

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 November 2011

Argentinean teachers, health workers strike

Teachers in Argentina's eastern province of Entre Ríos struck and marched in the provincial capital, Paraná, on October 26. The educators, members of the Agmer teachers union, gathered in front of the General Education Council (CGE) building, where they renewed their demands for salary adjustments to keep pace with Argentina's inflation rate.

Agmer general secretary César Baudino claimed more than 65 percent participation. He told reporters, "We are awaiting a proposal from the governor, we hear his message and we hope that the words of pluralism and openness can effect a salary proposal, which is necessary and possible." He also expressed hopes of a meeting with the CGE president and the approval by the provincial Senate of a number of measures.

Government spokespeople, on the other hand, maintained that 81 percent of teachers—some 25,728—actually worked that day. The CGE ordered the "discounting" (docking) of that day's pay for the 5,138 teachers it claimed did not come to work.

On October 29, workers for the Petroleum Industry Health Fund (CPS) completed their fourth day of an indefinite national strike against alleged irregularities committed by CPS general director Victor Hugo Vargas. The health workers are demanding the removal of Vargas and the restitution of workers fired from jobs in various departments.

Vargas denies the charges and has called the strike "illegal," accusing the employees of preventing those who want to work from entering their workplaces.

Chilean miners hold another one-day strike

Some 500 miners walked off the job at Chile's Collahuasi copper mining complex October 29 to protest bonuses that they claim are less than those agreed upon. They also advanced a list of 10 demands regarding the company's anti-union practices. Some mineworkers blockaded access along the principal highway to the mine as well.

Collahuasi is Chile's third-largest mine, with an expected 500,000 tons of production expected for 2011. There are about 1,550 unionized workers at Collahuasi. The union is currently in the lead-up to elections for executive board and leadership positions.

In November and December 2010, the workers held a 32-day

strike over the bonuses and working conditions. Their union called them back to work on December 6 after signing a deal that was essentially the same as management's original offer. A 24-hour strike in July was held to protest working conditions.

The company, which called the strike illegal, claimed that production was not significantly affected. On October 30, under the union's orders, the miners returned to work.

24-hour strike by Mexican education workers

Workers at the Enrique C. Rébsamen Normal Merit School in Veracruz, Mexico, held a one-day work stoppage October 26 over demands for "recategorization" payments owed to 50 of their co-workers. The workers, members of Section 56 of the SNTE education workers' union, were told by the section 56 leadership that an agreement to pay the money due would take effect on November 1.

A report in *Hoy Veracruz* notes, "The Section 56 militants that participated in the demonstration confirmed that the strike was carried out in a peaceful manner and they did not discount repeating the action in case their demands are not attended to."

Hospital strike in Panama spreads

A strike begun October 21 by medical personnel in Panama City's Hospital Santo Tomás (HST) spread nationwide on October 27. The action is in response to bill 349, which includes plans to introduce a "Private-Public Association" (APP) into the public health care system. By October 27, an estimated 75 percent of physicians in the country had joined the strike, according to Julio Osorio, coordinator of the National Negotiating Medical Commission (Comenenal).

The statements of Health Minister Franklin Vergara are reminiscent of his reaction last June to a strike by medical and health workers at the San Miguel Arcángel de San Miguelito Hospital over unpaid salaries. Vergara accused the workers of a "political agenda." This time, Vergara has repeated the claim, calling the strike "illegal" and unnecessary.

A promised discussion of the issue in the National Assembly failed to materialize, dashing doctors' hopes that it could be resolved and deepening their suspicion of the government's

intentions.

The news outlet *La Estrella* reported October 27, “Neither Vergara nor his colleague Frank de Lima from the Ministry of Economy and Finance were able to dispel doubts of the Santo Tomás physicians who, more quickly than imagined, began to receive avalanches of solidarity with the extension of the strike.”

Puerto Rican medical services staff protest, approve strike vote

Several dozen employees of Puerto Rico’s Medical Services Administration (ASEM) protested the snail-like pace of contract negotiations and delayed pay hikes at the Medical Center’s public square in Río Piedras October 26. Later, the workers voted in a special assembly for strike authorization if talks remain stalled.

The union, which is affiliated with the UGT (General Workers Confederation), “has been negotiating the collective agreement for over a year, but the administration has denied granting workers salary hikes during the next three years,” according to a *Puerto Rico Daily Sun* report.

On October 27, “ASEM Director Ernesto Torres announced that some funds had been found from some payments that had recently been made to the public corporation, and the administration was calling on the UGT to meet for further negotiations tomorrow (Friday) at 2 p.m.,” the *Sun* added.

Labor Secretary Miguel Romero announced, “We can’t allow the health services offered by ASEM to be affected because negotiations between workers and the administration are stuck,” and at Governor Luis Fortuño’s request, will serve as mediator. UGT President Manuel Perfecto noted that there have been no raises for three years, and said that the union would follow up on the strike authorization if ASEM did not make a “reasonable economic offer.”

Vermont Education Commissioner calls for ban on teachers’ strikes

Armando Vilaseca, Vermont’s education commissioner, called for a ban on teachers’ strikes October 28 as the strike by Bennington teachers over wages and benefits nears the two-week mark. Vilaseca, who pulls in an annual salary of \$113,400, attempted to mask his proposal by claiming concern for students.

Republican Party chairwoman Patricia McDonald joined the chorus against striking teachers by demanding Democratic Governor Peter Shumlin move against teachers’ right to strike as well. “It is outrageous that this strike has gone on for so long, and it’s time for the governor to speak up and tell the striking teachers to get back to work.... Instead of directing his anger at hard-working state employees—who are prohibited by law from striking—he should direct some of his ire towards the teachers union in Bennington.” Shumlin attacked state employees recently

over a pay issue grievance filed as a result of work disruptions due to Tropical Storm Irene.

Shumlin, however, prefers to use the labor bureaucracy to bring the strike to a conclusion. On October 27, a facilitator for the negotiations between the school board and the teachers’ union cancelled negotiations. However, the Southwestern Vermont Education Association announced it would introduce a new proposal aimed at breaking the deadlock. The union refused to reveal the concessions it will be offering.

Industrial accident kills worker at Kentucky CiNTAS facility

A worker at a Louisville, Kentucky, CiNTAS Uniform Rental Facility was found dead inside an 8-foot dryer October 28. According to the coroner, 55-year-old maintenance worker Kevin Burgess was pulled into the dryer while it was running. His body was found about 4:30 a.m., but it is unknown how long he remained in the dryer from the moment of the accident until his body was found.

According to a police lieutenant, speaking to *WLKY* radio, “It appears safety mechanisms were not in place, and it appears the dryer did start, which actually pulled him into the dryer. It does appear to be an industrial accident.”

In a previous and similar accident at a Tulsa, Oklahoma, CiNTAS plant, 46-year-old Eleazar Torres Gomez, fell into a dryer trying to dislodge a jammed load of laundry. CiNTAS blamed Gomez for his death, citing a failure to follow safety precautions. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration investigation into the Tulsa accident resulted in 46 violations against Gomez, of which 42 were classified as “willful violations.”



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