

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 March 2014

Latin America

Protests in Costa Rica against miniscule salary increase, benefit cuts

Workers in the public health, education and other sectors protested throughout Costa Rica on March 20. The actions were called by, among others, the National Educators Association, the Costa Rican Educators Syndicate and the National Social Security Employees Union. Dockworkers and other public and private sector workers participated as well.

Among the primary demands of the protests were the revision of a recent government-decreed 0.43 percent wage increase “in keeping with the cost of living,” negotiations to establish a new means of calculating salary adjustments, fortification of the social security system (CCSS), public health and pensions, and putting an end to their “dismantling.” The unions, however, are calling for a 3.62 percent raise, while inflation in 2013 was 3.68 percent.

The largest protest took place in the capital San Juan, where protesters marched to the Presidential House to denounce the policies of President Laura Chinchilla, which have included privatizations of public services, hikes in public service rates and miniscule raises for workers. The protesters also denounced corruption in the Chinchilla administration, from which several officials have resigned under allegations of malfeasance.

Dominican truck drivers strike to protest arrest of leaders

On March 20, fuel truck drivers at the Dominican Petroleum Refinery (Refidomsa) near the port city of Haina Occidental stopped work, paralyzing the delivery of petroleum. The workers held the surprise strike upon hearing that three of their union leaders, including General Secretary Clemente Morillo, had been arrested in a protest against the Gas Caribe petroleum firm the

day before.

The union reps had been protesting the refusal of Gas Caribe head Raisa Rodríguez and other gas facility owners to meet to discuss raises and other demands by the Gasoline Truck Drivers Syndicate.

The strike lasted about ten hours. Upon hearing that Morillo and the others had been freed, the drivers returned to their trucks.

Protests by Peruvian illegal miners over formalization deadline

Some 20,000 informal miners from across Peru protested in five regions March 20 and 21. About 1,500 of them converged on downtown Lima, where they marched to the Plaza San Martín under heavy police surveillance. In Arequipa, about 10,000 protesters briefly blocked the Pan American Highway and marched through various parts of the district. Similar actions took place in Piura, Ica and Puno, and police presence was heavy in all of them.

Tens of thousands of impoverished Peruvian workers, most of them displaced peasants and urban poor, eke out a living in informal mining. In 2012, President Ollanta Humala, claiming that the pursuit leads to pollution and loss of tax revenue, issued draconian decrees against informal mining, leading to clashes between miners and police and troops deployed to dislodge them.

A protest in Puerto Maldonado on March 15 of that year resulted in the shooting of three protesters, arrests of 62 protesters and the injuring of 36. (See: “Three workers killed in Peru mining protests”). In October of 2013, two informal miners’ associations called a strike that they ended after five days with the signing of an agreement supposedly facilitating the formalization process.

Miners who have not been formalized will be declared illegal and face stiff penalties, including imprisonment. The protesting miners are calling for the

extension of the formalization process, which is due to end on April 19.

Guyanese university workers protest nonpayment of salaries, expenses

On March 21, a group of workers for the University of Guyana (UG) protested outside the UG administration offices to demand the payment of overdue wages. The protesters included both full-and part-time staff.

The University of Guyana Senior Staff Association (UGSSA) and the University of Guyana Workers Union (UGWU) have filed a lawsuit against the UG chancellor for the payment of the salaries as well as other types of compensation, including “gratuities, book allowances, uniform allowances and other necessities,” as reported in caribnewsdesk.com. A UGSSA official told reporters that the non-payments are “a recurring problem and we see no other way out but to take the university to court.”

The United States

Vermont bus drivers’ strike enters second week as new negotiations fail

By March 22, contract negotiations between the Chittenden County Transportation Authority (CCTA) of Vermont and the union representing about 70 bus drivers failed to produce an agreement over compensation, schedules, use of part-timers and other work rules as the strike entered its second week.

Both the CCTA and Teamsters Local 597 have limited their comments on contract talks which are being overseen by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The two sides have engaged in talks since April 2013. On March 8, the CCTA put forward their “last, best and final offer.” Four days later, workers voted the proposal down.

According to the Teamsters, a key issue in the contract rejection was management’s insertion of an article on discipline. The union is also questioning the CCTA’s use of cameras on buses.

On March 10, students from Burlington High School attended Burlington’s city council meeting and submitted a petition, which gathered over 500 signatures in a single day. It declared, “It is irresponsible for CCTA management to provoke the driver strikes that would make it difficult or impossible

for many students to get to school. We call on Mayor Weinberger and the Burlington City Council to support the bus drivers who play a vital role in our community and school system.” The CCTA system, besides providing ridership for 9,700 commuters, also transports 2,400 students to school.

Canada

Government to outlaw BC truckers strike

The Liberal government of the province of British Columbia has introduced legislation to bring an end to the two-week-old strike by 1,600 container truck drivers at the Port of Vancouver, which is expected to pass into law this week.

While the law, which includes a 90-day cooling-off period, directly targets the 400 drivers that are unionized under Unifor, another 1,200 striking non-unionized drivers are threatened with the loss of their contracts and licenses that will soon expire.

Union leaders, who previously attempted to push through a contract that workers soundly rejected, are striking a militant pose in the face of the back-to-work legislation, staging a rally last Friday to oppose the legislation but indicating that they will nevertheless abide by its provisions.

Port officials say that over the past two weeks, container traffic has risen from 10 to 40 percent of normal, in part due to the hiring of replacement truckers.

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