

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 June 2013

Mexican teachers march to commemorate 2006 protests, evictions

On June 14, tens of thousands of teachers marched through Oaxaca, capital of the southern Mexican state of the same name, to commemorate the protests—and repression—that took place there in 2006.

On June 14 of that year, the state's governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, sent in over 3,000 police to dislodge the teachers who had occupied the main square or *Zócalo* as part of their demands for better pay, respect for their labor rights, more funding for education and other demands. The violent repression and the resistance to it continued for months, resulting in dozens of deaths, some disappearances and hundreds of injuries and arrests. Since then teachers, led primarily by section 22 of the SNTE teachers union, have commemorated the events with protest marches.

As they marched through the city toward the *Zócalo*, teachers tore down posters and leaflets advertising candidates for state elections July 7 in line with their call for a boycott of local elections. A few hooded men threw eggs and three teachers, injured by rock throwers, had to be hospitalized.

At the assembly in the *Zócalo* speakers called for the arrest and punishment of Ortiz Ruiz and those who committed the violence, guarantees of labor rights and the end of the education reform agenda begun by previous PAN president Felipe Calderón and continued by current PRI president Peña Nieto. Section 22 director Rubén Núñez Ginez called for a "Single Struggle Front with the objective of insisting on the freedom of political prisoners and the presentation, alive, of the disappeared."

Mexican bus drivers strike over discrepancies in ticket counts

Bus drivers in Mazatlán, a coastal city in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, stopped work June 13 to protest alleged inaccuracies in ticket counts.

The bus owners association, Alianza de Camiones Urbanos (Urban Bus Alliance), recently installed electronic sensors that count the numbers of passengers boarding and leaving the Alianza's 505 buses. The owners deducted a percentage of the fares based on the count. The tolerance for discrepancies was two tickets per hundred.

From day one, problems were reported with the system. Bus drivers claimed that the daily counts had shown discrepancies of up to 50 fares. In addition, they complained that the sensors counted every time the drivers themselves boarded or got off the buses.

In many cases, after the ticket count deduction, drivers ended their day without being paid.

The striking drivers demonstrated at the Alianza headquarters, where bus drivers' union leader Javier Betancourt Vargas told reporters that they were not opposed to modernization, but that they considered the bus owners' actions "an abuse."

The drivers returned to work on the morning of June 15, after the union and the owners signed an agreement that changed the tolerance from two to five.

Venezuelan government sends National Guard to end iron miners' strike

A strike begun June 5 by workers at Venezuela's state-owned Ferrominera Orinoco (FMO) iron mine was ended June 14 after National Guard troops occupied the facility. It was the fourth strike at FMO this year.

The workers, members of the Sintraferrominera union, struck over a number of longstanding issues, including delays in the payment of the remaining 50 percent of Sunday wages dating from 2006 to 2012, payments of benefits, contributions to the savings bank, funds for housing and management corruption and intransigence.

A previous tripartite meeting between the union, FMO's new head and the president of the CVG mineral conglomerate had already failed.

The government took a carrot-and-stick approach to the strike, with the stick playing the main role. Authorities arrested the former FMO executive, Radwan Sabbagh, whom the workers had accused of corruption and stonewalling, and on June 12, Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, addressing the strikers as "my beloved comrades, brother workers," said, "with this public socialist enterprise what must be done is work to produce and count on me to combat corruption, the wrongdoing and pending affairs ... let's discuss them while producing."

"Nonetheless," alianzasidicalindependiente.blogspot.com reported, "the call to work concealed the decision to militarize the enterprise. At 3:00 in the afternoon, various contingents of the National Guard took control of the factory." Members of the Bolivarian militia also participated in the takeover.

Sintraferrominera secretary general Rubén González complained, "They ordered a convoy to intimidate the workers, they are using all the power of the state. They are treating us like vulgar criminals."

The pro-government Workers Socialist Central (CST) federation announced that "after the application of a contingency plan, workers could enter the operative areas of the enterprise to begin production," as reported by *El Mundo*. The CST also submitted a document to Maduro requesting that he address the issues and establish a negotiating board.

Minister of Industries Ricardo Menéndez, who characterized the strike as "blackmail," praised "the leadership of Nicolás Maduro as a fundamental element of the struggle against corruption."

Chilean supermarket chain workers strike over wages, working conditions

Some 1,700 supermarket workers in Chile's Coquimbo region walked off the job June 14 after their employer, specialty chain Unimarc, refused to agree to their demands. The workers' union, Sindicato Zona Norte, had requested a salary raise, better vacation bonuses, equalization of wages across regions and other demands.

Unimarc is known for paying the lowest wages in the supermarket

sector, and its offer of a 4 percent raise amounts to a pittance. According to union director Marina Espíndola, almost 37 percent of the Unimarc workforce makes the minimum wage, 193,000 pesos, or US\$390 per month. The union is calling for an across-the-board raise of 30,000 pesos (US\$60).

The union also objects to Unimarc's benefit increase offers, which differ between new and veteran employees. "We don't want divisions," explained Espíndola.

Jamaican air traffic controllers vote for industrial action to press wage demand

The Jamaica Air Traffic Controllers Association (JATCA) announced June 11 that its members voted to take industrial action to press their demands for a raise. The JATCA had called a meeting June 10 following the latest in a number of meetings with the Jamaica Civil Aviation Authority (JCAA), which had stalemated.

The JATCA, which represents about 94 percent of Jamaica's air traffic controllers, had submitted its wage claim for the 2012-2014 contract period more than a year ago, but the parties have yet to reach an agreement. Meanwhile, rising costs have made living conditions more difficult for the controllers and their families.

Despite the statement by JATCA president Kurt Solomon that the time for talk is over, and that protest action would take place in the latter part of the week, the union tops have not announced or called for any actions yet. Solomon did tell *RJR News* that "we will be unveiling a course of action for a few days. In order to have our story told; in order to get the focus right that this is a group that requires immediate attention. We want the decision makers in the room to speak with us and to speak with us with respect. And if that is not the case we will just have to do what we have to do. Again, we are asking our members in the meantime to continue working safe, to maintain those safety margins."

Meanwhile, JCAA management "has disclosed that it has a contingency plan in place as air traffic controllers prepare to take industrial action," reports the *News*.

Minnesota non-union janitors hold 48-hour strike

Some two dozen non-union janitors in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota carried through a 48-hour strike June 11-12 to protest unfair labor practices by Twin Cities cleaning contractors who staff large retailers such as Target and Home Depot. CTUL (Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha) an organization supported by churches and the Service Employees International Union, has been campaigning to convince large retailers to bring pressure on the contractors to allow janitors to organize without retaliation.

The largely immigrant workforce has been laboring under poor working conditions, low wages and retaliations for voicing concerns. Janitors at the Target stores earn as little as \$8.50 an hour while unionized janitors who clean Target's corporate offices earn \$13.97 an hour. CTUL held picket lines at Target's stores in downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul to call attention to the plight of the janitors.

So far, only one contractor, Anisca Floor Maintenance of Rochester, Minnesota, has signed an agreement with the union not to interfere with a unionization campaign. Other contractors have refused to participate. The major retailers, who dictate economic terms to the contractors, have

sought to shield themselves from the poverty conditions of janitors maintaining, "None of these housekeepers are actually Target employees."

Washington state college service workers contract ratified

Student service workers at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, ratified their first-ever contract June 13 by a 52-2 vote. Workers organized under the Washington Federation of State Employees launched a one-day strike back on May 28 after 16 months of bargaining that failed to produce an agreement.

The new two-year contract includes a 3 percent pay increase July 1 and another 1 percent increase the following year. The agreement also includes step pay increases, but workers will not be eligible for them until they have accumulated 12 years seniority.

One motivating issue among workers was the demand for contract language that would require "just cause" in the event of disciplinary actions by management and provide for an "independent" review board as opposed to leaving the decision entirely in the hands of administration's managers. But the new agreement provides for a labor-management committee, a three-step grievance procedure and binding arbitration under the American Arbitration Association, which can serve to isolate workers facing victimizations.

Quebec construction workers set to strike

As many as 170,000 construction workers across the province of Quebec who have been in a legal strike position since the beginning of the month are set to go on strike after negotiations collapsed last week.

Workers in five unions negotiating as the Construction Union Alliance are in talks with the organization representing employers, L'association de la construction du Québec (ACQ). The unions affected cover most residential, commercial and industrial construction work in the province.

The union alliance says the ACQ is demanding a 14-hour workday and a six-day workweek, to be paid at regular wages. The ACQ says they are only asking for more flexibility from the union for longer hours and adjusted shifts. In addition, workers are opposing attacks on working conditions and travel expenses by employers as well cuts to insurance and pensions.

Locked-out Ikea workers in British Columbia face employer threats

Over 300 workers who were locked out on May 13 at Ikea's Vancouver outlet have received letters from the store manager threatening massive cuts in their employment terms as well as other cutbacks if they do not return to work.

The locked out workers, who are members of the Teamsters union, already face concession demands, including a tiered wage system and cuts to benefits, work hours, and job classifications. The letter sent out last week threatens to accelerate these cuts week over week until workers return to the their jobs.

On June 5, the provincial Labour Relations Board thwarted a company move to bring in replacement workers from out of province, ordering

management to cease and desist from using non-union workers to keep the store operating during the dispute.

B.C. civic workers strike

Forty-five civic workers employed by the town of Sechelt, British Columbia, north of Vancouver, went on strike last week after delivering an overwhelming strike mandate to their union, the BC Government and Service Employees Union.

Main issues in the dispute include work hours and wages and the union says there has been no movement in negotiations since the strike deadline passed on June 14.



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