

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Argentine teachers launch 48-hour strike

Demanding a number of changes to the Buenos Aires government's treatment of public schools, teachers and students, educators in the nation's capital carried out a 48-hour strike September 15-16. Several unions, including the Union of Education Workers (UTE) and Suteba—which are affiliated with the Ctera federation—the Federation of Educators of Buenos Aires (FEB) and the Workers Central of Argentina (CTA), participated.

The strike included protests in front of Buenos Aires' old city hall, across the Plaza de Mayo from the presidential palace. A statement by the unions demanded “the immediate resolution of the problems in the buildings, the creation of new schools, the payment of salaries on time,” as well as the establishment of a career ladder in the municipal system.

“The teachers unions are seeking an increase in base pay from 1,900 to 2,200 pesos (\$475-\$550) per month, and a hike of roughly \$125 for those on higher levels of the salary scale,” according to *Efe*.

In addition, the strikers expressed support for students who have occupied schools as part of their demands to repair decaying infrastructure. The occupations began three weeks ago in high schools and have since spread to over 30 schools, including Argentina's largest state-funded institution of higher learning, the University of Buenos Aires. “Another demand is for the resignation of municipal officials who asked high school principals to provide lists of students involved in the occupations with an eye toward having them arrested, a plan that was derailed last week, when student associations won a court injunction,” reported *Efe*.

The action was the 28th walkout that the city's teachers have taken against the administration of rightwing Mayor Mauricio Macri, which has cut school budgets, pushed privatization and allowed infrastructure at public schools to deteriorate.

Buenos Aires Education Secretary Esteban Bullrich called the strike “political” and said that teachers would be docked for missed workdays. UTE-Ctera General Secretary Eduardo Lopéz claimed that “they're going to be recovered, and we're going to guarantee the 180 class days, as the ministry wants, but in secure and decent buildings.”

In addition to the Buenos Aires action, the Association of Teachers of Santa Fe, AMSAFE, struck as part of a CTA solidarity action with Paraná Metal workers (see below), the university professors union Conadu Histórica walked out over salary negotiations, and teachers unions in other parts of Argentina joined the stoppage.

In a separate but related action, on September 17, thousands of

Argentine teachers and students commemorated the 34th anniversary of the “Night of the Pencils” by marching from Congress to the presidential palace. On the Night of the Pencils, students in Buenos Aires, who were demanding free bus passes and improvements in education, were kidnapped and killed during the 1976-83 military dictatorship.

Argentina: Protests over auto parts and dairy workers' sackings

On September 16, workers at the Rosario auto parts manufacturer Paraná Metal and their supporters carried out a “National Day of Struggle” called by the CTA labor federation to protest the firings of 600 workers from the plant. Actions included blockades of highways around the country, culminating at kilometer 246 of the Rosario-Buenos Aires freeway.

Operations at the plant have been hindered since mid-August shortly after the new owner, gambling and petroleum products entrepreneur Cristóbal López, instituted a plan of salary reductions and the firing of 600 of its 960 employees. The workers struck and filed a complaint with Argentina's Ministry of Labor.

Negotiations broke down last Thursday, when the employees' delegates rejected a proposal put forth by the company and the government over reinstatements and/or compensation for the fired workers and the salaries of the remaining workforce. Though talks restarted on Monday, with “small advances” claimed by all parties, negotiations remain deadlocked.

In Buenos Aires, two separate mobilizations involving marches, blockades, chanting and speeches took place, a reflection of the electoral campaigns of two factions of the CTA that are vying for elections set for September 23. The factions centered around teacher Hugo Yasky and opposition “List 1” candidate Pablo Micheli, who carried out separate protests in different parts of the city, snarling traffic throughout.

Workers at SanCor, which accounts for 15 percent of dairy products in Argentina, participated in the actions to protest the firings of five union activists in May and the layoffs of six more workers at the beginning of September. The enterprise registered 2.9 billion pesos (US \$741 million) in profits last year, an increase of 17 percent over the preceding year, according to *Indymedia Rosario*.

Dairy workers have struck and camped out for two weeks in front of SanCor's Rosario Distribution Center, where workers claim the 11 activists were sacked “with the complicity of the ATILRA (Association of Dairy Industry Workers of the Argentine Republic) union.”

Colombia: 36 union leaders murdered so far this year

Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for organized labor, according to an official of the CUT labor federation. Luis Alberto Vanegas, the federation's human rights director, told Efe news service last week that 36 union leaders have been killed so far in 2010, compared to 26 by this time in 2009. In 2009, 40 were slain.

Vanegas said, "A high percentage of those who threaten and pursue unionists are the private armies of paramilitaries financed by landholding business-owners," and that more than 2,700 have been killed since 1986.

The same week, on September 15, the US State Department announced that Colombia has met human rights conditions needed to receive \$30.3 million in military aid. The aid had been held up because of concern over human rights abuses, according to a report published by the US Labor Education in the Americas Project (USLEAP).

Although the State Department's press release "spent far more space identifying continuing human rights concerns than identifying progress," in what USLEAP called "stunning disregard for US law," the State Department commended Colombia's "positive steps," including "establishing a roundtable on labor," "meeting" with NGOs, "committing to increased engagement" and "reaching out" to the courts, measures that USLEAP called "hardly a concrete measure of progress."

A separate USLEAP report pointed out that "virtually no one is prosecuted or convicted for these murders, with approximately a 96% impunity rate," and that "Colombia is the largest recipient of US foreign aid outside of the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan, with more than 60% of aid funding the Colombian military."

USLEAP added that "impunity for the 3,000 cases of civilian deaths at the hands of Colombian armed forces continues, death threats against Afro-Colombian leaders, unionists and human rights defenders have increased significantly, and Colombia's intelligence agency (DAS) still operates in spite of allegations of widespread illegal surveillance."

Jamaican union confederation calls off general strike

A national public sector workers strike that the Jamaica Confederation of Trade Unions (JCTU) planned for September 15 was called off after federation officials met with government ministers Monday. The finance ministry "agreed on a course of action, including continued and regular discussions under a new Public Sector Monitoring Committee to replace the old Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Monitoring Committee," as reported by the *Jamaica Observer*.

Like other Caribbean island nations, Jamaica is suffering from the worldwide recession and is heavily indebted to the International Monetary Fund, which has conditioned loans on austerity measures like bus fare increases, regressive taxes and cuts in services. The government signed a \$1.2 billion "Stand-by Agreement" with the IMF in February, and in July Prime Minister Bruce Golding announced a two-year public sector wage freeze, reneging on a MOU-stipulated seven percent raise for JCTU members. In addition, it has been months behind in salary payments to some sectors.

The JCTU and other unions have complained about these measures, but have been quick to declare—even when calling for a general strike—that they are "responsible." In the words of National Workers Union President Vincent Morrison, "I want to make it very clear that there is no attempt by the unions to destabilise the government."

Nonetheless, the fact that the government recently paid over \$500 million of outstanding allowances to nurses put the JCTU bureaucrats under pressure to do something, hence the general strike threat. However, the general strike was called off after union officials met with Finance Minister Audley Shaw and three other ministers.

The ministers, according to the *Observer*, "all held senior trade union positions before the government took power three years ago." In fact, the JCTU is affiliated with the Jamaican Labour Party, which bested the People's National Party in elections in 2007.

The JCTU has put the general strike on hold pending talks over the grievances. Information Minister Daryl Vaz, while expressing relief at averting the strike, was quick to tell journalists that "there is some money that has been put aside, but the problem the government faces is that it doesn't have enough to meet all of the requirements."

The same week, the *Observer* reported that, while attending the World Bank's Americas Conference in Miami, "Shaw said that banks operating in Jamaica are showing an average return on equity (ROE) as high as a whopping 22 percent, one of the highest returns anywhere in the world."

Pennsylvania teachers strike over salaries and benefits

Teachers in the Allegheny Valley School District near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, walked out on strike September 16 after failing to reach agreement with the school board over salaries and benefits. The 94 members of the Allegheny Valley Education Association (AVEA) launched their action after rejecting a fact finder's compromise proposal and a letter from the school district calling for non-binding arbitration.

AVEA has declined to reveal the basic outline of their demands. According to the school board, the union wants a five-year contract with annual raises averaging 6.25 percent. The school district is seeking a four-year agreement with average annual raises of 3.55 percent. A state fact-finder has proposed that teachers keep their contribution towards health care at the current rate of 2 percent of their salaries during the first year of a new agreement, with subsequent annual increases of 3 percent, 5 percent and 6 percent.

The old agreement for Allegheny Valley teachers expired back in June of 2009. Under state law, the teachers are limited to striking for the next 14 days if students are to obtain the mandated 180 days of instruction before June 15 of next year.

NLRB rules against Illinois mechanics

The National Labor Relations Board ruled against 20 mechanics at Thomas Nissan and Thomas Toyota in Joliet, Illinois, who attempted to join Machinists Union Local 701 after the company cut pay, vacation and benefits. The workers say they were locked out July 28.

The company maintains that workers went out on strike, and has since then hired replacement workers who could potentially outvote strikers in a union certification election. Local 701 has said they will appeal the Labor Board's decision.

Illinois teachers end strike after accepting contract offer

Teachers in Danville, Illinois, voted September 16 by over 98 percent to accept a contract agreement ending their three-day strike and return to the classroom. Pending a vote by the school district's board on September 20, school district and union negotiators for the Danville Education Association declined to reveal the content of the new contract, which has been described as a "compromise."

The 400 teachers and 200 non-certified staff members launched their strike with a near unanimous rejection of the school board's proposal over wages and contract language. The old one-year contract covering the district expired on June 30.

Eighth one-day strike at Toronto hotels

The latest one-day strike action at a Toronto, Ontario, hotel was staged last Saturday following similar actions the day before at two other hotels in the city, bringing to eight the number of hotels that have seen such strikes in recent weeks.

The limited job actions and protests are the strategy of Unite Here to bring pressure on hotel owners to relent in their attacks on jobs and working conditions that they have justified citing the economic downturn.

The bulk of the strikes took place during the Toronto International Film Festival, which ended September 19—timing that union leaders insist was purely coincidental. Further strikes are planned in the coming days.



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