

Workers Struggles. The Americas

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

Massive protests against policies of Colombian president

Hundreds of thousands of workers, students and retirees marched April 6 in Bogotá, Barranquilla, Cali, Medellín and other cities across Colombia to protest the anti-worker policies of the government of Juan Manuel Santos. It was the first mass protest that the Santos government has experienced since Santos took over the reins from Alvaro Uribe last August.

Among the demands of the marchers were defense of labor rights, improved conditions for teachers and other employees and pensioners, and measures to decrease unemployment and protect union activists.

Colombia is notorious for violations of labor rights, and union activists have often suffered torture and death at the hands of paramilitary death squads.

Student and teacher groups marched as well to protest educational reforms that will lead to privatization of education.

President Santos was not in Colombia at the time of the protests, but was in the US to preside over the UN Security Council and meet with US President Barack Obama. The vice president, Angelino Garzon, warned the protesters of their “duty to be an expression of civility.”

Colombian Minister of Defense Rodrigo Rivera and DAS intelligence agency director Felipe Muñoz attempted to discount and intimidate marchers beforehand, telling reporters that FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and ELN (Army of National Liberation) guerrillas planned to infiltrate the demonstrations.

Nonetheless, the demonstrations drew large crowds, with estimates by the CUT trade union federation of participation reaching 1.5 million. Apart from a few incidents in Bogotá and Pereira, the demonstrations were peaceful, according to PressTV.

Argentinean trolley bus drivers end strike

On orders from Argentina’s secretariat of labor, trolley bus

operators in the Andean province of Mendoza ended their strike April 8 and will submit to binding arbitration. The strike against the provincial transportation entity EPTM began on Tuesday, April 5 over the trolley drivers’ demands for a 35 percent increase in their pay and parity with salaries of workers in the private sector. Delegates will meet with the government on April 13 to attempt to hammer out an accord.

The current wage for public trolley bus drivers is 121 pesos (US\$29.97) per day, while a private driver earns 173 (US\$42.86).

The strike was partial, only in effect from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Although the Labor Secretariat had called for binding arbitration at the beginning, the government refused to meet with delegates while the strike was in effect.

Jorge Chavez, a delegate for the ATE drivers’ union, told reporters, “Since we’re respectful of the law, we decided to lift the action. The government has resorted to binding arbitration because it doesn’t have the capacity to address our concerns in any other way.”

Argentinean doctors and medical workers strike over hospital security

“There is a social decomposition that puts at risk the lives of professionals and workers in hospitals,” explained Jorge Gilardi of the Municipal Doctors Association (AMM) of Buenos Aires, speaking of the strike begun Wednesday at 33 hospitals and 41 health centers in Argentina’s capital.

The hospital workers are demanding better security measures after a dispute between the municipal and national governments that resulted in the withdrawal of Federal Police from city government buildings, including hospital sites. According to Gilardi, the strike has the support of the Buenos Aires Federation of Government Professionals and the SUTECBA state workers union.

Emergency and outpatient services were not struck, with the stoppage mainly affecting patients with appointments.

According to *Clarín*, “The demand for better security came ... from the hospitals, where the doctors, nurses and health workers daily confront acts of violence. Therefore the decision by the government to discontinue the custody of the Federal Police from public buildings announced by Security Minister Nilda Garré at the beginning of the week unleashed the protest.”

Buenos Aires mayor and right-wing PRO member Mauricio

Macri, who is often at odds with the FPV administration of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, responded to Garré's announcement by saying that the city was not in any condition to guarantee the security of public buildings with the Metropolitan Police.

Gilardi of the AMM denied political motivations—at a time when the medical workers are seen as aligned with the Macri forces—claiming, “This strike is clearly a union issue and 16,000 people are striking. They want to discredit it by taking it to the political side.... We demand that the nation and the city converse and untangle the situation in rapid form.”

Chilean actors walk out over residuals

Hundreds of actors, members of the Chileactores guild, struck on April 8 over unresolved issues regarding the payment of residuals for reruns. The actors assembled in the Bellavista neighborhood of Santiago, home of several major TV stations, and marched to a nearby cultural center, where speakers denounced the stations' refusal to pay for all rebroadcasts.

The TV stations, Canal 13, Chilevisión and TVN, producers of some of Chile's most popular telenovelas (daily soap operas), claim that the actors' demands are unrealistic and that the actors are trying to skirt their own contracts. The actors respond that Law 20.243, passed by Congress in 2008, requires payment of residuals for all showings of programs, not only of the original broadcast, and that the stations are breaking the law.

Chileactores Vice President Claudio Arredondo told the *Santiago Times* that the dispute goes back over two and a half years, making a strike the only recourse. Arredondo added, “This is not just for television actors. It's a law that covers us all, the movies, video stores, and dancers. It is an audiovisual law in general.”

The stations have a “cushion” of up to two weeks for most telenovelas, but as of Thursday, only one new episode of a running telenovela had been recorded since the start of the walkout.

Oregon community college faculty and supporters rally against concessions

Students, faculty and staff at Mt. Hood Community College in Gresham, Oregon rallied April 7 to demand the institution's board initiate face-to-face negotiations with the faculty union to bring a year of fruitless negotiations to a close and avoid a strike. One day earlier, the Faculty Association, which represents 160 full-time faculty, voted by 90 percent to set a strike date if college negotiators continue to insist on \$1.6 million in concessions that will affect salaries and retirement as well as changes in overtime compensation.

Mt. Hood management is seeking to balance a projected \$5.5

million budget shortfall for next year by extracting concessions from instructors. A petition circulated by students at the rally demanded: “As the customers and a major funder of this college, we demand that the Board of Education negotiate in good faith and come to a resolution quickly so that we can all avoid the difficulties that would come with a strike of our faculty.”

The Mt. Hood administration responded to the rally and faculty strike vote: “In case of a strike, we are prepared to continue instruction and take any actions needed to ensure continuity of service to students, including hiring qualified, replacement faculty.” The Faculty Association must give a 10-day strike notice before walking out.

Toronto demonstration against right-wing assault

Well over 5,000 workers and youth turned out for a demonstration in Toronto last weekend to protest the mounting assault against workers and unions that has been spearheaded by Toronto's new mayor, Rob Ford.

Ford made one of his first targets the banning of strikes by Toronto transit workers, which the provincial Liberal government just passed into law last month. In addition, a wide range of social services faces privatization and deep budget cuts under the new municipal government.

While a couple of city councilors showed their support for union leaders and social activists who spoke at the rally, no clear means of opposing the attacks on jobs and living standards was offered. The event wound up with a boisterous march to Toronto City Hall.



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