

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 July 2011

Argentine hospital workers continue limited strikes

In a repeat of measures carried out in late June, hospital workers in the Buenos Aires area held short industrial actions last week. Medical and technical employees of the Alejandro Posadas and Juan P. Garrahan Hospitals stopped work and marched to the Labor Ministry on July 13 “in defense of the public hospital and public health, the personnel and patients,” as a press release from the Posadas Hospital Health Professionals Association (APHP) declared.

On the same day, medical workers at the Ricardo Gutiérrez Children’s Hospital held their eleventh limited strike of the year. The last strike was a two-day stoppage on June 28-29. A number of musicians came to entertain the workers and patients and express support.

Non-medical personnel announced a plan to strike at all Buenos Aires health centers on July 27. They will set up a tent at Gutiérrez to which they have invited workers from other facilities to come.

The demands of the workers include the reopening of parity talks, compliance with an agreement signed in August 2009, a 40 percent pay raise (as opposed to the hospitals’ offer of 25 percent), increased staffing and an end to chronic equipment and supply shortages.

Miners return to work after one-day strike at Chilean copper mine

Some 15,000 mine employees, joined by 30,000 contract laborers, walked off the job on July 11 at Chile’s state-owned Codelco mining complex over demands to be included in discussions of restructuring plans. The one-day “warning strike” (*huelga de advertencia*) was called by Codelco union leaders against plans for what they call a “covert privatization” by the government and Codelco management. Workers resumed work the next day.

Mining Minister Laurence Golborne denounced the strike as “illegal” and vociferously denied suggestions that the government had any plans to privatize Codelco.

The strike—the first in 18 years—coincided with the 40th anniversary of the nationalization of Chile’s copper industry during the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, who died in the 1973 coup headed by General Augusto Pinochet. Although the Pinochet dictatorship brutally imposed privatization and other free market policies on Chile’s economy, the copper industry remained nationalized, serving as “a cash cow for the armed forces,” as the *Latin American Herald Tribune* recently characterized it.

The *LAHT* adds: “Over time, however, the minerals sector was

opened to private firms, and Codelco now accounts for only a third of Chile’s annual copper output of around 5.7 million tons,” thus prompting calls for modernization. Restructuring would entail downsizing the workforce by at least 2,600 workers and incurring debts, which could be used as a pretext for eventual privatization.

The resort to contractors has already privatized over 30,000 jobs. Contract workers have demands beyond the “place at the table” requested by the union bureaucrats: better pay, job security, better safety, health and working conditions. Codelco refuses to negotiate directly with them, prompting some—like contract workers’ union president Cristián Cuevas—to broach the possibility of a general strike if their demands remain unaddressed.

Venezuelan university employees strike for 24 hours

On July 14, employees at autonomous universities, colleges and other higher education institutions stopped work throughout Venezuela against government policies. The University Workers Federation (Fetrauniversitario), which called the strike, claimed 90 percent adherence among the more than 70,000 university workers in the country. At the University of Zulia (LUZ), the University of Zulia Workers Union (Soluz) claimed 100 percent compliance.

Fetrauniversitario issued the strike call in response to the slow pace of negotiations, which were unilaterally delayed one week by the education ministry. Among the points of contention are pensions, hospitalization, surgery and maternity coverage, application of clauses regarding costs such as funeral expenses and a manual describing duties.

The principal objective of the action is the restitution of the former tabulation of the salary schedule. The employees and authorities had originally agreed to a 7 percent increment from one level to the next, but the ministry abruptly dropped the increase to 4 percent.

Around 13,600 workers and administrative personnel nationally took part in the strike. Hebert Villalobos, head of Soluz, told *El Región de Zulia* that if the ministry did not respond, the LUZ employees would initiate protest activities on September 5.

Three protesters shot to death during “civic strike” in Dominican Republic

Three people died from gunshot wounds during a 24-hour general strike July 11 in the Dominican Republic. One of the deceased, Carlos Luis Alonso Filión, 22, was shot during a confrontation between

police and demonstrators in Santiago, the country's second largest city. In addition, at least twelve people were injured and over twenty were detained, according to official sources.

Another, Edwin Manuel Felipe Abréu, 24, was, according to police, killed by shots fired by two men from an all-terrain vehicle in the Don Pedro neighborhood. The third, 32-year-old Anderson Parra Cruceta, was shot in the mouth while taking photos on his cell phone of violent confrontations between police and demonstrators in Santo Domingo Este.

At least four other protesters—a woman and three male youths—were reported injured by gunshots in other parts of the Dominican Republic.

The strike was called by the umbrella group Alternative Social Forum (FSA) as “a peaceful expression of the disagreement of the population with the government’s spending policy,” according to a *Prensa Latina* report. Over 200 civic organizations, unions and political parties, members of FSA, called the strike against excessive expenses and rising taxes.

The Dominican Republic imports all its petroleum, so recent oil price rises have impacted fuel, transportation, electricity and a range of other daily expenses. In response to the global economic crisis, the government of President Leonel Fernandez has instituted an austerity regime that has fallen mainly on the nation’s working class and poor. The protesters were calling for a lowering of the costs of food, medicine and fuel and a 35 percent raise for public workers’ salaries.

Steelworkers locked out at Pennsylvania ceiling plant

Members of United Steelworkers Local 285 were locked out Sunday at a Marietta, Pennsylvania ceiling plant operated by Armstrong World Industries following the expiration of a company imposed deadline. The contract for the 260 workers expired June 1. Union officials decided not to conduct a vote on the company’s latest contract proposal prior to the Saturday deadline saying they had not been given enough time to present it to the membership.

Workers rejected an earlier company proposal, termed by management its “best and final offer” by a 9-1 margin. Under management’s proposal workers would receive annual raises of 2.5 percent and a \$400 contribution to the workers 401k plan in the second and third years as well as a \$500 supplement to workers health care costs each year.

Illinois state workers protest

Hundreds of Illinois state workers held a protest July 12 in Chicago’s Loop to oppose the state’s denial of their contracted two percent pay increase. The order, signed by Illinois Democratic Governor Pat Quinn, affected 33,000 state workers, members of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Workers (AFSCME) employed in 14 departments. Quinn blamed the state legislature for not appropriating sufficient funds for the raises.

AFSCME, joined by teachers and laborers, has filed a federal lawsuit against the breach of their contracts by the state. AFSCME

supported Quinn’s election in 2010. Since 2009 AFSCME has agreed to defer pay increases and take furlough days in response to the state’s budget crisis.

Ontario steel plant on strike

Over 150 workers at Sandvik Materials Technology Canada in Arnprior north of Ottawa went on strike July 13 after talks broke down the previous day.

According to the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), which represents the strikers, the company is seeking cuts in cost of living, bereavement and pension provisions in a new contract. The last contract expired at the beginning of the month.

Sandvik is a world leader in the industry and its Arnprior plant produces stainless steel tubing for the nuclear and aerospace industry. The company claims that any increased cost to labor is not sustainable and its manager cites in particular the workers “generous” pension plan as unaffordable. Company profits were up over 60 percent last year.

Support staff locked out at BC University

Workers employed by The Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS) at Simon Fraser University near Vancouver, British Columbia were locked out last week after the employer ended mediated talks.

The 20 workers affected are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) employed in various support programs helping students. Negotiations have been ongoing for over two years with CUPE during which time the union agreed to numerous concessions, including the suspension of cost of living increases but SFSS is reportedly seeking dramatic cuts to wages and staff.

The union has sought an injunction to prevent managers from using replacement workers during the dispute but they have warned that the new Society president appears intent on breaking the union.



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