

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 March 2015

Latin America

Mexican farmworkers strike over miserable wages, abuses

Thousands of agricultural workers in the area around the town of San Quintin, in the Mexican state of Baja California, about 180 miles (290 km) south of Tijuana, walked off the job on March 17 to demand wage increases, labor rights, and an end to abuses.

In a March 18 demonstration and blockade along the north-south Transpeninsular Highway, police arrested over 200 protesters on charges of vandalism and blocking roads. Hundreds of police and soldiers broke up the blockades using tear gas and rubber bullets.

In the San Quintin Valley, there are about 50,000 agricultural workers, many from poverty-stricken states like Chiapas and Oaxaca. Most of the fruits and vegetables that they pick are exported to supermarket and restaurant chains in the United States. Workers earn around 100 pesos (US\$6.65) per workday of around ten hours or more, and they receive no overtime. The striking workers are demanding that their wages be raised to 300 pesos, a little less than US\$20.

Working conditions and abuses by foremen also figure in the workers' demands. One farmworker told reporters, "We get up at 4 AM to wait for the bus that takes us to the fields. We get there at 6:30 and the foremen tell us that we have to enter the furrows despite our starting time being 7:00; they never pay us the extra hours... you have to work until four or five in the afternoon, all day bent over and sometimes without water."

As reported before by the WSWs, Mexican corporate mega-farms are notorious for their abuses of farmworkers, including shorting and withholding of paychecks, threats, beatings, imprisonment, discrimination, filthy living quarters, sexual harassment, the use of company stores charging inflated prices and no benefits.

Fermin Salazar of the Alliance of National, State and Municipal Organizations for Social Justice, told reporters for *El Nuevo Herald* that employers have refused to meet with workers to discuss "multiple violations of labor and human rights on the part of the employers," until now, following the outbreak of the strike and protests.

The state government has set up a "dialog board" of business, worker and government representatives, at the same time warning that "there will be no tolerance for those who use demonstrations to act outside the law." The workers have lifted the blockades, but say that they will resume if concrete improvements do not result from the talks.

Colombian truckers end strike over fuel prices, freight charges and other issues

After 24 days of strikes and blockades of major highways, the Colombian Cargo Transporters Federation (Colfecar) reached an agreement with the government March 19 to put an end to nationwide mobilizations that kept about 40 percent of cargo trucks off the road. The deal was reached shortly after the government had ordered the militarization of the main highways to and from Colombian ports.

Colfecar had called the "national crusade for truckers' dignity" after talks broke down over a number of issues on February 23. Colfecar's main demands centered on freight rates and the cost of diesel fuel, but also included retirement conditions, housing credits and benefits such as health care. Yet another demand was an extension of the number of useful years for trucks past the current 15 years through a program of renovation and improvements.

In addition to slowing cargo traffic to ports, the strike hampered the delivery of foodstuffs to major cities like Medellin and Bogota, with food prices rising some 10 to 15 percent. Skirmishes occurred between strikers and scab truckers—as well as with police—with the government and media blaming the truckers for breaking hundreds of windshields.

Statements by both parties regarding the agreement were short on specifics, with the Transport Ministry saying that it would "create tools that allow, through monitoring and control, the fulfillment of rules governing the relations between the cargo manufacturers, transport companies and the owners of vehicles," one of those tools being a commission to "revise the competitiveness" of the sector. The ministry will also "contemplate" the other demands.

On the issue of the price of fuel, the government did not budge.

Trinidadian health minister orders legal action against nurses who held sickout

The dual-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago has experienced a number of strike and sickout actions by public employees in recent weeks. Fire, police and prison department employees held a sickout in mid-March, which was followed by a March 18 walkout by nurses at the Sangre Grande Hospital over breaches of the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

The nurses are represented by the Public Services Association (PSA) headed by Watson Duke. Duke told reporters that the PSA had written the Eastern Regional Health Authority (ERHA) in February about safety and health concerns, but did not get a response. "The CEO gave us no copies of documents about the OSH issues. We were asked to be reasonable.

"We stressed the importance of approved Town and Country Plans, fire certificate and engineers reports," Duke told reporters. "We are concerned that patients' and workers' lives are at risk... They are working employees beyond the eight-hour workday and five-day work week without additional compensation. Nurses are working 12-hour shifts, six days per week. They are assaulting the bodies of our members."

On March 20, Health Minister Fuad Khan ordered legal action against the nurses and told reporters that he had sent a contingent of Cuban nurses to Sangre Grande. Blaming the PSA nurses for the recent death of an infant at the hospital, and referring to an alleged death threat against the Cuban nurses, Khan claimed that he would bring in thousands of nurses from India and the Philippines, "because our nurses don't want to work," and "don't care about the patients."

The United States

Lockout at North Carolina security company

Nineteen workers at ADT Security in Winston-Salem, North Carolina are entering their sixth week of a lockout after workers voted to retain union representation. The installation specialists and service technicians rejected a demand for a 30 percent pay cut leading the company to retaliate with a lockout and the hiring of outside contractors to continue installing security systems.

Workers first turned to the International Brotherhood of

Electrical Workers in 2013 to unionize. When the IBEW failed to produce a contract after one year, workers voted 9-9 in October 2014 to decertify the union (a tie vote results in decertification). The IBEW filed charges alleging ADT had illegally pressured workers during the period leading up to the vote and won a new election where workers voted on January 14 by a 2 to 1 margin to retain the IBEW as its bargaining agent.

ADT provides security to about six million customers in the United States. The IBEW represents some 1,000 workers at ADT operations across the country and the Winston-Salem contract struggle is seen as a way by the company to deliver a blow against workers at other sites.

Canada

Nova Scotia daycare workers strike

Fifteen daycare workers at Town Daycare in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia went on strike last week after rejecting a contract offer that included a three-year wage freeze and conciliation talks failed.

The strikers, who include childcare workers, cooks and cleaners, are represented by Unifor and average just over \$12 an hour, which is only \$2 more than minimum wage. They won the support of parents that they contacted in advance of the strike when they learned how poorly paid they were and that the majority of daycare workers are required to earn an early childhood education diploma.

Daycare negotiators say that they are not able to raise wages due to inadequate funding from the provincial government and that they are already running a \$100,000 deficit. The strikers have been working without a contract since the end of 2013 and no talks are currently scheduled.



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