

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Mexican teachers battle their own union and police**

Last week, tens of thousands of protesting teachers from 13 regions of Mexico confronted Mexican security forces in the vicinity of Mexico's Government Bureau in Mexico City. In the central Mexican city of Cuernavaca, capital of Morelos state, teachers blocking the Cuernavaca-Zapotec highway fought police trying to drive them out. In the city of Xoxocotla, in Morelos state, parents of school children demanded that teachers' demands be addressed so that schools could open.

Morelos teachers are demanding that the Calderon government abandon the so-called "Alliance for Quality Education (ACE)," a government scheme that, using the pretext of increasing standards, threatens to disenfranchise teachers. Many of the strikers claim that the ACE is being used to gut public education and place it in the hands of corporate conglomerates.

The Morelos strikers are members of the Democratic Coordinating Committee, formerly the National Education Workers Coordinating Committee (CNTE), a dissident organization within the National Teachers Union (SNTE). The SNTE is in the hands of a gangster bureaucracy led by Elba Esther Gordillo, who is also an Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) senator. The SNTE is widely believed to have engaged in the kidnapping and disappearance of teachers during protests in Oaxaca several years ago. The SNTE is suspected of kidnapping teachers during the clashes in Morelos as well. The Mexican police admit to having arrested about 50 protesters.

Striking teachers and their supporters in Morelos confronted the police nearly every day last week. Intent on clearing barricades and disbanding protests, police charged against teachers and parents while helicopters sprayed tear gas. In turn, the demonstrators responded

with firecrackers, rocks, burning tires and gasoline bombs. Police also invaded and searched homes in the vicinity of the protests.

In Mexico City, striking teachers declared their intention to rally indefinitely at the offices of the Public Education Department in solidarity with the Morelos educators and against the ACE. A rotation of 12 teachers from each union local, some 700 teachers, will stay in tents at the protest site every day. CNTE leaders also announced that contingents would be sent to Morelos to preempt the escalation of state violence against the teachers.

## **Colombian president threatens to fire striking court employees**

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe decreed last week that Colombia is in a "state of internal commotion." The decree is one of three possible emergency measures contained in the Colombian constitution. It gives the president the right to replace striking judicial employees, who have been on strike for more than six weeks. Uribe claimed that he arrived at his decision after being told that the strike could result in prisoners being released.

Uribe's decree was denounced by Colombia's National Association of Judicial Employees (ASONAL). ASONAL members have been on strike since September 3, demanding higher wages.

## **Venezuela: Strike at Coca-Cola**

On October 10, a 10-day strike ended at Femsa, a Coca-Cola subsidiary in Venezuela, and workers abandoned the last of the four plants and 27 distribution centers they occupied during the strike. Femsa Director Rodrigo Anzola indicated that the company had obtained a court order to end the occupation of its plants. The company had the assistance of the police and National Guard.

The strike ended when Femsa agreed to compensate workers and former workers for back pay and other debts they were owed when the company was operated

by Hit, a Venezuelan bottler. Femsa, a Mexican concern, assumed control of the company in 2003 and refused to recognize workers' demands, saying the workers had no legal right to their claims. Venezuelan courts agreed with the company.

### **Massachusetts machinists strike high-tech firm**

Machinists at Thermo Fisher Scientific in Waltham, Massachusetts, voted down a three-year contract proposal by the scientific services company and walked out on strike October 10. Russ Krings, business agent for the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 510, which represents striking workers, indicated that company attempts to dump the current defined benefit pension and replace it with a 401(k) were not well received by workers, given the battering these plans had received with the recent collapse of stock prices.

A company press release stated, "It is our hope that union members will recognize the fairness of the contract, particularly given the challenging economic times for manufacturing in the United States." The agreement also called for wage freezes in the first two years of the contract followed by a 2 percent increase in the final year.

The current strike affects only a small percentage of the company's workers at two plants in Waltham. Thermo Fisher Scientific retains 30,000 employees and brings in annual revenue of \$10 billion providing laboratory equipment, software, chemicals and other services for scientific research.

### **Talks continue following strike by Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra**

The union representing striking members of the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra (WCO) brought partial proposals into negotiations last week. Management rejected these proposals, guaranteeing that the dispute will continue. The strike began October 1, resulting in the cancellation of last week's opening performance of the chamber orchestra's fall season.

Management issued a bitter press release saying, "It is frustrating to be engaged in a bargaining process where there are no assurances that new concessions will result in a signed contract." According to striking musicians, the major obstacle is a new demand by management for mandatory attendance and latitude to fire musicians without warning. The union is seeking a peer-review process to blunt this proposed weapon.

The 34 musicians average \$10,000-\$11,000 a year in salary with the WCO and therefore must take multiple side jobs to survive. This requires that musicians juggle their schedules to accommodate the WCO performance schedule.

### **St. Lawrence Seaway strike looms**

Four hundred forty-five workers at ports along the St. Lawrence Seaway from the Welland Canal through Lake Ontario gave their union, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), a 72-hour strike mandate as of last Friday, which could close down transportation as far away as the prairies.

A key issue in the dispute is the plan to implement a mechanized mooring system, which the CAW says would eliminate union jobs. A strike would affect the shipping of everything from metal ore and coal to grain, salt, sand and bulk liquids. The Canadian Wheat Board has already appealed to the federal government to intervene in the dispute, which comes during a critical shipping period. Workers affected have been without a contract since April.

### **Union caves to settle Toronto bus strike**

With the complicity of union leaders, 164 striking bus drivers employed by Veolia Transport to service municipal bus routes in the York region north of Toronto voted by a narrow margin to accept the same deal they had rejected at the outset of their strike more than two weeks ago.

The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) accepted the deal after the company threatened last Friday to reduce its offer and withdraw retroactive provisions if the contract wasn't passed immediately. Union leaders who recommended the deal the first time around refused to call the settlement a defeat, pointing to modest gains that were contained in the original offer. Throughout the strike, buses operated by unionized drivers for York Region Transit continued to service affected routes, minimizing the impact of the work stoppage.

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