Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 March 2011

Chilean miners strike

On Friday March 11, members of Chile's mining sector unions carried out a nationwide strike for improved labor conditions and against privatizations. As part of the action, demonstrators marched from Santiago's Plaza de Armas to the presidential palace La Moneda.

The protests came at the conclusion of the first year of the right-wing administration of Sebastian Piñera, who has pursued pro-market policies of privatization and the cutting of food and fuel subsidies.

Nelson Soto, director of the union of the National Copper Corporation, told *La Radio del Sur*, "We have a great mass of citizens, workers, professionals and small businesspeople who are discontented with the economic model that has been implemented in the country all these years."

Soto criticized the opposition parties and the CUT labor federation, which "play into the hands of the judicial political order installed by the right."

The union had also called for support for the demonstration by environmental groups opposed to the construction of thermoelectric complexes like the Central Castilla project in the northern region of Atacama. The environmentalists consider the complexes highly polluting.

Other issues are the sale of state enterprises to transnational corporations, the denationalization of the copper mining industry and, most importantly, unsafe conditions that led to the death of 45 miners in 2010 and more than 400 over the last decade.

Argentine teachers unions stop work over salary demands

Teachers in two Argentine unions in the northern region of Chaco held work stoppages on Thursday and Friday over salary demands. The Association of Education Workers (ATECH) and the SITECH federation called a 48-hour strike protesting what they termed "a shameful 10 percent increase of wages in March and another equal percentage for the month of August."

An ATECH statement said the measures were a reaction "to allow us to recuperate the purchasing power devoured by inflation and the freeze and reduction of wages for practically three years."

ATECH claimed a high level of adherence to the strike in Chaco and other areas, while government spokespeople claimed that participation by the second day was only 5 percent.

Meanwhile, in the northwest, members of the Association of Educators and Researchers of the National University of Tucuman (ADIUNT) have threatened a strike on Wednesday if the government does not respond to their call for a 40 percent raise.

Mexican health workers hold two-day strike, may strike again

Members of Mexico's National Union of Health Department Workers (SNTSA) stopped work in a nationwide "brazos caidos" (dropped arms) stoppage on March 8 and 9. The stoppage, which did not include emergency services, hospitalization and surgery, was called to demand "respect for the general conditions of work."

Thousands of doctors, nurses and administrative personnel—4,000 in Aguascalientes, 1,200 in Tamaulipas, 7,000 in Oaxaca, 1,400 in Chihuahua, to name a few—struck hospitals, health centers and other medical installations. In some states, workers occupied offices and blocked streets.

The action was taken, according to SNTSA section 38 (Aguascalientes) leader Netzahualcoyotl Alvarez Cardona, due to the failure of the federal government to fulfill general labor conditions, principally the equalization of salaries. "What concerns us most is salary homologation; we're talking about half of the workers who are still receiving a tabulation from the year 2007. We're already in 2011, and we'll go to the new tabulation in May of 2011…the salary increase barely serves to cover the loss of purchasing power and if we have the workers from 2007 falling behind, that's serious."

According to *El Universal*, in Aguascalientes alone, "until now there are 47 million pesos (US$4 million) that have not arrived to the state…to channel them into the salary equalization of more than 1,500 workers."

The health workers returned to work after the two-day strike with no action taken by the government. SNTSA delegates have arranged to meet with the Federal Health Department in Xalapa, Veracruz. If no resolution is forthcoming, there is a strong possibility of another strike call this week.

Costa Rican public sector workers protest tax plan, inadequate wage hikes

Thousands of Costa Rican workers marched to the Congress on March 10 to protest a proposed plan to resolve the country's budget crisis on the backs of the working class. The march was called against the fiscal plan, or "paquetazo," which president Laura Chinchilla presented to the Congress to shrink the nation's deficit this year.

Marchers shouted, "Jail for the rich that don't want to pay taxes!" and denounced the "measly salary increase" of about 2.3 and 2.6 percent for public and private employees, respectively, that was unilaterally decreed by the government. The march was around 10 blocks long and blocked traffic along major streets in the capital San Jose. Protesters vociferously expressed their disgust with the fiscal plan, which would raise the sales tax from 13 to 14 percent and impose a levy on private education and health services.

Union tops gave speeches in which they denounced the evasion of taxes by businesses to the tune of US$900 million per year and suggested that the government collect those obligations first before hammering workers. "We also oppose the intent of the government to freeze salaries, and the accelerated rise in basic food prices, electric bills and public services, that

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pummel the pocketbooks of the working class," said Martha Rodriguez of the Social Security Fund Employees Union.

According to the ANP/AFP news service, "It was the first demonstration against the Chinchilla government, which came to power ten months ago, and the biggest popular demonstration in almost four years, since the multitudinous protests against the TLC [Free Trade Agreement] with the United States that was ratified in a referendum in October of 2007."

Antigua union stages protest against government economic policies

The policies of Antigua and Barbuda's Baldwin Spencer administration were the target of a protest on March 10 in the capital St. John's, called by the Antigua Trades and Labour Union (ATLU), which denounced the prime minister's failure to address the two-island nation's economic woes. The rally, dubbed "The National White March," was attended by hundreds of workers, mostly members of the ATLU.

An ATLU statement issued before the protest claimed that "The planned layoffs at the Port, the sale of the State insurance, the massive increase in taxes since 2004, the excessive borrowings, and the acceptance of an IMF program have driven Antigua and Barbuda to the edge of the precipice."

According to an article in *Caribbean News Now!*: "The union added that it believes that the deepening economic crisis, the late payment of wages to workers by the government, and the outstanding wages owed to ATLU members at the Public Works Department and the Central Board of Health and other Ministries, are reasons sufficient for the workers of Antigua and Barbuda to send a clear message to the government that the vast majority are dissatisfied."

In speeches to the assembled protesters, ATLU leaders, including President Wrigley George, accused the government of doing next to nothing to alleviate the effects of the global financial crisis—large-scale unemployment and the high cost of living—on Antigua and Barbuda's working class.

Hawaiian electrical strike ends

Power workers for Hawaiian Electrical Company (HECO) and Maui Electric Company ratified a new labor agreement March 11 bringing the week-long strike by 1,280 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1260 to an end. Details of the new agreement were not made available.

At issue in the negotiations were company demands for a raise in the retirement age from age 60 to 62, a lower-tier wage structure for new hires, and a disagreement about backdating wage increases to October 2010 or starting them from the moment the new agreement is inked.

The union walkout encompassed the islands of Oahu, Hawaii, Maui, Molokai and Lanai and began hours after a major storm swept through Hawaii leaving thousands of customers without power.

Paper workers end strike over management refusal to abide by labor board ruling

Workers at the Ponderay Newsprint plant in Usk, Washington, returned to work last week after a March 1 walkout over allegations the company violated a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruling. According to Teamsters Local 422, Ponderay Newsprint management has not abided by an NLRB ruling that would allow workers to disengage from so-called voluntary committees such as production/management teams, the plants' fire brigade and emergency medical technicians.

The 92 workers, who make newsprint for more than 100 newspapers, voted to unionize in 2009 after management made cuts to their pensions and 401(k) plans. In January 2010, the two sides started negotiations over a first-time agreement. But one year later, workers are frustrated that discussions have not resulted in a contract.

Halifax seniors home facing strike

Five hundred sixty workers at Northwood Care, Nova Scotia's largest nursing home in the provincial capital of Halifax, are set to go on strike by the end of the week after workers narrowly voted to reject what the company has called its final offer last week.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union and have been in a legal strike position since Thursday. Workers affected include practical nurses, care workers, dietary, cafeteria and maintenance staff, who are seeking improvements in wages and benefits to bring them in line with their counterparts working in hospitals.

Northwood has said that they will continue to provide care to the 470 residents at the nursing home using management and non-union personnel. Mediated talks failed to bring the two sides closer to an agreement, but both say they are willing to resume negotiations.

Staff for mentally disabled take job action in Nova Scotia

Support staff at a home for the mentally disabled in Sydney, Nova Scotia, held an information picket last week in advance of possible strike action this week.

One hundred twenty dietary, housekeeping and laundry service workers as Braemore Home Corp. have been in a legal strike position since the end of January, but their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), has so far only mounted what it is calling a "strike aversion" demonstration hoping to avoid a confrontation.

One of the main issues is the designation of long-term workers as part-time, which deprives them of the protections and benefits of full-time status. There is agreement on wages for full-time staff, but other outstanding issues include job classification and shift pay.

Vancouver university faculty on strike

Five hundred fifty teaching staff at Vancouver Island University (VIU) went on strike last week and were joined by more than 700 members of two other unions who are also in contract negotiations at the school and who are refusing to cross picket lines.

The school is facing a three-year funding freeze from the British Columbia provincial Liberal government and is asking the VIU Faculty Association to cut costs by 10 percent. The union points to increases in compensation for administration of up to 40 percent in the last four years,

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a claim disputed by a VIU spokesperson.

Faculty at the school have been without a contract since March of last year and are reportedly not asking for a pay increase. Their Association has said that job security is a central issue in the dispute but expressed hopes that it will be a short strike.

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