Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site *invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

Oil workers occupy Argentinean export terminal

An indefinite strike launched on December 1 at oilfields in the provinces of Santa Cruz and Chubut by supervisory staff against a Spanish-owned oil production and export firm escalated when workers seized a crude oil export terminal in the southern Argentina port city of Comodoro Rivadavia on December 8. The strike was initially called over union demands for salary hikes to bring pay in line with wages of other unionized workers in the industry.

Other points of contention between the union and the firm, Repsol YPF, include inadequate compensation for long workdays—up to 20 hours—that oilfield workers are obliged to put in and layoffs from enterprises contracted to YPF.

YPF suspended production at the Santa Cruz oilfields on December 5, claiming the workers had broken the "National Accord for Dialogue and Social Peace" that oil sector unions and energy firms had signed in Buenos Aires with the government two weeks earlier. The company claimed that striking workers had been involved in "violent incidents" as well. Production has dropped 20 percent since the strike began, according to YPF.

"Union sources asserted that the accord…was not violated since they did not cut off any routes or paralyze production," reported *El Clarin*.

On December 9, workers seized the installations of port operator Terminales Maritimas Patagonicas, or Termap. The union's adjunct secretary, Elvio Pena, told Efe, "The takeover was peaceful. Meanwhile. the strike at the oilfields continues in hopes the operator changes its stance."

Chilean public sector workers begin open-ended national strike

More than 400,000 Chilean public employees walked off the job over salary and job security issues on December 7. The workers, members of the National Association of Public Employees (ANEF), are demanding a raise of 8.9 percent as opposed to the 5 percent offer made by the Piñera administration. In addition, they are demanding an end to layoffs that have already claimed 7,000 jobs since Piñera took office last March.

On December 7, thousands of workers—among them teachers, Civil Registry employees, treasury workers, and prison guards—rallied at the capital Santiago's Plaza de los Heroes. ANEF Vice President Nuri Benitez claimed a 90 percent nationwide rate of participation in the strike.

With optimistic projections by the Chilean Central Bank of economic growth of 5.4 percent and an inflation rate at 3 percent, "We're asking for a wage adjustment for 600,000 workers in the public sector, a decent adjustment that takes into account the bonanza that the country is enjoying these days," Benitez told reporters at the rally.

The Piñera government originally proposed a 4.2 percent raise, which was approved by the lower house of Congress over the opposition of the Concertacion minority. The proposal next goes to the Senate, where Concertacion is in the majority. Concertacion has offered to accept the raise in exchange for a pledge to halt the layoffs. Ex-president and current Concertacion senator Eduardo Frei called for an accounting of the layoffs, which he claimed were mainly applied to supporters of the previous administration of Concertacion President Michelle Bachelet.

Chilean mine workers approve deal with Collahuasi management, end strike

After more than a month on strike, mine workers at the Collahuasi copper complex in northern Chile voted in assembly on December 7 to accept a new collective bargaining agreement. The 32-day walkout broke the previous record of 29 days for a continuous strike at a mine.

The vote was fairly close—521 to 398, or about 57 percent—and according to a report in *El Mercurio*, "The last offer by the company is very similar to the one realized in the period of good offices before the paralyzation began."

The agreement contains a bonus of 12 million pesos (US$24,490) and a "soft" (i.e., interest-free) loan of 2 million pesos (US$4,080). The bonus is less than recently signed bonuses at two other mines, Radomiro Tomic (US$31,000) and Los Pelambres (US$28,000), which the Collahuaasi union wanted to meet or surpass. The raise increase for the 42-month contract comes to about 3.25 percent.

Mineweb.com noted, "The stoppage was seen costing Collahuasi a few thousand tonnes at most, a tiny fraction of its annual output of 535,000 tonnes a year," with the strike having "little impact" on copper prices. "Collahuasi's management came out ahead in the conflict after union leaders failed to wrest better terms in a strike seen driven more by union politics than justified union demands, analysts said."

As allowed by law, Collahuasi offered signing bonuses of around US$29,000 to workers who would go back to work, a tactic that the company claimed convinced at least 220 full-time workers to "unhang" from the strike and return to the job. "The mine also hired hundreds of temporary workers and about 100 new, permanent employees."

One worker acknowledged that the contract was less than a stunning victory when he told mineweb.com, "We will get them the next time."

Honduran physicians demand unpaid salaries, threaten strike

After months of unpaid salaries, physicians at the Medical College of Honduras (CMH) have threatened to strike until they are paid. CMH President Jose Manuel Espinal told *El Heraldo* on December 9 that more than 800 doctors contracted by the Ministry of Health have not received their pay for November, while 400 have not been paid for six months.

"Other physicians who work in administrative positions," according to *Honduras Weekly*, "report that they have gone without pay for the past year, while a number of doctors who were contracted to help respond to the dengue outbreak have not been paid for five months."

Espinal has been in talks "for many months" with Minister of Health Arturo Bendaña to try to come to an agreement on a date in which to settle the debts. He has not said how much longer the doctors are willing to wait, but their patience is wearing thin. He explained that "there are many complaints on the part of physicians and that the problems are the result of negligence by certain personnel within the Ministry of Health."

Meanwhile, contract workers at the Gabriela Alvarado de Danli Hospital struck last week over the same issue: delays in payment of wages. The same week, employees at El Torax Hospital took over the installations in protest of the delays in their wages and alleged acts of corruption by an administrator.

Mexicana airline workers sign new collective bargaining contract

With representatives of new owner CP Capital in attendance, union directors of pilots, flight attendants and floor workers unions at Mexicana Airlines met to sign a new contract at the office of the Secretariat of Labor and Social Security (STPS) in Mexico City on December 8.

The union tops, according to Proceso, "committed to making themselves rentable as soon as possible so that workers who were without employment would be contracted." While STPS official Javier Lozano Alarcon called the unions' acceptance of the agreement "transcendent" and "an act of maturity" for the "rebirth" of Mexicana, the union reps called the Mexicana crisis a "painful" lesson that all must learn so that something similar does not happen again.

The airline, which ceased operations in August after filing for bankruptcy, was founded in 1921 and was once a giant of Mexico's aviation industry, with daily flights to points in Mexico, the Americas, Cuba and Europe. By the time it filed for bankruptcy, the airline had a reported debt of US$125 million.

The restructuring will involve downsizing operations, slimming down service and cutting jobs. The "rebirth" will mean that only 30 percent of the Mexicana workers will be rehired, and at lower wages. The "equity stake" will be an incentive for the union bureaucrats to put company profits above all other considerations as PC Capital pursues, as described by flight attendants union leader Lizette Clavel, "a model of a low-cost airline, but with an administrative and operating plan of a standard commercial airline."

Jamaican air traffic controllers, Civil Aviation Authority at loggerheads

An effort by Jamaica's Ministry of Labour to resolve a conflict between the Jamaica Air Traffic Controllers Association (JATCA) and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) over recovery of alleged overpayments was rejected by the union on December 10.

JATCA President Kurt Solomon told the *Jamaica Gleaner* that the ministry had invited members to a 3:00 meeting, but "based on past experiences, the members of his association are not keen on attending any mediation meetings with the Ministry. It also says its members were not available due to a severe staff shortage."

Acting at the behest of the Ministry of Finance, the CAA claims that over a 22-month period, the government overpaid 71 controllers JMD$51 million, about US$596,500, "which would be equal to JMD$69,000 [US$807] a month for 18 months for each worker." The air traffic controllers dispute the claim, and vow to take "strong action" if attempts are made to make good on the claim.

Alabama steelworkers vote to return to work

Steelworkers at the US Pipe and Foundry Company in Bessemer, Alabama, ended their week-long work stoppage after the parent company threatened to replace the 250 striking workers. Mueller Water Products, which owns US Pipe, issued a letter to the union through a federal mediator warning the company would resume production without members of United Steelworkers Local 2140. "That is the main reason the membership voted to accept the contract," said union president Ronnie Woods.

Less than half of the striking membership participated in the ratification vote, which resulted in a 67-44 passage of the new four-year agreement. While complete details are not available, the two previous contracts rejected by workers included company demands to overhaul seniority, health insurance and pensions. Among the most controversial points was a proposal to consolidate job categories across the plant in violation of previous seniority rights, a change that the union said could create unsafe working conditions.

Ohio governor attacks public workers

Ohio Republican Governor-elect John Kasich told reporters at a news conference last week he was opposed to both binding arbitration and public workers' right to strike. Facing an $8 billion state budget gap, the former Fox news commentator and Lehman Brothers managing director called binding arbitration "low-hanging fruit" that could be dispensed with in order to help drive down the living standards of public employees.

"You think these local governments want to be stuck with binding arbitration?" railed Kasich. "Our local governments don't want that, it drives up the cost…if [public employees] want to strike, they should be fired.... I don't favor the right to strike of any public employee, ok?… I mean, they've got good jobs, high pay, good benefits, a great retirement, what are they striking for?"

Meanwhile, Kasich is advocating the elimination of Ohio's income tax and elimination of the estate tax, measures that would double the state's current $8 billion deficit.

Winnipeg malt workers on strike

Workers at Malteurop, which makes Moosehead and other brands of beer in Winnipeg, Manitoba, went on strike December 9 in a fight against concession demands.

The 22 striking workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action last July. Some of the biggest issues for workers are the company's attempt to offload pension risks onto workers and introduce wage differentials that would create a two-tiered system.

The company has refused to continue negotiations, but has said it will discontinue operations during the strike.

Ontario lumber mill workers strike

Sixty-four workers at Midway Lumber Mills in Thessalon, Ontario, near Sault Ste. Marie went on strike last week the day after their contract expired and after four days of conciliated talks failed to yield a new agreement.

A spokesperson with the United Steelworkers Union (USW), representing the workers, said the company cancelled a further day of talks and is demanding a three-year extension of a freeze on wages and benefits that has already been in place for three years. In addition, Midway is seeking to cap drug and health benefits, suggesting a provincial government plan may cover some of the shortfall.

The plant has been shut down during the strike and the union says it expects it will last until after Christmas.