Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 April 2013

Strike at Puerto Rican dairy over job security, conditions

Workers at the Suiza Dairy milk processing plant in San Juan, Puerto Rico began a strike on the morning of April 15. The company, a subsidiary of the giant Peruvian beverage firm La Gloria, represents almost 75 percent of dairy products sold in Puerto Rico, with a fleet of about 100 trucks that deliver milk to supermarkets, grocery stores and schools throughout the island.

Talks between management and the dairy workers' union, an affiliate of the island's CGT federation, broke down over Suiza's refusal to guarantee job security for its workers and to disclose its plans over changes that affect working conditions and put workers' jobs at risk.

According to a CGT official, Suiza not only refused to accept union bargainers' language guaranteeing job security, but it has already implemented some of the changes, refusing to reveal information during negotiations.

By April 17, deliveries were cut short at some locations and no trucks had left the San Juan complex.

Panamanian teachers strike to protest conditions in school

On April 17, teachers at the Instituto Profesional y Tecnico Louis Martinz in San Miguelito, Panama declared an indefinite strike over conditions at the school. The educators decided after a meeting with the regional director to take the action to bring the school's deplorable state to the attention of the Education Ministry. The teachers say they will not return to work until Education Minister Lucy Molinar comes to see the school with her own eyes and commits to addressing the problems.

San Miguelito, located in Panama province, is one of the most densely populated and poverty-stricken areas of Panama. It is also plagued by crime, with a homicide rate higher than that of Guatemala.

Louis Martinz, with a student population of about 850 students, has 76 teachers, with classes in auto mechanics, auto body work, refrigeration and other trades. The school has suffered from years of vandalism, theft and official neglect.

An article in *El Siglo* referred to "cracked walls, defective ceilings, damaged restrooms and classrooms without lights" as some of the conditions at Louis Martinz. In a TVN interview, one teacher called the area "completely neglected," and added, "There are no supplies for the students to really receive the learning process." Another told of the few supplies that had arrived being stolen before they could be used the next day. Teachers expressed fear for their physical safety and that of their students.

The response by Molinar was similar to that given in 2006 by then-Education Minister Miguel Angel Cañizales following the shooting death of an instructor in 2006: to blame the community for not taking responsibility for their children and neighbors.

24-hour strike by Peruvian teachers to protest arrest of union official

Teachers in the southern Peruvian region of Puno struck on April 17 to demand the release of Efrain Condori Ramos, director of Conare-Sutep, their union. Condori Ramos was arrested in March in the northern region of Loreto, accused of causing "disturbances," destruction of property and defending terrorism following a nationwide teachers strike and protest in 2012. He has been detained at a prison in Lima ever since.

About 500 teachers from various provinces converged in the city of Puno, where residents and teachers blocked a section of a road, stranding vehicles for several hours.

However, adhesion to the strike was partial, with some institutions holding classes without interruption, a reflection of divisions within the teachers' union. Many union officials and members are reluctant to associate themselves with Condori Ramos due to his alleged sympathy for and possible membership in Movadef, the political wing of Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), the Maoist guerrilla organization founded in the late 1960s and, despite serious setbacks in the last decade, still carries out sporadic attacks on the government, most recently in October 2012.

A remark by San Roman provincial secretary Mario Paricahua Calla typifies the stance of the nonparticipants: "This strike is being manipulated by a sector of alleged members of Conare-Movadef. We cannot politicize Sutep." Supporters of Condori Ramos contend that he is being detained for heading the 2012 strike and not for his alleged membership in Movadef.

Argentine bus drivers strike over security, pay

Bus drivers in Rosario, Argentina struck the government-owned Semtur bus company April 19 following a midnight vote of delegates of the UTA drivers' union.

The stoppage by nearly 600 workers on fifteen of the city's routes affected about 30 percent of commuter service.

The strike coincides with national negotiations between various cities and UTA. In Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires, UTA and the bus companies agreed to a 23 percent raise on April 17. The Rosario Public Services secretary, Pablo Seghezzo, alleged that the strike "could be tinged" by the national negotiations. The Rosario bus drivers are calling for the same figure.

However, local UTA general secretary Manuel Cornejo told reporters that the issue was not salaries, but security. To criticisms that the strike was called on short notice, inconveniencing passengers, Cornejo replied, "These types of measures are not prepared; they happen. Do they have to kill a driver before we do something? Agreements are continually being made with the authorities and they're never carried out. Every day we have attacks, shots at the buses, robberies in the doors of the police stations."

The strike decision came after a 20-day "obligatory conciliation"—in

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which strike actions are put on hold while talks take place—that was then extended for a week, followed by a *cuarto intermedio* or cooling-off period, none of which produced results. Cornejo added that the strike "could be repeated, perhaps next week," and might be extended to Rosario's other two bus lines, which are privately owned.

Trinidadian forestry workers protest possible retrenchments

About 100 forestry workers marched and picketed Trinidad's Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources in Port of Spain, Trinidad on April 15 to protest plans to establish a Forestry Authority. The workers are members of the Public Service Association (PSA) headed by Watson Duke.

The protesting workers claimed that they were not consulted regarding the proposed Authority, a claim the ministry denies, asserting that public hearings were held in 2010, and that "the views of all stakeholders were taken into consideration and incorporated into the policy," according to a *Trinidad Express* report.

The picketers expressed fears that the dissolution of the Forestry Division, currently part of Environment and Water, and its replacement by the Forestry Authority would result in the retrenchment of 1,000 jobs. About 1,400 workers currently work in the division.

More sympathy strike action on behalf of striking Ohio sanitation workers

Republic Services/Allied Waste sanitation workers in Ohio, Tennessee, Georgia and Washington state walked out on sympathy strike last week as the unfair labor practices strike by 23 members of Teamsters Local 377 at the Carbon Limestone landfill near Youngstown, Ohio.

Some 600 Ohio Republic Services truck drivers from Youngstown, Columbus, Canton, Elyria, and Cleveland, who originally went out on strike with the Carbon Landfill workers back on March 27 but returned after the Easter weekend, walked back to the picket lines April 15.

Another 175 workers in Memphis, Tennessee and 40 in McDonough, Georgia walked off the job on the same day, while 200 workers in the Seattle, Washington area launched a sympathy strike the following day. In all, hundreds of workers in at least seven states have launched solidarity strikes.

The Teamsters union, while calling out small sections of the Republic Services workers on sympathy strike, has remained opaque about the true nature of the strike, hiding behind the phrase "unfair labor practices" and has not sought any support from wider sections of the working class.

The union has revealed that Republic has been deducting up to $140 a month from workers' paychecks for bogus health insurance surcharges and alleges Republic lawyers have been exploiting loopholes in the law governing overtime to pay rates as low as $6 or $7 an hour.

Many reports indicate that the real struggle involved in the face-off between Republic and the Teamsters officialdom is over the company's demand to withdraw from the Teamster-controlled Central States pension fund and impose the inferior 401(k) plan, although the Teamsters has called this a "smokescreen" for the company. Republic official Holly Georgell told vindy.com, "Until we started bargaining several months ago to exit the Central States pension fund, we almost never had a dispute with the Teamsters much less the ongoing picketing and work-stoppage activity."

Minnesota: Tentative agreement in St. Paul Chamber Orchestra lockout

St. Paul Democratic Mayor Chris Coleman joined the management of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra to press musicians to accept a concessions agreement aimed at ending the six-month lockout. The American Federation of Musicians negotiated a special digital media agreement covering recordings while the local bargaining committee accepted an 18.6 percent cut in salaries and a reduction of the orchestra from 34 to 28 members among other changes.

The musicians' bargaining committee, while accepting wage cuts, had objected to contract language governing pay for freelance substitute players and a proposed artistic review panel. They charged that Mayor Coleman's summary and the actual contract language were in conflict.

The mayor shot back, "None of your remaining concerns, in my opinion, rise to the level of importance that would be worth jeopardizing the long-term viability of this orchestra." Coleman stated that the contract was "not necessarily palatable" to the musicians, "but I believe it is necessary."

Orchestra musicians, many of whom are scattered across the United States performing with other ensembles, rejected management's demand that they ratify the agreement by 5 p.m. April 22. Instead, musicians will vote by mail-in ballot.

Union forces Ontario Steelworkers to vote on contract

After deciding against voting on a concession contract proposal, over 900 workers at U.S. Steel's Lake Erie Works in Nanticoke in southern Ontario have been mandated by United Steelworkers (USW) leadership to vote on the deal anyway.

The workers have twice voted almost unanimously against putting what the company has called its final offer to a vote but will nevertheless be forced by the union international to vote on the contract this week, possibly precipitating a strike or lockout.

Furthermore, the union has made it clear that it will not issue strike pay without first exhausting all options to avoid a strike. While the tabled offer includes minimal wage increases, it cuts cost of living provisions by 80 percent, as well as reducing benefits and vacation provisions.

Quebec Metal workers set to strike

Over 200 workers at Globe Specialty Metals Inc.'s facility in Becancour, Quebec could soon be on strike or lockout after the company last week delivered a final contract offer.

Leaders for the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) which represents the workers, have said the offer is unacceptable, citing deep cuts in the contract proposal.

New York-based Globe Specialty Metals is one of the world's largest producers of silicon metals and alloys. The current contract expires at the end of April.

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Workers protest company racism in Labrador

Workers at Nalcor Energy, in Muskrat Falls, Labrador shut down the energy plant for two days last week to protest against racial slurs made by a contracted supervisor against workers at the facility.

After company executives flew into the area to deal with the issue, the contractor accused of the racist language was removed from the site. Members of the Innu nation had staged a protest at the plant for two days, which ended with the removal of the offending individual after what were termed by Innu leaders as satisfactory negotiations.

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