

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 August 2015

Protests by Mexican, Costa Rican and Colombian taxi drivers against ride-sharing services

Taxi drivers in three Latin American countries held protests against the Uber ride-sharing service on July 29. Uber and the smaller Cabify are app-based ride-sharing services that have drawn the ire of conventional cabbies because they are unregulated and skirt tax and licensing requirements, undercutting the livelihoods of traditional *taxistas*.

In San Jose, Costa Rica, taxi drivers protested at the Colombian Embassy in solidarity with Mexican and Colombian drivers. Cabbies in Colombia held protests as well. Both of the mobilizations took place without incidents.

Violence broke out, however, in Mexico. Outside Mexico City's international airport, some licensed *taxistas* used their vehicles to block the street, and some protesters attacked Uber vehicles and their drivers, throwing eggs and flour inside the cars, kicking doors and vandalizing them. The cabbies' union, the Organized Taxi Drivers of Mexico City, denounced the violence and denied any involvement.

Mexico City recently became the first Latin American city to set down regulations for Uber and similar services. According to *caribbeanbusinesspr.com*, "They call for the companies to pay 1.5 percent of fares to a fund for improving transportation; require drivers to register and submit to annual inspections; and bar them from accepting cash or establishing the equivalent of taxi stands."

Salvadoran bus drivers strike over gang violence

On July 27, bus drivers in El Salvador went on strike to demand greater security against gang violence. Gangs routinely extort bus drivers, passengers and owners, threatening to torch buses and property and commit violence against them.

The situation is exacerbated by the recent breakdown of a truce between two gangs, the Mara Salvatruchas and Barrio 18. Murders in the first five months of 2015 increased by 50 percent over the same period last year, to 2,192, and bus drivers and passengers are often caught in the middle of turf battles.

At times, the gangs themselves have called strikes under threat of death—for example, in October 2010, when they called a three-day strike in order to pressure the president to veto an anti-gang piece of legislation. On the morning of July 27, a Monday, five bus drivers and a non-driver employee were found dead, following a

weekend in which two buses were torched.

On July 28, police arrested one of the leaders of Barrio 18, Cesar Vladimir Montoya Climaco. By then, the number of murdered drivers had risen to nine. On July 29, the government, transport business owners and drivers reached an agreement to add more security to bus routes.

Strike by Panamanian brewery workers suspended

After 17 days of strike and protests, workers at Panama's main brewery, Cervceria Nacional (also known as SABMiller), returned to work the morning of July 28. According to an *EFE* report, the two unions representing 80 percent of the firm's 2,000 workers, SITRAFCOREBGASCELIS and STICP, "decided to turn to arbitration before the Labor and Employment Development Ministry" because the "company still maintained its position," and so that the "compañeros wouldn't get worn down."

On July 27, SABMiller and STICP signed an agreement whereby the workers would receive pay for the first 10 days in July—which the company had "retained"—and "an annual bonus established in Panamanian law and the commitment not to retaliate against the workers." The arbitration will continue for 30 days.

"The basis of negotiations in arbitration will be the 71 clauses in the List of Demands. There will be no way for the company to keep refusing to negotiate and sign the new Collective agreement with both unions," a STICP official said. Primary among the demands are a wage increase and Sundays off.

72-hour strike by Venezuelan university professors

Professors at the University of the Andes (ULA) completed a three-day strike last week over the Ministry of Education's refusal to address their salary demands. The professors, members of the ULA Professors Association (Apula), ratified a proposal to go on indefinite strike in September if there is no progress in ongoing discussions with the ministry.

Day of protests in Uruguay in lead-up to general strike

Teachers, utility workers, oil workers, bank employees and others held protests on July 28 in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. The actions were called in anticipation of a general strike due to take place August 6.

Teachers in particular took a leading role in the protest, due to the government's refusal to offer a sufficient pay hike. The current average teacher's salary is 21,000 pesos (US\$739). The government's latest offer was 25,000 pesos (US\$880), which would be phased in over a five-year stretch.

24-hour "warning strike" by Chilean Civil Registry employees

Employees in Chile's Civil Registry held a one-day "warning strike" on July 31 to protest the lack of progress in negotiations with the Justice Ministry. The workers say that the issues over which they held a strike in 2013 are yet to be resolved.

The Civil Registry Functionaries Association is demanding that the department be standardized in terms of wages, bonuses, assignments and promotions in accord with promises made by the former minister, Jose Antonio Gomez. Since the current minister, Javiera Blanco, assumed office in May, negotiations have regressed.

Another Justice Ministry agency, the National Minors Service, or Sename, which is charged with protecting children's rights, held a strike on the same day to demand salary improvements. Both agencies do not discount an indefinite strike if Blanco refuses to address their demands.

Strike and protests by Chilean copper mine contract workers continue

Contract workers for Chilean copper mining giant Codelco continued the strike and protests that they began July 21. The workers walked out to demand that their wages and conditions be on a par with those of regular workers.

Codelco has refused to meet with the workers' union, the CTC, which represents more than 20,000 workers employed by private contractors, claiming that the union has to negotiate with each individual contractor. The company is also claiming that in the midst of slumping copper prices, the workers' demands are unfeasible.

The strike and protests began in the northern El Salvador mine, but have since spread to other mines. Production was stopped briefly at the most productive location, Chuquicamata in the nation's north, on the morning of July 27, but resumed by early afternoon. Striking workers have marched, blocked roads and railways and prevented buses from entering at the Radomiro Romic and Ministro Hales near Chuquicamata as well.

Units of Carabineros, Chile's militarized national police, were deployed to break up the blockades. Clashes between police and

striking workers were reported in the central Chilean Andina mine and other locations. At the El Salvador mine, where a worker died July 24 of a heart attack after being struck in the leg by a police bullet, workers occupied the mine.

Utah paramedics vote to hold informational picket

Paramedics in St. George, Utah, voted not to strike on July 25, but to launch an informational campaign aimed at exposing working conditions and low wages under Gold Cross Ambulance, the largest private ambulance service in the state. The workers start at \$11.29 an hour and are protesting long working hours that can result in back-to-back 12-hour shifts. "You live in the trucks for 24 hours," Chris Bown, a paramedic, told the *St. George News*.

Gold Cross waged a two-year battle against rival Dixie Ambulance for the license to cover St. George and the surrounding area. After 18 months of service, Gold Cross was required to conform to a city ordinance that specified various standards that any ambulance service must meet in order to guarantee patient care and safety.

In 2014, workers for Gold Cross sought union representation and in September of that year voted unanimously to join the Teamsters. In eight months of negotiations, Gold Cross management has made a big issue of deducting union dues and initiation fees, declaring, "We'll not pay the bill for, or be the bill collector for, the union." Teamsters Local 222 says the issue of dues has become a smokescreen for refusing to come to agreement with the union.

One of the reasons workers voted to carry out informational picketing as opposed to a strike was the ability of Gold Cross to tap its statewide ambulance services and the fact it has mutual aid agreements with neighboring emergency medical services to serve as strikebreaking forces. In the face of this threat, the Teamsters bureaucracy is relying on the filing of seven charges with the National Labor Relations Board alleging unfair labor practices.



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