

## Chilean railway workers walk out; strike vote by Vancouver BC transit workers

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 October 2019

### Chilean railway workers strike over pay, management intransigence

Workers for the Chilean railway Ferrocarriles del Pacífico, aka Fepasa, struck on October 7 following failed negotiations. Their demands include a five percent salary adjustment, extra pay for night service and wage equality for all drivers. The last demand is in response to wage differences of up to 300 pesos (US\$422) in monthly wages among drivers. The strike encompasses eight cities in the central region, including Santiago, Rancagua, Tacahuano and Puerto San Antonio.

The workers' union accused Fepasa of using tripartite negotiations decreed and mediated by the Labor Ministry to delay any action, devising contingency plans—including the recruitment of scabs and the use of trucks to transport cargo—while the fruitless talks dragged on.

The union's director also recounted to kaosenlared.net how the company's general manager never offered a formal proposal, instead sending personal letters to individual workers offering bonuses if they refused to strike.

The union handed over a letter to the labor department delineating Fepasa's illegal and antiunion practices.

### Protests by Colombian students and workers against education underfunding and paramilitary violence

University students, professors, relatives and supporters held their sixth protest in cities across Colombia October 10 over a number of demands. The students are calling for the government of right-wing president Iván Duque to deliver on promises to increase investment in public education and end the corruption that has siphoned money out of universities.

Another equally urgent call is for an end to violence by armed groups who have murdered hundreds of social activists, environmentalists, demobilized former FARC members and labor organizers in recent years. In addition to these crimes, the

students also protested against the attacks by police, especially the notorious ESMAD antiriot squads. The students are calling for the dismantling of ESMAD.

Though the protest organizers emphasize the peaceful nature of their action, acts of vandalism and rock throwing by hooded and masked elements, some likely provocateurs, have provided opportunities for ESMAD units to beat, tear gas and otherwise attack student protesters. In addition, last week two members of the National Police were caught throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at a student loan agency, and police have attacked several universities.

Joining the protesters this time was the Colombian Unitary Workers Central (CUT), which denounced the anti-labor laws proposed by the Duque administration, including elimination of overtime, weekend and holiday pay, raising the retirement age, cuts in pensions along with higher contributions by workers to the system.

Another protest is planned for October 17.

### Mexican soccer players threaten strike over unpaid salaries

Players for the Veracruz, Mexico soccer team Los Tiburones Rojos (the Red Sharks) declared their resolve not to play until they are paid half of their overdue wages by October 15. They will go on strike until the full amount is delivered.

The Tiburones are members of the top-tier Liga MX (MX League), whose president, Enrique Bonilla, has suggested to the players that they bring their case to the Veracruz Controversy Conciliation and Resolution Commission. According to Bonilla, the commission would look into “the possibility of finding a quantity that could help them in this process, without guaranteeing a provision of 50 percent, but to help in some form.”

### Mexican sugar workers poised to strike over wage demands

Workers at several sugar factories in the Mexican state of San Luis Potosí are set to strike on October 16. The strike vote was taken on September 23 at an extraordinary general assembly called by the STIASRM sugar industry workers' union's Section 34.

According to the Section 34 secretary, Tinoco Alarcón, some 58 sugar factories nationwide will be struck. The enterprises have been notified of the planned walkout and they are taking "precautionary measures" in anticipation.

The strike call derived from disagreements between negotiators for STIASRM and the factory owners, primarily over wages.

### **Hawaiian Airlines flight attendants demonstrate in advance of strike vote**

Flight attendants for Hawaiian Airlines staged a demonstration October 9 ahead of a strike vote by the 2,100 members of the Association of Flight Attendants scheduled for October 28. The contract became amenable at the end of 2016 and workers are demanding increased wages and improved benefits.

The negotiations fall under the Railway Labor Act, which seeks to tie workers up in interminable negotiations and delays aimed at wearing down resistance to company demands while maintaining transportation networks. Even should workers vote to strike, mediators can impose cooling off periods and President Trump could intervene to order an end to the strike.

Nevertheless, the October 28 vote represents the first time the union has held a strike vote in the company's 90-year history and indicates deep dissatisfaction among flight attendants.

### **California Airgas workers called out by Teamsters on unfair labor practices strike**

Workers at four Airgas USA locations in California walked out on strike October 8 over numerous labor law violations. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is now taking into consideration the charges filed by Teamsters Local 848.

Airgas is the United States' largest distributor of industrial, medical and specialty gases and employs 18,000 workers in the United States. It is owned by Air Liquide, based in France, which is the world's largest distributor of gases operating in 80 countries.

The workers, comprising truck drivers and warehouse workers along with those who fill gas cylinders, operate at locations in Burbank, Lynwood, Pomona and Ventura,

California. They voted last year to join the Teamsters.

In 2017 the Teamsters carried out strikes by Airgas workers in New England but similarly subordinated the struggle of workers to appeals to the NLRB as opposed to seeking to unite them with broader struggles of the working class.

### **British Columbia transit workers authorize strike action**

An October 3 vote by more than 3,200 transit workers in Vancouver, British Columbia, recorded 99 percent in favor of launching strike action against Coast Mountain Bus Company, which employs some 5,000 workers. Unifor Local 111, the union that falsely claims to represent the interests of the workers, has violated the principle of "No Contract, No Work" by negotiating long past the contract expiration date of March 31 without calling out the workforce to shut down CMBC operations.

One of the major points of contention has been the erosion of working conditions. The burgeoning of ridership in the Vancouver area without a commensurate uptick in the hiring of more vehicle operators has forced drivers to shorten their breaks and recovery time between trips in order to meet their schedules. Over 1.1 million people in the area use CMBC every day. Vancouver Metro drivers and Seabus workers operate a combined system of ferries and buses to transport thousands to and from North Vancouver to Vancouver every day.

CMBC management has indicated that it takes for granted that Unifor will accept a sellout contract and refuse to call out the workers out on strike. A CMBC spokesman declared, "CMBC remains committed to reaching an acceptable negotiated settlement. Both parties will continue bargaining in the coming days. We don't anticipate imminent disruptions at this time."

With a 108-day-old strike of over 2,600 British Columbia forestry workers against Western Forest Products and a 30-day-old strike by over 1,000 hotel workers against four major hotels in Vancouver, a transit worker strike would reinforce the growing strike wave in British Columbia, Canada, and across North America.



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