

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 May 2011

Argentine oil workers end strike

Oil workers in Argentina's southern Santa Cruz province returned to work April 26 after a strike over an April 1 deal reached between union and company negotiators.

The strike was precipitated by the agreement reached by the oil companies with the president of the Private Petrol Trade Union, Héctor Segovia. The deal included a 25 percent raise, rejected by the majority of workers because it did not keep pace with the inflation rate. Led by adjunct secretary Rubén Retamoso, workers struck and demanded that Segovia step down.

A chain of events followed involving intervention by the Labor Ministry, a judicial order suspending the leadership (including both Segovia and Retamoso), the bringing in of a "normalizer" (mediator) designated by the national union federation and the occupation of four union local headquarters by Segovia supporters. Meanwhile, Santa Cruz's daily production of

125,000 barrels was virtually halted, spurring concerns in Santa Cruz over lost revenues and nationally over possible shortages, both for national use and for export.

Workers returned to the job at 8:00 p.m. Tuesday. *Adital* reported, "The accord includes payment of lost salaries during the strike.... Also the intervention of...the delegate normalizer Carlos Flaquier, designated by the national federation for 90 days, during which he will call upon the affiliates to elect authorities, was announced." There were few other details regarding the nature of the deal ending the strike.

According to *MarketWatch*, "A union spokesman couldn't be reached for comment. However, an oil industry official said that while the strike formally ended Tuesday night, local police reported Wednesday that some disgruntled workers were blocking access to wells and preventing others from returning to work."

Buenos Aires bank employees: march, strike, binding arbitration

Bank clerks marched through downtown Buenos Aires on April 26 after failing to reach agreement on salary talks with management. Negotiators for the Bank Clerks' Association demanded a 30 to 35 percent raise; bank negotiators countered with an offer of 24 percent. The previous contract expired December 31.

The union called for a national mobilization, and claimed 90 percent compliance.

The Buenos Aires march took protesters to the headquarters of several of the banks in the "minicentro" business district. Marchers carried picket signs, chanted to the rhythm of *bombó* drums and set off firecrackers along the way.

The next day, the clerks stopped all bank business save for the payment of pensions, in spite of a call by the Labor Ministry for binding arbitration. After the ministry said it would fine the union 5,000 pesos (US\$1226) for each striking worker, the union leadership called off the strike.

Despite the union's backdown, the Labor Ministry has not withdrawn the fines. Union spokespeople claim that they were not notified in a timely manner, so the fines should be rescinded. Adrián Caneto, national subdirector for labor relations, calling the claim "a lie," told the press that the union "repeats the same inanity every year."

The mandatory talks—which have 15 days to reach a conclusion—began the morning of April 28.

Peruvian mine reopens after three-week strike and roadblock

Workers returned to work April 25 at the Uchucchacua silver mine after 21 days of a strike and road blockade, in which fighting between police and workers left one protester dead.

On April 4, contract workers struck for the second time in a year, with workers demanding better benefits from Peru's largest precious metals miner.

"Our demands, including payment of production bonuses from 2010 as well as protection equipment, food and shelter,

have not been met,” union leader Marcos Hurtado said. In addition, the 1,300 workers who walked out demanded that Minas Buenaventura, the mine’s owner, allocate public works funds to the local community.

The strike was declared illegal by the Labor Ministry. Buenaventura Chief Financial Officer Carlos Galvez told reporters, “This is a political dispute between the community and the Town Hall of Oyon and not labor-related. This strike will probably be over in a few days.”

In fact, the strike escalated into a roadblock by residents of Oyon, who pressed for more investment in improving the community. After eight days, the miners were told to go back to work by the union, but the residents continued the blockade. “We’ve already lifted the strike but residents won’t let people past, and the company isn’t concerned to make it secure (for us),” Hurtado told Reuters. “The community is blocking the access because Buenaventura isn’t resolving their problems.”

The stoppage ended after the local town hall and the community agreed to build public works.

Bermudan public service workers march over pay freeze

Shouting “We want our voices heard!” and “Solidarity forever!” some 800 members of the Bermuda Public Service Union (BPSU) marched on the British territory’s Parliament building in the capital of Hamilton on April 26. The protest was called in response to Prime Minister Paula Cox’s simultaneous granting of a raise to ministers while freezing public service workers’ wages.

Cox was not on the island at the time of the march; she was in England to attend the royal wedding. In fact, she had asked the BPSU to either march on Monday, the day before her departure, or postpone its march until her return next month.

Bermuda Public Services Union President Kevin Grant’s tone changed when he met Acting Premier Michael Scott and a number of ministers outside Cabinet. Claiming the march was the result of “a breakdown in communication,” he handed Scott a statement, which, according to the *Royal Gazette*, “stated the union would accept a pay freeze if Government gives assurance: there will be no compulsory redundancies; it takes all reasonable steps to advocate a price freeze on essential products and services; Ministers consider cutting their own salaries; considers setting up a jobs pact; both sides effect ways to save money.”

The statement concluded, “If the goal is to do more with less in these challenging economic times, then Government

must consider partnering with Bermudian unions and local employers to find ways to accelerate the recovery of Bermuda’s economy and employment opportunities.”

The Bermuda Industrial Union (BIU) declined to join the march, which took place during the workers’ lunch hour. BIU President Chris Fubert told the *Bermuda Sun*, “I don’t have authorization to march.”

Maine Governor supports weakening of state’s child-labor law

Maine Republican Governor Paul LePage announced last week that he supports current legislation aimed at changing the state’s child-labor laws by undercutting the minimum wage with a training wage and extending the number of hours young people can work. Bill LD 1346, introduced in the state senate, would make it legal to pay anyone under the age of 20 a training wage \$2 an hour under the state’s current minimum wage for a period of 180 days.

The bill would also eliminate a maximum on the number of hours that minors 16 years of age and older can work on a school day and would allow minors under 16 years to work up to four hours on a school day when school is not in session. Currently, Maine’s minimum wage is \$7.50 an hour, which means companies would be able to implement training wages of \$5.50 an hour.

A second bill, LD 516, would permit students 16 and 17 years of age to work until 11:00 p.m. on school nights and put in a total of 24 hours per week. Currently the state limits students in this age bracket to working until 10:00 p.m. and only 20 hours per week. LePage told a town hall meeting last week, “I went to work at 11 years old. I became governor. It’s not a big deal. Work doesn’t hurt anybody.”



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