

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 July 2008

## Argentine police assault protesting workers

Supporters of Polo Obrero and Quebracho and 18 other left-wing militant organizations were attacked by the Buenos Aires police on July 8. The attack came as the protesters were setting up a protest tent in Plaza de Mayo, across the street from the Rose House, Argentina's presidential palace. Several workers and a press photographer were injured.

The marchers entered the square after having been blocked by security forces for several hours at the city's Obelisk in Buenos Aires' commercial center. In the context of an ongoing dispute between the government of President Cristina Kirchner and Argentine agricultural interests, the purpose of the protest was to declare these organizations' independence from both parties and to request a meeting with President Kirchner.

Protesters described the police action as a "round-up" that began just as the demonstrators were unloading trucks to set up tents. Demonstrators were surrounded with nowhere to go and systematically beaten and shot with rubber bullets by the security forces.

PO leader Néstor Pitrola denounced the police action: "Shame on them! Our intention was to read a document to explain our independence from the warring parties, but it appears that we are not popular with either side." According to Pitrola, police refused to tell the marchers who had given the order to block the march, other than to say that it "came from high up." Twice this year these organizations have set up protest tents for 24-hours in Plaza de Mayo, on May 1 and on June 26, to memorialize the 2002 police killing of two unemployed youth, Dario Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki. Both of those protests took place without incident.

## Peru: thousands in national strike

Over 200 workers were arrested in Peru on July 9 as a result of a national strike. Thousands of strikers demonstrated in cities across this impoverished nation. According to the Argentine daily *Río Negro*, while the impact of the strike varied across—in some areas, including Lima, it was lightly observed—it was very

effective in southern and central Peru.

The strike was called by the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP) to protest the high cost of living and against government repression. In addition there were a series of regional demands. In the south, thousands of residents of Puerto Maldonado on the border with Bolivia marched on government buildings to protest legislation that would facilitate the privatization of the region's common lands. In response, the government of Alan García declared a 60-day state of emergency.

The Peruvian government had declared the protest strike illegal and mobilized tens of thousands of police against the striking workers. In Lima, thousands of marchers denounced President García for "forgetting" the poor and for his ties with transnational companies. Many carried signs calling on him to resign. At the Lima rally Mario Huamán, CGTP general secretary, denounced the "incessant rise in the cost of living," pointing out that, since García took power two years ago, the cost of products that workers buy has doubled while the president did nothing.

Huamán also indicated that the CGTP plans to set up a "people's assembly" this November to coordinate new protests against García. He said that the month of November had been chosen in honor of Inca leader Tupac Amará, who led a historic rebellion against Spanish rule in 1572.

In the wake of the protest strike, García claimed that only 5 percent of the working class had participated in the strike. "In November, only 1 percent will strike," said García, "because no one backs the losers."

## Railroad engineers strike in Chile

Train operators struck the national railroad company in Chile on July 10. At issue is a 40 percent cut in workers' wages. The strike affects inter-city passenger service in central and southern Chile.

The railroad is in financial distress, with a deficit of US\$ 1.1 billion, and is being investigated by the Chilean congress for mismanagement. Rail officials say they have not cut workers' benefits and are dealing with employees

according to Chilean law.

### **Protests continue in Chile over education reform**

Over 154 people were arrested in Chile last Wednesday during protests by teachers and students over the education law that President Michelle Bachelet has placed before the Senate. Public school teachers in Santiago, Calama, Valparaiso and Coquimbo are on strike.

In June, Bachelet sent the controversial law to the lower house of the legislature despite protests by teachers and high school students who see it as an attempt to increase inequality between rich and poor schools and to pave the way to privatize education. The teachers point out that only 8 percent of poor students are able to go on to higher education, compared to 72 percent of wealthy students.

In Santiago the demonstration began at 10 a.m. Thousands of strikers, high school and university students and university employees marched, confronting police using water cannon. Despite the repression, protests continued into the afternoon as the demonstrators broke up into small groups.

### **Wisconsin workers end nine-week strike under replacement threat**

Workers at Kewaunee Fabrications near Green Bay, Wisconsin, ended their nine-week strike, returning to work July 10. The 250 members of Boilermakers Local 48, isolated and facing the threat by the company that it would hire permanent replacements, went back under the terms of a proposal rejected June 18 by a 186-52 margin.

Local 48 officials declined to reveal the vote tally at last Thursday's union meeting, nor did they give any details of the contract agreement. According to company management, that agreement contained raises of 3.4 percent over the course of a four-year agreement. The rank and file had initially opposed that offer because it offloaded insurance obligations onto workers, essentially canceling out wage increases.

### **New York cement truck drivers end strike**

Teamsters Local 282, representing 400 cement truck drivers, reached a tentative settlement on July 11 with the Association of New York Concrete Producers. Details of the agreement have not been released.

On Thursday, a separate settlement had been reached with the Quadrozzi Concrete Corporation, and as a result the work on the World Trade Center resumed on Friday. The details of this deal also have not been disclosed.

The strike had lasted 10 days and had effectively shut down the multibillion-dollar construction industry. This included a number of major projects such as Freedom Tower, the 2nd Avenue subway, two new baseball

stadiums for the Yankees and the New York Mets, as well as many high-rise apartment buildings. A spokesman for the union said that the drivers would return to work Monday, July 14, and that the vote on the tentative settlement would be completed in a few weeks.

### **Seattle construction workers end strike**

Members of the United Association of Sprinkler Fitters & Apprentices ended their 10-day strike after approving a new contract that met some of their demands. According to reports, the new agreement provides wage increases of \$13.05 an hour spread out over the terms of a three-year pact.

Workers had opposed the National Fire Sprinkler Association's (NFSA) attempt to force acceptance of a four-year proposal. The contract also offers improvements in the area of health benefits, lower deductibles and decreased out-of-pocket costs.

The final status of lower-paid apprentices is not clear. NFSA, the industry group negotiator, wanted to increase the number of apprentices and include a provision mandating drug tests.

### **Strike at Saskatchewan grain facility**

Nearly 200 office workers at Viterra Inc. in Regina, Saskatchewan went on strike July 7 and another 650 operations and maintenance workers began limited job action the same day. Although all are members of the same union, the Grain Services Union (GSU), they belong to three separate bargaining units and union leaders have so far declined to unite their efforts—this despite a unanimous strike mandate from each unit.

A company statement declared the various strikes have had little impact thus far on their national operation and last week instituted what they termed a “modified lock-out.” Though wages are a key issue in the dispute, benefits and job classification are also at issue.

No talks are currently planned. Union leaders report that the company has made acceptance of its last offer a condition for continued talks. Picket lines continued throughout the week at the company's head office.



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