

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 May 2011

Argentinean oil workers signs accord

After weeks of industrial actions and under threats from Argentina's Labor Ministry, negotiators for the Argentine Oil, Gas and Biocombustibles Union Federation signed an accord with industry representatives on May 13. The agreement contains a two-stage raise of 24 percent—15 percent this month and 9 percent in October—below the federation's original demand of 36 percent and also below the rate of inflation. It is one percent less than the original agreement that sparked a conflict between the union leadership and dissidents.

The strike and blockades began in April after union president Héctor Segovia's acceptance of a 25 percent raise. A dissident faction struck and demanded that Segovia step down. The Labor Ministry suspended the leaders of both factions and imposed binding arbitration. When talks passed the deadline for resolution, the union leadership threatened to strike anew; Labor Minister Carlos Tomada responded that the union would be "susceptible to sanctions" if it did not return to the table. The agreement was signed the next day.

Chilean students and educational workers demonstrate

More than 100,000 students, workers, teachers and academics struck and marched throughout Chile on May 12, demanding an increase in the education budget and rejection of privatization and structural changes to the education department. The actions were endorsed by a number of organizations including the Workers Unitary Center (CUT), the Council of Rectors, the College of Professors, and the National Fiscal Employees Association (ANEF).

The marches were peaceful, but were met with a heavy police presence. In Santiago, where some 50,000 protesters converged, police hemmed in marchers and fired teargas. One student was hit in the eye with a canister and is in critical condition.

Dominican Republic: strike ends after protesters shot dead

At least three people were shot to death and dozens injured

during protests in several towns in the north of the Dominican Republic May 10. Twenty-two-year-old student José Aquiles Jones Núñez and Joel Martínez Rosario, 27, were shot in separate incidents related to protests demanding job creation in San Francisco de Macorís, about 150 miles from the capital Santo Domingo.

The protest was organized by a group called the Broad Front for Popular Struggle (Falpo) to demand that the government provide employment in the area. According to *Hoy Digital*, Núñez "was impacted by a shot...by hooded subjects while he was being transported in a Caribe Tours enterprise autobus." Martínez, the brother of a popular bachata singer, "fell struck by a bullet in the mouth...during encounters between police and groups of demonstrators in the San Martín de Porres suburb. This act was attributed to a police patrol."

The Latin American *Herald Tribune* reported one dead in the municipality of Moca. 26-year-old accounting student and Falpo organizer Alfredo Gómez died when a police officer, according to a Falpo spokesman, "without a word fired at the crowd, killing our comrade and wounding four others." Police spokesman Col. Antonio Pérez claimed that Gómez was shot by another demonstrator.

The strike, which had closed almost 100 percent of businesses and had lasted 48 hours, was called off after the deaths. However, a Falpo spokesman told *Hoy Digital* that the strikes would continue in some sectors until jailed demonstrators were released. There has been no response by the government to the protesters' demands.

Eleven teachers join hunger strike in Honduras

On May 10, eleven Honduran teachers joined a hunger strike begun by their colleagues a week earlier to demand the rehiring of 305 teachers laid off due to their participation in demonstrations and strikes over the last few months. The actions involved over 60,000 educators, who were protesting the undermining of their rights, moves toward privatization, nonpayment of overdue salaries and money withheld from the teachers' retirement fund.

The government reacted to the strikes and demonstrations with violent repression, with police attacking and arresting protesters. President Porfirio Lobos, claiming that the teachers were denying children the right to education, imposed the layoffs.

The hunger strikers have set up tents on the ground floor of the

National Congress in Tegucigalpa, the capital. Yanina Parada, one of the original hunger strikers, told La Tribuna, “We will not move from here while the government continues without solutions to the educators’ grave problems, and therefore today we are denouncing these outrages internationally.”

Puebla, Mexico city workers union reaches agreement on raise

After several months of negotiations, the Mexican city of Puebla and negotiators for the Puebla City Workers’ Sole Union have reached an agreement on raises. The accord will raise wages by four percent (five percent for sanitation workers) and includes a five percent hike in the Mexican federal institute for worker’s housing, Infonavit, along with a one-time bonus of 2,000 pesos (US\$170).

Diario Cambio reported, “With this accord, the process of calling for a strike that had been started a month ago, before the Tribunal of Municipal Arbitration, was cancelled.”

The agreement affects about 2,300 unionized workers. Union bargainers had entered negotiations demanding two-digit raises—in the case of the sanitation workers up to 40 percent. While union head Israel Pacheco Velásquez expressed satisfaction with the deal, the inflation rate in the month of April alone was 3.36 percent.

New York union imposes healthcare costs on workers

A New York state local of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is requiring 35,000 of its members to begin paying for the cost of healthcare coverage. Local 1199 of the SEIU has begun requiring a weekly \$30 payroll deduction from home care attendants under a plan administered by Fidelis Care in partnership with the union, New York State and New York City. The SEIU has not stated how many workers authorized the deduction, but the annual \$1,560 hike in the cost of medical coverage could force many of the workers, who are low paid, to drop coverage.

The program began three years ago when New York state allowed 1199 SEIU home care workers to enroll in a public insurance program called Family Health Plus. Very quickly, the union was compelled to increase the hours required for workers’ spouses to be eligible for the plan. In 2009, spousal coverage was eliminated. And in the fall of 2010, coverage for dependents was stricken from the plan.

Crain’s New York Business commented, “Health costs have escalated in part because so many of the workers are in poorer health themselves... The union members’ greater level of medical service utilization results in higher premiums.”

Dispute over Connecticut nursing home strike settlement

The New England Healthcare Employees Union District 1199 announced at a rally May 12 that they had come to an agreement ending a 13-month strike at four Connecticut nursing homes. Later that day Spectrum Healthcare, which operates the nursing homes, said it was “perplexed” at the announcement and said only a “framework for a contract” had been reached.

District 1199 claimed that the terms of the agreement would restore pre-strike positions, shifts and hours for the 340 workers and Spectrum would be required to pay \$395,000 to cover losses sustained by the strikers. According to the union, the settlement terms came out of a National Labor Relations Board trial.

Health care workers strike across Saskatchewan

Over the past week, hundreds of health care workers in Prince Albert, Swift Current and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan walked off the job as the result of an ongoing contract dispute with the Saskatchewan Association of Health Associations (SAHO).

The workers affected are members of the Health Sciences Association of Saskatchewan (HSAS) and include counselors, dietitians, health inspectors and social workers who have been without a contract for over two years. A central issue in negotiations is wages, with HSAS asking for an 18.5 per-cent increase over four years while SAHO is offering only 7.5 percent over the same period.

Although most of the strikers returned to work after one or two days, those in Swift Current remain on strike and the union has not ruled out further action.



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