

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 June 2011

Protests for wage increases, against police attack on striking Argentine teachers

Teachers held a number of strikes and protests in Argentina last week over salary demands and repression of their colleagues. In Puerto Madryn, Esquel, Chubut, Rosario, Buenos Aires and other cities, teachers struck, marched and blockaded streets. Estimates of adhesion varied by location from 30 to 80 percent.

One issue highlighted by the protests was the June 23 attack on an encampment of teachers in Buenos Aires. Federal police violently evicted a group of teachers who were attempting to set up an encampment in front of Buenos Aires' labor ministry. The police dislodged the teachers using water cannons, arresting four and injuring nine.

The dislodged teachers are from the southern province of Santa Cruz and have been on strike for two months over wage demands, which have been met with intransigence by the provincial government. The encampment was meant to bring attention to their demands and force the intervention of the Ministry of Labor.

The teachers, members of Santa Cruz's Adosac union, demand a salary increase of 50 percent to offset the nation's inflation rate. The provincial government has remained adamant with its offer of 25 percent.

According to the *Argentina Independent*, "Ministry officials received Santa Cruz teachers and concluded that the issue should be resolved by the provincial jurisdiction and not through the national labor ministry."

The Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic (Ctera) called for a nationwide one-hour strike and assembly on Monday to protest the repression of the teachers.

Guyanian municipal workers go slow, strike over unpaid wages

Hundreds of municipal workers in Guyana's capital city, Georgetown, angered over delays in payment of their salaries, went on a "go slow" on June 16 and a partial strike June 17. The workers had yet to receive salary payments for the month of May.

The workers cut short their strike on the 17th after they were promised that they would be paid that afternoon. However, by the end of the day, only a small number of them had received paychecks. The workers, members of the Guyana Local Government Officers Union (GLGOU) the Guyana Labour Union (GLU), were instructed to continue with the "go slow" but not to strike.

Payments are made to the workers through a number of banks, particularly Republic Bank, which has delayed payments since

February in some cases. Garbage collection is done through two contracting companies, which have threatened to pull their trucks if the bank continues to fail to pay them, posing the possibility of garbage piling up and creating a health hazard.

A meeting between union reps and the government was called for June 23 to discuss wage payments for May and June.

Georgetown has suffered from chronic revenue shortfalls dating back to the 1990s. An unnamed city official told *demerawaves.com* that since "the flows will not be enough to do so," workers would not be paid for June until after August 1. The official added that the city government is likely to pressure the GLGOU and GLU executives to accept the "retrenchment" of 272 of the 908 municipal workers.

Mexico: health workers end strike in one section, others remain out

On Wednesday, June 22, members of section 70 of the National Health Secretariat Workers' Union (SNTSA) in Vera Cruz ended a strike begun Monday. The return to work followed the signing of an agreement between the department and providers of uniforms, protective equipment and work materials demanded by the workers.

The workers are part of the state's vector prevention program, which combats mosquito infestation in the warm and humid region. They struck to demand the provision of essential equipment, such as uniforms and protective equipment for fumigation, for which they have been waiting for six months. Vera Cruz will soon be entering its rainiest season, in which the danger of dengue transmission is highest.

The problems have not been resolved for other sections of the SNTSA, however. Sections 71 of San Andrés Tuxtla and 74 of Pánuco were not included in the deal, and remained on strike.

Mexican elementary school teachers end 23-day strike

Mexico's National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE) announced that it had reached an agreement with authorities June 23 after 23 days on strike. According to CNTE director Jorge Cázares Torres, the agreement has designated 465 million pesos (US\$39 million) for construction and infrastructure improvements for elementary schools in the state of Michoacán.

In addition, the monies will be used for free breakfasts for some children and the creation of positions for auxiliary educational personnel. Also included in the accord is a salary increase of 4.75 percent.

The strike, which began on May 31, affected around 700,000 students and included a June 3 protest march to the governor's mansion. Classes restarted on Friday.

Panamanian teachers march, call for national strike

Some 2,000 members of 16 Panamanian teachers' unions marched in protest against education policies on June 23 in Panama City. They ended their march near the presidential palace, where delegates handed over a petition to authorities.

The demands included quality education, transformation of the curriculum, revision of salaries and incentives and the rehiring of teachers who have been fired. A major demand was the sacking of education minister Lucy Molinar. An appointee of right-wing president Ricardo Martinelli, Molinar has pushed a "competitiveness" agenda that entails private-public partnerships, business-oriented curriculum changes, undermining of teachers' rights and evaluations whose validity has been called into question by teachers.

The march followed a general assembly in which attendees voted to call for a national strike, although a date was not agreed upon. Molinar had forbidden the holding of the assembly, since it closed classrooms for the day. The teachers defied the order and held the assembly and march anyway.

Nonetheless, from a membership of 30,000, 2,000 was not a strong turnout, though union officials claimed there was widespread support for the action. One union, the Authentic Independent Teachers Association, abstained from participation.

Rally to support Southern California grocery workers

Members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) picketed a Ralph's supermarket in Inglewood, California, Monday to support Southern California grocery workers who have been without a contract for three months.

Some 62,000 members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) employed at Ralph's/Food for Less, Vons/Pavillion and Albertson chains are facing demands for steep concessions, including \$450 million in cuts to health benefits. The UFCW has proposed its own health care cuts, including an increase in weekly employee contributions from \$7 to \$9 per week for individuals and from \$15 to \$23 per week for families.

The grocery workers' contract expired in March. In April, workers voted for strike authorization. However, the union has refused to call a strike. Meanwhile, Vons and Albertson officials said there had been progress in the talks, with a tentative agreement reached on the question of pensions.

Southern California grocery workers faced a five-month strike/lockout in 2003-2004 that ended with the UFCW accepting all the major concessions demanded by management, including a two-tier wages system and cuts to pension and health benefits.

Honeywell workers mark one year of lockout

Workers at a Honeywell Inc. uranium processing plant in Metropolis, Illinois, marked the one-year anniversary of a management lockout with a June 25 rally that brought together 800 supporters. The 228 members of the United Steelworkers were locked out June 28, 2010, following the expiration of their contract. Management has continued operations during the lockout with strikebreakers.

Outstanding issues include overtime pay, medical leave, the institution of an inferior pension plan for new hires and a company-paid meal allowance for staff who work overtime.

The Metropolis plant mills yellow cake uranium into uranium hexafluoride that is frozen and sold for use by the nuclear power industry. Since the lockout, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has levied 17 serious workplace safety violations against the company. The violations stemmed from a December 22, 2010, release of hydrogen fluoride vapors.

Saskatchewan insurance strike ends under threat

Two days after the provincial government of Brad Wall introduced back-to-work legislation, and three days after it began, a strike by 470 crop insurance workers has ended with the signing of a new contract.

The 470 workers who are members of the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union (SGEU) had been without a contract for almost two years, but the Saskatchewan Party government, a right-wing political amalgamation, cited devastating floods to justify the threat of legislating an end to the strike.

The new contract, which has yet to be ratified, provides wage increases of only 5.5 percent over three years, but SGEU leaders say they are happy the strike ended with a negotiated settlement.



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