

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 October 2010

Argentina: La Plata teachers announce 48-hour strike

On October 15, the Frente Gremial Docente (Education Guild Front), made up of a number of public and private school unions in Buenos Aires province's capital La Plata, announced a strike to take place on Wednesday and Thursday of this week. The announcement was made after a meeting with the provincial government failed to resolve salary issues.

A meeting of the educators unions last week voted to grant authorization to strike if the talks failed. Mirna Petrocini, head of the Buenos Aires Educators Federation, FEB, told reporters, "The government confirmed to us that it will not open the discussion for the rest of the year. We will carry out the measures approved by the congresses last week." Other outstanding issues include "elimination of limits to family allotments and expediting of the retirement award to teachers that retired between 2001 and 2005," she added.

The strike will affect about 4.5 million students at all educational levels throughout Buenos Aires province.

Argentine Labor Ministry orders arbitration in paper factory dispute

Argentina's Ministry of Labor for Buenos Aires province ordered compulsory arbitration in the conflict that has paralyzed operations at the Papel Prensa paper plant in San Pedro. Workers at the plant, which supplies newsprint to most of Argentina's daily newspapers, have been on strike since October 5.

On October 12, picketers impeded truck access to the factory, placing tires and other objects in front of the entrance gate. Since Papel Prensa is the only large-scale supplier of newsprint in Argentina, newspapers around the country have felt the pinch.

On October 13 over 250 daily papers issued a communiqué, through their trade organization COOPAL (Argentine Press Provision Cooperative), demanding "immediate and necessary measures to recuperate normality and protect the rights of its associates."

The strike is taking place in the context of an ongoing conflict between the government of Cristina de Kirshner and two dailies, *El Clarín* and *La Nación*, both major stockholders in Papel Prensa. They accuse the Kirshner administration of a vendetta against the two dailies for their criticism of the government's policies and support for opposition politicians. The papers frequently note the salaries of Papel Prensa workers, which they say are higher than the industry average.

Daniel Montes de Oca, director of the Provincial Office of Labor Relations ordered mandatory arbitration on October 14. Beginning October 15, and for a length of 15 days, *El Clarín* reported, "the situation returns to Tuesday, October 5.... During the time that the negotiation with Papel Prensa management lasts, the union must abstain from carrying out

any direct action measure that can have an impact on the enterprise. During the two weeks, the parties must seek a solution."

West Indies teachers return to negotiations after one-day walkout

Talks between the West Indies Group of University Teachers (WIGUT) and the St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI) resumed October 14 after a one-day strike involving lecturers, administrative and other staff. The walkout was a protest against UWI's recent offer of a pitiful one percent per year salary increase over a three-year period, the same offer the university made in April.

After the meeting, UWI issued a press statement containing a request to reconsider the offer, which they later forwarded to Fazal Karim, Science, Technology and Tertiary Education Minister. As of October 15, Karim was unavailable for comment.

WIGUT continued its protest Friday with a gathering at the Main Library on the campus.

Hunger strike by Chilean transport workers enters third week

Eleven former drivers for transportation concessionaire Transaraucaria entered their third week of a hunger strike in an attempt to bring attention to their plight. Four months ago, Transaraucaria lost its concession to Buses Gran Santiago, which cut the workforce from 650 to 260 drivers, to whom it offered indefinite contracts at lower salaries.

On July 1, the Transaraucaria workers struck and picketed Gran Santiago, demanding four basic points, which were enumerated October 6 on the website radio.uchile: "immediate readjusted payment of salaries pending since the month of June, immediate payment of social security and health care contributions owed, continuity of all the workers of the enterprise and the establishment by law of bidding and contracts, protection of jobs, permanence and rights of public transportation workers in Chile."

Meanwhile, the workers' wives have joined the protest. They sent a letter to the First Lady asking her to intervene, and some have declared their intention to join their husbands in the hunger strike if the government does not find a solution.

Nonetheless, despite the hunger strike, the workers have not seen any concrete response from the labor ministry, which claims that the issue is a dispute between private parties, and that it has no authority to "interfere."

On October 13, the eleven escalated their action to a "dry" fast, meaning they would ingest no liquids.

Venezuelan students and professors march to protest budget cuts

Several thousand students and professors, carrying signs and banners and chanting, marched from the campus of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) on October 14 to the Ministry of Higher Education headquarters in central Caracas. The march was called to protest cuts in university budgets.

Roderick Navarro, president of the Student Federation of UCV, denounced the budget cuts, which reduce aid to students and the transportation system and credits for research projects.

“The minister, Edgardo Ramírez, has to receive our petitions,” Navarro told DPA. “We want an increase in scholarships, we need more transportation, additional credits have to be designated to the university authorities.”

UCV rector Cecilia García Arocha said, “There are debts for 12 billion bolívares (US\$2.8 billion), there are debts with the workers, with the labor norms, postgraduates, there are debts with everything. The plan is that we sit down with minister Ramírez so that all the universities have the same opportunities.”

A cordon of police kept the demonstrators a few meters from the ministry, only allowing a delegation to deliver its petitions.

Panamanian government agrees to temporarily repeal anti-union law

The government of Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli agreed October 10 to repeal its controversial Ley 30, or “ley chorizo” (sausage law), after a 90-day “dialogue round table” between the government and union bureaucrats, later joined by environmentalists.

Crafted by the conservative Martinelli government and passed by the National Assembly in June, Ley 30 was ostensibly designed as a reform of aviation codes, yet contained other provisions that, according to a report by the indigenous rights group Cultural Survival, “eliminates the requirement for environmental impact assessments for government-sponsored development projects, protects the police from prosecution for crimes and human rights abuses that they commit on the job, and limits labor unions’ right to strike.” In addition, the law eliminated the automatic deduction for union dues, an issue of special concern to the union bureaucracy.

This mélange of provisions earned Ley 30 the sobriquets “nine-in-one law” and “sausage law.”

Right after passage, protests and demonstrations erupted across the country, most notably in Changuinola, Bocas del Toro Province, where banana workers were on strike. Police killed two protesters and injured and arrested hundreds of others. Fearing that the protests were spreading beyond their control, leaders of the construction workers confederation SUNTRACS and other unions began meeting with the government in July.

The result so far is that the government will revoke Ley 30 and introduce six new laws separately in the Assembly, with the approval of the unions.

The website Voz del SUNTRACS declared that the agreement “without a doubt should be considered a triumph of the people with which the sacrifice of the workers and the blood spilled en Changuinola is honored.” However, calling the government “tricky and dishonest,” the website admitted, “Just a few hours after the culmination of the dialogue...the government pressured sectors that had taken part in the dialogue to eliminate preventive detention for the police who killed citizens in public demonstrations,” suggesting further conflict ahead for the Panamanian working class, as the Martinelli administration seeks other means to carry out its rightwing agenda.

Workers in three cities strike Hilton hotel chain

Hotel workers in Honolulu, San Francisco and Chicago launched limited strikes against the Hilton properties charging the chain with using the economic crisis to impose “cheap concession contracts” on its workforce. Hundreds of workers in Chicago and San Francisco set up picket lines earlier last week while 1,500 workers at the company’s giant Waikiki facility in Hawaii walked out October 16, virtually halting restaurant, room service, valet parking, housekeeping and other services.

The Hilton has called the union’s demand for seven percent wage increases and other benefits “very costly proposals.” Contracts for some of the workers expired as far back as one year ago. UNITE HERE, which represents the striking workers, has pointed out that the hotel is attempting to impose cuts under conditions where the Federal Reserve wrote off \$180 million in debt owed by Hilton to taxpayers.

Missouri factory workers end strike

Members of the United Steelworkers union voted by 80 percent October 16 to ratify a new agreement and end their three-day strike at the Polar Tank Trailer plant in Springfield, Missouri. The union agreed to accept a requirement that its 150 members work mandatory overtime for up to 50 hours a week. The company had originally demanded 58 hours a week mandatory overtime.

The new five-year contract also provides annual 37-cent-an-hour wage increases, but imposes higher deductibles and co-pays for health insurance. Workers twice rejected company proposals that included the demand for mandatory 58-hour workweeks. Workers walked out following an October 12 vote in which they rejected the company’s proposal by a 95 percent margin.

Seven-hour strike by medics in Pennsylvania

Emergency medics in the Homestead, Pennsylvania, area ended their 7-hour strike October 16 after borough officials hammered out a compromise contract. The contract struggle erupted with MAPS (Munhall Area Prehospital Service) unilaterally imposing new contract terms after a year of fruitless negotiations.

MAPS offered a four percent base wage increase and called for reducing medics’ workweek from 48 to 40 hours. Despite the 4 percent wage increase, the effect of no longer guaranteeing eight hours of overtime per week represented a 30 percent wage reduction. MAPS couched their proposal in terms of improving safety by also calling for an end to 24-hour work shifts.

The new contract fashioned by borough officials kept the 48-hour workweek, froze base pay and cut the 24-hour work shift down to 16 hours.

Ottawa food service workers to strike

Unionized workers at Compass Group of Canada are scheduled to go on strike this week after the company failed to show up for a meeting

requested by a government mediator, and the union requested a “no board” ruling.

The workers who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have been without a contract since March of this year. Compass Group, which is one of the largest food service employers in Canada, took over the contract last year at the old Nortel headquarters building in Ottawa’s west end. In their previous contract workers were entitled to 12 sick days a year, but CUPE negotiators report that the company is now asking for the complete elimination of sick benefits.

Unions make inroads at Wal-Mart Canada

Two more Wal-Mart locations have been unionized in recent days, bringing to three the number of outlets to hold certification in Canada.

One hundred fifty workers at the Gatineau store in Quebec, across the river from Ottawa, were certified with the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) as were workers at the Weyburn, Saskatchewan, outlet after an appeals court struck down an earlier ruling in Wal-Mart’s favor, which the union hopes will bring to an end the six-year battle against the notoriously ant-union retail giant.

In a related development, a Quebec Superior Court recently upheld a lower court ruling that Wal-Mart acted illegally when it closed a store in Jonquiere, Quebec, when workers there voted to unionize.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact