

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 March 2013

Colombian coal miners union, company reach tentative agreement

On March 7, representatives of the Colombian Cerrejon open-pit coal mining complex and the 4,500-member Sintracarbon mine workers union reached a tentative agreement. The agreement was expected to put an end to a strike that began February 6.

Although the deal had not been signed and finalized, union officials were eager to conclude the strike. Sintracarbon president Igor Diaz told Reuters, “The majority of workers embraced the deal and we’ll be working on drafting [the agreement] today.”

Nonetheless, of issues besides pay—including health services, job-related maladies, contracted workers, displaced communities and the environment—21 items have not been resolved. Sintracarbon negotiator Marlon Gomez told reporters that differences between the union and the company are “not conceptual, but in the aspect of editing,” and that the company “would give its response about the inquietudes that we have.”

The contract will be in effect for three years instead of the usual two. The choice of three years was influenced by a bonus of US\$7,000 not included in the two-year option. However, the salary increase of 5.1 percent for the first year is just a tenth of a percent higher than Cerrejon’s original offer, as opposed to the 7 percent initially proposed by the union.

Colombian sugarcane workers strike over wages, layoffs, persecution

About 600 workers at the Ingenio La Cabaña sugar refinery in Cauca department, southwestern Colombia walked off the job on March 7. The workers are members of the Sintrainagro union, which issued a statement on February 20 declaring its intention to strike.

The document lists a whole range of accusations against the company, including refusal to consider and negotiate a list of demands, hiring of short-time labor, flouting of labor laws, firing of pro-union workers and intimidation of their spouses, shorting of payments by under-weighting of sugarcane, all of which have converted the refinery “almost into a concentration camp.” Some 90 workers have been laid off recently as well.

The statement refers to the inaction of the government—which “doesn’t make a peep”—and adds, “The enterprise and the government oblige us to strike since our families do not deserve to starve! We are good men and the only “crime” we

have committed is to unionize to demand of the company that it respect our rights.”

The statement denounces the company’s threats to “respond with lead” if the workers strike, affirms that the strike would be peaceful and “if acts of violence happen it will be through the initiative of it [La Cabaña].” The union asks of government entities at all levels “the protection of our lives and our physical integrity and the guarantees for the exercise of democratic rights such as protest.”

Colombia is notorious for the impunity with which the murders of scores of pro-union workers have been carried out. On January 28, Juan Carlos Perez Muñoz, a cane cutter, Sintrainagro activist and father of two, was gunned down in front of his coworkers. Nobody has been charged with the killing.

The statement concludes with calls for the identification and prosecution of the killers and for the solidarity of union, social and political organizations at the national and international level, and pleads with the media to “make known our difficult situation to public opinion.”

Costa Rican teachers, public workers protest bill to cut benefits

On Friday, March 8, thousands of teachers and public workers marched on the Costa Rican capital San Jose against a bill currently in the Legislative Assembly. The “Public Sector Salary Bill,” drafted by the Labor Ministry, would slash or eliminate a number of extra-salary benefits for educators and public employees.

The Labor Ministry claims that such benefits for educators as severance pay, extra pay for work outside of the classroom and “exclusivity” bonuses (for not taking a second job) “create inequities among public workers,” and the bill is a means to lessen the alleged inequities. High school principal Henry Morales countered that it “would cut nearly 40 percent of our salaries by eliminating bonuses earned on the streets many years ago, and that will affect employees from the entire public sector.”

The protesters gathered about two kilometers east of the capital and marched to the Presidential House carrying banners, signs, balloons and flags. Speakers denounced the government’s scapegoating of teachers for the country’s deficit while large corporations get tax exemptions, representing more than 6 percent of GDP. Union officials

threatened a general strike if the bill should pass.

Company goons attack striking Mexican refinery workers

About 70 members of a “grupo de choque” (“clash group,” i.e., hired thugs) attacked striking refinery workers in Atitalaquia in the Mexican state of Hidalgo on March 7. The goons’ services were contracted by Cotrisa, which hires workers for the Bicentenario refinery. They arrived in two buses from the state of Mexico that morning and set upon the workers. The skirmish left seven injured and 31 detained.

In the course of the fighting, gunshots were discharged, and police intervened. Among those arrested was the manager of the work site, Pedro Bazan.

The workers went on strike 15 days before to protest working conditions at the refinery, where they labor under dangerous conditions in tunnels and canals. In addition, they are often called on to work for up to 12 hours, although their contracts stipulate 8-hour days.

According to a Vanguardia report, “The Bicentenario Refinery is constructed on 700 hectares [1729 acres] of land from the municipalities of Tula, Tlaxcoapan and Atitalaquia, and since they initiated work constant labor problems with the workers have been registered.”

According to Hidalgo’s Government Secretariat, a lawyer for Cotrisa has agreed to meet with worker representatives for negotiations.

Antigua and Barbuda: Teachers sit in to protest chronic late payment of salaries

Teachers in the Caribbean twin-island nation of Antigua and Barbuda staged sit-ins at the Ministry of Finance March 7 and 8 to protest the nonpayment of their salaries on time. The educators are members of the Antigua and Barbuda Union of Teachers (A&BUT).

Late payment of wages for teachers and other public employees is a chronic problem in Antigua and Barbuda. Last December, teachers sat in at the ministry in response to weeks of late payment, forcing the early closure of some schools. The resulting public uproar caused the government to pledge to remedy the situation, or at least notify the A&BUT if payments would be late, a pledge with which it did not comply for February’s salaries.

Various other unions and their members were present at the sit-in, including air traffic controllers, nurses, laborers and construction workers. On the morning of March 8, Finance Minister Harold Lovell held a meeting with representatives of public employee unions, where he apologized, thanked them for their patience and again promised to stick by the agreement.

According to a report in Caribarena, “A release said the unions committed to working co-operatively with the government.”

Bankruptcy judge gives green light to nursing home

operator to re-impose benefit cuts

A New Jersey U.S. Bankruptcy Court judge granted a motion March 4 to the nursing home chain HealthBridge to temporarily cut pension and medical benefits. One day earlier the Service Employees International Union District 1199 praised the “legal rules” that had allowed over 600 nursing home workers to return to work after an eight month lockout at five of HealthBridge’s nursing homes in Connecticut.

Three months ago, a federal judge ordered HealthBridge to allow the locked-out workers to return to work under their old agreement after the National Labor Relations Board declared that management had violated labor law back in July 2012 when it unilaterally imposed pension and benefit cuts and then locked out workers. Two weeks ago, HealthBridge filed for bankruptcy, declaring that without the cuts, it will have to shutter its nursing homes.

This week’s ruling by the bankruptcy court essentially allows HealthBridge to implement the very cuts that the NLRB claimed were improperly imposed last year.

Newfoundland airport strike marks six months

Airport workers at St. John’s International Airport marked six months on strike Monday. About 85 workers have been strike since September 11. A media blackout has been imposed on the progress of the negotiations, but earlier in the month, a federal mediator declined to bring the parties back to the table for lack of progress.

The workers, members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, are demanding wages in line with staff at larger airports, including Halifax. Management calls the demand excessive, amounting to an increase of 58 percent over four years.

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