

Workers Struggles, the Americas

26 March 2013

Latin America

Striking Colombian sugar workers face threats, violence, police repression

Sugarcane cutters at the Ingenio La Cabaña processing plant, who have been on strike since March 6 (see March 12 Workers Struggles), have been subjected to escalating harassment, threats and violence from La Cabaña security guards, police and paramilitary forces. The workers are members of the Sintrainagro union, which has already lost some of its supporters to paramilitary murder.

The strike was motivated by poor pay as well as by conditions that one union document describes as turning the workplace “almost into a concentration camp.” Some of the other factors included the company’s refusal to negotiate, threats against workers and their families, the flouting of labor laws, and the use of short-time labor and mass layoffs.

Not only has the government taken no action to defend the workers, it has collaborated with the employers.

For example, when striking workers were riding in buses to the entrance of an industrial park for a demonstration, they heard gunshots and had to duck for cover.

Upon arrival at the plant entrance, “we were met with a strong contingent of police who dispersed us with teargas bombs,” Sintrainagro plant president Mauricio Ramos told reporters.

Buses carrying scab workers to the plant are escorted by trucks full of armed guards. “They tell them if they talk of a strike, they’re going to kill them,” said Ramos. Security guards watch the workers and maintain cordons around the plant.

The union’s response to this climate of terror and intimidation has been to call for “civil resistance”—that is, a campaign of nonviolent actions that supposedly will compel the government to come to the workers’ defense.

Some unions, local residents, and students and a few politicians have come out in support of the campaign, which included a letter sent to Colombia’s right-wing president Juan Manuel Santos pleading for his intervention.

State workers in Argentina strike over pay

State workers in Argentina’s Health and Central Administration departments struck for 48 hours March 20 and 21 to protest the government’s failure to improve its salary raise proposals.

The workers, members of the Health Professionals Association (Ampros) and State Employees Association (ATE), respectively, have been in parity talks at which union negotiators called for a 50 percent raise, with government bargainers holding to 24 percent.

According to union officials, meetings held March 15 resulted in

overwhelming support, with a plenary held at the Labor Secretariat voting unanimously for the action. One reason was that the government upped its previous offer a mere 0.33 percent from 23.67 percent, a move that “infuriated the workers,” who immediately rejected the offer and decided to “militate the strike” in all the Public Administration branches, according to *Los Andes*.

The vote and subsequent strike did not bring a change to the government’s offer, and officials declared that strikers would be docked for time off the job.

Panamanian firefighters protest nonpayment of raises, firings, working conditions

Members of the Firefighters Corps of Panama marched from a fire station in Panama City to the central Plaza 5 de Mayo on March 19. The march was held two weeks after some firefighters denounced the government for breaking its promise to adjust their salaries. Seven firefighters were fired after that protest.

About 50 firefighters, under the vigilant control of National Police agents, participated in the march.

Government minister Jorge Ricardo Fabrega justified the firings as necessary to maintain discipline in the fire department. Seventeen firefighters are currently on a hunger strike against the firings as well as the rejection by their executive of a 13-point petition.

Among the points in the petition are a salary raise, better working conditions and regulated promotions. Another demand is the reinstatement of their fired colleagues. One of the firefighters, Lieutenant Cruz Gomez, told Telesur TV that they “will continue the hunger strike until they achieve their objectives.”

Mexican professors’ strike ends after six weeks

On March 19, the Autonomous University of Chapingo Academic Workers Syndicate (STUACH) in Texcoco, state of Mexico, ended the strike that they had begun on February 1. STUACH negotiators had originally called for the walkout demanding a 20 percent raise, but after separate votes by professors and administrative workers, agreed to accept the university’s original offer of 3.9 percent plus increments of 2.4 and 5.0 percent for benefits and travel allowances.

About 1,200 professors and 1,800 administrative workers returned to work.

Mexican teachers strike against education reform

In the border city of Juarez, Chihuahua, some 700 teachers from 10 schools stopped work March 20 to “solicit protection of the judges in the face of this modification of working conditions that they are carrying out, without consulting the base, without consulting the teachers, without consulting the SNTE [National Education Workers Syndicate],” one teacher told Noticias Televisa.

The teachers held a protest in front of the Federal Judiciary building downtown, where they presented a petition before a federal court.

Mexico: Oaxaca educators’ protests and strikes continue

In Oaxaca, on March 21, a celebration of the 207th anniversary of the birth of Oaxaca-born five-term president Benito Juarez turned into a protest by teachers against educational reforms, as teachers disrupted the commemorative ceremonies with chants and signs.

Two days later, in Oaxaca, section 22 of the SNTE held a “mega-march” of more than 20,000 against government plans to impose sweeping education reforms, which include privatizations and attacks on teachers’ rights and wages. However, the action ended in “blows, pushing and screams,” according to a noticiasnet.mx report.

Section 22 secretary general Ruben Nuñez Ginez gave the final speech. During the speech, a group of teachers in the crowd shouted demands that new union elections be held, claiming that Nuñez Ginez’s election “was fixed.” Nuñez Ginez made a dismissive gesture, which brought angry shouts from the dissident group.

When Nuñez Ginez attempted to leave the stand, a scuffle broke out between his supporters and the protesting teachers. Nuñez’s supporters prevented journalists and photographers from covering the melee and spirited him off to safety.

The National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE) Section 22, which is considered a dissident wing of SNTE, called for an indefinite strike on March 23 in addition to the street protests against the federal education reform and for the democratization of the national teaching profession. In a strike vote the previous week, out of 74,000 union members, about 25,300 teachers voted for the proposed indefinite strike and 10,826 voted against it.

The United States

Union orders end to Washington state paper strike

Union officials ordered 130 workers at the Nippon Paper Industries USA plant in Port Angeles, Washington, back to work March 23, ending a three-day strike against unilaterally imposed concessions. The workers, members of the International Association of Western Pulp & Paper Workers (AWPPW) Local 155, voted unanimously to strike after management imposed its “best and final offer” following nearly two years of bargaining.

Neither the AWPPW nor management has revealed the extent of the concessions imposed by the company. But the climb-down by the AWPPW leadership means the company will continue the imposition of its contract while the union is fostering hopes in a labor complaint filed with the National Labor Relations Board.

Nippon Paper produces paper for telephone books, catalogs and newspapers, a market that is feeling heavy pressure from global competitors. One day after workers struck, the company launched an advertising campaign to recruit “permanent replacement workers.”

There are approximately 300 pulp and paper mills in the United States. The AWPPW has about 5,000 members and 21 locals.

Canada

General Dynamics workers in London to vote on CAW contract

Workers at General Dynamics Land Systems’ London, Ontario, plant will vote Tuesday on a contract proposal agreed to by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW). London’s largest military manufacturer and the CAW announced the deal Sunday night. The London Free Press calls the agreement “last minute,” averting a strike by the local’s 530 members.

Jim Wilkes, financial secretary for CAW Local 27, told the press, “We have a deal in place, we think it is a fair deal and we can’t comment on it until our members have a chance to see it.”

The plant manufactures armored vehicles, including the LAV III and the Stryker, employing a total of 2,300 workers.

Ontario liquor distribution workers face contract showdown

The Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) has angered its 7,000 unionized members with its demand that workers accept a four-year freeze on wages plus other concessions. The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) announced a strike vote for next month. This will be scheduled after the expiration of the contract on March 31.

Most of the workers are employed in retail stores, but some work in distribution warehouses and the LCBO office. Despite workers’ opposition to management demands and the imminent expiration of the contract deadline, OPSEU officials played down the threat of a walkout.

The sales and distribution of alcoholic beverages in Canada is carried out by provincial governments in most cases. The Ontario provincial government’s key component of its plan to eliminate the budget deficit is “restraint in the area of employee compensation,” and demands that the LCBO negotiate “in the context of that economic reality.”



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