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act known as Obamacare. Management is seeking to cut off part-time workers from health care coverage in 2014, claiming these workers will be able to obtain insurance coverage under state-operated health insurance exchanges.

Elements of the new health care program are anticipated to raise the cost of many union-employer plans. The UFCW and other AFL-CIO unions have been pressing the Obama administration to provide subsidies to preserve these plans but are not getting any response. Unions consider health care coverage one of the few last incentives to retain union membership and continue to collect dues.

NBA player representatives remove executive director

Player representatives for the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) voted unanimously to remove the union’s executive director Billy Hunter last week. The 24-0 vote comes on the heels of a US Attorney’s office investigation of an NBPA contract with the failing New Jersey investment firm Prim Capital that authorized future payments of more than \$3 million to the firm.

Prim Capital hired Billy Hunter’s son Todd in 2002. The contract between the NBPA and Prim Capital is being questioned over the legitimacy of signatures by the NBPA’s late counsel Gary Hall and the union’s director of player services Purvis Short. The attorney’s office is currently reviewing handwriting samples in an effort to determine the signing’s authenticity.

The investigation also reveals that Hunter failed to get proper player approval for his five-year, \$15 million contract extension in 2010.

Childcare workers on strike in B.C.

Eighty-seven early childcare educators at various centers in the Vancouver, British Columbia area will be on a one-day strike on February 19 after their union gave 72 hours notice over the weekend.

Union leaders cite the employer's failure to seriously address issues such as wages and their refusal to return to the bargaining table. Workers voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action after reaching an impasse in negotiations last December.

BCGEU has launched similar limited job actions in the social service sector in recent weeks aimed at putting pressure on the provincial Liberal government to restore funding that has been drastically cut in recent years.

City workers strike in central B.C.

Worker employed by the City of Williams Lake in south central British Columbia went on strike this past weekend but returned to work Monday, as negotiations resumed at the bargaining table.

The workers are represented by the International Union of Operating Engineers (IOUE), who have imposed an overtime ban since the return to work. They are employed in a range of front-line jobs from administration to city maintenance in the town of approximately 12,000.

Central issues in the dispute include pensions and benefits and particularly "call-out" pay, a minimum payment provision for some services, which the city is trying to eliminate.



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