

Workers Struggles, the Americas

10 May 2011

Argentine teachers strike, block roads to oilfields

Teachers in the southern Argentinean province of Santa Cruz have gone on indefinite strike over wage demands. In addition to the work stoppage, hundreds of educators blockaded access roads to a number of oilfields last week, halting operations at oilfields operated by Repsol, Sinopec and Pan American Energy. At some sites, security guards joined the teachers.

The teachers took the actions after rejecting a government offer of a 25 percent wage hike, which is lower than the current rate of inflation. The teachers are demanding a 50 percent raise.

The blockades came barely a week after the end of a 25-day strike by oilfield workers over salary issues. That strike paralyzed production and resulted in intervention by the Labor Ministry, which suspended the oil workers union leadership, imposed binding arbitration and ordered the workers back to the job.

Provincial governor Daniel Peralta is threatening to take similar steps against the teachers. However, as reported El Tribuno. "For their part, [teachers union] Adosac spokespeople signaled that if binding arbitration is decreed, it will be the educators' Congress that will decide to comply or not."

Meanwhile, the compulsory talks between the oil workers union and oil firms have failed, bringing on a renewed strike. Calling the oil companies' offer of a 20 percent raise "derisory and disrespectful," union secretary general Alberto Roberti called members out on May 7 at 26 plants and refineries in the region. The union is demanding 36 percent.

One-day strike by Argentine sugar workers

Sugar processing plant workers, members of the Tucumán Sugar Industry Workers Federation (Fotia) carried out a one-day strike on Thursday May 5 over stalled parity talks with CART, the Tucumán Sugar Industry Center. The negotiations are taking place in Buenos Aires, and bargainers have been unable to reach agreement on salary raises and working conditions. A particular sticking point is CART's reluctance to agree to redefine more workers as permanent.

In terms of salaries, Fotia wants a 37 percent raise as opposed to CART's offer of 30 percent. However, according to a La Gaceta report, one factor that has generated ill will among the Fotia team is the use by CART of a battery of attorneys in negotiations.

"These are people who never in their lives saw a machine or a canebrake. And they have no idea what they're talking about. They don't understand the functions of the workers in the factory, nor do they know anything about harvesting sugar cane," Fotia adjunct secretary general Andrés Galván told reporters.

Galván also complained about the delays caused by having the attorneys as go-betweens, with each often unaware of what the others are doing.

Compliance with the stoppage, according to Fotia secretary general was total. In a meeting of secretaries general, discussion centered on extending

the strike if there is no progress in negotiations.

Located in Argentina's northwest, Tucumán is the smallest and most densely populated of the provinces, and is a highly productive sugar production and processing center.

Negotiations are scheduled to resume on Wednesday.

Parguayan hydroelectric power plant workers strike

Paraguayan workers at the Itaipú power generation facility went on strike midnight May 3, demanding the signing and fulfillment of a collective bargaining contract.

The workers are employed at Itaipú Binacional, a huge dam and power generation facility on the Paraná River that separates Brazil and Paraguay. The plant provides about 95 billion kilowatt-hours per year, supplying 90 percent of Paraguay's and 19 percent of Brazil's electricity, second only to the Three Gorges hydroelectric complex in China.

The workers are represented by three unions, Steibi, Siconap/s and Sitraibi, who accuse Itaipú interim general director Gustavo Codas of seeking "the destruction" of the national organizations of workers with "coercive measures" and violations of the Collective Contract of Conditions of Work (CCCT).

Americaeconomia.com reported, "According to the complaints, among the 21 supposedly unfulfilled articles by the binational entity, they mention firings without summary hearings and without communication with the union, the designation of directors without union participation and without priority being given to those who belong to the proper framework of the entity."

Other issues include benefits and provisions for housing.

Union officials claimed that the strike would last for a month. At the same time, they pledged that "essential services" would be provided and 300 workers were allowed to pass the barricade set up at the entrance to the dam for that purpose. The three unions have a membership of approximately 1,700, and there are around 1,000 contract workers indirectly employed at Itaipú. Union spokespeople claimed 90 percent compliance with the strike.

Seventeen die in two separate accidents at Mexican mines

Two separate mining accidents claimed seventeen lives in Mexico last week. On Tuesday May 3, an explosion trapped fourteen miners in a pocito ("little pit"), a small temporary mine near the town of Sabinas in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila.

The mine, owned by Asociación de Carboneros BINSAs, is one of a multitude of small poorly regulated mines in Mexico. Short-term quick-profit enterprises, pocitos are dug with minimal consideration for safety or the surrounding community, and with little or no inspection. Sabinas

mayor Jesús María Montemayor Garza told reporters that the mine is little more than a derrick poised over a single vertical shaft with four horizontal tunnels—just 1.2 meters or barely 4 feet high—radiating outward.

The Sabinas mine was about three weeks old and authorities had been unaware of its existence.

Rescue efforts were hampered by the high concentration of methane gas that remained in the shaft, and by Thursday authorities expressed no hope that any of the trapped miners would be found alive. By Friday, nine bodies had been recovered. One miner, 15-year-old Jesús Fernando Lara Ruiz, who was not in the mineshaft at the time of the explosion, was severely burned and lost his right forearm to amputation.

Mothers, wives and sisters of the miners denounced the mine owner, who “has not shown his face,” and called on him to pay their loved ones’ salaries, because “the children have to eat.”

Coahuila was the scene of Mexico’s worst mining disaster in 2006 when 65 mine workers were killed by an explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine. The bodies were never recovered, and ill feelings toward the company and the authorities among residents still linger.

In Jalisco, which alone has over 150 pocitos, a landslide at an opal mine in the small Jalisco town of Hostotipaquillo buried three men early Thursday evening. According to workers, the three were not employees, but had entered the mine after hours, and were killed by the collapse of a 35-meter (115 feet) wall of dirt.

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Honduras: suspended teachers hold protest, are dislodged by police

A group of 18 teachers, who were among 305 educators suspended for participation in strikes and protests in the last two months, held a protest on the ground floor of the Honduran National Congress building in Tegucigalpa May 3. At about midnight they were dislodged and driven out by club-wielding police.

The teachers—about 30 this time—returned later in the afternoon to hold their protest at the Plaza La Merced, an annex of the Legislative Palace. They announced a 24-hour fast as “a peaceful action to ask the government to pay attention to the conflict” between the teachers, members of the FOMH teachers federation and the government of Porfirio Lobos.

FOMH director Luis Sosa told reporters about the previous night and noted that the police injured several protesters, but above all the women. He reiterated their intention to continue the protests until the suspended teachers are restored to their posts. “We are the only support for our families and we don’t have resources to pay for water, lights, the telephone and the house, therefore we have no alternative.”

The teachers have been engaged in protests against the government for months over unpaid back wages, attempts to privatize education, laws undermining teachers’ rights and cancellation of the government’s debt with the teachers’ retirement fund.

California nurses stage 5-day strike against concessions

Nurses at Children's Hospital Oakland launched a five-day strike May 4 against wage and benefit concessions. The 750 members of the California Nurses Union (CNA) are opposed to the healthcare plans proposed by hospital management which, in one case, would require nurses to pay up to an additional \$4,000 per year in premiums and in another case the premiums would be waived but the plan requires a very high deductible. Nurses are also critical of the hospital's wage offer, which will place the unit's salaries under those of nurses at other Bay-area hospitals.

The hospital claimed the concessions were warranted due to operating losses and the increasing cost of healthcare. Management canceled elective surgery and hired 125 temporary replacement nurses in an effort to cope with the strike.

Nurses have been without a contract since July of 2010. Last October, the CNA called a three-day strike to call attention to hospital officials' intransigence.

Ohio pharmacy strike nears two-month mark

Pharmacy workers at six Rite Aid stores in Northeast Ohio are closing in on two months of strike against health care concessions. Rite Aid is demanding the implementation of a new health care plan and provider that will impose dramatic increases on workers.

“My annual deductible would go from \$250 to \$1,200,” Reatha Tolliver told the Cleveland Plain Dealer. In previous contracts, workers had agreed to forgo higher wages in return for a union-run health care plan with lower deductibles and few co-pays. Rite Aid now wants to select a provider of its own choosing.

Rite Aid chairwoman and former CEO Mary Sammons received a combined \$3.2 million in compensation during 2010. Current Rite Aid CEO John Standley doubled his take last year, bringing in \$4.5 million. The six Rite Aid pharmacies are located in Cleveland, Painesville, University Heights, Parma and Lorain, Ohio.

Saskatchewan teachers walk out

Last Thursday, 12,000 teachers across the province of Saskatchewan staged an unprecedented one-day walk out with over 2,000 rallying at the provincial legislature in Regina.

While their union, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation called it a ‘study session’, teachers voted 95 per-cent in favor of job action last month in response to a contract offer from the Saskatchewan School Boards Association of a 5.5 per-cent wage increase over three years. The teachers had been asking for a 12 per-cent hike to bring them into line with their counterparts in neighboring provinces.

Saskatchewan has seen a sharp rise in housing prices and other living costs in the recent period and many teachers have left the profession for better paying work to make ends meet. They have been without a contract since last August and their union says actions of this sort could escalate in coming weeks.

Supreme court denies farm workers union rights

In an historic decision, late last month the Supreme court of Canada

struck down an earlier decision granting agricultural workers in Ontario the right that other workers in Canada have, labor rights protection and the right to join a union.

This decision by the federal court is the result of an appeal by the Ontario Liberal government of a lower court decision arising from a successful challenge to Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms launched by the Union of Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) in 2009.

The decision not only reverses earlier rulings but flies in the face of UN findings that Canada's and Ontario are in violation of international conventions on human rights for 80,000 farm workers in Ontario.



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