

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 October 2011

Uruguayan metalworkers strike, occupy factories

As of October 20, Uruguayan metalworkers remained on strike in the face of management intransigence. The metalworkers, members of the UNTMRA metallurgy workers union, have been on strike since October 10. In addition, they have occupied 40 factories throughout the country. UNTMRA has a membership of some 5,000 workers.

The metalworkers' contract expired on June 30 last year. According to the web site of the International Metalworkers' Federation with which UNTMRA is affiliated, "The union has been negotiating for months but has not yet reached agreement with employers in the sector. A decree awarded a 1.5 percent pay rise in January 2011 but the union says a decree is not the same as a collective agreement."

UNTMRA's main demands are: "an inflation plus 3.5 percent pay rise every six months, reduction of the working week from 48 to 44 hours without loss of pay, an end to employer misuse of attendance bonuses to undermine the union, a new job classification structure (the current classification dates from 1968) and two hours' pay for union meetings." The workers also want a minimum salary of 14,000 pesos (US\$700).

The employers' organization (Cámara Metalúrgica) "has showed a clear lack of interest in meeting our pay demands and also a lack of initiative with regard to industrial development. However, it has increased repression of the workforce, temporarily placing some workers on unemployment pay, threatening to dismiss others and generally acting in a provocative way in order to change the focus of the dispute away from our list of demands."

UNTMRA has appealed to the Labor Ministry to intervene to bring the employers to the table, but the Cámara Metalúrgica has refused to meet as long as the factories remain occupied. The union modified its occupation, allowing the transit of people and goods, but the employers remain adamant. Last week, the Minister of Labor and Social Security said that he would send in police to "proceed" against picketers who limit the movement of people or merchandise.

On October 19, thousands of workers marched and rallied in downtown Montevideo.

Brazilian airport workers cut strike short

Workers at the São Paulo and Brasília airports, who had walked out on a planned 48-hour strike on October 20, returned to work the next day when their union agreed to meet with management this week. São Paulo, which is served by two airports, and Brasília are respectively the nation's most populous city and its capital.

The workers are members of Sina, the National Syndicate of Airport Workers. They voted on the night of Monday, October 17 to strike over the government's plan to privatize operations at the airports.

The government plan envisions the transfer of operations, cargo loading,

air navigation, fare control, maintenance and specialized engineering to private enterprises. The current projection is to sell off concessions towards the end of December in anticipation of the World Cup soccer games in 2014.

Negotiations are set to begin on Wednesday of this week. Sina stated that it maintains a "state of strike" and that it will call for new mobilizations if the meetings do not bring satisfactory results.

Argentinean teachers stage 48-hour strike

Teachers in Buenos Aires wrapped up their 48-hour strike October 20 with a march and protest rally at the city's Legislature to protest plans by the government of Mayor Mauricio Macri to make changes in the Classification Boards for teachers. Around 10,000 teachers, members of some 15 unions, most notably the Union of Education Workers (UTE), participated.

UTE spokespeople claimed a 98 percent compliance with the strike. Macri called the action "absurd," warning "all those days lost because of the strike will be compensated in December."

UTE president Eduardo López accused Macri of "wanting to impose the logic of a ranch owner to teachers, professors and school administrators."

The unions have threatened new actions despite the education ministry's policy of docking pay or adding workdays to compensate for strike days. According to a *Clarín* report, "The key date could be November 3, when there are elections for new members to the Classification Boards."

Strike by Mexican indigenous peoples commission workers over firings

Workers at the National Indigenous Peoples Development Commission (CDI) in Mexico City struck October 20 over the recent dismissals of five of their colleagues. The National Indigenous Workers Syndicate has called for a national strike.

The fired workers include drivers, a secretary and a warehouse worker. According to a union source, they showed up for work as always, but were denied access to the installation without any explanation.

The commission's director of Human Resources, Zoila Aurora Guillén, maintains that the firings were carried out under instructions from the Treasury Department that the CDI cut staff nationally by 2.5 percent, beginning in the central offices. Union sources claim that the problem is overstaffing at the administrative level and cronyism. Those who come into conflict with management are also subject to reprisal.

Fredy Poot, a union local representative in Yucatán, where 70 workers walked out, told *Yucatán.com*, "What we lament is that the institute is overpopulated with positions for friends, creating positions for middle

management and important posts. We, the rank and file, are the main support and pillar of Mexico and the institution.”

Poot indicated that workers in Sotuta, Peto, Maxcanú, Valladolid and Mérida had joined the strike. Delegates have been called to meet in Mexico City October 24 to devise a plan to prevent further dismissals and to reinstate the fired employees. “We total 1,300 workers, who also ask to avoid reprisals against us and threats of firing when we demand that our sources of work be conserved,” he added.

Panamanian public hospital doctors strike over privatization plans

A strike by specialists, interns and residents at Panama City’s Hospital Santo Tomás, the Health Ministry’s largest public hospital, entered its second day Friday, October 21. The striking doctors, members of the Medical Specialists Association, are demanding that the projected Law 349, which would create a Public-Private Association (APP) for public services, be subjected to further debate and more ample public discussion before it is voted upon.

Law 349, according to the doctors, would create conflict between private and public needs, lead to work insecurity, outsourcing and the creation of a low-paid temporary, part-time workforce.

Emergency services and critical areas remained open during the strike.

In related news, Panama’s National Negotiating Medical Commission reached a last-minute agreement with doctors at the Arnulfo Arias Madrid hospital of the Social Security Fund (CSS) to suspend a scheduled strike. The strike had been called over the doctors’ fear that CSS plans to privatize health services, hire outside doctors and renege on collective bargaining agreements. The parties have agreed to a 3-month window in which to negotiate the issues.

Puerto Rican teachers protest charter school plans

Hundreds of teachers congregated outside the Puerto Rico Convention Center in Miramar October 17 to protest the “Puerto Rico Education Summit” attended by Puerto Rican officials and their invited guest, US Education Secretary Arne Duncan. The educators denounced Duncan’s implementation of charter schools in the US, and protested plans by the administration of president Luis Fortuño to expand charter schools on the island.

Students who have seen their schools’ fine arts, health, sports and music programs eliminated joined the teachers. Some students voiced opposition to standardized testing. A *Puerto Rico Daily Sun* report quoted one ninth grade student: “We don’t want our schools to be classified as failures... we want our achievements to be honored and we don’t want our school to be compared with a private school.”

Eva Ayala, spokesperson for the Educamos Education Group, told the daily, “Our students aren’t merchandise. They’re not a business and they’re not for sale.” Duncan has already announced a \$153 million SIG (School Improvement Grant) grant to Puerto Rico to accelerate the growth of charter schools.

Vermont teachers strike

Some 270 teachers in Bennington, Vermont went on strike October 19 to protest the failure of the school board to come to an equitable agreement after going for two years without a contract and working five months under district-imposed wage cut. The Southwest Vermont Educations Association and the school board are deadlocked over salaries and benefits. Negotiations are scheduled to resume this week.

Teachers voted overwhelming on October 12 to strike if the board failed to come to an agreement. Many of the 3,000 students affected by the strike have rallied to the side of teachers. Karissa Gibson told the *Times-Union*, “A lot of people think it’s just for money. It’s more than that. They want to be respected.”

The *Bennington Banner* reported, “Union members are ‘really staying organized and together,’ according to one teacher. But there is growing ‘frustration’ that union officials have not shared more specific details of proposals. ‘They don’t understand the details of the proposals,’ the teacher said. ‘They’re staying organized but they wish they really knew what was going on with the proposals.’”

Nebraska sugar workers prepared to strike over company drug testing policy

Production and maintenance workers at Western Sugars Cooperative plants in Fort Morgan and Scottsbluff, Nebraska were poised to strike over the weekend in opposition to management’s insistence on a random drug test in a new contract. The 260 members of Teamsters Local 455 voted by a 2-1 margin to defeat management’s “last and final” contract proposal.

According to Teamsters business agent Bob Adams, Western Sugar has not provided any data to support the implementation of the random drug test and the current contract language provides for pre-employment and “reasonable suspicion” drug tests.

Adams claims that the contract offer was acceptable to workers except for the new drug policy. Teamsters at Western Sugar are working under an extension of the old contract that expired back on June 1.

Toronto area transit strikes loom

Two hundred-fifty workers at two companies in the York Region north of Toronto are set to strike this week unless a deal can be reached in contract negotiations, and another strike by commuter transit service GO could also be announced this week.

Bus drivers and maintenance staff voted unanimously last week to reject contract offers from both Miller Transit and First Student Canada in disagreement over issues around wages and benefits according to their union, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU).

Fifteen hundred workers for GO Transit could also go on strike this week while another 100 workers in a different bargaining unit in York Region also voted to reject the latest offer. While rail service in the region is expected to continue without disruption, most bus service would be affected by a strike.

British Columbia stadium workers set to strike

Workers at BC Place in Vancouver, British Columbia issued a 72-hour strike notice last week after mediated talks failed to yield a settlement.

The 660 workers affected include maintenance staff and skilled trades. Management at the stadium has announced that if there is a strike all scheduled events, including the Grey Cup, would have to be moved elsewhere or cancelled.

Workers at the venue have been without a contract since May, but their union, the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU) has said it will allow other locals at the stadium to continue working during a strike.

Children's Aid workers strike

One-hundred-twenty workers at the Kawartha-Haliburton Children's Aid Society, two hours north of Toronto, went on strike last week saying that management has refused to return to the bargaining table.

The workers are members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) who say that the main issues in the dispute are workload and job security. The workers involved in the action are those directly responsible for social services and protection to 4,300 children in the region.



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