

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Argentina: Rival public employee unions clash following strike

Members of Argentina’s Association of State Workers (ATE) held a work stoppage on June 9 after rejecting a government offer of a 21 percent wage hike. Saying the raise “does not correspond with inflationary reality,” ATE demanded a 30 percent hike, which government negotiators refused.

ATE workers in Buenos Aires marched to the Plaza de Mayo, where they encountered members of the National Civil Personnel Union (UPCN), which had signed an agreement with the government the week before. The agreement included the 21 percent increase that the ATE had turned down.

The ATE had criticized the signing of the accord by the UPCN. As reported by *Página/12*, an ATE communiqué said, “The government is playing with fire by not recognizing inflation, since the country has 13 million people in a state of poverty, 5 million in a state of indigence and every percentage point increase in the price of the basic food basket implies 20,000 more poor people.”

The two unions encountered each other in front of the PAMI (Integral Medicine Care Program, a state-run program for disabled and senior citizens) building, where UPCN delegates were engaged in parity talks. Shouts and gestures soon turned into violence. The two groups threw bottles, stones and sticks—as well as flatware, plates and chairs from nearby cafés—at each other, and then came to blows. Eventually, the Federal Police intervened to separate the workers.

The melee was not the first between the two public employees unions. The most recent of several run-ins occurred two years ago, when they tussled in the Palacio de Hacienda, the headquarters of the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

Representatives of each union blamed the other for the fracas, giving completely different versions of events, according to *Página/12*. Pablo Micheli, ATE general secretary, told the daily that “a UPCN gang intercepted some ATE delegates who were directing our march and started to hit them. When people in the march found out about what was happening, some went to defend them.”

UPCN delegate Claudio Longo claimed that “we were negotiating in the PAMI building, when some guys from ATE came up and barged in to participate in the parity talks. There was some shoving, and a comrade

Argentina: National Museum employees call for three-hour strike

Employees of Argentina’s Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Museum of Fine Arts)—the nation’s principal museum—called for a three-hour work stoppage on Tuesday, June 15, to protest the lack of response to a number of concerns.

Cristian Mazza, delegate of the ATE public employees union, told *La Nación* on June 11 that the employees would partially block Avenida de la Libertador in front of the museum from 12:30 to 3:30. “And today we handed out pamphlets to each car that was passing by.”

The building was closed the afternoon of June 10 while an assembly of 120 employees demanded a meeting with the museum’s director, Guillermo Alonso, who refused to meet with them. The functionary did not answer repeated attempts to communicate with him Tuesday.

Employees enumerated a number of issues to *La Nación*: “The closing of the 250-person auditorium, through which they stopped offering concerts and free movie showings to patrons; lack of maintenance of the infrastructure of the building; handing over responsibility for jobs that they are not in condition to receive; and not calling people to cover positions.”

Alonso was put in charge of the museum in 2008 after a decree that reorganized the management and administrative structure of the institution. He has expressed willingness to meet separately with department heads of each area, while employees want him to meet with all of them at the same time. Union officials told *La Nación* that in two years Alonso has not met with personnel.

Police attack Cananea miners, take control of mine

Mexican Federal Police and state police totaling over 2,000 attacked miners at the Cananea copper mine in the state of Sonora on the night of June 6, using tear gas and beating miners who were occupying the mine, according to a *Labour Notes* report. The miners are members of the miners union, SNTMMRM, which has been engaged in a three-year strike. The walkout began over wages, safety and health issues, but became a protracted dispute over the fate of the union’s president.

Grupo México, owner of the mine, has used the courts to prosecute the union's president, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, who fled to Canada to escape prosecution, declare the strike "nonexistent," and arrest union officials. State and federal police as well as the army have tried to dislodge the miners, and the community—located about 325 miles south of the US state of Arizona—has been economically devastated.

This time the police cleared the mine and Grupo México managers took control. According to *Labour Notes*, "The company reported that it had 2,000 'contractors' ready to go to work as soon as it was safe to do so."

The struggles between miners and Grupo México are not confined to Cananea. An article in the June 7 *New York Times* reported, "Hours after the police action in Cananea, state police officers in the border state of Coahuila dislodged families of some of the 65 miners who were killed when the Pasta de Conchos coal mine exploded in February 2006. The coal mine is also owned by Grupo México.

"Some of the families had been camping outside the mine demanding the recovery of the miners' remains. Mr. Rebolledo said the police were accompanying officials who were shutting down the mine for good. The timing—on the same day as the Cananea action—was a coincidence, he said."

Four-hour general strike in Uruguay over wage, health, education issues

Members of the PIT-CNT, Uruguay's main labor federation, held a four-hour general strike on June 9 over a number of issues including wage increases, distribution of wealth, health benefits and education. The strike was followed a march by thousands of workers to the Plaza Libertad in the capital city of Montevideo.

The marchers raised the slogans, "More democracy, more collective negotiations, for a political economy in service to the people," in the face of the proposed five-year budget of President José Mujica. According to *Página/12*, "The paralysis encompassed almost all branches of national activity, including the banks, health, public and private education and administration."

Public and private education workers struck for 24 hours, demanding that the government invest 6 percent of the Gross Internal Product in the National Administration of Public Education.

The strike occurred on the 101st day of the administration of José Mujica, a former member of the Tupamaro guerrilla movement who, during the country's 1973-1985 dictatorship, suffered bullet wounds, imprisonment and torture. He later became a member of the *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front) party and ran for president in 2009 on an antipoverty program.

Wages have not kept up with the country's economic growth and high investment rate, much of it in the IT sector. Nonetheless, union spokesperson Milton Castellano was quoted by *uruguaydailynews.com* as saying, "This is not a strike against the government. It's the only method the workers have to defend their platform publicly. It's not my vision."

San Francisco Hotel workers end three-day strike

Some 400 San Francisco workers ended a three-day strike against the city's Hyatt Regency Hotel June 11 aimed at pressuring management to back off of demands for increased workloads and the imposition of more health care costs on workers.

The strike coincided with demonstrations by Hyatt workers at hotel properties in Honolulu, Los Angeles, Chicago and Vancouver, Canada. The contract for some 9,000 Hyatt workers expired last August. New negotiations got underway last week and are expected to continue this week.

Nova Scotia civic workers locked out

A rally was held on June 9 in support of workers who were locked out May 31 at the Pictou County Shared Services Authority (PCSSA) in Stellarton, Nova Scotia, who are fighting for a first contract under the National Union of Public and General Employees union (NUPGE).

The 13 workers involved in the action include building inspectors, technicians and maintenance operators for five municipalities in the area. They were locked out with a take-it-or-leave-it offer that included claw-backs in pensions, vacation and travel provisions.

Mississauga Red Cross drivers to strike

Over 40 drivers in Mississauga-Halton, just west of Toronto, went on strike Monday in a first contract struggle that has been met with a campaign of threats and intimidation by their employer, the Canadian Red Cross.

The workers have been in a legal strike position for over a week, but their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), initially opted to stage informational pickets between shifts instead of calling workers off the job. The strike was called only after a number of workers received phone calls threatening to have them fired and their vehicles towed.



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