

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Buenos Aires teachers to strike next week

Public and private school teachers in Buenos Aires will strike on November 18 and 19. As part of this job action the strikers will set up tents across from Argentina's Government House. A similar protest took place 15 years ago.

The three unions that represent teachers announced they would not accept the 110 peso (US\$30) rise in monthly salaries offered by the Education Ministry. The Private School Teachers Union (SADOP) had accepted the offer. The unions are demanding a 20 percent increase in pay. The teachers are also demanding that 2,500 teachers working under temporary contracts be made permanent. They also want improvements in school buildings, better school meals and more scholarships for secondary students.

The teachers rejected the 110 peso offer because it was insufficient and because it did not apply to base pay (the portion of the salary that is used to calculate teachers' retirement pensions).

This is expected to be the last teachers' protest this school year (the school year in Argentina begins in March and ends in December). Francisco Nenna, leader of the Education Workers Union (UTE-CETERA), warned however that the 2009 school year would begin the same way if the government insists on not investing in education. SADOP leader Héctor Neri explained to the Argentine daily *La Nación* that after private school teachers accepted the wage offer from the Education Ministry, many of them returned to their jobs only to find that their pay had been cut by 300 pesos a month.

Argentine bank employees strike

Members of the Argentine Banking Association (AB) went on

strike on November 5. AB leaders indicated that a big issue in the strike is the continuation of illegal firing practices by private banks. Workers are forced to accept so-called voluntary retirement as a cover for their jobs being destroyed. AB is demanding the rehiring of all employees illegally fired, that banks carry out all their contractual agreements and that bank employees receive a 1,000 peso (US\$300) bonus in celebration of "Bank Employee Day," a national holiday.

Civic strike in Peruvian City of Tacna

A civic strike in the city of Tacna on the Chile-Peru border is in its second week. At the core of this strike is the rejection by mine workers of new tax legislation that distributes tax receipts across the region. The government of President Alan Garcia has refused to negotiate with the strikers, claiming the protesters have turned to violence. Two people have died and tens more have been injured in clashes with military police forces. On November 4, the government declared a state of emergency and the police opened fire on protesters that had surrounded a military vehicle killing one protester.

The state of emergency suspends constitutional guarantees and gives the police the right to enter people's houses without a warrant, suspend protests and arrest protesters with impunity.

On November 5, Tacna residents took to the streets banging on pots and defying the military police. The strike was suspended temporarily on November 7, while a delegation travels to Lima to present its grievances to the government. The strike will resume November 11.

The dispute began on October 27, when 5,000 demonstrators in the nearby city of Moquegua demanded a change in the way that taxes paid by the transnational firm Southern Copper are calculated, favoring Moquegua over Tacna. Currently taxes are levied on the amount of minerals produced. The new law would levy the tax based on the amount sold. Southern Copper first proposed the change in a letter to the Peruvian government last June.

Tacna leaders indicated that the changes had been drafted by Southern Copper to reduce its tax burden. They accuse Congress of provoking the Tacna strike by approving the draft legislation exactly as Southern Copper wrote it. The Tacna miners denounced the change, which will result in the loss of US\$118 million in taxes from Southern Copper, one of the world's largest copper producers.

Texas transit workers end strike

Union officials representing transit workers in Austin, Texas ended a three-day strike November 7, after coming to an agreement with Capital Metro management over a new contract covering 850 workers. Final details were not available. Members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1091 will vote on the proposal after they return to work this week.

Transit management had been seeking higher out-of-pocket costs for health care. In addition they wanted to only pay workers a one-time \$1,000 cash payment for the 2007-2008 year and follow that with pay increases of 3 percent, 3 percent and 3.25 percent over the course of the next three years. The previous contract for Capital Metro workers expired 16 months ago and workers did not receive a raise during that period.

Transit officials claim 124 workers crossed picket lines. Some who crossed were probationary workers who can be legally fired for striking. Management also sought to draft workers from a local transit contractor, Veolia Transportation, but 18 refused to be strikebreakers and walked off the job.

Michigan strike entering third week

Workers at the Metalworks plant in Ludington, Michigan have concluded two weeks on strike against the office furniture maker over wages and other issues. The 146 members of Teamsters Local 406 walked off the job over Metalworks' demand for a five-year contract that offered only cash bonuses in the first two years followed by 2 percent wage increases in each of the remaining three years. The company also wants a lower-tier wage scale for new hires.

Union members want a three-year contract with increases of 4 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent. Union officials are not opposed to a two-tier wage system, but are only requesting that workers at some point graduate to the upper tier.

Workers rejected the company offer back on October 8 by a 137-2 vote and gave the union authorization to strike Metalworks on October 29 by a 127-17 margin.

York University on strike

All classes have been cancelled at York University in the north end of Toronto due to a strike by 3,400 teaching staff at Canada's third largest university that began on November 6.

The strike involves teaching assistants and faculty—represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)—who are fighting for job security for 950 part-time teaching staff and improvements in wages and benefits. Part-time staff currently must reapply each semester even if they have been in their positions for several years. In an effort to coordinate the bargaining schedules of all Ontario campuses, CUPE is seeking an 11 percent increase in wages in a two-year contract, but university negotiators have offered only a 9.5 percent increase over three years and have indicated they are willing to go to binding arbitration to resolve the dispute.

The York Federation of Students, representing 50,000 students at the school, had earlier passed a resolution in support of a possible strike. A strike eight years ago at York lasted 11 weeks, but did not close classes. No talks are currently scheduled.

Copper strike ends

A 35-day strike at Xstrata Copper in Timmins in northern Ontario ended last week after the ratification of a new contract between the company and the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW).

The new contract for 700 workers at the metallurgical site includes wage increases of 8.25 percent over the term of the three-year agreement as well as improvements in job security and benefits. The deal is reportedly unfavorable to skilled trades, whom the company has had difficulty retaining.



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