

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 October 2010

Uruguayan union federations hold 24-hour general strike

Workers in Uruguay struck for 24 hours on October 7 to protest the budget proposed by president José “Pepe” Mujica, and currently being discussed in the Chamber of Deputies. The deadline for the budget is October 15.

Called by the PIT-CNT labor federation and the COFE public sector workers organization, the strike had a high level of adherence in the capital Montevideo, with *Página 12* reporting “the stoppage affected all public administration, banks and aerial activity ... According to Juan Castillo, one of the (PIT-CNT) coordinators ... the adherence was one hundred percent in the construction, port and metallurgical sectors.” Public transport workers limited their activities to emergencies, as did hospital workers. Teachers stayed away from classes as well.

Similar actions took place in other cities around the country.

The main demand of the strike was an increase of the education budget to six percent of Gross Domestic Product; Mujica’s proposed budget would allot 4.5 percent. In addition, demands included salary hikes, a better distribution of wealth and improvements in education, health and housing.

The mobilization was the latest in a number of actions that have followed the election of Mujica, a member of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition, last March. Mujica was elected based on promises of progressive reforms, which, since the election, he has not carried out. In August, PIT-CNT and COFE called a four-hour strike over the same issues.

The union bureaucracy has been reluctant to challenge Mujica, whom the PIT-CNT and other unions strongly supported in the elections. In fact, as reported by the *Argentina Independent*, “The strike has taken place in the midst of an internal conflict within the Uruguayan central union between conservative elements that are close to the government and the radicals. The group with closest allegiances to the government has called upon its followers not to go out into the streets.”

Although Castillo himself was quoted as saying, “in this case we decided that it would be a day of reflection, without actions,” there were nonetheless some actions including

blockades and demonstrations in Montevideo and other places.

Mujica dismissed the strike, claiming he and the Frente Amplio had done “everything possible” and that the strike served only to “nourish dailies and news programs.”

Paper workers strike Argentine paper factory

Workers at the Argentine paper factory Papel Prensa struck the plant over wage issues on October 6. The factory produces newsprint for papers including the dailies *El Clarín* and *La Nación*. The strike has not only halted production, but has slowed the provision of supplies to customers.

The factory employs about 500 workers, 300 of whom are members of the Paper Industry Union. Although the union had agreed to a salary increase of 23 percent from March of this year until March of next year, inflation has eaten up the raise. At an assembly in which around 250 union members were present, the workers voted to continue the strike for an indefinite period. The workers are demanding an increase of 20 percent, counterpoised to a company offer of three percent. A meeting at the Ministry of Labor on Friday failed to settle the differences.

The firm sent out 300 telegrams recently to its workers warning them to return to work.

President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who is currently in Germany, supported the union

by Twitter and questioned the company’s claims regarding the inflation rate, which it claims limits its ability to raise wages. The company also claims that wages at Papel Prensa are already generous. While the minimum wage in the paper industry is about 1,800 pesos (US\$454), the minimum wage at PP is almost 4,000 pesos (US\$1,000).

El Clarín and *La Nación* not only support their supplier against the workers, but have stock in Papel Prensa. Both papers oppose Fernández de Kirchner in upcoming elections.

El Clarín stated that, “In the midst of the tension, the union’s attorney let slip that if there were no accord he anticipated calling the secretary of Commerce Guillermo Moreno, which bolsters the thesis that behind the conflict, there appear to be interests of the Casa Rosada.” The Casa Rosada, or “Pink House,” is the seat of the offices of the President.

The statement suggests other issues being played out. Grupo Clarin, which Fernández accuses of biased coverage, was bought from its original owners, Grupo Graiver, by the two papers and *La Razón* with the complicity of the military dictatorship in 1976. The paper’s owner, Lida Papleo Graiver, was later kidnapped by the dictatorship. On August 24 of this year, the government filed suit against the three alleging crimes against humanity and illegal appropriation of Papel Prensa.

Service workers stage strikes and protests in several states

Service workers in Georgia, Louisiana and Ohio launched protests last week against the French multinational corporation Sodexo over inferior pay and working conditions while cafeteria workers at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia walked out on an unfair labor practices strike over wages and benefits.

Custodians and other workers picketed some 52 Recovery School District schools in Louisiana to protest the lack of union negotiations since their contract expired on October 1. Sodexo has instituted layoffs “due to changing business needs” that have resulted in increased workloads for remaining workers. In addition, workers face poverty level wages ranging from \$8 to \$12 an hour. Food service workers staged a small strike at an Ohio State University soccer game. Over one hundred full and part-time workers provide food concession and cleaning services under Sodexo at OSU’s stadium. Sodexo operates in 80 countries. In 2009, its revenues were \$20.6 billion.

Meanwhile, food service and other non-union workers at Louisiana universities of Tulane and Loyola have authorized strikes charging the company with unfair labor practices.

Worker loses arm in Florida industrial accident

A worker’s arm was amputated after being caught in an auger on October 8 at the Spanish Trail Lumber plant in Cypress, Florida. The unidentified man was evacuated to a trauma center and was reported in critical condition. It was the second recent serious industrial accident at the facility.

In March of 2009, 48-year-old Rufus Dudley was killed when

a planer machine ejected a 12-foot 2x4. The piece of wood struck Dudley in the torso and he died on the plant floor.

Union calls off planned grocery workers’ strike

A strike at nine Loblaw owned grocery outlets in southern Ontario that was scheduled to start October 8 was called off at the last minute when union leaders elected to put to a second vote a contract that workers had already rejected, provoking a storm of protest from the rank-and-file.

Eighteen hundred workers had turned down the contract less than a week earlier and were set to take strike action at a critical time for the grocery giant—the eve of the Thanksgiving weekend—but negotiators for their union, the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) called off the strike with no apparent explanation.

Unionized workers at other grocery chains in the province only narrowly ratified the same concession-laden contract offer last week, with the union giving it a unanimous recommendation. The union justified the strike cancellation calling it a “difficult decision” and offered assurances that the old contract would remain in effect until a government-monitored vote could be held.



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