

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 February 2014

Latin America

Mexican teachers strike to protest benefit cuts

About 400 teachers in Saltillo, in the Mexican state of Coahuila, struck January 29 over recent deductions to their paychecks. The teachers marched from the office of Section 5 of the SNTE education workers union to the Palace of Government, blocking traffic in some places.

The cause of the protest was the imposition of the new Fiscal Reform Law in the state, which eliminates some of the tax deductions that teachers get for benefits, thus reducing their net earnings. Also, a tax called the ISR (for Impuesto Sobre la Renta, Above Rent Tax) is imposed when earnings pass a certain level.

One teacher told *Vanguardia*, “Apart from providing us a few economic supports, when the salary is augmented, it has repercussions on the ISR rate, then for one peso we jump to another tax rate level, which pulverizes the salary increase that they provided last year.”

The teachers repeated the marches and protests on January 30.

Guatemalan teachers protest to demand increased education budget

Demanding “the necessary resources to provide classes,” hundreds of Guatemalan public school teachers blocked highways in Guatemala City January 30. The teachers carried out the actions to pressure the national legislature to increase funding for the nation’s education budget.

The protests slowed or stopped traffic on at least fourteen highways leading into the capital. Teachers Union president Joviel Acevedo has said that the protests will continue until legislators come through with the increased budget.

The congress has refused to grant the budget hikes, which would provide about \$187 million for salary increases for teachers and health care workers, as well as infrastructure and other improvements. Of 158 members, only 50 support the proposed increase, far short of the 80 needed to pass it. The congress has already voted to maintain funding at the 2013 level.

Dominican bus drivers strike for changes in law, compensation

Public transit drivers in Santiago and surrounding areas in the Dominican Republic stopped work on January 29 to push for changes in the law governing fuels and repairs of roads used by taxis among other demands.

The paralyzing of transport began at 6:00 am and was called by the National Transport Workers Central (CNTT) and the Northern Region Transport Workers Federation (FETTRANRENO).

The police and military presence was notable in strategic locations throughout the city, with orders to “patrol in a preventive manner.” Nonetheless, some incidents occurred, with some private taxis being vandalized. Strike organizers accused the government of contracting bands to commit the acts to discredit the strike.

According to a report in *7dias.com.do*, “The protest is seeking to make the government reduce the price of combustibles, modify the hydrocarbons law, redefine the transport subsidy and repair the streets.”

Chilean mineworkers union ends 50-day strike, signs agreement

On January 30, directors of the mineworkers union at the Santa Margarita site of Chile’s Cerro Dominador copper mining firm announced the signing of an accord, ending a 50-day strike. The union officials admitted that the agreement “did not satisfy them completely, since the enterprise refused to make a better offer, and let the movement wear itself out in order to give time to finalize a deal,” according to a report in *El Nortero*.

Cerro Dominador is known for practicing multirut, the restructuring of businesses into multiple corporate entities to avoid labor and other costs.

The strike began on December 10, with 44 of the 60 Santa Margarita workers walking out. In addition to higher wages, workers demanded improvements in the condition of machinery and equipment and improved working conditions and hygiene. Strikers condemned Cerro Dominador for its anti-union activities.

Workers complained of defective windshields, seats and braking systems. In one instance last June, workers were sickened by food poisoning in the cafeteria.

Some workers went on a hunger strike on December 22, and at one point strikers occupied the cathedral in the nearby

town of Antofagasta to dramatize their struggle. The company's director general, Ignacio Moreno Fernández, claimed that losses prevented acceding to their demands and that "when the enterprise makes some money, we'll share the cake [torta] with everybody, but this is not the case." Moreno denied that Cerro Dominador engaged in multirut.

Workers were dealt another blow this month when it was announced that Moreno would take the job of subsecretary of mining in the incoming "left" PPD (Party for Democracy) government of President-elect Michelle Bachelet.

The agreement, as reported by *ciperchile.cl*, "contemplates a payment of 2,620,000 pesos [US\$4,717] for each worker, which will be paid out in four deferred payments until January 2015. The accord also obliges the employees to drop their suit filed with the Labor Inspection Ministry."

Chilean customs workers strike to protest interference of civil police

Customs officials at the Paso Cardenal Samoré mountain crossing customs station in southern Chile began an indefinite strike at 8:00 am January 30. The action was called by the customs agents union ANFACH to protest the interference of the Antinarcotics Brigade of the Investigation Police (PDI) in their operations.

The PDI is one of two national police bodies in Chile and is the principle law enforcement arm of the Public Ministry of Chile in criminal investigation. The other is the Carabineros, who joined in the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government, brutally suppressing the Chilean working class.

Tensions between the customs officials and PDI have festered for months, and on January 23 ANFACH alerted its members to the possibility of a strike. Despite meetings between the Interior and Finance Ministries, the Customs Service and the PDI, the antinarcotics officers continued to interfere illegally in the customs control process.

ANFACH's national director called the actions "an open and disrespectful provocation against the customs authorities and functionaries, and a clear failure to comply with the authorities' instructions and therefore we demand that those responsible be sanctioned immediately."

Shortly after the stoppage at Cardenal Samoré began, the strike went national, with all the other customs stations along Chile's Andean range border with Argentina joining in.

The United States

Federal arbitrator fines longshoremen's union

A federal arbitrator has ordered the union representing longshoremen at the Port of Baltimore to pay a \$3.8 million fine for a three-day strike last October. The fine comes as port management is seeking to force through its final offer, which, among other concessions, seeks to wrest control from the union over how job assignments are made at the port.

Members of Local 333 of the International Longshoremen's Union voted 517 to 25 to reject the concessions contract last October. Workers for three other port unions refused to cross picket lines with the result that traffic at the one of the East Coast's largest port came to a halt.

Both Local 333 and the ILA international leadership have refused comment on the fine and proposed no united struggle against it. Meanwhile, port traffic is being diverted to other ports in an effort to use a decline of jobs and hours of longshoremen to bring further pressure on workers.

Canada

Strike ends for Nova Scotia school bus drivers

After two days off the job last week, nearly 500 bus drivers and support workers at the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board in central Nova Scotia returned to work after their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), agreed to mediated talks which won't begin until March.

Workers had voted against the latest contract offer a week ago Sunday, which meant that they were on strike by Monday morning, the first day of exams at the school board. The union quickly agreed to mediation but did not get confirmation from the board soon enough to get workers back on the job before Wednesday.

A central issue for workers is the contracting out of work at the second largest school board in the province. This became a serious conflict in the past when the board hired contract workers while some trades people were on layoff. The union claims that they did not expect that the contract could have been interpreted to allow that to happen and are insisting on clear contract language to prevent it in the future.



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