

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 July 2016

## Colombian truckers end 45-day strike, sign accord with government

Colombian truckers and government representatives signed an agreement July 22 ending 45 days of strikes, protests and blockades that saw one person killed, scores of trucks impounded and the revocations of over 13,000 truckers' licenses.

The truckers struck in early June over a number of issues, including the prices of toll road access and fuel and cargo rates. A prime target of the industrial action was the government's discontinuation of a program for scrapping old vehicles. This issue was extremely important to the truckers, since there is a glut of trucks in Colombia, and many trucks operate illegally, skirting regulations and undercutting the earnings of registered truckers.

The government had originally been adamant about refusing to meet with the truckers as long as the strike was in effect, but later agreed to negotiate as the economy, especially the coffee export sector, were affected. Fuel and food shortages also pushed the government to concede to negotiations. During the strike, some truckers used their vehicles to block major highways, leading to confrontations with police and one death.

The deal, described as "realistic and fair" by President Juan Manuel Santos, only addressed two of the truckers' demands—cargo rates and scrapping of old trucks—leaving open toll road and fuel costs. In announcing the accord, Transport Minister Jorge Eduardo Rojas said, "Investigations and trials will continue so those responsible [for blockades and government-defined "violence"] are rightly sanctioned." The truckers union president told reporters that the accord "satisfied the needs" of the trucking sector.

## 72-hour strike by Panamanian teachers for wage raise, investment in education

Public school teachers in Panama began a 72-hour strike July 18 to demand improvements in their salaries. The government has offered a raise of US\$150 per month beginning May 2017 and US\$150 for May 2018. The teachers' union is calling for US\$300 for 2017 and 2020, per a decree that had been signed into law by previous president Ricardo Martinelli.

The government announced that it would suspend negotiations until teachers returned to work. The government has also declared that it would pay a "recognition bonus" to teachers who scabbed. In the face of threats to investigate teachers who strike, teachers marched to the comptroller's office on July 19 to demand that the constitutional right to strike be respected. The secretary of the Panama Professors Association called the bonus "vulgar blackmail, an act of corruption," especially since there are teachers who have not been paid for eight fortnights.

The teachers also demanded that the budget for education be increased from 4.6 to 6 percent of the gross domestic product, as established by law

in 1995, but never implemented. Over 90 percent of public schools are in terrible condition: classrooms, walls, bathrooms, chairs and laboratories are all in need of repair and refurbishing.

Faced with government intransigence, the union made the strike "indefinite" on July 23.

## Mexican teachers and supporters protest education reform

Hundreds of teachers and their supporters in Morelia, capital of the Mexican state of Michoacán, engaged in protests against the right-wing education reforms of president Enrique Peña Nieto last week. Most of the schools in Michoacán have been closed since the teachers began a strike May 16.

On July 21, the teachers, who are members of the CNTE federation, along with their supporters, blocked freight rails with boulders, tree trunks and other debris. The action followed the commandeering of over 140 buses and trucks by student supporters earlier in the week.

The next day, over 500 residents of surrounding villages and towns, accompanied by *normalistas* (teaching students), marched with machetes and sticks from the city's Lázaro Cárdenas Monument to the Government Palace to support the teachers and demand automatic jobs for graduating *normalistas*.

The protesters have set up an encampment across from the palace. The Michoacán branch of the CNTE says that the educators will return to work if the state government rescinds its threat to fire over 1,600 teachers who have been involved in strikes and protests.

## Trinidadian farmworkers hold protest over back pay, working conditions

A month after protesting their deplorable working conditions in front of Trinidad and Tobago's Agricultural Ministry, workers for the Mora Valley Farm held another demonstration July 18.

In the June 14 action, protesters listed a number of issues: no raise since 2007 for workers; no improvements in retired workers' pensions; the nonpayment of promised back pay and vacation leave; electricity failures; and safety and health problems.

They also denounced the neglect of over 1,000 head of Buffalypso, water buffalo imported from India and selectively bred for beef and milk production. During a dry spell in June, 100 Buffalypso died, when the average of deaths per previous years had been five.

The ministry had promised to make changes that did not materialize, according to Nirvan Maharaj, leader of the All Trinidad General Workers Trade Union (ATGWTU). Maharaj accused the ministry of "turning a blind eye" to their concerns. He also called for more security, citing the example of a man who entered the farm and threatened the manager with a

cutlass.

### **Antigua and Barbuda: Teachers petition union to oppose secondary school conversion plan**

Teachers in the Antigua & Barbuda Union of Teachers (A&BUT) have submitted a petition to the union to support their opposition to the planned transformation of the Five Islands secondary school into a university. The planned change, which has been financed with help from the Chinese government, would exacerbate already crowded conditions at the remaining secondary schools, according to the National Parents Teachers Association (NPTA).

The A&BUT has said that it supports the facility remaining as a secondary school, but that the union cannot dictate government policy. A teacher, Diana Edwards Martin, had moved a resolution in May at the union's general conference, but it was rejected. The dissident teachers announced July 20 that they would submit two documents as well as a petition, which has around 100 teachers' signatures, to the A&BUT urging it to have a special meeting over the issue.

Edwards Martin told the *Antigua Observer* that once the documents are handed over to the A&BUT, "we expect them to move on our behalf," and that the teachers will take "things into their hands" if the union decides against industrial action.

### **Groundskeepers at Arlington National Cemetery strike for better pay and sick leave**

Some 30 groundskeepers at Arlington National Cemetery went on strike July 19 to demand wage increases and paid sick leave. The workers are members of the Laborers International Union and work for two contractors, Davey Tree Expert Company and Greenleaf Services, Inc.

Workers are currently making only \$13 an hour and are only asking for a 4 percent pay increase. Davey Tree originally held the contract for Arlington Cemetery, but now it functions as a subcontractor to Greenleaf Services who obtained the contract in 2014.

Workers for Davey Tree receive a 401(k) plan and mediocre health care. Greenleaf offers no benefits to their workers. And neither offer any paid sick leave, which is a major gripe workers have with the companies.

The Laborers Union is asking that the companies honor the presidential mandate that federal contractors offer a minimum seven days paid sick leave. The proposal is scheduled to go into effect September 30, 2016. One day after workers walked off the job, Greenleaf offered to concede to workers a mere one day of paid sick leave.

### **Workers strike Miami International Airport over low wages and working conditions**

Contract workers at Miami International Airport held a one-day strike July 21 to protest low pay and dangerous working conditions. The workers are currently seeking union recognition through the Service Employees International Union from contractors Triangle Services, Eulen America and Ultra Aviation, which provide service for Delta, American Airlines and LATAM.

Ramp worker Marshall Rodriguez told WLRN Public Radio, "They're treating us like dogs, really." Last month, airport workers testified about sweatshop conditions at the airport before the Miami Dade County Trade and Tourism Committee.

Among the complaints were irregular hours, a failure to pay overtime and intimidation over organizing. Poor working conditions included exposure to extremely high levels of carbon monoxide, airport vehicles in dangerous disrepair with faulty breaks, broken headlights and bald tires, along with a lack of clean drinking water and access to restrooms.

### **Administrative staff strike BC nurse's union**

After they were locked out by the British Columbia Nurses' Union (BCNU) on Friday in Burnaby, British Columbia, near Vancouver, support staff immediately went out on strike.

According to negotiators for the union MoveUP that represents staff, ironically the Nurse's Union is trying to cut sick and medical leave and this remains the main area of dispute. Negotiators for BCNU say that the appointment leave benefit is "out of control" because too many of its staff are taking time off work for medical appointments.

BCNU lifted the lockout Friday morning, at which point their staff walked off the job—having worked without a contract since the end of 2015.

### **Youth service workers to strike in Manitoba**

Workers at the government-funded agency Macdonald Youth Services (MYS) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, could be off the job as early as August 1 after their union, the Manitoba Government and General Employees Union (MGEU/NUPGE), delivered strike notice last week.

The union is asking the Provincial Conservatives to honor a promised wage increase of 2 percent over four years made by the previous NDP government, but the government has said that such promises were irresponsible. The 26 workers at the center provide care and services for disadvantaged and at risk youth.

Workers at MYS have been without a contract since March of 2014. Union leaders say in the event of a work stoppage, some workers will remain on the job to provide essential services.



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