

Workers Struggles: The Americas

18 October 2011

State workers strike, rally in Argentine provincial capital

Over 4,500 public sector workers stopped work and demonstrated in front of the Government Building in La Plata, Argentina on October 13. The protesters, mostly members of the ATE state workers union, included government office employees, teachers and medical workers, as well as supporters from social organizations.

Among the demands were: salary increases, recognition of seniority once a worker reaches permanent status, permanent positions for precarizados (temporary and/or part-time, low-paid workers), elimination of limits on family allocations, derogation of the decree penalizing strikers with docking of pay, a collective contract to replace the current Law 10.430, parity talks among the municipalities and the return of the previously cut 3 percent seniority bonus.

ATE Regional Secretary General Oscar de Isasi told reporters, “If they call us we are open to dialogue. We don’t have a problem, we’re disposed to sit down to talk with the governor,” Daniel Scioli. Isasi blamed the lack of movement in parity talks on Scioli, whom he accused of “diddling” and authoritarianism.

Brazilian postal workers end 28-day strike

After 28 days on strike, Brazilian postal workers returned to their workplaces October 13. The workers were ordered back by a court order from the Superior Labor Court (TST).

Not only were the workers ordered back, but the TST allowed the post office to dock them for seven of the 28 days. In addition, the workers will have to work weekends to make up for the other 21 days to process and deliver some 185 million items that have piled up since the start of the strike. If the postal workers’ union refuses to comply, it can be fined 50,000 reais (US\$28,000) per day.

Moreover, the TST ordered the imposition of the government’s original salary offer: a raise of 80 reais (US\$46) retroactive to October 1, with a 6.87 percent across-the-board salary and benefits increase retroactive to August 1. The inflation rate for September in Brazil was 7.31 percent.

After lamenting, “We expected more,” the general secretary of one of the postal unions, Jose Rivaldo da Silva, told *Brazzil Mag* that “the lesson of this strike seemed to be that a negotiated deal was better than a Labor Court order.”

Contract agreement disputed by Colombian and international labor activists

A group of Colombian and international labor activists set out from Bogota for the eastern province of Meta on October 10 to protest an agreement signed between the Pacific Rubiales Energy Corporation and workers at the Puerto Gaitan oilfields. By Monday night, about 500 peaceful protesters had already arrived in Puerto Gaitan to call for better labor rights and to condemn the agreement.

USO oil workers union president Rodolfo Vecino called the agreement “a dirty move” contrived between the company and the Mines and Energy Ministry. The “alleged agreement,” according to Vecino, includes unacceptable concessions. Although it stipulates some hiring and investment in the community, union leaders said the concessions do not adequately address the needs of the poor community.

About 7,000 of the area’s 12,000 oil workers struck in September over issues of salary parity, contract labor and union rights. The strike was marked by firings of union supporters, attacks by riot police and worker resistance. The workers returned to work September 22 only after receiving assurances from Pacific Rubiales that it would engage in dialogue over the points of contention.

The CUT labor federation arranged the caravan in conjunction with the USO. *Efe* reported, “The caravan includes representatives of the U.S. AFL-CIO, the International Trade Union Confederation and the World Federation of Trade Unions.”

Puerto Rican Court orders striking bus drivers back to work

Two days after bus drivers voted to extend their strike into its third week, the San Juan Superior Court issued a court injunction against them October 11, ordering them back to work. The litigation had been filed by the Metropolitan Bus Authority (AMA) and was supported by Governor Luis Fortuño.

The drivers, members of the Metropolitan Bus Authority United Workers, went on strike September 28 after negotiations with Labor Secretary Miguel Romero stalled over salary and benefit demands. The union had called for a \$1.09 per hour raise to take effect July 14—which did not materialize—and for an additional raise of between \$1.14 and \$1.17 per hour by the summer of 2012.

Workers want their live-in partners, whether legally married or

not, to be included in their government health insurance plan.

On Monday, October 10, Fortuño announced the formation of a committee, consisting of former judges and law experts, which ostensibly would bring the parties together to hammer out differences. Union president Antonio Díaz welcomed the formation of the committee, as long as they “start working recognizing the legality of the stipulations signed last year between the union and the AMA administration.”

Missouri defense workers on strike against two-tier wage

Workers at the Honeywell defense plant in Kansas City, Missouri continued their week-long strike against the company’s demand to implement a two-tier wage system and other concessions. The 840 members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 778 voted by a 79 percent margin one week ago to reject the company’s last proposal and by an 85 percent margin to strike.

Previously, new hires needed about two years to reach top pay. The current proposal would both lengthen the period to five years and establish a permanent ceiling for lower-tier workers set at 90 percent of the pay of senior workers.

Both the company and union agree that under the defeated agreement pay would rise 13.5 percent over the course of a six-year agreement. But a company letter refers to “a reduction in future medical and pension benefits for future employees.”

University of Southern California hospital workers stage 24-hour strike

Some 640 health care workers at University of Southern California’s Keck Hospital launched a 24-hour strike October 12 to protest lack of sufficient staffing, inadequate delivery of patient care, and a year-long wage freeze. According to the National Union of Healthcare Workers, which represents the strikers, the National Labor Relations Board in Los Angeles will hold a hearing to take up charges of unfair labor practices against the hospital.

Contract negotiations between the union and hospital management began in the fall of 2010. The negotiations cover respiratory therapists, radiology technologists, surgical technicians and housekeepers.

Professors strike Brandon University in Manitoba

Two hundred forty professors and other teaching staff went on strike last week at Brandon University in Manitoba after contract talks broke down.

The University suspended classes for the first week of the strike, but issued an appeal to professors to return to work individually with a view to resuming classes this week with those teachers and students who are willing to cross the picket line.

Negotiators for both sides met with a conciliator after the strike began last week in order to resolve outstanding issues such as wages, benefits and research funding. Professors are demanding wage increases of 3.9, 4.25 and 4.4 percent in each year of a three-year contract while school negotiators are offering only 0.5, 1 percent and 2.75 percent, but which union negotiators say amounts to a wage cut when other demands are factored in.

Teaching staff have been without a contract since March of this year. The last strike was three years ago and lasted for 17 days.

Toronto area aerospace workers on strike

Workers at Northstar Aerospace in Milton, Ontario, west of Toronto, went on strike last week the day that their contract expired.

The 135 workers are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW). Negotiators report that the company is seeking major concessions. The company issued a statement saying that it is seeking improved efficiencies and “cost containment” in order to stay competitive in a global market

Northstar manufactures parts for the aerospace and airline industry throughout North America.



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