

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 October 2014

## Latin America

### Guatemalans protest poverty and violence on anniversary of 1944 Revolution

More than 6,000 people marched through Guatemala City October 20 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of the brutal dictatorship of Gen. Jorge Ubico. Marchers turned the celebration into a protest against the grinding poverty and prevalence of both official and criminal violence faced by the working class and poor.

The protest, which featured signs and shouts denouncing the dire situation faced by the working class—half of whom live in extreme poverty—was organized by a number of peasant, student, social and political organizations. Some politicians also attended it with eyes on the 2015 elections.

The overthrow of Ubico led to the election of Jacobo Arbenz, a left-nationalist politician whose attempts at agrarian, social and labor reforms drew the ire of the US ruling class. Arbenz's CIA-instigated overthrow in 1954 and subsequent decades of genocidal war and repression left a legacy of violence and inequality that remains to this day.

### Police break up strike by Costa Rican port workers

On October 22, dockworkers at Costa Rica's most important terminals, Puerto Limon's state-run Moin and Limon, launched an indefinite strike. The action was called by the SINTRAJAP stevedores' union following a Supreme Court decision this month approving a \$1 billion "megaport" expansion concession granted to shipping behemoth APM Terminals.

The two terminals account for about 80 percent of Costa Rica's import/export activity. Advocates for the concession claim that the privatization of the terminals will make the ports more efficient and profitable.

The union had opposed the concession, saying that it would result in the elimination of public-sector jobs and constitute an "illegal monopoly" by APM. It is demanding a renegotiation of its contract and has condemned the environmental damage and increased taxation it claims will result from the concession.

As the movement of cargo vessels in the harbor began to stall, President Luis Guillermo Solis ordered the deployment of about 150 police officers to break the strike. The police reopened the port and arrested 68 men and women.

Police remained at the terminals to keep them open. On October 24, the Atlantic Port Authority, JAPDEVA, brought in contract workers to restart operations.

SINTRJAP appealed to other unions to support the strike and called for street protests in San Jose and Limon.

### Colombian bus drivers strike against law limiting number of buses on Bogotá streets

Private-company bus drivers in Bogotá, Colombia, began an indefinite work stoppage on October 20 against the implementation of a law limiting their numbers. Some 10,000 drivers stopped work to protest the extension of the so-called *pico y placa* law—which limits the number of vehicles by their license plate numbers on certain days—from private autos to privately run buses.

Mass transit, which has been carried out by private firms and is mainly patronized by poor and working class commuters, has been an ongoing source of problems, including pollution, overcrowding, traffic jams, reckless driving and corruption, in Bogotá for years. The city has instituted a public transit bus system (SITP) in opposition to the privately owned buses, but so far public use of the SITP buses has been slow in catching on.

However, according to *latincorrespondent.com*, "many drivers of private buses as well as various drivers' unions have complained about it, saying the measure violates their right to work and will result in significant lost wages."

The city called out 17,000 police officers to break up attempts at blockades of stations and critical intersections. Some damage to buses was reported.

### One-day strike by Brazilian aircraft factory workers for wage rise, profit sharing

About 7,000 workers at the Brazilian aircraft manufacturer Embraer's factory outside of São Paulo held a 24-hour strike October 21 to demand a pay hike and a share of company profits.

Embraer, the third-largest commercial airplane manufacturer in the world, has offered a raise of 6.6 percent; the workers' unions are calling for 10. Net profits for the firm—of which workers are demanding a greater share—were about \$342 million last year.

### Argentine municipal press workers strike over wages, working conditions

Reporters, journalists, graphic artists and other municipal press workers in the Buenos Aires provincial city of Azul struck October 22 to demand a regularly scheduled workday, better treatment and a raise of their meager salaries. The striking workers received support from the Azul Municipal Workers Syndicate (STMA).

A protest demonstration in the lobby of the manager's office October 20 failed to get a response. Subsequent negotiations involving STMA, the

government and the director fell through.

According to the workers, one root of their complaints was the lack of response by management to their demands. The workers denounced their director, Ayelén Martínez, whose salary is 12,000 pesos (US\$1,414) while the workers receive about 4,000 pesos (US\$471). Another complaint was the long hours, around 48 per week. Workers are asking for a 42-hour workweek.

Martínez claimed that the strike was a political move by supporters of President Cristina Kirchner and denied mistreating the workers.

The negotiations continued, and on October 23 Martínez announced that an agreement had been reached and that the workers would return to their jobs. The 48-hour workweek remains in place, but “with an accord about work hours,” according to *noticiasdeazul.com*.

### **Martinique longshoremen strike to protest waste facility health threat**

Dockworkers in Fort-de-France, capital of the island of Martinique, struck October 20 to bring attention to health risks posed by an industrial waste-processing facility near their workplace.

Workers complain that the facility, Metal Dom, generates noise and bad odors, and that it releases metal dust.

#### **The United States**

### **FairPoint accuses striking telecom workers of sabotage**

Officials for FairPoint charged telecom workers with sabotage October 23 in the strike by 2,000 workers in Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire. The company is alleging that a cross box in Manchester, New Hampshire, had its wires cut and pulled out and said the action was “threatening public safety that could endanger the lives of our customers.” The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Communications Workers of America, which represent striking workers, is denying the charges.

The allegations of sabotage came as the company started bringing in replacement workers and mobilizing management personnel to perform struck work. In Maine, FairPoint is paying police double-time to patrol particular picket locations. The Falmouth police chief has admitted that there have been no incidents that have required his officers to file a report.

Workers initially went on strike against FairPoint on October 16 after the company unilaterally implemented its demands for \$700 million in contract concessions. The unions had previously offered \$210 million in concessions, but the company refused to consider the proposal. The North Carolina-based company demanded workers pay into health care for the first time. The proposal eliminated retiree health care benefits for current workers, scrapped the old defined benefit pension and substituted the inferior 401(k). The company also insisted it be allowed to hire non-union contractors to perform bargaining unit work.

### **California labor board accuses striking court workers of breaking law**

A California labor board accused court workers last week of violating state labor law when they went on strike against the San Francisco Superior Court system. T. Michael Yuen, the executive officer of the

court, charged the Service Employees International Union Local 1021 with violating a no-strike pledge and said the strike “created a substantial and imminent threat to public health or safety.”

About 250 of the city’s 438 court workers went on strike October 14 shutting down 23 of the district’s 49 courtrooms. Workers are upset that court negotiators refused to pay workers a raise out of a \$16 million reserve fund. Officials for the court have used the fact that San Francisco court workers are the highest paid in the state, which, while true, does not take into account the extremely high cost of living in San Francisco.

California trial courts have suffered \$1 billion in reductions over the last six years. In 2011, the San Francisco Superior Court laid off 69 workers and closed 11 out of 63 courtrooms. In the current fiscal year, Governor Jerry Brown’s budget only provided half of the increase the court system said they needed.

### **Vermont teachers strike ends with new tentative agreement**

School teachers from South Burlington, Vermont, returned to the classrooms October 20 after negotiators for the union and school board reached a tentative agreement bringing the four-day strike to an end. Neither side involved in the negotiations would reveal details of the new pact until after members of the Vermont National Education Association and the board ratify the final proposal.

During the strike, two-term Democratic governor Peter Shumlin declared in an interview that teachers should be barred from striking and that teachers’ contracts should be subject to binding arbitration. The Vermont NEA has endorsed Shumlin in the upcoming elections and contributed \$1.15 million this year to the Democratic Governors Association that Shumlin chairs.

#### **Canada**

### **New Brunswick City workers vote to strike**

Outside workers in the City of Fredericton, New Brunswick, have voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action after being without a contract since December 2013, setting the stage for possible strike action in the coming weeks.

Talks between the city and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), representing snowplow operators and other outside workers, are set to resume in the wake of last week’s vote. The two sides are reportedly far apart on the issue of wages, with the union seeking 2.5 percent annually.

If workers do go on strike, it would be for the first time in their 60-year history.

### **Southern Ontario nurses poised to strike**

Public Health Nurses (PHNs) in Middlesex-London in southern Ontario are set to go on strike in the coming weeks if no agreement is reached in mediated talks scheduled for November 12.

Members of the Ontario Nurses Association, (ONA) PHNs deliver support services such as immunization clinics in communities across the province. They have been working without a contract since March of this

year and are fighting for wage parity with PHNs in neighboring communities.

According to union negotiators, despite nearly six months of negotiations, workers are being offered wage increases that don't even keep pace with inflation.



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