

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 April 2015

Latin America

## Colombian teachers strike

On April 22, over 330,000 teachers across Colombia began an indefinite strike, organized primarily by the Colombian Federation of Educators, Fecode. The striking teachers, who held marches and rallies in major cities, particularly in the capital Bogota, are protesting the neoliberal policies of President Juan Manuel Santos, which have led to further impoverishment of the working class and given public education short shrift.

Listed among the teachers' demands are a raise in wages, improved working conditions and benefits. Colombian teachers' wages, averaging US\$500-800 a month, are some of the lowest in Latin America. Minister of Education Gina Parody pointed to these demands to characterize the teachers as unreasonable and selfish, and to declare that the government would not negotiate as long as they remained on strike. She also threatened to dock striking teachers' pay.

Parody chose to ignore other demands that are just as prominent, especially funding for education. Student meal allotments—about \$1 a day—are inadequate for a nourishing meal, and infrastructure and teaching materials are in a dire state, a reflection of the country's gross inequality.

Another important demand is that teachers be able to teach without fear of violence by paramilitaries and government security forces. Since 1995, nearly a thousand Colombian teachers have been murdered with impunity.

**Two-day strike by Mexican teachers, students against education reforms**

Teachers in Morelia, Michoacan, Mexico held a 48-hour strike on April 23 and 24 to protest the government's education reform agenda. The teachers, members of the National Education Workers Coordinator (CNTE), also occupied five government buildings for five hours and blocked traffic on some principal streets.

The CNTE claimed adherence of over 80 percent to the strike at 12,000 primary schools in the state.

The teachers were joined by a group called the Civic Social Front (FCS), consisting of around 40 unions and student and civic organizations. FCS members marched to the government palace to demand an audience with the state government. One demand was the rescinding of 100 orders of apprehension against students who were involved in confrontations with police during protests in 2012.

The reforms promoted by the Mexican ruling class include federal teacher evaluations that teachers say do not take social conditions into account and can be used as tools to intimidate and fire teachers. CNTE threatened to boycott upcoming elections and prevent the installation of ballot boxes in schools if their demands are not addressed by May 30.

**Strike call to Mexican farmworkers over stonewalling of demands**

Following delays by the federal and state governments in responding to their salary demands, leaders of the farmworkers who stopped work March 17 in Baja California's Valle de San Quintin have called for a general strike. The striking farmworkers had waited for two weeks, but had not gotten a response by April 17.

About 2,000 farmworkers, angered by the government's siding with the growers, held a protest

march under a heavy police presence on April 16.

In tripartite talks, farmworker representatives originally demanded \$20 a day, as opposed to the \$6.50 to \$10 they currently earn. They have since lowered their demand to about \$13, a demand that growers' reps have rejected.

The United States

Sun Country airline pilots authorize strike, demand higher wages

Airline pilots at Sun Country Airlines voted a resounding 209-0 to authorize the Air Line Pilots Association to call a strike against the Minnesota-based company. Pilots last had a wage increase in 2001 and they currently make merely two-thirds in salary of their counterparts at other airlines.

Informational pickets by Sun Country pilots on April 24 were greeted with support from the 8,000 pilots at Southwest Airlines. Their independent pilots union declared that Sun Country pilots "are about 30 percent below the industry average pay ... Low fares do not have to equal low wages in our industry and we fully support our friends at Sun Country in seeking a fair agreement."

Sun Country pilots have been in mediation since 2012. In 2011 the airline went through bankruptcy and pilots were forced to accept a 50 percent pay cut. Under new ownership, the airline has been profitable for the last four years and has undergone expansion. In current negotiations, pilots are seeking to reach average pay over the course of a five-year agreement.

California golf course workers strike

Some 13 workers at a golf course in Hidden Valley Lake, California, went on strike April 21, charging management with a variety of unfair labor practices. Among them, they accuse the Hidden Valley Lake Association (HVLA) of unilateral changes in contract terms and coercive actions against workers.

HVLA has assigned staff and temporary workers to replace striking workers. Among the bargaining issues

that separate the two sides are increased health care costs. In a press release, HVLA charged, "The Union has been unwilling to try and understand the economic situation we all face."

Workers previously obtained health insurance and paid \$64.04 per pay period to cover their portion of health care costs. HVLA unilaterally implemented a \$36.04 increase for health care costs on top of the previous deduction.

In its unfair labor practices suit, Laborers' Local 324 alleges coercive activities by management that include suspending a worker who "assisted the Union and engaged in concerted activities."

Canada

Support workers strike at Saskatchewan schools

Over 250 school support workers in rural communities of the South East Cornerstone School Division near Weyburn in southern Saskatchewan went on strike last week after conciliated talks failed to produce an agreement.

Library and kitchen staff, custodians, bus drivers and other support staff represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in 27 schools in the area are fighting for wage increases above the cost of living, which is running at 2.9 percent in that region. The workers overwhelmingly rejected the last contract offer that contained increases of 4 percent over two years.

The union says that the employer has refused to return to the bargaining table since the end of the conciliation process and that the ball is now in their court.



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