

Workers Struggles—the Americas

17 September 2013

Colombian teachers strike, march over unpaid raises, privatization, repression

On September 11, thousands of teachers struck and marched in several Colombian cities over their wages, benefits and conditions. In some cases, the teachers defied their union's orders to call off the actions.

In Bogota, for example, the Colombian Teachers' Federation (Fecode) ordered its members to suspend their two-day-old strike as part of a September 10 agreement with the government. More than 2,500 teachers marched and blocked traffic, nonetheless. In Cali, 5,000 teachers and student supporters marched, and the departments of Narino and Antioquia witnessed protests as well.

Primary among the teachers' demands are the payment of promised raises, health care and pensions. The teachers also voiced opposition to moves to privatize public education. Moreover, protesters called for an end to paramilitary violence against workers. Teachers accounted for more than half of the 816 violent deaths of Colombian workers between 1999 and 2005.

"Despite the fact that teachers in Colombia arrived at an agreement with the government Tuesday night," reported *El Pais*, "the strike will continue in some regions until all the unions meet this Wednesday (September 18) afternoon and discuss the points agreed with the President of the Republic."

The agreement called for "a substantial investment to improve the salaries, work conditions, health and quality of life of the country's more than 320,000 teachers," according to the Education Ministry.

Citing pay and conditions, Colombian airline pilots stop working overtime

On September 13, some 900 pilots for Colombian airline Avianca began "Operation Zero Overtime" to protest their salaries and working conditions. The pilots are members of the Avianca Pilots Union (ODEAA) and the Colombian Association of Civil Aviators (Acdac).

Union and company negotiators have been engaged in talks for eight months without an agreement. Avianca has refused to budge on the unions' proposed 15 percent increase, with the airline's president, Fabio Villegas, calling it "exorbitant" and "impossible" while maintaining that Avianca pilots earn more than pilots in competing airlines. Villegas also stated that the pilots only work 75 hours per month, compared to the national average of 90.

The unions, as well as a study by the news site Dinero, contradicted his claims, demonstrating that if other airline pilots worked according

to Avianca's scheduling, they would be paid about US\$2,200 per month more than Avianca pilots. Pilots for competing airlines actually average about 70 hours per month.

The Avianca pilots have complained of having to work 12-hour days and of going three or four years without vacation leave. An Acadac statement lists problems suffered by crew members: "illnesses caused by work conditions and lowered life expectancy due to exposure to...carcinogenic substances, family break-ups caused by absentee parents, and a very high percentage of miscarriages, among other problems."

Avianca has canceled about 160 domestic flights through September 18. Meanwhile, union reps are meeting this week with Avianca owner German Efromovich and government mediators.

Government intervenes to end Colombian coal miners' strike

On September 13, after 52 days on strike, workers at US-based Drummond coal company's two Colombian mines and port were ordered to return to work by the Labor Ministry. The workers' union, Sintramienergetica, had called the walkout on July 23 over wage and bonus demands as well as layoffs at Drummond's port facility.

On September 14, Reuters reported, "On Friday, Colombia's Labor Ministry said it was sending the case to an arbitration tribunal after the majority of the company's 5,000 direct, non-contract employees voted to resolve the dispute that way." The union disputed the September 6 vote, saying that it was illegal and could be tainted by fraud. It stated as well that it had not received any official notification from the ministry that it was ending the strike.

Drummond announced that work would resume on the evening shift of September 14.

Brazilian postal workers strike for salary raise

About 55,000 workers for the Brazilian public postal service Empresa Brasileira de Correios e Telégrafos (ECT) went on strike September 12 in the states of São Paulo, Tocantins, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul, Rondonia, Ceará, Pernambuco y Paraíba. The striking workers represented about half of the membership of the Union of Workers at the Post and Telegraph Company (Sintect).

The principal demand of the postal workers was a wage increase of 15 percent. Of equal import was the demand that wage hikes be adjusted for inflation, which was officially 7.13 percent from August

2012 to July 2013. ECT's offer of 5.27 percent, therefore, would mean a real wage cut.

A *Prensa Latina* report listed other demands: "food stamps for 35 reales (\$15.4 USD), medical insurance...a strengthening of the institution, increased deliveries across the country, more workers and better customer service." On September 13, negotiators for Sintec and the national postal workers' federation Fentec met with ECT reps in Brasilia to "close the gap and reach an agreement," according to the report.

Later that same day, Sintec called off the strike after signing an agreement that established an 8 percent raise and unspecified benefits. In one state, Rio Grande do Sul, the workers rejected the accord and announced that they would remain on strike.

Uruguayan construction workers march against deaths due to dangerous conditions

On September 11, the Uruguayan national construction workers' union Sunca called a partial work stoppage—from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.—and march to protest dangerous working conditions that have caused the deaths of more than 500 construction workers in the last 10 years. The PIT-CNT federation endorsed the mobilizations.

Workers marched to the Legislative Palace in Montevideo under the slogan "How many deaths are too many? Penal Responsibility Law Now." The law, also called the Business Responsibility Law, would require investigation by the Justice Ministry of worksite deaths and reports of dangerous conditions, with stiff penalties, including imprisonment, for violators. The law is currently being debated in the legislature.

Speakers denounced the lack of consequences for flouting safety regulations. "When the law is violated and it puts the life of workers at risk, those aren't workplace accidents. They're crimes against workers," stated Sunca secretary general Oscar Andrade. Another speaker noted that there is more concern for the health of cattle than of construction workers.

In addition to the denunciations of employer callousness and impunity and calls for the passage of the law were other issues, Sunca speakers called for reformulation of the construction industry health and safety decree.

Maryland waste disposal company uses anti-immigrant tactic against trash haulers

More than 50 trash haulers in several Maryland suburbs outside Washington, D.C., launched a two-day strike starting September 9 against Potomac Disposal over an attempt to intimidate the largely Latino immigrant workforce with threats against undocumented workers. The recently unionized workforce was in negotiations with the company the previous week over increased wages, benefits and sick days when management attached I-9 forms to their time cards. The federal government uses form I-9 to verify citizenship.

When workers attempted to return to work on September 11, the company locked them out. According to witnesses, a vehicle leaving

the company's worksite gunned its engine, drove up on the sidewalk and struck a picket. One of the signs carried by picketing workers read, "We haul trash, but we're not trash."

Potomac Disposal has a \$5 million contract with Montgomery County, Maryland, to pick up trash and recyclables at 40,000 homes. Drivers currently make \$120 to \$130 a day, while helpers earn a meager \$60 to \$70 a day. The latter wage puts the workers below a so-called \$13.95 living wage, which has led to calling for an audit of the company.

Workers in Toronto stage protest to raise minimum wage

More than 100 workers and youth took part in a protest at a west-end mall near downtown Toronto on Saturday to demand the raising of the minimum wage in Ontario from C\$10.25 to C\$14.00 an hour.

The protest was organized by a coalition of advocacy groups as part of an ongoing campaign to pressure the provincial government to raise the three-year freeze on the minimum wage. The Liberal government says it is currently conducting a review to determine if a raise in the minimum wage could be implemented with the approval of businesses in the province.

University of Windsor union settles while strike continues

The newly amalgamated national union Unifor, has reached tentative deals for 400 workers at the University of Windsor, as the strike by workers in another union continues and threatens to expand in the coming days.

The last-minute deals cover two Unifor bargaining units that include clerical staff and engineers who are holding ratification votes this week. At the same time, 280 workers with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) continue a week-old strike. With the school continuing classes despite the strike, another CUPE local representing maintenance, grounds keeping and food service workers is poised to go on strike next week if a deal is not reached before then.



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