

Strikes in Colombia underscore worsening conditions in schools and among workers

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Colombia: “Civic strike” and protests against rampant poverty, lack of services, corruption

Thousands of residents of Buenaventura, in Colombia’s Pacific Coast department of Valle de Cauca, began a “civic strike” on May 16 to protest the horrendous conditions endured by the city’s working class. Home of Colombia’s largest port, the city of over 440,000 is infamous for corruption, poverty and criminal gang violence.

Nearly half of Buenaventura’s inhabitants have no access to safe drinking water, 62 percent are unemployed and infant mortality, mainly due to starvation, is 27 per 1,000. The last three mayors, as well as the former prison director, are all serving prison time, drug trafficking is rampant and the “self defense” (i.e. paramilitary), group AGC assassinates anyone who challenges its authority, which supersedes that of the police.

The protests began peacefully on May 16, with 7,000 marching and chanting, “Yes, we can!” and “Buenaventura is fed up!” under a massive police and military presence. Public transport was stopped, classes were suspended and businesses were closed. Protesters blocked 11 key transit points, preventing semi trucks from picking up or dropping off cargo. Violence ensued on Friday, May 19, following the breakdown of talks and the unprovoked shooting by an ESMAD (Mobile Antidisturbance Squad) unit of some protesters.

Colombian teachers strike, march for improved conditions, salaries, educational system

Teachers throughout Colombia continued their strike and held mobilizations May 16 to press their demand that the government comply with its stated commitment

to education. The teachers were joined by workers in the public sector, the CGT, CUT, CTC and other labor confederations, pensioners and social organizations.

“According to estimates,” reported *El Espectador*, “in the whole nation close to a half-million workers from the public sector joined in the strike called by the Colombian Federation of Education Workers (Fecode)...”

Fecode and other teachers unions are demanding the amplification of education personnel by 15,300, a raise that keeps up with the cost of living, work stability, fulfillment of signed agreements and improvements in education funding. The government claims that it lacks the resources to carry out measures that it had agreed to.

Strike by Chilean mining supply workers over wage demand

Workers for the Anachemia Science mining supply company, based in Santiago, Chile, walked off the job on May 19 after negotiations between union and company negotiators failed to come to an agreement. The union’s president told reporters, “They didn’t give us anything more than what they had thought to give us from the start.”

The main demand is a base monthly wage raise of 80,000 Chilean pesos, about US\$120. According to the terms of the current contract, the first negotiated in the union’s five years at Anachemia, some workers received a raise of 2,500 pesos (US\$3.74) while others received no raise at all. Another issue is the duration of the contract. The mineworkers want a two-year contract while management has not budged from its four-year contract demand.

Mexican miners strike over bonus, benefits

Workers for mining firm Minera del Norte in the town of Hercules, Coahuila, Mexico began a strike May 17 over a series of labor violations. Workers had met with management that day to discuss the company's announcement of their profit-sharing bonus of 10,000 pesos (US\$535), an amount considered low for a mining firm. The usual profit-sharing payment is in the area of 30,000 pesos.

Adding insult to injury, there was no bonus last year. Instead, the workers were given a 10,000 peso loan, a situation one worker called "a joke." In addition, "They say that they're not going to deposit (wages for work already done) until we call off the strike and something more serious, the business is not paying into Social Security...nor to [federal housing fund] Infovot," the worker said.

New York beer distributor moves to replace striking drivers

The strikebound Clare Rose beer distributor in Long Island, New York has moved to replace its unionized drivers as the strike by 117 members of Teamsters Local 812 enters its second month.

The Teamsters union has sought to both isolate the striking workers and divert their attention by petitioning the Brookhaven Town Industrial Development Agency.

Among the concessions demanded by the management that drove workers to take strike action is an end to company contributions to the Teamster pension fund and the elimination of a sales function performed by drivers that boosted incomes.

Chicago charter schools teachers set to walk out

Teachers at Passages Charter School will walk out of their classrooms next Thursday if they can't come to an agreement with the school management by midnight Wednesday, union leaders said Friday.

The Chicago Teachers Union has collaborated in school closings and attacks on public school teachers in exchange for the opportunity to "organize" low-paid charter school teachers.

New Hampshire Westinghouse employees locked out

The 172 union Workers at Westinghouse Electric in

Newington were locked out at midnight Sunday after failing to reach a contract agreement. Their contract expired on April 30 and negotiations had been going on for just over a month.

Michael DiClemente of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Local 651, said, "The contract was not ratified, so we asked and received a 30-day extension. Guys have been going to work. We were given a lockout notice that if we didn't accept their last and final offer we would be locked out."

Westinghouse management said the plant would continue operations with non-union employees with backup from its other locations.

Ontario auto parts workers reject union-sanctioned deals

After rejecting two contract proposals recommended by their union Unifor earlier this month, workers at auto parts manufacturer Flex-N-Gate in Windsor, Ontario voted on Sunday to accept a deal reached in haste between the company and union negotiators.

Global parts supplier Flex-N-Gate, produces door rails for Chrysler minivans and it was feared that the strike by 210 workers that began on Friday would affect production at the FCA Windsor Assembly Plant that employs over 6,000 workers. The deals that workers had earlier rejected by over 55 percent had been recommended by their union at both the local and national level.

The workers, who had not had a wage increase in over a decade, were reportedly at odds with their union over a number of issues including pensions, wages and vacation provisions but it is unclear what changes are contained this latest deal.

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