

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 February 2013

Colombian coal miners' strike enters third week

February 20 marked two weeks of a strike by 5,000 coal miners at Colombia's largest coal mining and export facility, Cerrejon. The workers, members of the Sintracarbon union, walked out over a range of issues, including salary and benefits, health services, job-related maladies, contracted workers, displaced communities and the environment.

The strike has caused production and export of coal to plummet, eliciting increasingly strident calls from business and the media to bring it to an end. Negotiations between the parties, now with a government mediator, "have focused exclusively on the rules and regulations for how to begin substantive negotiations," according to a Reuters report.

Cerrejon has filed a petition to take the strike to arbitration and refused to continue negotiations unless workers return to work. Sintracarbon denounced the move; a union official told reporters, "We are at the head of a just strike, and therefore a solution has to be found through the signing of a collective agreement."

Meanwhile, two separate bombings of Cerrejon trucks have brought charges of "terrorism" against the workers. The company issued a communiqué that called for "the solidarity of its workers and the community ... to repudiate ... this type of action." Sintracarbon quickly denounced the attacks. Although no evidence as to the perpetrators has been produced, the attacks have served to escalate tensions and calls to end the strike.

On February 22, an article in *EL Herald* reported on an "open letter" from some nonunion contract workers rejecting the strike and calling for a procedure not unlike that demanded by Cerrejon: using "legal mechanisms," i.e., arbitration, if the parties do not come to an agreement within a certain timeframe.

Sintracarbon and the Cerrejon agreed to return to talks on Monday, February 25, but the strike remains in force.

Brazilian dockworkers strike, protest port privatization

Workers at Brazil's port facilities engaged in protest actions last week against the government's plans to accelerate privatization at the nation's ports.

On February 18, about 60 stevedores boarded a Chinese vessel to prevent the unloading of cranes by nonunion workers. The *South China Morning Post* reported, "The cranes are to be installed at Embraport, a new US\$1.2 billion private container terminal in Santos that does not use established union procedures to hire workers." Unloading resumed when the terminal agreed to hire union workers to

watch over the unloading and assembly of the cranes.

Of particular concern for the workers, and their union, the Força Sindical, is Presidential Decree 595, which allows for the hiring of dockworkers by private firms outside of the purview of a centralized agency called the OGMO that assigns available shifts to union members. The government plans to auction off up to 159 state-run terminals throughout Brazil, weakening the OGMO system and undercutting dockworkers' job security.

The government of President Dilma Rousseff is attempting to bring down the so-called "Brazil Cost" for port activities, which it claims should be brought down by at least 20 percent to be competitive.

February 22 witnessed a six-hour strike at 36 ports. Some 30,000 dockworkers stopped work to protest 595. Força Sindical had initially called for other actions, including another limited strike on February 26, but put them all on hold following an agreement with the government.

Union officials pledged not to call for or consider any job actions until March 15 while negotiations take place. Força Sindical President Paulo Pereira da Silva, calling the strike "a success," claimed, "today we opened a channel." On the other hand, Special Secretariat for Ports Leonidas Cristino told reporters, "We have no intention of changing the essence of the reform, but we're open to negotiations."

Brazilian stadium workers strike over wages, benefits

Workers on Rio de Janeiro's Maracana Stadium downed their tools for 24 hours on February 18 to demand improvements in wages and benefits. The workers want a 15 percent raise as well as the extension of health insurance to family members and a higher food allowance.

The workers, who number about 5,500, belong to the Sintraicp heavy construction union. They have been working on the modernization of the iconic Maracana Stadium in preparation for the FIFA Confederation Cup competition in June and the 2014 World Cup international soccer playoffs as well as some of the Olympic games in 2016.

A number of strikes have occurred during the Maracana renovation project, including a nearly three-week work stoppage in 2011 over issues identical to the current ones.

The workers returned to work the following day. Sintraicp petitioned the governor to discuss their demands, and he said he would meet with them.

Dominican professors end three-day strike, administrative employees strike extended

Professors at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) held a three-day strike February 19-21. The professors, members of the UASD Professors Association, or Faprousad, were joined by the Association of University Employees (Asodemu).

UASD is the Dominican Republic's largest university, with 185,000 students and 15 satellite campuses. It is also the nation's only public institution of higher learning.

The main purpose of the strike was to demand raises in salaries and travel allowances. The university's offer of a 10 percent raise is half of the 20 percent demanded by Faprousad and Asodemu. The administration claims that the raises would drain funds from the university's retirement system.

Faprousad President Ismael Peralta explained to reporters that the raise was necessary because of inflation, which has been 34 percent since 2008. In addition, since the beginning of 2013 an increase in the sales tax and the scrapping of tax exemptions for some food items and property have eaten into paychecks.

Faprousad is also demanding a 25 percent increase in the travel allowance for professors who teach at the satellite campuses.

Faprousad called the professors back to work on February 22, but Asodemu told its members to remain on strike. The administrative employees have other demands, including pharmacy and dental coverage, a blood bank, regularization of salaries and the payment of overdue money owed to retired workers.

Argentine teachers unions call for 48-hour strike

On February 23, the Education Workers Confederation of Argentina (Ctera) called for a two-day strike to begin February 24. The confederation also called for "a day of protest and mobilization for March 6."

The stoppage will delay the beginning of the school year, scheduled for February 24, by two days. Ctera will join four other teachers unions that have already called for the same or similar actions.

At a press conference, Ctera Secretary General Stella Maldonado listed some of the teachers' demands: the establishment of 8 percent of GNP for the education budget, modification of the tax on higher-paid workers, universalization of family allowances and the participation of the Labor Ministry in parity negotiations.

Primary among all the unions' demands is a salary raise that can keep pace with Argentina's constantly rising inflation rate.

Teachers unions in Buenos Aires already announced a four-day strike, to be held the Mondays and Tuesdays of the next two weeks, and the Magisterial Association of Santa Fe (Amsafe) resolved to strike on February 24 and 25 against the provincial government's salary offer.

Ohio teachers and supporters angered over union-busting preparations by school board

Teachers and their supporters in Strongsville, Ohio packed a school board meeting February 21 to denounce the district's concession demands and a decision to hire a professional strikebreaking firm in

the run-up to a possible March 4 labor stoppage.

The hiring of Huffmaster Strike Services has doubly alarmed the community after it emerged that in 2006, during a contract struggle in Sandusky, Ohio, some one-third of the security guards hired by the company had criminal records. Alternative Workforce, Inc., which is a subsidiary of Huffmaster, has begun advertising for replacement teachers.

Jathangi Sridharan, a student liaison to the school board, broke down in tears at the conclusion of her monthly report to the meeting, voicing support for the teachers. A second student liaison, Jordan Kelley, charged that school superintendent John Krupinski called his mother and threatened to eject him from the board if he did not maintain neutrality in relation to the labor dispute. Both Sridharan and Kelley vacated their seats during the meeting to sit with teachers.

One day before the school board meeting, teachers filed a 10-day strike notice. Two negotiating sessions are scheduled before a possible strike. Should negotiations fail, the Strongsville Education Association says it will hold a final secret ballot on March 3 to determine whether to go forward with a walkout.

Shelter workers strike in Toronto

Seventy workers at the Homes First Society in Toronto, Ontario went on strike February 18, with their union pointing out the irony of the strike beginning on "Family Day," a provincial holiday.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU/NUPGE) represents the strikers, who work with the homeless and low-income tenants at the Homes First shelter. The company has hired replacement workers as well as security guards in what the union says is an effort to intimidate striking workers.

Union leaders have unsuccessfully appealed to city hall to pressure the company to return to the bargaining table. The City of Toronto provides \$6 million in annual funding to Homes First, but relations between management and staff at the company have been persistently bitter.



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