

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 January 2017

Hundreds protest new tolls on Pan American Highway in Peru

On January 4, hundreds blocked the northern section of the Pan American Highway in several spots along the Puente Piedra district, near Lima, the Peruvian capital, to protest a new system of tolls south to north. Among the demonstrators were bus drivers and residents of the region. Police used tear gas but were unsuccessful in clearing the protesters.

For the most part, bus companies that use this part of the highway did not attempt to operate past the barricades.

The protest took place after Rutas de Lima, the private company in charge of that sector of the Pan American Highway, installed a tollbooth on the south-to-north side of the highway. Tolls already were being charged for vehicles going the other way. Drivers into Lima must now pay both ways.

Peruvian court employees lift their strike

A seven-week strike of 25,000 court employees reached a controversial end on January 4. The strike began in the wake of a 30 percent cut by the government in the judicial budget, which would make wage increases nearly impossible.

In addition, the strikers demanded the regularization of 7,500 contingent employees, many of them earning less than US\$300 per month. Despite opposition by the rank-and-file union that represents the court workers, the Peruvian National Federation of Court Employees forced workers back in return for a meager wage increase for the contingent workers, leaving the other issues unsettled.

Argentina: Striking public employees rally at Education Ministry over jobs

Two separate public employee federations (ATE, UPCN) carried out a protest strike last week against Education Minister Esteban Bullrich's decision not to renew the contracts of 400 public employees. In addition, the ATE is warning that the jobs of 2,600 teachers are being threatened by the government's decision to cut back a teacher training program. In the last days of December 2016, workers lifted an occupation of the Education Ministry. When they returned this week to negotiate with government authorities, government officials claimed to be on summer vacation and the sacked workers were met violently by Buenos Aires police. Workers were knocked down and beaten.

Chilean miners struggle over safety, givebacks

Seventy miners occupied the Santa Ana coalmine in eastern Chile demanding that the government reopen it. The mine was shut down in 2015 due to safety concerns. The government of President Michelle Bachelet has refused to provide the necessary funds to make the mine safe.

Instead, it offered funds to retrain the miners in other jobs. The miners have vowed to be "buried" in the mine, unless their demand is met.

Elsewhere in Chile, negotiations are stalled between miners and mining transnational BHP Billiton. On Wednesday, the company rejected workers' demands for a new contract at the Escondida copper mine. The company is proposing a giveback contract including reductions in wages, benefits and production bonuses. Escondida is the world's largest copper mine, employing more than 2,500 miners.

Disaster relief workers strike in Mexico

Employees of the Mexican National Disaster Fund (FONDEN) in the city of Chilpancingo, capital of the Mexican state of Guerrero, have been on strike for more than three weeks. They are owed four months back pay and have been informed repeatedly that the FONDEN national office in Mexico City has yet to find the money to pay them.

The workers declared on December 10 that they have had to use their own money to supervise the work of reconstruction of structures and homes damaged by Tropical Storm Manuel that hit southern Mexico in April 2016. On that very same day, the workers declared their strike.

Strikers report repeatedly getting the runaround from FONDEN officials, and plan to rally this week to demand their wages and expenses.

Union extends contract before unanimous strike vote by Minnesota drivers

Truck drivers who deliver auto parts to O'Reilly Auto Parts stores across Minnesota voted unanimously on December 30 to strike in protest over increased work schedules and low pay. Negotiators for O'Reilly and Teamsters Local 120, which represents the 23 drivers, preceded the strike announcement with a contract extension.

The union says that the company should expand the workforce by another 5-6 drivers due to heavy workloads and said the shortage of drivers contributed to unsafe working conditions. Drivers are also protesting a complicated wage formula that O'Reilly uses that results in underpayment.

O'Reilly raked in record profits in 2015 and assert increased sales in each quarter of 2106. The company has 99 stores in Minnesota and 4,712 in 45 states nationally. The parts retailer was on target to add 210 new stores in the past year and acquired 48 more through a recent acquisition.

Over 1,000 ambulance technicians and paramedics across the province of Quebec are set to go on strike January 19, after voting 90 percent in favor of strike action in December.

The workers, members of the Fédération des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Québec (FTQ), are fighting for improvements in wages, pensions and work schedules. Many of the workers are restricted from striking under essential service legislation.

At the same time, another 3,600 unionized EMTs in the province are also scheduled for strike votes in the coming weeks.

Quebec union leader disciplined ahead of bus strike

The head of the Syndicat uni du Transport (SUT) in Gatineau, Quebec in the Ottawa region has been suspended for four days as public transit workers in Gatineau prepare for strike action.

The suspension of SUT union head Félix Gendron is part of disciplinary action being carried out against the union by the Société de transport de l'Outaouais (STO). Workers voted almost unanimously in favor of strike action in December, but are awaiting an essential services ruling from the Industrial Relations Board before taking strike action.

The 485 bus drivers and maintenance workers are members of the SUT, but the STO says that disciplinary action against the union had nothing to do with ongoing contract negotiations.



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