

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 September 2013

Striking Ecuadoran sugar workers, police clash

On August 28, workers for the Ecuadoran sugar company Equodos, on strike for two weeks, marched through the city of La Troncal to demand the overdue payment of profit shares. As they approached the plant entrance they were confronted by a squadron of police, who attacked them with pepper gas and clubs.

The workers fought back with rocks, with about 25 injuries resulting on both sides. After the clash, workers blocked the entrance with tires, which they set on fire. They also parked tractors and trucks in front of the entrance, vowing to prevent passage until their demands were met. The workers were joined by their spouses, families and friends.

On the other side of the barricades, about 250 well-equipped riot police guarded the plant, with orders to prevent the workers from taking over the factory. An August 29 meeting between the workers' representatives and management failed to produce an agreement, so the strike was still in force as of August 30.

The workers are demanding the payment of profit shares dating from 2000 to 2011. Equodos disavows any obligation for the overdue payments, claiming that they were the responsibility of the previous administration. Grupo Gloria, the current majority stock owner of Consorcio Azucarero Ecuatoriano (Ecuadoran Sugar Consortium), acquired 70 percent of the company through public auction in September 2011. Equodos has also called the strike "at the margin of the law," as reported in *El Comercio*.

In addition to the share demand, the workers are calling for a wage raise and the selling of 30 percent of the company.

Chilean Civil Registry workers walk out over stalled salary talks

Some 3,000 workers for Chile's Civil Registry went on an indefinite national strike August 30 as negotiations, begun in May, between the Justice Ministry and the employees' representatives remained stalled. Adhesion to the walkout was high, in some areas, such as Bio Bio, Punta Arenas and Puerto Montt, reaching 100 percent.

On August 13, the workers held a one-day "warning strike" to bring ministry negotiators back to the table after talks broke down. Although a government spokesperson promised to return to negotiations, nothing has happened since. A union official told *El Pinguino*, "We keep waiting and we're open to dialogue, but we can't keep waiting without doing anything."

Chief among the workers' demands is a raise in pay, which has remained frozen since 2008 while their workload has increased. Particularly galling to the workers is the fact that US\$385 million was recently awarded to a firm to create new identification cards and passports. They claim that the resulting changes in the system will create more work and extend the time it takes to get the documents. "While this is happening, we Civil Registry career functionaries receive no improvement," one worker told *Diario Discusión*.

The employees' union is calling for a monthly salary raise of 40,000 pesos (US\$80). Other demands are a consistent promotion policy and performance bonuses.

Chilean postal workers end five-week strike over pay

On August 27, workers for the Chilean autonomous state postal firm Correos de Chile ended a strike that they began in July. The workers had walked out over the nonpayment of a monthly raise of 50,000 pesos (US\$97) that had been agreed to two years ago.

Around 4,500 workers nationwide had participated in the strike. Strikers engaged in other actions, including bicycle caravans to bring attention to and explain the strike, marches—one of which brought 1,500 to downtown Santiago—and the temporary occupation of a bridge.

Adding to the postal workers' anger over management's stalling tactics was a raise of 20,000 pesos (US\$40) directors gave themselves in February "without a single conversation with the workers," as one striker told the *Santiago Times*.

The agreement finally reached between Correos de Chile and Fetracortel, the postal workers union federation, fell significantly short of the workers' demands. The raise was cut to 40,000 pesos (US\$80), and the bonus for returning to work was 1 million pesos (US\$1,950), two thirds of the original demand of 1.5 million pesos (US\$3,000). For 14 days of the strike that Correos was able to get declared "illegal," pay will be deducted over a 24-month period.

Some benefits, including school bond, marriage, birth and death, were increased by 15 percent.

Mexican university workers strike over unpaid wages

Food service, transportation and administrative workers at the Antonio Narro Agrarian University (UAAAN), located in Saltillo, the capital and largest city of the northeastern Mexican state of Coahuila, stopped work on August 22. The workers struck to demand the payment of 500,000 pesos (US\$37,370) owed to them by UAAAN.

The workers' union, SUTUAAAN, listed other demands: vouchers for gasoline and supplies, implementation of seniority bonuses, progress on paperwork for obtaining housing through the State Housing Institute, respect for labor rights, rectification of some clauses in the collective contract.

UAAAN asserted that it only owed 285,000 pesos (US\$21,300), which it offered to pay if the workers returned to the job. On August 26, SUTUAAAN requested the intervention of the state government.

On August 30, the union called off the strike "once the rector Eladio Cornejo Oviedo and Gustavo Lara Sanchez, SUTUAAAN secretary general, dialogued and they will seek the form of addressing the syndical

organization's requests," reported *Vanguardia* .

Trinidad and Tobago: Postal workers protest nonpayment of back pay, violations of rights

Workers for Trinidad and Tobago's TTPost mail service demonstrated August 30 in front of the firm's head office in the northern Trinidadian city of Piarco. The workers carried signs denouncing the nonpayment of back pay and infringement of workers' rights. The protesters are also demanding a pay raise.

The next day, workers in Tobago picketed the TTPost office in Scarborough. The demonstrations followed a one-day strike August 26 by TTPost workers in Trinidad.

TTPost took over T&T's postal operations from the government in 1999. Last April, TTPost management and Trinidad and Tobago Postal Workers Union (TTPWU) representatives signed their first collective agreement, which contains a promise by TTPost to pay overdue wage demands dating back to 2006. A TTPost statement claims that management "has supplied all requested information for the payment of these funds to the relevant parties and are currently awaiting the disbursement of funds."

Barbados public sector union attempts to defuse workers' anger over layoffs

After an August 27 meeting with the acting head of the Civil Service in Barbados, the National Union of Public Workers (NUPW) called a meeting of temporary public officers for the next day at union headquarters. The issue to be discussed was likely layoffs following the 2013 budget proposals. Some temporary workers have already been laid off.

It was not long before tempers flared at the standing-room-only meeting. When a union member suggested that the temporary workers strike, NUPW general secretary Denis Clarke rejected the idea. Earlier in the meeting, he had told the assembled crowd that he would go home first before supporting a temp workers' strike.

Another union official was quoted by *Barbados Today* as saying, "We have to get the information and analyze it to determine if we have to hit the road." A postman, one among 35 scheduled for layoff, said that Clarke and other union tops should stop "the lot of long talk" and come up with a solution. Clarke replied, "I hope in the next couple of weeks to get the matter resolved," and advised employees to report to work as usual.

Clarke maintained that the problem was "complicated" because it was difficult to ascertain seniority for temporary workers, and that what was needed was a database "so we would know how the seniority in years pans out." The *Daily Nation* reported that Clarke told the more than 300 members that he would meet with personnel agencies "and get a better deal than what we are witnessing at the moment."

Non-union truck drivers carry out 24-hour strike to demand right to unionize

Some 30 drivers for Green Fleet Systems in Carson, California, went out

on a 24-hour strike August 26 to protest efforts by the company to frustrate their attempt to unionize. Workers charge that company management has hired a union-busting firm to advise it on how to impede their attempt to join Teamsters Local 848.

According to the Teamsters, a supervisor for Green Fleet asked a truck driver to sign an anti-union petition and promised in return better pay and benefits. The company hauls freight to and from the nearby Port of Long Beach.

Alberta grocery strike looms

Across the province of Alberta, 8,500 workers at Real Canadian Superstore could walk off the job this week after voting overwhelmingly in favor of strike action last week.

The strikers, who have been without a contract for more than a year, are members of the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW). Throughout negotiations, the company has been pushing for wage cuts and the introduction of a two-tiered pay scale where new employees would be paid less than half the wages of existing staff.

Superstore is owned by grocery giant Loblaw, which is in contract negotiations with workers in neighboring provinces Saskatchewan and Manitoba. A strike or lockout could take place this week in Alberta with 72 hours' notice.

Carriage drivers strike in Quebec City

Forty-five horse-drawn carriage or "calèches" drivers went on strike last Friday in Quebec City, Quebec, against the city's largest carriage business, Les Calèches de la Nouvelle France, after voting overwhelmingly in favor of strike action the previous week.

The drivers are members of the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) and work up to 90 hours a week for minimum wage regardless of years of service. In addition, they are required to work full-time through the winter months with no warm shelter. Other issues in dispute include meal breaks, overtime and holidays.

Conciliation is scheduled for later in the week. A union spokesman says that the drivers want to get back to work, but that the company continues to make "ridiculous offers".



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