

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Bolivian protests continue despite government-union accord

Factory workers and teachers continued their protests against the meager five percent wage increase decreed by the government of Evo Morales May 1. The protests took place in spite of the announcement that the government and the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), the country's largest labor federation, had reached an agreement to end "pressure tactics."

Teachers want an increase in their monthly wages—currently between US\$424 and \$565—to about US\$1,000. Manufacturing workers, who make about US\$100 per month, are demanding a 12 percent increase.

Shortly after the director of the teachers union announced an indefinite general strike beginning May 16, coupled with a march from the Altiplano town of Caracollo to La Paz, Morales ratcheted up his denunciations. Calling the teachers "enemies of education and, therefore, enemies of Bolivia," Morales stated Bolivia needed "new professionals and students with a patriotic mentality" and accused the teachers of "conspiracy."

Last week in the impoverished town of Caranavi, north of La Paz, government forces broke up a highway blockade protest leaving two youth dead. At the funerals of the youths, signs could be read with messages like "Evo asesino" ("Evo murderer") and "Evo, aquí tienes tu Premio Nobel" ("Evo, here's your Nobel Prize").

Chile: Copper miners to resume operations after strike

A strike and blockade begun on May 8 by contract miners at the Collahuasi copper mine in northern Chile ended May 15, with the company set to resume normal operations on Monday, according to a *Reuters* report.

The strike began on Friday, May 8, when some 4,000 contract workers stopped work and blocked access to the mine in protest over working conditions as well as growing income disparities with full-time workers.

The mine's joint owners, Anglo-Swiss Xstrata Plc and South Africa's Anglo American, requested the use of the Carabineros, the country's militarized police force, to break up the blockade.

Cristian Cuevas, president of the Copper Workers Confederation, told *El Mercurio* that the Carabineros used "tear gas canisters, rubber bullets, gas-firing armored cars police helicopters and water cannons" to clear the miners' encampments. In addition, the Carabineros made 17 arrests. Nonetheless, the blockade continued the next day.

Brazil: Access to Christ the Redeemer Statue blocked by strikers

Workers for the Brazilian government's Ibama environmental agency blocked access to the country's top tourist attraction, the Christ the Redeemer Statue, on May 12. Workers repairing mudslide-affected roads nearby were allowed through, but tourists were prevented from reaching the top of Corcovado Mountain, where the statue stands.

The protest is part of a strike begun on April 8 by employees of Brazil's environment agencies. According to the *Latin American Herald Tribune*, "Some 600 people employed by environmental agencies are on strike in Rio de Janeiro's Itatiaia, Serra dos Orgaos, Bocaina and Tijuca parks."

"The Ibama employees are demanding pay increases for workers stationed in isolated or dangerous areas, as well as salaries and responsibilities based on individual employees' qualifications."

Argentine rail workers end strike

Workers for the Sarmiento railway company lifted their 17-hour work stoppage after Argentina's Labor Ministry ordered mandatory arbitration talks May 15, according to *lanacion.com*. Workers had struck a branch that connects the western sector of the capital with ten municipalities of greater Buenos Aires, demanding the opening of parity talks and better working conditions.

The head of the delegation of Ferrocarril Sarmiento, Rubén Sobrero, announced the work stoppage on May 14. The action did not have the support of the union, the Unión Ferroviaria.

The head of the UF, José Pedraza, criticized the stoppage, saying that it was "decided unilaterally by one section outside of the union organization."

Puerto Rican public employees protest layoffs

Public workers in San Juan staged a protest in the capitol rotunda on Wednesday, May 12, protesting layoffs scheduled for May 28. The protesters carried signs denouncing Law 7, the Fiscal Emergency Law, the *Puerto Rico Daily Sun* reported May 13. According to the *Sun*, "The workers, all of whom were given layoff notices effective May 28, were stripped of their placards [picket signs] immediately. Capitol officials said no one is allowed to protest in the area of the rotunda."

The layoffs are part of the brutal cost-cutting being carried out by Governor Luis Fortuño, which has also provoked student strikes and occupations at the University of Puerto Rico in the San Juan suburb of Rio Piedras.

Departments affected by the layoffs include the Special Communities Office, Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, and the Institute for the Training

of Future Businessmen and Workers (AAFET). A worker in the Special Communities Office in Ponce told the *Sun*, “Some received layoff notices while the others will be left in agencies without resources and staff to provide services.”

“The employees were originally given layoff notices in November,” reported the *Sun*, “but a court ruled that the agencies violated their due process, as established by Law 7, so they were able to temporarily stay in their jobs. The agencies started dismissal process against them all over again.”

The government recently consolidated the two commissions in charge of handling complaints regarding the layoffs. Luis Pedraza Leduc, coordinator of a group that supports the electrical and irrigation workers union, UTIER, said, “They are doing that to hurt the workers. The two entities have 27,000 cases and it will take them eight years to go over them.”

Colombia: Rise in attacks on education workers

The International Trade Union Confederation website reported May 12 that violence, especially against education sector workers is “reaching a peak in Colombia.” The report states that, “Since 28 January of this year, no fewer than four teachers affiliated to the teachers’ association of Cordoba, ADEMACOR, have been assassinated in the Department of Cordoba.”

In addition, acts of violence against members of ADIDA, the teachers association of Antioquia, continue. In April, two ADIDA members were murdered and the union’s president Over Dorado escaped an assassination attempt. In addition, 59 teachers were threatened and teachers were harassed during a march on April 15, “at which an official from the Criminal Investigations Department (SIJIN) filmed the speech of Over Dorado.”

Colombian President Álvaro Uribe is known to have extensive ties with paramilitary death squads dating back at least to the 1990s.

California aerospace workers strike

Workers at Boeing Corporation’s aerospace production facility in Long Beach, California went on strike May 11 over company proposals to reduce medical and pension benefits. The 1,700 members of United Auto Workers Local 148 are angry about the concession demands, particularly given Boeing’s 2009 profits of \$1.31 billion and CEO Jim McNerney’s compensation package of \$13.7 million.

Boeing is seeking to increase workers’ portion of healthcare contributions during the last two months of a 46-month contract from 12 percent to 15 percent for HMOs and from 4 percent to 5 percent for PPOs. Wages will be increased a mere 3.4 percent during the course of the entire agreement in a de facto pay cut.

Boeing has slated the plant for closure in 2012 unless it can increase its orders for the C-17 cargo jet used by the military and other government entities. No new talks have been scheduled.

New York workers protest furloughs

Hundreds of New York workers protested outside the state capitol in Albany May 10 to protest the state legislature’s approval of an emergency spending bill that includes a clause requiring some 100,000 state workers to take furloughs of one day a week. New York’s Democratic governor, David Paterson, declared, “I commend the Legislature for approving my emergency appropriations legislation.”

Ken Brynien, president of the Public Employees Federation, declared he was “disappointed” in the decision but would only go so far as to file a temporary restraining order against the measure. Civil Service Employees Association President Danny Donohue called the move “misguided” and also announced it would proceed with a temporary restraining order.

The furloughs will save the state an estimated \$30 million a week.

City workers poised to strike in southern Ontario

Forty-one inside and outside workers in the town of Tecumseh near Windsor, Ontario could be on strike this week unless a last minute deal is reached with the city.

The workers who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have been without a contract since the end of last year. They are fighting against concession demands in job classifications and retirement benefits as well as a proposed wage freeze.

The union has already agreed to cut retirement benefits for future hires but is seeking the same pension guarantees for current workers that was given to their counterparts after they went on strike in Windsor last year.

Metal workers stage wildcat in Windsor

Around 70 workers employed by the metal stamping company Fabco in Windsor, Ontario walked off the job on May 12 in protest of the suspension of a fellow worker.

The plant, whose workers are members of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), is scheduled for closure at the end of June. Windsor, a southern Ontario town across the river from Detroit, already has the highest unemployment rate in the province.

The company suspended the worker—a 24-year veteran at the plant—claiming he was not meeting production goals. The worker was back on the job by the end of the day and a blockade that had been set up was lifted.



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