

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 March 2007

Latin America

Millions of Argentine workers in the underground economy

More than 4.6 million Argentine workers, 43 percent of the civilian labor force, work in the informal sector, with no pension rights or medical benefits. The figure indicates the lingering effects of the economic collapse of 2001. Several years of high GDP growth have not been able to eliminate this measure of hidden unemployment.

According to the Argentine daily *Página 12*, those same figures for 1980 represented 18 percent of the civilian labor force. They rose to 25.5 percent in 2000 and to 37.2 percent in 2000, on the eve of the crisis. Underground unemployment climbed to 49.7 percent of the civilian labor force in 2003 and has fallen by 7 points since then.

Official unemployment figures also reveal that unemployment continues to be stubbornly high, 8.7 percent, down from 10 percent in 2005, nearly twice the unemployment rates that existed before the economic crisis.

A Labor Ministry report issued last week tried to give a favorable spin to these figures, claiming that the decline from 2003 “represents a drastic turnaround that is a result of a new pattern of growth.”

In reality, the huge army of unemployed workers following four solid years of economic growth (gross domestic product is higher today than in 1998, when the recession began) represents a structural change in Argentina’s economy, with increasing levels of inequality and employers’ resistance to hiring permanent workers who not only have modest protections against arbitrary sackings but also receive higher salaries and more benefits than their informal sector counterparts.

Buenos Aires public employees protest low pay

Despite a wage offer from the Felipe Solá, governor of Buenos Aires, Argentina’s wealthiest province, the province’s public workers carried out a 72-hour strike last Wednesday. On Wednesday, public health workers also went on strike for 72 hours. Court employees indicated that they are also considering strike action.

The workers are demanding a new wage scale with a minimum monthly salary of 2,400 pesos (US\$850) with a cost-of-living adjustment tied to the nation’s cost-of-living index.

The public health professionals of Buenos Aires province carried out their fifth strike this year. It involved employees at outpatient clinics in 77 provincial hospitals.

The union representing professional hospital employees is demanding a starting wage of 2,500 pesos (US\$860), the hiring of 1,500 new employees and that temporary employees be made permanent. In addition, they are demanding higher budgetary

allotments and more personnel targeted to hospitals in the industrial suburbs of the city of Buenos Aires. Strike leaders insist that there is an urgent health crisis in the province and that emergency measures must be taken.

Mexican telephone company employees threaten to strike

Employees of the government-owned telephone company, Telmex, have set a strike date of April 25. The 63,000 employees are demanding a 10 percent raise. Union leader Francisco Hernandez said that Telmex is also trying to impose inferior pensions for new hires. This includes raising the retirement age to 60 years with 35 years of service for both men and women. Current employees can retire at age 48, with 25 years of service (women), and at age 53 with 25 years of service (men).

Metal workers strike in Leon, México

Employees of Maco, a maker of stainless steel kitchen appliances and furniture, walked off their jobs last week to demand 11 weeks’ back pay plus a year-end bonus for 2006. In addition, Maco has been behind since last year in payroll taxes deducted from workers’ wages for Social Insurance. Management has refused to negotiate with the workers, many of whom are concerned that the factory will never reopen.

The 40 strikers blame corruption and mismanagement by Ramón Oliva Ramirez, the brother of the governor of Guanajuato state, who administers the plant. Workers indicated that Oliva and other managers attempted to begin removing machines from the factory, with the intention of selling it, shutting down the plant and not paying the workers. Many of the workers have more than 40 years on the job.

Argentine University professors to strike this week

The 1,200 professors at the Rosario campus of the Argentine National University plan to carry out a rally this Tuesday with their students and a 24-hour strike on March 28 to demand higher wages and better working conditions.

The professors are demanding a 1,200-peso starting monthly wage (up from the current 650 pesos, about US\$260). The 1,200 pesos are half of what an average family needs to live for a month, and it would be paid to part-time teaching assistants.

United States

Indian guest workers victimized over protest of shipyard conditions

Hundreds of guest workers employed by Signal International have been victimized for protesting oppressive working conditions. The company, which performs repairs and services on oil drilling platforms, used a labor recruiter in India to bring 300 workers to a Pascagoula, Mississippi, shipyard under the H2B visa program to work as welders and fitters.

Workers paid a \$20,000 fee after being promised \$18-an-hour

jobs and the refund of their money. Instead, Signal International paid them half that amount and housed workers in groups of 24 in 12-by-18-foot rooms for which they were charged \$35 per day. In February, workers began holding meetings at a church to organize against their exploitation.

Signal reacted by shipping some workers back to India and reclassifying workers at lower pay. One guest worker told New America Media a co-worker had slashed his wrists upon finding out he had been terminated. "I knew he had sold his home, and had no place to return to. He was only able to make back a small part of the thousands of dollars he paid to the recruiter, and he said he couldn't go home like that."

Cleveland State faculty negotiations at impasse

Unionized employees at Cleveland State University are angry over the university president's decision to offer salary increases of 3 percent and retroactive pay to non-bargaining unit employees (administrators, deans, supervisory staff) while negotiations with four campus unions have not been concluded, a substantial departure from past practices.

The president's decision was taken following the collapse of negotiations February 26 with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) representing 400 faculty members. Mediation broke down primarily over the across-the-board component of salary, with the AAUP rejecting the university's offer of a 3 percent increase. In a report to the membership, the AAUP complained about "hostile anti-faculty, antiunion proposals" and the slow pace of negotiations. The union will proceed to fact-finding.

During negotiations, the AAUP was able to roll back the administration's demands for increased faculty teaching loads. Tentative agreements were reached on tenure and promotion clarifications, computer privacy, distance education and credit for prior service. The AAUP is opposing administration's proposals to eliminate retirement teaching and increase non-tenure track faculty.

Another group of 370 university employees, represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), began bargaining with the university in May 2006. It wasn't until August that the university requested a contract extension for economic reasons, due to uncertainties over the November elections, low enrollment projections, and investment returns. The SEIU still has not been presented with an economic proposal.

OSHA cites 14,000 companies for injury and illness rates

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration announced March 15 that 14,000 companies were notified by the Labor Department agency that their worksites had higher-than-average illness and injury rates. The notification was based upon an analysis of 2005 data reported by 80,000 companies.

The survey determined that there existed a national average of 2.4 illnesses or injuries per 100 workers that resulted in days away from work, restricted work activity or job transfers. Those companies flagged by OSHA to receive letters were found to have had a rate of 5.3 incidents per 100 workers.

No fines were associated with the notifications. Instead, OSHA called notifications a proactive step and declared it would provide employers with free consultation as a way to supposedly reverse

the trend. "This identification process is meant to raise awareness that injuries and illnesses are high at these facilities," said OSHA's assistant secretary of labor, Edwin Foulke.

Oil giant and US government charged with failure in Texas refinery explosion

The US Chemical Board released a report last week on the deadly 2005 explosion that rocked a Texas City, Texas, oil refinery owned by British Petroleum. The report charged the company with safety violations and the US government with failure to enforce safety regulations that could have prevented the disaster that killed 15 workers and injured another 180.

The board's chairman, Carolyn Merritt, said, "Rules already on the books would likely have prevented the tragedy in Texas City. But if a company is not following those rules, it is ultimately the responsibility of the federal government to enforce good safety practices before more lives are lost."

The Chemical Board said that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration failed in its oversight due to "insufficient" capabilities to enforce current regulations. Specifically, the report charged that after BP acquired the refinery in 1999 from Amoco, it had multiple warnings of a possible catastrophe at the Texas facility where a vapor cloud buildup ignited and led to the deadly explosion.

Canada

Toronto area school workers strike

Two thousand one hundred support staff at the Durham District School Board north of Toronto went on strike last week after 40 days of negotiations failed to yield a new agreement. Schools in the district are expected to remain open during the strike, but the board has said it will assess conditions on a daily basis.

Workers affected include education assistants, office, clerical custodial, maintenance and technical staff who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The main issues in the dispute include increased workloads as well as wages and benefits. Over the past weekend, 30 busloads of strikers traveled to the provincial government buildings at Queens Park to picket the Liberal government. The school board has appealed to teaching and administrative staff to answer phones and do custodial work during the strike to prevent school closings.



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