

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 March 2015

Latin America

**Colombian cargo truck operators' strike enters fourth week**

A strike by Colombian cargo truck drivers that began in the last week of February completed its third week March 14. The strike was touched off by the anger of operators of cargo trucks (tractomulas) over high fuel costs, rising toll fees and deteriorating conditions of roads.

The truckers see their livelihoods threatened by the incursion of international trucking companies, particularly the Swiss firm Impala, driving smaller companies out of business. They denounce the government's failure to comply with an agreement signed in 2013, which was supposed to regulate tariffs and impede price speculation.

Tactics have involved pulling over to the side of the road—reaching 250,000 parked trucks on March 4—“turtle trails,” i.e., snarling traffic by driving slowly, and blockades. Skirmishes between striking and nonstriking truckers as well as police have been reported as the strike has grown.

The Colombian Cargo Transporters Federation (Colfecar) lamented the alleged breaking of 300 windshields of nonstriking truckers' vehicles and threats against them. Fabio Sanín Berger, Colfecar Antioquia regional director, told Caracol Radio, “This matter is going from bad to worse, and it appears very complicated to me, for which reason it is necessary to work with the police and the army to be able to take the caravans from the sites of origin to their destination, as was done in other occasions.”

Berger also called for respect of the right to work of those who did not participate in the protests. A March 3 meeting between the Labor Ministry and the truckers broke down, with each side blaming the other for refusal to bargain in good faith.

**One-day strike by Bolivian transport drivers over toll costs, poor roads**

Transport drivers in the Bolivian city of Cochabamba, in the department of the same name, held a 24-hour strike and blockade of strategic roads on March 12. The drivers protested the poor state of the highways, increases in the cost of tolls and expansion of mass transit.

According to Jose Orellana, president of the drivers' union, there had been sufficient time for the authorities to avoid a strike by calling for negotiations, but they waited until the last minute, when union officials had already been sent to various zones to organize the protests.

Orellana denounced the increase in tolls, when the condition of roads has deteriorated. “How is it possible to raise the price if the roads are so bad?” he asked reporters.

The union has submitted a six-point petition to the government, based on a resolution passed at a general meeting. The petition rejects the tolls, delays and obstacles along the highways and installation of mass transit. It also demands the conclusion of Municipal Ordinance 3302, which regulates public and private transport traffic in Cercado province.

**Puerto Rican taxi drivers strike against tax**

Taxi drivers in Puerto Rico struck March 9 to protest a proposed value added tax (VAT) on oil, parts and other related items necessary to vehicle operators.

Governor Alejandro García Padilla has been promoting the VAT, along with such measures as reducing the number of public-sector workers and lowering taxes on corporations, as a way to dig the island's economy out of debt. Despite his vigorous campaign—including public meetings and television

appearances—VAT faces “strong opposition from nearly every sector of society, as well as nearly daily protests in the past week,” according to *caribbeanbusinesspr.com* .

The strike was called by the Puerto Rico Federation of Taxis, which also called on the island’s Senate to ratify Project 1209. The measure would enact stricter requirements on ride-sharing services, which union leader Juan de León claimed “puts passenger safety in jeopardy” and “creates unfair competition.”

The United States

San Francisco sheet metal workers near two-months on strike

Some 22 members of Sheet Metal Workers Local 104 are nearing the two-month mark in their strike against Trayer Engineering Corporation of San Francisco over pay and benefit cuts. Trayer wants to cut pay by 37 percent and wipe out its health care plan.

Trayer’s financial problems began when a major customer, PG&E, went bankrupt in the early 2000’s, and was owed hundreds of thousands of dollars. Other financial issues led to the dismantling of incentive pay for workers. Workers have been without a contract since July 2013. An SMW Local 104 shop steward told the media, “We are still ready to make cuts ...” in an effort to reach an agreement.

Trayer has hired about 20 replacement workers in an effort to break the strike. What has especially angered striking sheet metal workers is the refusal of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1245 to honor picket lines. IBEW members also have a contract with Trayer. Local 1245 communications director, Eric Wolfe, attempted to deflect responsibility from the union’s leadership by saying that IBEW members’ decision to cross picket lines was an individual choice.

Canada

Government investigates 18-month metal strike

The Ontario government last week appointed a one-man commission to look into the extended strike by over 120 workers at Crown Holdings’ Toronto plant, which produces metal cans for brewery and food companies across the country.

The extraordinary, if toothless, measure to address one of the longest strikes in the province’s history highlights the worthlessness of the United Steelworkers leadership

(USW), which has isolated the strike and sought to dampen the militancy of strikers with a boycott against buying beer in cans. At the same time, union negotiators welcomed what they term “the leadership” of the Ontario government in this move, saying they are hopeful it will put a stop to flagrant attacks on union rights such as the ongoing use of replacement workers by the company during the strike.

Crown’s “final” offer last year was a clear provocation, removing the two-tiered wage previously proposed and instead demanding a 30 percent pay cut across-the-board. Workers voted almost unanimously against the proposal, and the company responded with promises to keep scabs on permanently. The union meanwhile is awaiting a decision by the Labor board on its allegations of unfair labor practices against the company.

Nova Scotia daycare workers to strike

Fourteen workers at Town Daycare in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, will be in a legal strike position this week, and a union spokesman has announced plans to walk off the job.

The daycare workers at Town, who include childcare workers, cooks and cleaners, have been working without a contract since the end of 2013. Negotiators for Unifor, which represents the workers, say that contract talks were not even begun until the end of 2014 and conciliation began last month.

The union is asking for a wage increase to keep pace with inflation, but the most recent offer for a three-year contract included a wage freeze. The government-funded daycare says they cannot afford to raise the wages of workers, which now average just over \$12 an hour, because of insufficient increases from the province that forces them to operate with an ever growing deficit.



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