

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 November 2013

Latin America

Protests over killings of youth by police in Brazil

Protests over the police murder of a student youth in Sao Paulo led to the wounding of at least one demonstrator and damage to vehicles and storefronts.

Douglas Rodriguez, 17, whose last words “Why did you shoot me?” (“porque atirou em mim?”) became the slogan of weeklong protests, was shot by a military police officer, who later claimed it had been an accident.

Another youth, 16, was killed on October 29, prompting more protests and tire burnings in his neighborhood. Reports indicate that his body was returned to relatives with missing teeth and broken legs. His name has not been released.

In Río on November 1, protesters marched on police headquarters demanding the return of the body of Amarildo de Souza, kidnapped, tortured and killed by police in July.

Each of these killings is connected to the government policy of “pacifying” working class slums with police violence.

Uruguay unions call four-hour national strike

On Wednesday October 30, Uruguay’s labor federation (PIT-CNT) launched a symbolic four-hour general strike to protest low wages. The strike took place on the eve of national wage negotiations between the trade unions, employers and the government.

Strikers rallied at the Rural Association building in

Montevideo, demanding better working conditions and pay for agricultural workers.

One of the demands is that the minimum monthly wage be raised to 10,000 pesos (\$480) from 7,920 pesos (\$350). The workers are also demanding access to better housing and decent medical benefits.

Union sources report that 800,000 workers, nearly half the labor force, receives less than \$650 a month; 490,000 of them receive less than \$460.

Starbucks strike in Chile

On October 29, the union that represents Starbucks Coffee employees in Chile initiated a strike at 30 of 31 of the company’s stores.

The union reports that Starbucks management has stonewalled negotiations over 13 union demands. On the eve of the strike, it agreed to discuss remuneration to employees for any costs associated with their coming to work of the meals that they consume during working hours.

Starbucks management is notoriously anti-union, even by Chilean standards, and had been repeatedly fined for their practice of intimidating workers (so-called “partners”) to discourage their joining the union. Union organizers point out that 80 percent of the workers at Starbucks support the strike and would join the union, but for the atmosphere of intimidation.

Starbucks claims that the union represents only a few malcontents and that its workers are opposed to the union’s demands.

The Chilean union is the only one in Latin America for Starbucks employees.

Protests over new health law in Colombia

Thousands of doctors, health workers and medical students marched and rallied in Bogotá, Calí, and other

cities in this South American nation. The protesters are repudiating proposed health reforms.

Colombia began a process of privatization of public health in 1993, with the infamous law 100 (Ley 100). Impending legislation would deepen that process, placing all public health care in the hands of private health enterprises.

Health workers consider that this latest measure would drive copays and other fees beyond the reach of workers and poor people and are demanding that Congress not approve the changes and reverse the privatization of public health care.

The United States

Overwhelming strike vote by University of California workers

University of California staff and medical service workers voted by a 96 percent margin last week to strike over pensions and workers' rights after a year of deadlocked negotiations between management and the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). The UC system has been cutting costs by imposing a greater burden on students, faculty and staff, including a plan to gut pensions on the 22,000-member bargaining unit.

Back in September, California's Public Employees Relations Board, basing themselves on internal UC documents, charged the university with using threats and coercion against workers who participated in a May strike. Former Obama administration cabinet member Janet Napolitano is the new UC president who is now in charge of prosecuting the attack on university workers.

AFSCME Local 3299 represents some 13,000 patient care workers and 8,300 service workers at UC's five medical centers and ten college campuses. The recent strike authorization can be implemented at any time, and it legally requires a ten-day notification to the university administration.

Canada

Toronto area charity workers locked out

Around 30 personal support workers at the March of Dimes facility in the town of Oakville, Ontario, west of Toronto, were locked out last week after failing to accept a concession-laden contract.

Mostly part-time women, the workers were locked out for refusing to accept a number of concessions in a new contract including a three-year wage freeze, reduced benefits, and a cut in vacation time. The workers are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, whose leaders point out that the not-for-profit charity accumulated nearly a million dollars in profit in the last two years.

As soon as the lockout began, the company brought in replacement workers at their Oakville apartment complex, where the workers affected are employed helping adults with physical disabilities.



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