

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 April 2011

Argentine petroleum union internal struggle leads to strike, government intervention

Argentina's Labor Ministry has acted to end a strike by energy workers in the southern province of Santa Cruz. Acting on a judicial order, the ministry suspended the leadership of the Private Petrol Trade Union, whose secretary general, Héctor Segovia, and adjunct secretary, Rubén Retamoso, are antagonists in an inter-union conflict over recent contract negotiations. In the meantime, a delegate from the Gas and Oil Federation, at the request of Santa Cruz governor Daniel Peralta, has been called in to quell the conflict.

Santa Cruz accounts for about 20 percent of crude oil produced for national consumption, bringing in millions of pesos to the province in royalties and taxes per month. Government officials are jittery about shortages of supplies as a result of the conflict.

The strike broke out on April 2 after Segovia and the area's oil companies struck a deal that included a 25 percent raise. The majority of workers rejected the deal, saying the raise was not enough to keep pace with inflation. Retamoso, citing a rank-and-file assembly vote, demanded that Segovia step down, a demand that Segovia rejected.

After two weeks, Peralta called for talks between all the parties, but the striking workers rejected the choice of the location, Rio Gallegos, where a gang of construction union thugs had severely beaten striking teachers the week before.

Labor Ministry official Carlos Tomada, who named a "normalizing functionary" from the union to resume production, claimed at a press conference, "This is not an intervention, but it has to do with designating a functionary in order to guarantee normal functioning until the federation intervenes." Tomada broached the possibility of a ratification vote on Segovia or the calling of elections—which are slotted for 2012—ahead of schedule.

Union attorneys have filed an appeal motion against the judicial order. Segovia denounced Tomada's suggestions and vowed to take the matter up with the federation.

On Saturday, a group of about 70 workers—Segovia supporters—occupied a union headquarters in Caleta Olivia in protest against the interference of the government and announced plans to take over three other sites and remain there "until they revoke the [judicial] measure."

Argentina: Buenos Aires bus drivers on strike

As union officials and MONSA bus corporation negotiators wrangle over an accord signed April 11, bus drivers for the Buenos Aires Línea 60 (60 Line) continued their strike to protest squandered assets

and company stonewalling. The negotiations are being supervised by a Collective Negotiation deputy director "who ordered the company's board of directors to comply with the salary agreement and the correct liquidation of back payments and vacation days." according to the *Buenos Aires Herald*.

Línea 60 serves around 250,000 riders daily in the downtown Buenos Aires area.

In an assembly on April 19, the workers decided to continue the stoppage due to the bad faith bargaining of MONSA. After the assembly, delegate Daniel Farella told *El Argentino*, "on Monday April 11 the business signed an accord committing itself to pay the claims and then they didn't comply with any of the points."

Workers rallied at the labor ministry headquarters after blocking the Panamerica route, where one of the protesters was struck by a truck.

The union bureaucracy does not support the protests. UTA drivers union press secretary Mario Calegaris alleged to *Página/12* that the measure had "a political origin" and that "there is a minority group that doesn't accept the negotiations that arrived at an end and insists on its demands," which "should be channeled within what are normal frameworks."

Peruvian miners end strike

In a meeting called by Peru's Labor Ministry, contract employers and Union of Mine Workers representatives at the Casapalca silver/zinc/lead/copper mine—located 62 miles east of Lima at 4,500 meters (14,625 feet) above sea level—agreed April 22 to a collective agreement, ending a strike begun on April 1.

The Casapalca mine has been the scene of a number of frequently violent labor conflicts over the years due to poor pay and dangerous conditions. Years ago, the owners opted to use contracting firms to hire and pay workers. These businesses have a reputation for renegeing on promises once a strike has been called off.

According to the agreement, workers would return to their shifts on Monday without any type of retaliation or firings against union officials or workers in general. In addition, the contractors agreed to a raise of 1.50 soles (US\$.53) over the basic daily rate. The raise will be retroactive to January 1 and will stay in effect until December 31 of this year. The contractors have also promised a one-time "deal closer" payment of 200 soles (US\$70.57) on April 29.

Union officials will be given an "extraordinary bonus" beginning May 5 allowing them 150 days "so that they can conduct business and union activities," according to the news outlet *RPP*. The contractors have agreed to provide safety shoes and overalls that "will have adequate quality as much in materials as in construction, to permit an

efficient and safe performance of assigned labors.”

Mexican miners return to work soon after short strike at open pit mine

Over 3,000 mineworkers at the Peñasquito open pit gold and silver mine in Zacatecas suspended activities on the night of Tuesday, April 19 over non-payment and other issues. The workers were protesting the fact that in the last six months, Canadian-based firm Gold Corp has refused to pay overtime as well as monthly productivity and profit bonuses. On April 21 the miners returned to work.

The miners, members of the SNTMMSRM miners union, held an assembly in which they voted to go on “indefinite strike” until the problems were rectified.

Other complaints included working 12-hour shifts—sometimes for 14 consecutive days—and maltreatment by the mine’s administrative director, who laughed off demands for bonuses and threatened to fire protesting workers.

In addition to the SNTMMSRM miners, about 2,000 contract workers are employed at Peñasquito. Although they did not strike, operations were brought to a halt because, as SNTMMSRM section 304’s secretary explained, “the jobs and maneuvers are all related one with the other, like in a production line, and if one part of the process is detained, the entire complex stops.”

Haitian telecom workers strike privatized phone company

A strike that began on April 11 at Port-au-Prince telecom Natcom has spread to other areas, including Cap-Haitien, Cayes and Mirebalais. The company, formerly Haiti Teleco, was a state-owned firm prior to the selling of 60 percent of its shares to a Vietnamese telecom in April 2010.

The new company offered the employees a “choice” between two severance packages, Plan A and Plan B. As explained by Weekly News Update on the Americas, “Plan A provided a severance package for workers leaving immediately, while Plan B guaranteed employment for one full year but gave the company the option to terminate the employees at the end of the period, on Aug. 31, with much less severance pay than in Plan A.

“The Plan B workers, many of them long-term employees, are now striking for a larger severance package.”

Compliance with the strike has varied by location. In Cap-Haitien, a worker told ourhaititoday.com that “Only employees of the Administrative Division come to work.” On the other hand, in Mirebalais, an employee told the web site, “Aware of the precarious situation of Mirebalais in communication, we are a little flexible in respect of the work stoppage initiated by our colleagues in Port-au-Prince and other towns.” The article adds, “However, he continues, our flexibility does not mean that we are against the movement.”

Nurses oppose increased workloads that endanger patients

Nurses in several states are coming into conflict with hospital management over the drive to increase the number of patients that each nurse must care for and the resulting danger that this workload represents for patient safety.

Some 150 nurses at the Range Regional Health Services in Hibbing Minnesota delivered an intent-to-strike notice last week setting May 4 as the target for the beginning of a three-day strike. Nurses are frustrated after nine months of negotiations have failed to resolve their concerns about over-stressed staffing levels. Hibbing nurses are also struggling with scheduling issues and oppose management’s attempt to combine sick days and vacation days under a single category. Negotiators for the hospital and the Minnesota Nurses Association are scheduled to meet again on April 28.

Another 1,300 registered nurses at the Chicago Medical Center voted overwhelmingly to authorize their union, National Nurses United, to call a strike if their demands for better staffing ratios and an end to rotating shifts are not met. The two sides have been negotiating since last August.

Two weeks ago, 1,100 nurses at Tufts Medical Center in Boston granted strike authorization by a 70 percent margin as they seek to reduce the number of patients nurses must care for from as many as six or seven down to a maximum of four. Nurses at Saint Vincent’s Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts also authorized strike action over similar issues.

Casino workers duped by union to accept new deal

Last week workers at Caesars in Windsor, Ontario found out that their new contract was misrepresented to them by their union, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) when they voted narrowly to accept it earlier this month.

Workers interviewed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) at the union meeting where details of the deal were revealed, were outraged that it was not the contract they voted for. Among various distortions and omissions, a wage increase earlier reported to them by union negotiators does not come into effect for two years.

Union leaders admitted there was some ‘miscommunication’ but insist that there is no going back on the deal.



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