Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Uruguayan port workers stage six-hour work stoppage

Activities at Uruguay's major ports were brought to a six-hour standstill on April 1 as port workers, members of the SUPRA port workers union, struck sites in Montevideo, Nueva Palmira, Colonia, Juan Lacaze, Fray Bentos and Paysandú. SUPRA Secretary Andrés Martínez told AP that the stoppage, which began at 10:00 in the morning and ended at 6:00 p.m., was called as part of salary demands as well as an act of solidarity with the AFE rail workers union, which opposes planned privatizations in Uruguay's rail system.

The stoppage was based on five main points, according to Martínez. The first is the acceleration of negotiations, which have been at a standstill for five months. Another demand is the raising of salaries of certain categories, including stevedores, toolmakers, mooring fasteners and administrative helpers, which are lower than the prevailing wage for comparable work in other parts of Latin America.

A law for the registration of port workers, initiated by the congress in 2009 and the subject of much debate in the maritime port community, forms the third major point of contention. The fourth and fifth concern seasonal contracts and solidarity with AFE.

After the stoppage, activity returned to normal.

The daily *Observa* reported, "For the moment there are no new mobilizations foreseen, although next Tuesday [April 5] there will be a new meeting of the union national executive committee to evaluate the course of the conflict and open the door to the possibility of new measures."

Bolivian miners end 10-day strike

Union representatives at the San Cristóbal Mines (MSC) zinc, silver and lead complex signed a "pre-accord" Saturday intended to lead to the end of a strike and blockade that lasted for 10 days. The action was initiated March 24 primarily over workplace conditions and health care issues, with the union demanding improved medical services following the death of a miner at the remote high-altitude site in early March.

The pre-accord followed a five-hour tripartite meeting between negotiators for MSC, the union and the Labor Ministry. Federation of Miners of Bolivia Secretary General César Lugo told Reuters that the strike would be officially lifted only after an assembly of the membership scheduled for Sunday.

Lugo admitted that no issues were resolved as a result of the strike, but said, "We have signed an act of understanding that we are going to put before the assembly, and only if the assembly approves it will mining work be renewed."

Argentinean musicians' union lifts strike after 41 members are terminated

The head of the Buenos Aires ATE Capital musicians' union, Rudolfo Arrechea, affirmed Saturday, April 2 that the months-long strike at the Teatro Colón opera house has been lifted "in order to attend a negotiation session next Tuesday with government functionaries," as reported in *Urgente 24*.

Arrechea said that a "compás de espera," (a "whole rest," i.e., a brief interruption) was decided upon in assembly in order to facilitate negotiations, but he added that it followed termination notice telegrams to 41 musicians at the opera house.

The telegrams were sent to the musicians' homes under orders of Teatro Colón General Director Pedro Pablo García Caffi, an ally of right-wing mayor Mauricio Macrí. Macrí has denounced the musicians as "a group of employees who are very violent, authoritarian and believe themselves to be the owners of the theater." The musicians are members of the Colón's orchestra and are on strike over salary issues, as well as over the deplorable conditions in the Teatro, where renovation and repair work has been plagued by cost overruns, delays and inadequate and unsafe conditions for years.

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Mexican workers protest proposed labor law modifications

Thousands of Mexican workers protested in Mexico City on March 31 over legislation that would bring drastic changes to the nation's labor laws. The workers, mostly union members, assembled at the capital's main plaza, the Zócalo, and marched to the Congress, where the bill is being discussed.

The proposed legislation was submitted by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and it is in line with the continuing rightward trajectory of Mexico's official politics. It includes provisions to sharply curtail the right to strike while giving businesses a freer hand to outsource, dismiss workers at will, and blunt industrial actions through extending the mandatory cooling-off period for labor conflicts.

In addition, the bill's provisions to facilitate the entry of adolescents and women into the labor force will be used by corporations to undercut working class living standards to the benefit of corporate profits, according to Octavio Loyzaga, a researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Loyzaga called the bill "an attack on the constitution and a brutal procedure against the progress labor has achieved."

Congress is expected to pass the law before the end of the month.

South Carolina workers end strike after company submits new proposal

Workers at the Owens-Corning plant in Aiken, South Carolina approved a new contract March 27, ending over three weeks on strike against pension, wage and other concessions. Exact details of the new offer were not available, but management sent Teamsters Local 509 a revised contract the previous week that was ratified by the 75 striking workers.

The strike was initiated after Owens-Corning demanded a new two-tier wage that paid new hires $5 an hour under the previous scale. Management also sought to freeze pensions for workers younger than 60 years of age. Last December, Owens-Corning agreed to move forward with a new $36 million investment that would add a production line to the Aiken plant and add about 25 new workers.

Pennsylvania nurses union files labor board complaint over hospital's refusal to deduct union dues

The union representing nurses at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital in Pennsylvania filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board last week charging that the hospital had refused to deduct union dues for more than a year. The NLRB has set a hearing for June 21 on the complaint.

According to the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals, which represents nurses at Wilkes-Barre General, Community Health Systems (CHS) signed a 60-day memorandum of agreement with the union that stipulated some terms of the old agreement that included the dues-check off system.

An NLRB decision is also pending after a hearing last November when the nurses union charged hospital management was withholding information about a new health care plan. CHS is a Fortune 500 company that operates 125 hospitals in 29 states and is currently seeking to finalize a $150 million deal on the purchase of a number of Pennsylvania clinics as well as the Mercy Health Partner hospital in Scranton.

Aerospace workers on strike in Winnipeg

Nearly 400 workers at Bristol Aerospace in Winnipeg, Manitoba went on strike over a variety of issues last Friday, the day after their contract expired.

According to the Canadian Auto Workers, which represents the strikers, along with cuts to retiree benefits a central issue in the dispute is the company's insistence that cost-of-living increases be eliminated. The striking workers include trades people and other plant workers as well as about 100 retirees.

Bristol, which produces parts for commercial aircraft components, recently won the contract to work on the federal government's F35 Joint Strike Fighter military jet program. The company maintains that it is open to negotiations, but will continue to respond to the requirements of customers during the strike.

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