

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 October 2010

Buenos Aires teachers work stoppage ends without resolution of issues

Teachers unions in Buenos Aires concluded another 48-hour strike Friday demanding salary adjustments and protesting “the lack of response” by the government of Mauricio Macri.

The strike was called after an attempt at negotiation between teachers’ delegates and education Minister Esteban Bullrich broke down. The level of compliance was high, between 80 percent—the government’s claim—and 95 percent claimed by UTE-Ctera.

As he has done in the past, Buenos Aires City Cabinet Chief Horacio Rodríguez Larreta denounced the strike and swore that the teachers would be docked for the missed days. Education Minister Bullrich called the teachers union “Kirchnerite” and claimed, “It was the teachers’ union who asked for the meeting, but now they decide to go on strike.” Eduardo López, secretary general of the UTE-Ctera education workers federation, countered, “It’s shameful for the education minister to summon us for a meeting on the eve of a 48-hour strike and unilaterally withdraw himself without giving us any kind of answers to our demands.”

López told *Página12*, “We hold the head of government responsible for the lost class days. Macri continues without listening to the teachers’ demands for a raise, a higher education budget, and timely payment of salaries.” He warned at the end of the day that if the situation does not improve, the stoppage could repeat itself in the coming weeks.

Rising tensions between Mexican dockworkers and terminal operator portend strike

Dockworkers in the eastern port city of Tampico are at the point of going out on strike against terminal operator CICE over persistent grievances. The dockworkers, members of la Unión de Jornaleros y Trabajadores Portuarios y la Nueva CROC de Tampico (the Union of Port Workers and the New Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants of Tampico), complain of underpayments, labor law violations, refusal to sign a collective

bargaining contract and other grievances. The Veracruz-based terminal operator, which holds the cargo-handling concession for sections 8 to 11 in the port, has operated in the port for little over three months.

Nueva CROC Director Gregorio Pego Cruz told *La Razón* that of an average of 150 workers in those sections of the port operated by CICE, a number are not registered with Social Security and work for a lower salary than the prevailing wage. He said that the union would bring a complaint to the SCT (Secretariat of Communication and Transportation), “because it continues violating the workers’ rights, since it doesn’t register them with Social Security, it promises salaries of 320 pesos (US\$25.50) and it pays them 220 pesos (\$US17.50) for twelve hours, and the same thing is happening that happened with the GUA.”

The GUA (Unified Guild of Cargo Handlers), a cooperative dating back to the beginning of the 20th Century, was forced out by the port authority for nonpayment of taxes and wages.

As quoted by *conexióntotal.mx*, Nueva CROC Secretary General Mauro Vega claimed that “the options for coming to an accord between the workers and the enterprise are practically exhausted and certainly from one moment to the next, a labor stoppage could break out.”

Uruguay: 4-hour stoppage against government policies

Some 200 people demonstrated on September 30 in front of the Economics Ministry in Montevideo as part of a four-hour work stoppage called by union organizations. Demonstrators demanded salary increases and a larger budget for education. In addition, they protested the government’s proposed reforms of the state.

The action, called by the Interunion Plenary of Workers-National Convention of Workers (PIT-CNT), is the third partial stoppage against the economic policies of the government of President José Mujica, who took office on March 1. Mujica has proposed government reforms in the name of efficiency, but he has faced strong union opposition, especially from state workers, who number about 240,000.

One of the reforms that public sector unions reject is the attempt to form associations with private enterprises, which the unions claim are part of a backdoor privatization scheme.

In the gathering in front of the Economics Ministry, speakers called for rejection of the five-year projected budget and the government reform agenda. Some advocated that the government stipulate an automatic clause of salary increases if inflation passes 10 percent. So far, cost-of-living projections for the end of this year have reached 7 percent.

On Thursday it was announced that 2,800 non-teacher workers at the University of the Republic will begin a general strike on Tuesday in demand of a 30 percent salary increase. The government proposed 8.6 percent.

Trinidad and Tobago public sector federation threatens strike over wage issues

The Public Service Association (PSA) of Trinidad and Tobago announced September 30 that the government of the two-island nation had an October 1 deadline to conclude salary negotiations or it would face strike action.

The PSA, which represents about 19,000 workers in various government agencies, has been calling on the government to raise public service workers' salaries to a baseline rate of TTD\$6,000 (US\$950). PSA president Watson Duke had previously demanded TTD\$7,700 (US \$1,220), but according to *Trinidad Express*, "he was willing to accept a flat \$6,000 if that would move the negotiations along."

Prison officers and fire officers are demanding \$8,000 and \$7,000 respectively.

Duke had earlier called for a march in Port-of-Spain from the Ministry of Finance to the prime minister's office on September 26. The march brought out about 200 public sector workers from 50 government agencies. The Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar of the ruling People's Partnership, was out of the country.

In related news, the PSA and the North Central Regional Health Authority (NCRHA) signed an agreement on September 29 to resolve longstanding issues of pay allowances and outstanding arrears to staff. Due on the second to last day of the month, the payments were deposited into staff bank accounts on September 30.

Duke told Trinidad and Tobago's *Newsday* that the signing "went smoothly and we'll be meeting again in two weeks to determine the exact amount of the allowance."

"However," noted the daily, "the union and the NCRHA's chief executive officer Ronald Tsoi-a-Fatt have yet to reach agreements

on general salary negotiations, and job security for contract employees."

Pickets protest sweatshop conditions at Illinois training facility

Union members held an informational picket outside Beverly Farm October 2 in Godfrey, Illinois, to protest excessive overtime and low wages. Members of AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) Local 3784 have gone without a contract for about a year and a half at Beverly Farm, a not-for-profit home and training center for mentally retarded and developmentally disabled adults.

The union alleges that due to understaffing, workers have been forced to work more than 32 hours of overtime per week. They warn that these conditions endanger the quality of care for the facility's 386 residents and are unhealthy for employees. The average wage for workers in 2009 was \$8.27 an hour.

Pennsylvania school district resumes course-work for seniors amid teachers' strike

Some 90 seniors in the Allegheny Valley School District, northwest of Pittsburgh, returned to class amid a two-and-a-half week strike by teachers over wages and health care issues. The school district has assigned administrators with teaching certificates to instruct only seniors in core subjects of English, math, science and social studies along with some electives.

According to the school district, the instruction during the strike is aimed at meeting state requirements for seniors to complete course work so they can graduate by the earlier targeted date of June 3. According to Pennsylvania law, striking teachers would have to end their work stoppage by October 14 to meet the state mandate of 180 days class work that must be completed by June 15, 2011.

Negotiators for the school board and the Allegheny Education Association (AVEA) met September 27 under the supervision of a state mediator, but no progress was made towards a settlement.



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