

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 hold 48-hour strike

Teachers in Buenos Aires struck for two days, November 10 and 11, as part of their demand for salary hikes. The Frente Gremial (Union Front), which includes a number of public and private educators' unions, claimed an adherence rate of 95 percent, while school officials said it was closer to 70 percent. The mobilization affected about 4.5 million students.

On November 10, teachers from the Frente marched to the provincial capital building, where they demonstrated outside the Casa de la Provincia de Buenos Aires. The date for the action was decided on after a "short and frustrating" Monday meeting between authorities and unions failed to produce any results.

The teachers are demanding raises to counteract the effects of inflation. Mirta Petrocini of the FEB (Buenos Aires Educators Federation) told *El Clarín*, "It was strictly necessary to help the teachers with an increase that could relieve a situation in which the cost of living is riding in a Formula One and wages are on a bicycle."

The government says the demand is impossible within the present budget. Director General of Education Mario Oporto, however, said, "After the stoppage we have to keep talking. We don't want to blur other issues in which we can advance."

Nonetheless, salary issues are paramount, and the unions resolved to meet in assemblies with their memberships to decide on the next step. The Suteba union stated in a press release, "If there is no accord, classes don't start," referring to the new school cycle set to begin on February 28.

Laid-off Chilean miners demand severance pay, safety improvements

A group of miners from Chile's San Jose mine—where 33 miners were trapped deep underground for 70 days—traveled to the capital of Santiago to present a petition to President Sebastian Pinera demanding severance pay from the mine, which was shuttered after the cave-in. They also demanded that he keep his promise to improve safety conditions in the mines.

During the rescue operation, Pinera visited Camp Hope, where relatives of the trapped miners had gathered, and promised not to abandon the other miners who lost their jobs due to the closing of the mine. By posing as being concerned for the trapped miners' safety and celebrating their rescue, the Pinera government gained a temporary boost in popularity.

Javier Castillo, provincial president of the CUT labor confederation in Copiapo, home of the San Jose mine, told *El Ciudadano* that the miners

want Pinera "not to be so complacent with the assassin enterprises." He added, "From 1996 to 2007, seven dead, three amputated, a series of injured and now, with 33 victims of a lamentable act, the fruit of a system that obliges them to work at whatever cost, he converts them into heroes and takes them to promenade around the country."

A *Latin American Herald Tribune* report quoted Cristian Cuevas, an official in the CUT labor federation: "The government has profited from the rescue of the miners and it's now time to end the trauma of the workers who still remain without jobs."

In related news, two miners were killed and a third hospitalized due to an explosion at the Los Reyes copper mine, not far from the San Jose mine, on Monday, November 8. *Radio Cooperativa* reported that the men had begun work on that very day, and that the mine was not registered with the National Geology and Mining Service.

Panamanian retirees take to the streets over pension payments

Reacting to contradictory statements by Health Minister Franklin Vergara, Panama's retirees returned to the streets on November 9. The retirees had staged previous protests in face of government equivocation over increases to their pensions, most recently on October 30.

Vergara had previously stated that pensioners would receive increases of from \$50 to \$80. Yet on November 8, at a celebration of the 1821 Las Tablas uprising against Spain, he backtracked, claiming that there was as yet no firm plan to raise pensions.

Members of the Association of Independent Retirees turned out the next day to block traffic along Panama City's Avenida Simon Bolivar, also known as the Transistmica, where they had held previous demonstrations. Traffic was snarled for about two and a half hours.

Association leader Eladio Fernandez told *Newsroom Panama* that the government "is making fun of us...and many of us have barely enough to eat." Fernández said that the protests will continue "as long as it takes" to get the increases.

Peru: Judicial workers suspend strike after judge declares it illegal

Workers in Peru's court system were ordered back to work on November 10 after a week on strike. President of the Supreme Court Javier Villa Stein, by means of an "administrative resolution," declared that the strike did not meet the minimum requirements of law and was thus illegal. Villa Stein claimed that the union, the National Federation of Judicial Workers of Peru, had not shown that the decision to carry out the measure "has been adopted by the majority of its members."

The resolution also pronounced that exercising the right to strike "supposes that direct negotiation of the disputed matter between the parties has been exhausted, which in the present case has not been

produced.”

The workers are demanding an increase in their wages, which they consider insufficient for the level of work they do. Currently, monthly wages in the court system range from 450 nuevos soles (US\$160) to 1,350 nuevos soles (US\$482). The strike involved more than 15,600 judicial employees.

With the workers compelled to return to their jobs, the matter will be debated in the congress as well as negotiated between representatives of the Federation and the Ministry of Economy and Finances.

Labor federation report: 16 Colombian teachers killed so far in 2010

A report released Tuesday by the CUT labor federation highlighted the dangers facing teachers in Colombia. According to the report, 16 teachers have been murdered this year, 3 have disappeared and at least 3 survived attacks. In addition, 20 have been forced to leave their homes for fear of attempts on their lives. According to *EFE*, “The CUT, Colombia’s main union federation, emphasized that another 144 teachers had received threats since the beginning of this year.”

Violence against teachers and union members is not a recent problem in Colombia. In a report published in August, the *Education International* web site called the data on violence against teachers over the last two decades “staggering.” The EI report continues: “Since 1991, more than 873 teachers have been reportedly killed. More than 3,000 have been threatened; 1,000 have been displaced, more than 70 have been forced to leave the country with their families, and 60 have simply disappeared without trace. Despite a protection program being put in place by the Colombian authorities, teacher trade unionists continue to be targeted by paramilitary groups, armed guerillas and drug traffickers.”

The CUT report was released after the killing over the weekend of Ligia González, a teacher in the southwestern town of Tulua. Like most of the other murdered educators, González was a union member who was involved in organizing activities.

Both the CUT and the FECODE (Colombian Federation of Educators) have repeatedly denounced the murders and called on the government to take action to solve the murders and bring the perpetrators to justice, calls that have had little or no effect. As the *Education International* report notes, “The fact that 96 percent of murders are neither investigated nor solved, creates an unacceptable climate of impunity.”

Guyanese sugar workers continue strike

With sugar workers on strike since November 6, the Guyana Sugar Corporation (Guysuco) and the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) have yet to agree on salaries. The company offered back pay of 3 to 5 percent, an offer that GAWU president Komal Chand called “an extremely poor number.” The union is demanding 15 percent.

The company claims that lagging production will make it impossible to meet this year’s production goal of 270,000 tons of sugar. In addition to this year’s frequent wet periods, which have plagued the sugar plantations, Guysuco blames lagging attendance by workers, down to 54 percent from the usual 80 percent, for the production shortfall.

According to *Caribbean News Now!*, “Guysuco is calling on GAWU to review their demands for a 15 percent increase at this critical time and is calling on the sugar workers to work in harmony with the sugar corporation so that their targets can be met in order to satisfy the overseas

markets.”

Although Chand has threatened to shut down the industry if the union’s demands are not met, “he disclosed that the workers will stay strike action until after the Christmas holidays.”

Production crew workers strike NBC reality TV show

About 60 production crew workers for the NBC reality television show “Biggest Loser” walked off the set outside Los Angeles, California, November 11 demanding union recognition and benefits. The action shut down production over the next two days, but the producers refused to sign a contract with the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE).

Instead, producers are rumored to have decided to fire the crew and hire replacement workers. One striker, Erin Barrow, was quoted in the *Hollywood Reporter*, saying, “On a show that’s about health, to not offer a health plan flies in the face of what (the show) is doing.” The American Federation of Television and Radio Artists and the Directors Guild of America already have agreements with the “Biggest Loser” to represent workers in their respective crafts.

Strike ends at Wisconsin manufacturer

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) ended a seven-and-a-half-month strike November 11 against Merrill Manufacturing Corporation in Merrill, Wisconsin, after accepting a mediator’s proposal that will not result in the immediate recall of striking workers. No details of the final proposal were made available except that the company will retain replacement workers and only recall striking workers as jobs become available.

Some 32 out of a total 58 members of IAM United Lodge 2362 originally struck Merrill Manufacturing back on March 23 over wages. In April, the company announced it had suffered significant losses and would require wage and benefit cuts. Following that, the IAM appealed for federal mediation to reach an agreement.

NLRB complaint against corporate hair salon

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) issued a complaint against Regis Corporation—the world’s largest hair salon operator—charging it violated federal labor law in seeking to block its workers from unionizing. The complaint alleges Regis attempted to compel workers to sign pledges they would not sign union authorization cards.

In a DVD, CEO Paul Finkelstein declared Regis “would close salons if employees selected a union to represent them” and threatened that those who did sign “would be blacklisted in the industry.” The company also established a hotline for employees to report union activity.

The NLRB investigation began after complaints were filed in Wisconsin, Florida, New York and Indiana. Regis, based in Edina, Minnesota, operates 12,700 salons worldwide.

Steelworkers locked out in Hamilton

Nine hundred workers at U.S. Steel in Hamilton, Ontario, were locked out November 7 after the company delivered a final offer that the union deemed unworthy of putting to a vote.

According to the United Steelworkers, the company did modify certain of its concession demands, except on the key question of pensions, which made it a “deal breaker.” Proposed changes would mean that new hires would be excluded from the existing pension plan and indexing for retirees would be ended.

The last agreement at the facility, previously operated by Stelco, expired in July. The company says it will continue to push for a vote on its final offer.



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