

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 May 2011

Argentinean teachers end strike

After nearly a month of protests, teachers in Argentina's Santa Cruz province ended their strike and returned to their classrooms on May 16. The teachers, members of the Santa Cruz Teachers Association (Adosac) and the Technical Education Teachers Association (AMET) walked out April 15 after successive partial strike actions of 24, 48 and 72 hours failed to budge the government.

The teachers had demanded a 50 percent increase of the base salary as opposed to the government offer of 25 percent. Provincial Labor Minister Raúl Santibáñez denounced the strike as "political," claimed that the teachers "are holding our kids hostage" and ordered binding arbitration on May 10, an order that the unions rejected. A local judge imposed fines of 1,000 pesos (US\$245) per day on each striking teacher for "disobedience."

Adhesion to the strike began to diminish as the Provincial Education Council brought in "substitutes," i.e., scabs. Adosac and AMET appealed the ruling and have requested the intervention of the National Labor Ministry.

Argentina: Pharmacy workers hold partial work stoppage

Argentinean hospital pharmacy workers, members of the FATSA health workers confederation, held a 24-hour strike May 18 over stalled negotiations. FATSA bargainers are demanding a 33.8 percent raise—as opposed to management's offer of 25 percent over a 5-month period—and a reduction of the workweek from 48 to 44 hours.

FATSA negotiators are calling for a 48-hour strike on May 27-28 if talks remain stalled. *Clarín* reported May 19, "In keeping with what has happened in sectors like foodstuffs and metallurgy, it is not discounted that the Labor Ministry may intervene in the conflict, through the decreeing of binding arbitration."

Strikes and protests in Brazil

Last week witnessed a number of protest actions and strikes in Brazil in response to the deteriorating situation facing large sections of the working class.

In at least 12 states the National Union for Popular Housing (UNMP) held occupations and demonstrations over the shortage of housing for poor and working class families, surpassing 5.5 million units. Among UNMP's demands are increased funding for the "My House, My Life" low-income family housing program, strengthening and consolidation of the National Habitation System, formation of a Popular Habitation Policy, and availability of unoccupied lands and buildings.

In addition, the UNMP protested the criminalization of protests and police and military repression of demonstrators and squatters.

Some 2,000 contract workers at a Petrobras refinery in the São Paulo city of Cubatao began a strike May 19 over salaries. The workers want a 12 percent wage hike and a bonus.

In a General Motors auto plant in São José dos Campos, also in São Paulo state, day and evening shift workers staged a 24-hour strike over the company's most recent profit-sharing offer. The vote for the walkout was unanimous. The plant produces 400,000 vehicles per year and is planning to expand operations. Workers are demanding a larger share of the company's profits.

In the southern state of Santa Catarina, over 39,000 teachers struck May 17 over demands that the state government adopt the national base salary of 1,187 reais (US\$735); the current base pay in Santa Catarina is 609 reais (US\$377).

Four-day strike in Dominican Republic province ends

Residents of the city of Salcedo, capital of the northern Dominican province of Hermanas Mirabal, ended a strike May 21 after four days. The strike—which closed down most businesses—was called by an organization called FALPO (Broad Front for Popular Struggle) to demand that the central government in Santo Domingo take a number of actions to improve the lot of the area's residents, including completion of unfinished highway projects, alleviation of the area's high unemployment rate, cessation of power cutoffs, lowering of fuel costs and increased funding for education.

An earlier strike that took place on May 10 was called off after two protesters were shot dead by police. On May 18, a number of confrontations between police and protesters were reported, with police claiming they were fired upon by unknown assailants. Residents of the Los Mangos neighborhood denounced a police agent who they said fired shots from the roof of a police barracks, damaging 15 houses and the local sports stadium. No deaths were reported.

The strike was lifted when a commission of government officials promised to solve the problems, beginning with the completion of the road projects. In addition, a "Monitoring Commission" made up of representatives of popular groups, the Catholic Church, the mayor, a senator and the provincial governor was formed.

Mexico: Strikes and blockades by teachers in state of Oaxaca

Seeking to pressure state and federal governments to meet their demands, teachers in the National Education Workers Union (SNTE) struck and blockaded public buildings and roads in various cities in the Mexican state of Oaxaca on May 18 and 19. Over 70,000 teachers blocked

access to the state Congress, the Civil Registry and other buildings in the capital city of Oaxaca, while teachers occupied municipal buildings in all the major cities in the state.

In addition to salary demands, SNTE is calling for an accounting for professor Carlos René Román Salazar, who disappeared March 14, the sacking of a number of government officials. It also demanded “the punishment of the assassin Ulises Ruiz Ortiz and all those responsible for the aggressions against the people of Oaxaca in 2006,” referring to the teachers’ political struggles and subsequent repression—presided over by then-governor Ruiz Ortiz—that left from 17 to 27 people dead.

Paraguayan hydroelectric workers end strike

After ten hours of intense negotiations, management and union reps at the Itaipú Binacional power generation facility signed an accord May 20 for the 2011-2012 collective contract period.

The strike was called on May 3 over the arbitrary treatment of workers by the facility’s directors, especially general director Gustavo Codas. Benefits and provision of housing were also issues.

Trinidadian public service workers campaign to oust union president

Still angry over Trinidad and Tobago’s Public Services Association (PSA) president Watson Duke’s acceptance of a pitiful five percent raise last month, a group of PSA members has launched a campaign to strip him of his office. The group, which calls itself “Disgruntled, Dissatisfied, Disadvantaged Public Officers,” has launched a petition drive—Project 5000—to gather at least 5,000 signatures calling for Duke’s immediate resignation.

In the months preceding wage talks with the government’s chief financial officer, Duke had loudly denounced the five percent offer and had led marches and demonstrations against it. On April 8, however, he emerged from a meeting with Chief Personnel Officer (CPO) Stephanie Lewis having agreed to the five percent. Shortly thereafter, he went on a three-week vacation.

In a press conference May 20, Project 5000 spokespeople denounced Duke as a “leader who lacks negotiating skills and experience” and criticized a number of inaccuracies that Duke purportedly cited to justify his capitulation.

The drive is not the first attempt to punish Duke over the “five percent betrayal.” While he was on vacation, members circulated a similar petition and at one point publicly beat him in effigy.

Trinidad and Tobago: Teachers “rest and reflect” over wage offer

The Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers’ Association (TTUTA) called on its members to stay home and “rest and reflect” over the five percent wage hike offer from CPO Stephanie Lewis Friday, May 20. TTUTA estimated a 75-80 percent compliance rate—about 9,000 teachers—while the Ministry of Education claimed that the rate was more like 50 percent.

The two-island country’s current inflation rate is around 11 percent.

TTUTA officials criticize Lewis for diverging from the External Labour Market survey, which has been the basis for wage hike negotiations since 2002. In addition, according to TTUTA first vice president Davanand Sinanan, the union rejects her call for an across-the-board increase.

Until the “rest and reflect” Friday, the union has limited members to demonstrations and “Red Days” (Thursdays in which teachers wear red). Asked about future actions, general secretary Peter Wilson told *Trinidad Express* that teachers would continue the “Red Days” and, “if necessary, teachers would march in protest, and “reflect” again.” The next meeting with CPO Lewis is scheduled for Friday, May 27.

One day strike at California hospital complex

About 2,500 medical workers and staff at Kaiser Permanente’s flagship Medical Center in Los Angeles and other Southern California work locations carried out a one-day strike May 18 to protest proposed contract changes that will affect medical and retirement benefits. Three separate bargaining units of the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), which cover nurses, social workers, dieticians, psychologists and other specialists, took part in the walkout.

The NUHW is also raising the issue of violations by Kaiser Permanente of California’s legally mandated nurse-to-patient ratios. “They’re not giving us enough staff, and they’re not giving us enough voice as to people who do the work,” NUHW member Susan Whitney told KABC News. Kaiser and the NUHW have been in contract negotiations since April 2010.

Petition to decertify union in year-long Mississippi strike

Strikebreakers at the Omnova Solutions, Inc., plant in Columbus, Mississippi have submitted a petition to decertify the United Steelworkers Local 748-L after the strike by 168 unionized workers passed the one-year mark on May 21. The National Labor Relations Board confirmed the reception of a petition and a hearing involving all parties will be held soon.

The contract covering the original group of workers who have been on strike expired May 15, 2010. At that time Omnova management demanded a new agreement that eliminated seniority rights, imposed an incentives-based program, eliminated shift and vacation preferences and cut deeply into benefits. More than 100 strikebreakers are currently employed by the company. Omnova, which fabricates upholstery products, employs 2,300 people at operations in Europe, America and Asia.

Postal strike looms

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) has set May 24 as a strike deadline for 54,000 postal workers across the country after they voted 94.5 per-cent in favor of strike action. Canada Post has said that with the notice they have been given, the earliest date for a legal strike would be two days later but also say they are determined to reach a deal before that.

Main issues in negotiations include wages and benefits, staffing levels

and working conditions. CUPW cites demands by Canada Post for reduced wage and benefit levels for new employees as well as the imposition of a defined contribution plan for pensions as major hurdles for a new deal.

The last four-year contract for postal workers expired in January. The CUPW has already agreed to allow volunteers to deliver government cheques in the event of a strike.

Saskatchewan teachers to resume strike action

In a continuation of job action begun earlier this month, 12,000 teachers across the province will hold a two-day strike on May 25-26. Talks with a provincial government bargaining committee broke off last Thursday.

A central issue in this dispute is wages. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation originally asked for a 12 percent hike the first year. It subsequently modified that to 16 percent over three years. The government is offering only six percent over that term.

Aerospace workers set to strike

Only months after getting union recognition, 65 workers at Northstar Aerospace in Windsor, Ontario have voted to go on strike beginning May 24.

The workers joined the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) last October but have not yet been able to get a first contract with the company since that time. Workplace fairness and wages are central concerns for workers at the plant who, in some cases, are paid five different wage rates for the same job.

Northstar produces gear and transmission parts for aircraft at the plant outside of Windsor.



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