

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 July 2018

Latin America

## Colombian teachers hold one-day strike

Hundreds of thousands of teachers in five Colombian cities stopped work and held marches on July 25 to demand that the government comply with the agreement it signed in June 2017 following a 37-day strike. In Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Cali, Cartagena, and Medellín, members of the Education Workers Federation of Colombia (Fecode), students, parents and supporters marched along the main streets.

This was the third mobilization of teachers in 2018. Among the demands were adequate staffing to prevent overcrowding and overwork, improvements in the healthcare system, infrastructure upgrades, the end to delays in enactment of the Student Nutrition Program, and more funding for students' education and transportation. Fecode also denounced corruption "that seeks to rob us of the few designated resources" and privatization moves by the government.

Of particular concern among the teachers is death squad violence. A Fecode statement noted the "alarming increase" in threats against and killings of teachers: "They are victims of extortion, persecution for their ideology, coercion for their pedagogical and social labors, and being marked for exercising union activity." In fact, a teacher was murdered in the department of Caquetá on the day of the protests. The statement called for the designation of schools as "peace territories."

The National Education Minister, Yaneth Giha Tovar, issued a communiqué claiming that the strike call was unjustified and that the government had complied with 12 of the 24 main demands, contending that "we have always kept the doors of dialogue open."

## Mexican municipal clerical workers strike for overdue pay, end to abuse

Administrative workers for the Mexican municipality of Ahumada, Chihuahua remain on strike to demand that the city pay salaries that have been overdue from one to five fortnights. The workers originally walked out on July 17, as supervisors maintained minimal services. However, on July 24 the workers were joined by management, who locked the doors and, along with the striking clerical workers, stationed themselves outside and explained the situation to citizens.

The office workers, who are overwhelmingly women, are also demanding to be treated with respect by the mayor, César Alberto Aguirre López, who has repeatedly berated, threatened and ridiculed them, sometimes individually in front of other workers, and sometimes as a group, using highly vulgar language. A recent investigation referred to rampant nepotism and an excess of upper-level personnel in the municipal administration as well.

In a demonstration of disdain for the striking office workers, on July 23 Aguirre López, whose wife also holds a position in the administration, left on a vacation trip to Mazatlán with his family. The city administration, meanwhile, claims that there is not enough money to pay the overdue wages to all of the workers.

The strikers have called for an audit of the municipality's books and asked that state lawmakers rectify their plight.

## Venezuelan electrical workers go on strike over wages, resources

Venezuela's electrical sector workers showed up at their places but refused to carry out their labors beginning

July 23. They are members of the 17,000-member Fetraelec electrical sector workers union, which called an indefinite strike to demand that the state-run Corpoelec electrical agency raise workers' wages and provide them with the resources to deliver electricity.

In the midst of the country's economic crisis, the electrical sector, like the healthcare and other sectors, has suffered from shortages of supplies and equipment, resulting in outages, delays in repairs and poor maintenance. The government has blamed the blackouts on sabotage, a claim the union denies.

Workers' wages have deteriorated due to hyperinflation, so Fetraelec is calling for a monthly increase of from 8 to 18 times the minimum wage, or US\$16 to \$37. Fetraelec stated that the workers would only respond to emergencies or outages until their demands are met.

### **Uruguayan construction workers down tools for four hours to protest death of coworker**

On July 21, 34-year-old construction worker Gonzalo González fell 20 feet to his death from the roof of a supermarket in Montevideo, Uruguay. González, an architecture student and father-to-be, had been repairing a leak when the fatal accident occurred. When his body was discovered, management personnel ordered workers to clean up traces of blood and continue as if nothing had happened.

The supermarket is part of the Disco chain, the largest in Uruguay. The president of the Uruguayan Federation of Commercial and Services Employees (Fuecys) later complained that he found out about the accident on social media and that the chain delayed in notifying the Labor Ministry and Security Commission of the tragedy. He criticized the "indifference and lack of sensitivity" of the responsible parties at Disco and called for "the elaboration of a protocol that determines basic criteria at the time that this type of fatal accidents occur in a work setting."

Fuecys denounced Disco for giving González the keys to the roof on a day in which there was a yellow alert due to strong winds, and for not providing him with appropriate clothing and footwear. Fuecys head Carlos Baiz told reporters that "on social media there are videos that show that the scene of the accident was altered." An

investigation by the Labor inspector general concluded, "The human factor has to be taken into account, but the business is always the responsible party for compliance with the norm."

This is the third fatal accident in the construction sector in two months. The SUNCA construction workers union called for a four-hour work stoppage—from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm—to protest the incident. SUNCA declared that it would consult with the deceased's family to see if they want to file a lawsuit against Sipra, the contractor for whom González worked.

The United States

### **Contract unresolved as Rhode Island nurses conclude four-day work stoppage**

Some 2,400 nurses and hospital support staff returned to work July 27 after a 3-day strike followed by a one-day walkout at Rhode Island Hospital and Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island. Members of Local 5098 of the United Nurses and Allied Workers are protesting benefits and low wages that are causing heavy turnover at the facilities.

Lifespan, which owns the two hospitals and is the largest healthcare chain in Rhode Island, showed no indication of backing down and new negotiations will not take place until August 8. The company further incited nurses by declaring that the \$10 million cost for hiring replacement workers will be deducted from their last proposal to the union.

Workers overwhelmingly rejected a company offer back on July 13 that proposed wage increases over three years of 9 percent to 25 percent. The higher wage increases were an attempt by the hospitals to mollify workers with less than 10 years seniority, who are paid substandard wages.

But the strike and lockout appear to have done nothing to dampen opposition by workers as the union announced it would request a new strike vote for a follow-up strike.



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