

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 January 2016

Argentine transit workers strike to protest firings, persecution, labor conditions

Drivers and other workers for Line 203 in Buenos Aires' bus system stopped work indefinitely on January 21 after the firing of 36 of their coworkers. Line 203 is owned by Azul SATA, which also runs other routes in the greater Buenos Aires area.

"The trigger for the action was the firing of a driver, presumably for "poor effort," and the assault on another driver early Thursday morning, according to notas.org.ar. When the workers held an assembly following the sacking, the company sent an email announcing the firings of 35 more workers.

In addition to demanding the reinstatement of their colleagues, the striking workers are demanding better security, improved working conditions, and an end to persecution and speedups. One worker told reporters that the company anticipates an end to subsidies, and so is pushing to get the same amount of work out of fewer workers. In particular, he complained that the condition of buses has been deteriorating because workers are not given enough time to do adequate cleaning, repair and maintenance.

When asked about the response of the Automotive Transport System Union (UTA) to the walkout, he said, "Up to now the UTA hasn't given us any favorable response. The compañero is still fired and the 35 others, even though the telegram hasn't officially arrived, the notification by email did arrive. The UTA directors say that since they didn't receive any telegram they aren't fired and we say yes, they already know. And that creates discontent in the labor climate."

24-hour strike by Chilean forestry workers over salary, other demands

Workers for Chile's National Forestry Corporation (Conaf) went on a one-day warning strike January 22. The workers, who belong to the 1,300-member National Federation of Conaf Syndicates (Fenasic), had voted December 17 in assembly to down their tools if Conaf management did not address their demands.

The demands include better salaries, an end to arbitrary hiring practices, a restructuring of benefits for years of service and the end of what Fenasic calls "the dismantling of priority areas of the nation." The last demand has to do with discussions in the legislature over establishing a new service for biodiversity and protected area projects. Fenasic opposes the likely transfer of its members to the proposed service and

wants them to remain in Conaf.

Fenasic officials accused the Conaf director of showing "little sincerity" and of engaging in "illicit practices" such as asserting that the unions have refused to engage in dialogue.

Guyanese sugar workers protest factory closure

Scores of workers for a sugar factory in Guyana protested January 22 against the government's decision to close the facility. On January 18, the government confirmed that it would shutter the Wales, West Bank Demerara (WBD) Sugar Estate in the course of the year. The Agricultural Ministry claimed that "the finances are simply not available" to refurbish WBD and diverting funds from the other estates would "seriously jeopardize the future of these estates."

Part of the 2016 "Budget and Action Plan" of the state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) is to retire the Wales Estate land following the harvest, use the WBD factory to process the cane and shut it down afterwards. In 2017, farmers' cane will be rerouted some 20 miles to the Uitvlugt plant.

According to a Ministry release, "Agricultural workers at Wales will be absorbed by Uitvlugt up to the extent of suitable vacancies on that location. Surplus labour would have to be made redundant. The same principle would apply to the other departments." The Wales Estate lands will be "diversified," the statement further averred.

The decision was taken without any consultation with the workers. One of the protesting workers told the Guyana Chronicle that management had told them that WBD had been performing well: "They even told us that we were ranked the third best performing estate and that they want people from other estates to come and follow our pattern."

Panamanian coffee pickers strike against deplorable living conditions

Some 600 workers at four coffee plantations in the western Panama town of Boquete stopped work on January 21. The mostly indigenous coffee bean harvesters struck to demand improvements in their living conditions.

Eugenio Marcucci, head of the Tierras Altas Indigenous Workers Syndicate (Sitraipei), denounced the "many difficulties with lodging," such as the lack of potable water, adequate sleeping quarters and cooking facilities.

"Not just that, they demand that we pick the best quality

coffee and they pay us two dollars a tin instead of four, and out of the four or five tins that we pick daily, they don't pay us for one, obliging us to present our complaints to the authorities of the Labor Ministry," he told *La Estrella* reporters.

Strikers say that the owner has threatened to close the plantations if the workers press their demands. The owner also employs minors. On a recent inspection, an operative for the Labor Ministry counted five youths between 15 and 17 years of age; the majority of the rest were under 12 years old.

Tripartite negotiations began shortly after the initiation of the strike.

Mexican university workers strike, protest contract violations

Members of the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca Workers and Employees Syndicate (STEUABJO) held a 12-hour strike January 19. The strike was sparked by the refusal of the administration to respond to a list of demands that the union had submitted to the rector two months ago.

The petition demanded that the rector, Eduardo Martínez Helmes, address contract violations including the refusal to fire personnel contracted without the union's knowledge, not granting permanent status to workers who have accrued enough time and not complying with programs for quality and efficiency, among others.

The STEUABJO strike committee warned that if the demands were not addressed, an indefinite strike could begin on the first of February.

On January 21, the University of Oaxaca Academic Workers Syndicate (STAUO) occupied the buildings of the University to demand that the authorities address their demands, which include compliance with the collective contract, the immediate termination of 300 workers hired "in an irregular form," the reinstatement of fired workers in various regions of the state, the handing over of more than 5 million pesos (US\$271,000) of dues owed to the union and a salary raise.

Charging misappropriation of funds by both the university and the local arbitration board, STAUO said that it would call out its 800 members on February 22 if the demands are not met.

Labor board judge orders Walmart to rehire victimized workers

An administrative law judge for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled January 21 that Walmart must rehire 16 workers involved in strikes and protests. During May and June of 2013 workers at 29 stores were involved in work stoppages and some 100 journeyed to Walmart's annual shareholder meeting in Bentonville, Arkansas to protest low wages and working conditions.

Walmart tapped defense contractor Lockheed Martin to help monitor protesters and then fired those it argued were not involved in legal strikes but "intermittent" work stoppages that

are not protected by labor law. Judge Geoffrey Carter ruled that the various walkouts and the time involved in the bus caravan to Walmart's headquarters in Arkansas involved the same risk as organized workers who engage in more formal strike activity.

Carter ordered the 16 workers rehired with back pay and also said the company must hold meetings at the 29 stores involved in the 2013 activities and inform employees of their rights to organize. Jessica Levin with the organization Making Change at Walmart, sponsored by the United Food & Commercial Workers International Union, declared the decision as a "huge victory." Walmart immediately countered that it will appeal the rulings.

The NLRB decision came one day after Walmart announced it would implement a pay raise for 1.2 million workers during 2016. The miserly pay hike will only bring minimum wages at Walmart up to \$10 an hour, leaving a considerable number mired in poverty and eligible for public assistance.

Montreal white collar workers strike

White collar workers for the city of Montreal struck Midnight January 24 as part of a series of rotating strikes aimed at putting pressure on management. About 8,000 workers are involved in the action.

A general strike of all white collar and blue collar city workers is set for March 1, the day municipal taxes are due. Essential services, including police and fire, are to be maintained during the actions.

The Syndicat des cols blancs de l'île de Montréal, the bargaining agent for white collar workers, is calling for improvements in salary and better working conditions. The union is also opposing the use of what it calls an excessive number of subcontractors.

Marc Ranger, the union president, called the union's demands "reasonable." For its part, the city said it had done its part to reach an agreement with Mayor Denis Coderre, saying the city had done its best to reach an agreement in good faith.

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