

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 November 2010

Chilean public sector employees demand wage hike

Public employees union officials delivered a petition to the Chilean government October 29 asking for a raise of 8.9 percent and improvements in labor conditions. Directors of the main labor organization, the CUT (Workers Unitary Center) and the National Association of Public Employees, presented the demands at a meeting with the country's Labor and Treasury secretaries. The organizations represent over 400,000 public sector workers.

CUT president Arturo Martínez told AP, “[W]e have presented our aspirations, which are in five categories—remunerations, labor stability, retirement conditions, equal opportunities and bonuses for extreme areas—to the unions.”

Raúl de la Puente, head of the public employees union, said, “[I]f the country has economic growth, the workers should be participants in that economic growth.” The official growth in gross domestic product this year has been between 5 and 5.5 percent with an inflation rate of 3.5 percent.

The government has not revealed its proposed raise, but press reports, citing official sources, say that it will offer between four and five percent. Negotiations were set to begin in November, after which the government will send its salary proposals to the Congress for passage on December 1.

Chilean mine workers union rejects salary offer but returns to negotiations

After gaining a strike authorization vote from its membership, negotiators for mine workers at Collahuasi—the third largest copper deposit in the world—restarted bargaining for a new contract. The union's members had rejected the company's previous offer by a near-unanimous vote, 1,415 to 7.

The company's latest offer of the equivalent of US\$19,000 was called insufficient by the union, which seeks parity with the US\$25,000 obtained last year by mine workers at the BHP Billiton mine. The company has requested government mediation, which will delay any strike until at least November 4.

The mine's operating company, Minera Doña Inés de Collahuasi, is located near Chile's border with Bolivia in the Andes. In the middle of this year, a protest by terceristas (contract workers) demanding better conditions briefly paralyzed production, but according to *El Mercurio*, “[T]he impact was limited and didn't alter the company's annual goals.”

Argentine railway workers union bureaucrats back down from strike

On the night of October 25, the directors of the railway union La

Fraternidad (the Brotherhood) called off a strike that had been planned for midnight in solidarity with workers at Ferrocarril Pampeano (FEPSA) of the Techint group, who have been on strike for over two weeks in a salary dispute. The Techint group is the only freight railway that has not agreed on salaries with union negotiators.

Horacio Caminos, a spokesman for La Fraternidad, told reporters that the union negotiators had met with the Labor Ministry and that “there will be trains as a contribution of solidarity with society, but we are not dropping our demands. We are going to discuss with our members in what manner we are going to pursue our struggle.” Among the demands are equalization of salaries for the same tasks and identical payments for helpers and apprentices.

The union had earlier claimed that “Techint's intransigence obliged the adoption of the measure,” i.e., the strike that they later called off.

Railway unions are currently at the center of controversy over the October 20 shooting death of Workers Party militant Mariano Ferreyra, during a confrontation with Unión Ferroviaria thugs last week.

Argentina: another attack against militants by union thugs

A week after a member of the Workers Party was shot to death and several others wounded in attacks by railway union thugs, members of a construction workers union brutally beat the group's president and others in Río Gallegos, located in the southern province of Santa Cruz. Río Gallegos is also the hometown and burial site of recently deceased ex-president Nestor Kirchner.

A contingent of the party's militants had gone to the UOCRA construction union's local headquarters to support a group of workers who were protesting the exclusion of opposition candidates in the local's upcoming election. At 5:30, around 50 UOCRA members approached the protesters and began attacking them with fists, rocks and sticks. Workers Party head Miguel del Plá was knocked to the ground and kicked repeatedly. Eight people were hurt, including reporter Mirtha Espina who, while being called “daughter of a whore,” was pushed and beaten by the thugs “so you don't report lies.”

An OPI report noted that while the attacks, which lasted about 10 minutes, were taking place, police in the area refused to intervene. An *El Clarín* article noted, “[T]he militants of the UOCRA, which is aligned with Santa Cruz Governor Daniel Peralta, remained in control of the local. They sang songs in favor of Kirchnerism and continued intimidating.” After a few more minutes, they left the scene—“shouting and brandishing sticks and rocks”—unmolested.

Public sector workers mount protests in Trinidad and Tobago

A number of protest actions have occurred recently in the two-island

Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago. The global recession has slowed economic growth in Trinidad, which depends heavily on petroleum exports in addition to food and beverage manufacturing, tourism and a growing financial sector. The government has fallen deeper into debt and has been in arrears to some of its public service sector workers. Workers have reacted with protest actions.

On October 25, employees of the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) in Trinidad's southwest coastal city of San Fernando staged a lunchtime protest over the company's flouting of Occupational, Safety and Health (OSH) issues such as inadequate accommodations at the San Fernando office, lack of sufficient security for workers in "trouble areas," nonpayment of overtime and minimal payments of pensions to retired WASA workers.

On October 26, workers at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex in Champs Fleurs stopped work and gathered at the North Central Regional Health Authority (NCRHA) building. Workers have been demonstrating since 2009 over unpaid wages and changing deadlines given by the NCRHA.

NCRHA CEO Ronald Tsoi-a-Fatt had announced the week before that he was going to leave the agency. Public Services Association (PSA) President Watson Duke joined the protesters, telling *T&T Newsday*, "Before he goes, we want firm commitments that they will settle today."

Outstanding issues include "payment of increments, unused sick leave, nurses' specialization allowance, meal allowance for cashiers, on-call allowance for radiographers and allowances for staff of the central sterilization department," according to the daily. Tsoi-a-Fatt did not show, and instead Duke talked to Chief Operating Officer Caroline Aigle for about two hours. "Asked whether the COO could give any guarantees for the CEO, Duke could not comment," reported the paper.

On the same day in the capital city of Port of Spain, more than 15,000 public service workers assembled outside the Office of the Chief Personnel Officer to protest the government's offer of a puny one percent increase.

According to *Caribbean News Now*, the demonstration was a follow-up to a protest action the week before and was much bigger. A number of union functionaries addressed the gathering, claiming that the protests would continue until the government meets their demands.

Two separate sickouts in the Virgin Islands

Employees of the US Virgin Islands Port Authority (VIPA) halted cruise and container ship traffic in the Virgin Islands port city of St. Thomas on October 26 due to a sickout. The employees are members of the Seafarers International Union de Puerto Rico, Caribe y Latino America, which includes ferry operators, harbor pilots and dockmasters.

Although the union did not respond to calls—though shop steward Willis Pinney later told reporters that "I know that I'm home because I'm sick. I don't know about a job action," an article in the *St. Thomas Source* reported, "the TRUE cause of the 'sick out' was that the non-management VIPA employees' contract had expired four years ago, and they had not received a raise and the VIPA refused to return to the negotiation table."

Two days later, 66 employees of the VI Water and Power Authority (WAPA) on St. Croix staged a sickout. The workers are members of Utility Workers Union of America Local 602, but the local's President Redford Joseph told *Virgin Island News* said the union had nothing to do with it.

"The union did not, has not, will not, promote anything that is illegal," Joseph said. Utility provision workers are prohibited by Virgin Islands law

from striking.

In a news release, WAPA Executive Director Hugo Hodge, Jr., claimed, "I cannot imagine that it would be an issue of contract negotiations, since UWUA Local 602 employees are still negotiating a wage reopener on their existing five-year contract which expires in June 2010.... Negotiations are going well. We are not at an impasse and have not been notified by the union otherwise."

A WAPA spokeswoman claimed that operations were not seriously affected at the 270-employee St. Croix office. The employees returned to work on Friday.

California nurses return to work after three-day work stoppage over staffing ratios

Nurses at the Watsonville Community Hospital (SCH) in Watsonville, California, returned to work October 29 after a one-day strike followed by a two-day lockout. Members of the California Nurses Association (CNA) launched their 24-hour strike to protest stalled contract talks and raise the demand for patient safety.

CNA members charge that WCH is not observing state-mandated nurse-to-patient ratios when nurses take breaks. Hospital management has sought to divert attention away from its foot-dragging on staffing ratios and instead has wildly inflated nurse salaries in the media in an effort to turn public opinion against the nurses.

The union and hospital have been in talks since February, and in recent months negotiations have been conducted using a federal mediator. Currently, no new talks are scheduled.

Contract stalemate in Pennsylvania teachers strike

Contract talks between the American Federation of Teachers and the Bethel Park, Pennsylvania, school district broke off after a brief meeting October 29, leading union negotiators to predict a long strike. The 391 members of the American Federation of Teachers walked off the job October 25 over salaries, health care and contract language governing the length of workday and school year.

The union said the proposal it made the day before the strike failed to elicit a counter-offer from district officials. The union had expected the district to reply to their proposals at the October 29 session, but school board negotiators remained silent.

The district wants to increase the school day from 7 ½ hours to 8 and increase the school year by 3 days. It also wants to implement a new health care plan that would require higher contributions to premiums and would not pay out-of-network costs. The district is also focused on changing a clause in the contract raising the salaries of teachers with master's degrees by some \$35,000 when they reach 17 years of service. Over the course of the next five years some 100 teachers will become eligible for the pay increase.

Grocery warehouse workers stage one-day strike

Warehouse workers in Woodbridge, New Jersey, staged a one-day

unfair labor practice strike against Grocery Haulers, Inc., charging the company has not bargained with Teamsters Local 863. Workers have gone without a contract for 10 months.

Some 200 Teamsters members and their supporters also held a demonstration outside of Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company, which contracts with Grocery Haulers. Demonstrators also charged that Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company's parent, New Hampshire-based C&S is planning to move some 1,500 warehousing jobs out of New Jersey and run non-union operations from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Toronto hotel workers strike

After months of one-day actions arranged by their union, 500 workers at the Delta Chelsea hotel in downtown Toronto went on strike Oct 27, though even this has been limited in advance by the union to a two-week walkout.

Stating that "our plan is not to disrupt the hotel any longer than we have to" the leadership of Local 75 Unite Here has only reluctantly called this strike despite the fact that workers have been without a contract since February and voted last July for strike action.

According to reports there has been no progress for months in negotiations over outstanding issues such as job security, workplace safety and wages.

Strike by workers in Manitoba municipality

Thirty-three workers in the Rural Municipality of St. Clements north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, went on strike October 25 after rejecting the latest contract offer by 92 percent.

Striking workers are represented by the International Union of Operating Engineers and include public works and office staff, who voted overwhelmingly for strike action at the end of September. The union had been asking for a 3 percent wage increase but were only offered 1.5 in a new four year deal, although that reportedly was raised to 2.5 percent on the eve of the strike when the union offered to give up two days of leave.

Municipality administrators have said they will maintain affected services such as waste transfer and water treatment using non-unionized staff.



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