

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 March 2016

Colombia: Nationwide strike, protests against government economic policies

Thousands of Colombians struck and took to the streets throughout the nation March 17 to protest the policies of the right-wing government of President Juan Carlos Santos. The CGT, CUT and CTC union federations, as well as human rights, students, environmental, indigenous, farmers and other organizations participated in the daylong mobilizations.

Marches and blockages of streets occurred in all the major cities. In Bogotá, where more than 16,000 gathered, riot police used water cannon to disperse protesters, and arrests for “disturbing the public order” were reported in several locales.

The protesters, in an open letter, presented a list of demands that included emergency measures to stop children’s deaths by starvation in the north; increases of the minimum wage (the most recent of which was below the inflation rate) and transport subsidies; progressive reform of the taxation and pension systems; an end to privatizations of key industries, in particular energy; nationalization of the health care system; labor security; and environmental protections from mining companies’ activities.

Two other demands were the dismantling of the notorious ESMAD riot police unit and the end of death threats and assassinations by paramilitary death squads, which had supposedly been demobilized. Colombia remains one of the most dangerous nations in the world for union organizers, human rights and environmental advocates, and other activists.

The petition called for “increased efforts to combat corruption” and “regulating financial speculation,” both of which are rampant. Colombia has been hard hit by the drop in oil prices and the global economic slowdown, aggravating already extreme inequality and attacks on the working class.

One-day strike by Uruguayan bus and taxi drivers following shooting death of taxi driver

Bus drivers for the Tres Cruces national bus terminal in Montevideo, Uruguay, held a 24-hour strike March 18 to protest the shooting death of a taxi driver in Punta de Rieles, a nearby barrio. The drivers voted March 17 to strike at a meeting of the Transport Workers Union (Unott).

The Suatt taxi drivers union, which had begun a 24-hour strike on March 15 shortly after hearing of the killing, extended it until the afternoon of the 18th.

Not all bus companies were affected by the stoppage. Three regional bus lines informed riders that their operations were proceeding normally.

Argentine bus drivers strike to protest firings

Drivers for Autobuses Santa Fe, which provides interurban bus service for the Argentine city of Córdoba, capital of the province of the same name, stopped work on March 16 to protest the firings of six of their coworkers. The drivers are members of the UTA transport workers union.

UTA spokesman Julio Díaz informed the press that the action was taken following the company’s March 15 notification that the six workers, who had “distinct seniority,” were sacked. Díaz said that the firings were without cause and that the firm considered drivers to be “dispensable.” He added, “We don’t understand this attitude of an enterprise that has so many failings and problems.”

By March 17, Díaz announced that UTA and Autobuses Santa Fe had reached an agreement wherein two of the drivers would be reinstated and “the other

cases are going to be pursued in obligatory conciliation [arbitration decreed by the state government] and they will keep paying their corresponding salaries.” The striking workers were called back to resume their labors that day.

One-day strike at Ohio gas facility

Members of Teamsters Local 100 went back to work March 11 after a one-day strike against Airgas in Sharonville, Ohio, over company demands for concessions on health care, job security and seniority. The contract covering 20 drivers and plant operations expired in November, and workers voted unanimously on March 1 to strike.

The company unilaterally terminated the 401(k) retirement plan and threatened disciplinary action against a shop steward should he attend contract negotiations.

According to the Teamsters, a new management team was brought in when Airgas was acquired by the French firm Air Liquide in a \$10.3 billion transaction in February. The recent merger has made Air Liquide the world’s biggest industrial gas conglomerate.

Teamsters officials have done little more than issue empty threats and appeals to the company. Union Division Director Keith Gleason whined, “Unbelievably, Air Liquide...has stood idly by and allowed these attacks on its American workers to continue.” Local 100 business agent Sam Bucalo declared, “The company has a loyal and dedicated workforce at the Cincinnati facility. There’s no logical reason for the attacks.”

Among the contract language changes being demanded by the company is the removal of an old clause, never used by the Teamsters, that allows them to legally honor picket lines.

The Teamsters’ Gleason has warned, “The problem at Airgas extends across North America and is putting its business at risk, including current and future pipeline projects.”

Manitoba midwives ready to strike

Having given their union a strike mandate in January, midwives across the province of Manitoba are in a strike position after voting last week to reject their employer’s latest contract offer.

The 53 midwives in the province are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been working without a contract for two years. Union negotiators say they are fighting to bring wages and other contract provisions in line with other western provinces that pay up to C\$20,000 more annually to midwives. The union is also fighting for education funding from the province to meet current demand.

Midwives in Manitoba are governed by Essential Services legislation, and the NDP government has offered assurances that there will be no disruption to services in the event of a strike. The union nevertheless issued a news release last week saying that a strike date could be announced in the coming days.



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