

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 June 2017

Mass strikes and protests in Colombia

Latin America

Colombia: Tens of thousands of striking teachers march in Bogotá, Colombia.

On Tuesday, June 6, some 60,000 striking teachers marched through downtown Bogotá. Joining them were thousands of students and workers, plus an organized contingent of rice farmers. The enormous number of demonstrators nearly paralyzed traffic in this city of 8 million inhabitants, nearly 9,000 feet above sea-level (2.6 thousand meters).

Joining the teachers were rice farmers striking over collapsing prices. Though the teachers marched peacefully, police at several locations attacked them with tear gas spewing armored vehicles.

The gigantic mobilization included thousands of educators from other Colombian cities. Three hundred thousand public school teachers have been on strike since May 11. At issue are wage increases and improvements in health benefits that were promised by President Santos during his election campaign.

End of Buenaventura protests in Colombia

Twenty-one days after they began, strikes and demonstrations ended in Buenaventura, the city that

surrounds Colombia's most important port, also a major South American port on the Pacific. The main issue of this civic protest and strike wave was that little of the revenues and profits generated by the port reaches the inhabitants of this city, one of the poorest in Latin America. Eighty percent of its population (350,000) lives in poverty and relies on informal and part time employment.

To end the protests, the central government promised a series of concessions, including an investment in Buenaventura infrastructure projects of a paltry 500,000 US dollars and legislation that promises that a 20 percent of business taxes be spent locally.

Pressuring the Santos administration into reaching a deal, the port remained closed for the duration of the strikes, causing a daily loss of three million US dollars in revenue. Through Buenaventura passes sixty percent of Colombian trade.

Department store workers strike in Chile

Employees at the H & M chain of department stores in Chile, voted 95 percent to 5 percent, on June 8 to reject a company offer and extend their strike, which began on May 30.

The workers are demanding a wage hike of 193 percent. Management has offered 17 percent above whatever is negotiated across the industry. Workers are also demanding a wage scale based on employee seniority and better vacation pay.

H & M, headquartered in Sweden, is a highly successful firm in Chile, with daily sales of between 140 and 180 million dollars.

Educators walk out in Costa Rica

Costa Rican teachers and education workers, members of the High School teachers union (APSE), announced a one-day protest strike for June 27, having been unable to reach agreement with the government. APSE represents 38,000 education workers. In addition to their one-day strike, the teachers plan to rally in the Costa Rican capital of San José.

The educators' demands include elimination of unpaid and "irrational" administrative duties, not related to teaching, improved pensions and higher wages.

The United States

Salinas, California wildcat strike erupts

Workers at Taylor Farms processing plant in Salinas, California, returned to work June 7 after the company and a committee of striking workers and Teamsters officials held rapid negotiations to bring a wildcat strike by some 1,500 to 2,000 workers to an end. The new contract calls for an immediate \$1.50 an hour wage increase with another \$1.00 hike due on January 1, 2018.

"Many employees are satisfied with the agreement and others are not," admitted Eufonio Alba, a striking worker who sat in on negotiations. Workers are dissatisfied with working conditions, company discipline and health insurance. Last year, Taylor Farms increased health insurance costs for workers.

Taylor Farms is the world's largest supplier of cut vegetables and salad. Their products are sold by Safeway, Walmart, Costco, McDonald's, Chipotle, Subway and Starbucks. Company CEO Bruce Taylor is also chairman of Western Growers, the trade association which has amassed untold profits from the exploitation of migrant and immigrant workers over the decades.

Canada

Quebec brewery workers strike

80 workers employed by Japanese owned Sleeman-Unibroue in Chambly, Quebec, east of Montreal went on strike June 8 after they overwhelmingly rejected the 'final' company offer presented to them by their Teamsters local bargaining team.

With over 200 grievances currently outstanding the work environment has become increasingly acrimonious, but according to union negotiators the main issues in dispute are seniority rights and overtime pay, with the company demanding the right to replace full-time experienced workers with temporary workers. Facing what they characterized as unacceptable offers, the union asked for a mediator just prior to the expiration of the last contract but that was in November of last year.

Tentative settlement ends Toronto zoo strike

The four-week old strike by over 400 workers at the Toronto zoo was brought to a halt on June 8 after negotiators for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) elected to accept a contract offer.

No details of the proposed deal are yet available but zoo management has called it a "fair and reasonable" offer. Non-union workers have been allowed to care for zoo animals during the strike but union leaders have expressed concerns that animal welfare may have been jeopardized as a result.



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