Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 November 2011

Argentinean oil-processing workers ordered to compulsory arbitration after strike and blockade

The union representing vegetable oil-processing workers in Argentina's northeastern port region lifted its blockade and picketing of terminals and plants November 4 after the Labor Ministry decreed compulsory arbitration.

The blockade was called the previous day as a result of the exclusion of the tercerizados, or contract workers, from the contract being negotiated between the oil-processing business sector and the SOEA union of Puerto San Martín, through which the processed oil is loaded for export. The agreement covers 3,000 unionized workers, but leaves out the more than 1,000 contract workers who labor in the oil-processing industrial corridor.

The blockade followed a similar one on Monday, which also paralyzed production in the area.

According to a *La Capital* report: "It all started with a request for an annual bonus [gratificación], and faced with the refusal of the business sector to include the tercerizados in this benefit, the union reacted, launching the industrial action and demanding the inclusion of all the personnel that serve the oil-processing sector in this zone."

The Labor Ministry decree requires a 15-day negotiation period to reach a "definitive accord."

Argentine educators strike, demonstrate over fate of classification board

Some 3,000 teachers from 17 teachers' unions demonstrated outside the Buenos Aires legislature November 4 to voice their opposition to a plan advocated by right-wing mayor Mauricio Macri to restructure the school system's teacher classification board.

The teachers' unions object to the city government's attempt to modify the classification board—or get rid of it altogether. They have denounced it as a politically motivated attempt by the Macri administration to have a freer hand in the hiring, promotion and firing of teachers.

A discussion in the legislature on the issue was interrupted when a group of teachers entered the chamber and tried to get past security personnel. A short scuffle ensued.

Predictably, Macri denounced the teachers for the incident, lamenting that it was "los chicos" (the little ones) that have to suffer and threatened to dock the pay of all striking teachers.

Protests force Paraguayan president to veto airport concessions privatization scheme

Paraguayan president Fernando Lugo vetoed a law privatizing concessions in some of the nation's airports November 1 after airport workers protested the measure. The airport workers' unions had previously urged the Congress to reject the bill and had threatened to strike on October 28 right as various nations' delegates to the Iberoamerican Summit scheduled in Asunción were to arrive. The unions backed down when the government declared the strike illegal and ordered them to halt.

Lugo's Civil Cabinet chief Miguel López told reporters that the veto was the result of the president's realization that he had "made a mistake," a hardly credible claim given that Lugo himself had introduced the measure and strongly advocated it for over a year.

The bourgeois press lambasted Lugo for "lack of courage" and "incoherence," and characterized objections to the law as "foolishness."

Nonetheless, López affirmed that the law had "some defects" and that the government would present a new bill not only privatizing airport concessions but other public services as well.

Paraguayan nurses cut strike short, accept wage agreement

A general strike called by the Paraguayan Nurses Association (APE) was called off 17 hours after it began following a tripartite meeting in the Labor Vice Ministry November 2. At noon, representatives from APE, the Labor Vice Ministry and the Public Health Ministry (MSP) emerged from the meeting with an agreement.

The strike was called off at 5:00 p.m. It had minimal impact on hospital and clinical services, with surgery, chemotherapy and emergency services maintained throughout.

The agreement establishes a salary floor of 4 million guaraníes (US$952) for MSP nurses. The agreed raises are 10 percent for nurses and supervisors, 16 percent for licensed nurses, 15 percent for aides and 18 percent for technicians. Contracted registered nurses and aides will get raises of 25 and 31 percent respectively.

Final implementation of the accord hinges on the approval of the bicameral Congress, however, after they have been analyzed as part of the General Budget of the Nation for 2012, according to the Justice and Labor Ministry.

Peruvian miners stay on strike after talks fail again

A meeting between representatives of striking miners and management at the Cerro Verde copper mine—located in Peru's southern Arequipa region—ended in failure November 4, the latest in a number of fruitless attempts at negotiation since the strike began on September 29.

Cerro Verde is owned by Phoenix, Arizona-based Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold, Inc., one of the world's largest producers of gold, as well as its lowest-cost copper producer. The firm has refused to budge from its

September offer of a one-time bonus in exchange for a no-strike pledge and its demand that the contract be in effect for three years. The workers want a raise and a one-year contract.

In a departure from 40 years of Peruvian mining sector history, president Ollanta Humala declared the strike legal in September, a declaration that Freeport has appealed. The mineworkers' union has asked the government to intervene.

Doctors' strike forces Panamanian president to beat tactical retreat over privatization plan

Panamanian president Ricardo Martinelli announced November 3 that he would withdraw a controversial bill establishing a "public/private association" (APP) for public hospitals from the Congress. The backtrack came a week after the outbreak of a strike by public hospital doctors and health workers, who opposed the bill because they feared that it would lead to wholesale privatization in the nation's health sector.

The strikers also denounced the fact that the bill was not subjected to significant public input and debate. Thus Martinelli added that the bill would go before the National Development Concertation, described by a Univisión report as "a forum for dialog where the government, syndical organizations and unions debate different projects."

Martinelli repeated his claim that "in no way" was the bill meant to privatize health, education and canal services. He and other advocates of the bill assert that it would generate savings for the public and increase efficiency. Opponents nonetheless harbor suspicions that the proposed APP is part of an agenda to undermine and destroy previous social gains.

Mexican teachers strike, march over medical supply shortages

Some 2,000 teachers in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico struck on November 4 over shortages of medical supplies in the State Institute of Workers' Security and Social Services (ISSSTE). The SNTE education workers' union claims shortages of up to 57 percent for some medications.

The teachers marched through intermittent rain to rally in front of downtown Tijuana's state government center, where they accused ISSSTE secretary general José Villalobos López of responsibility for the situation and called for his removal. SNTE officials maintain that the funds are available to obtain the medical supplies, but that Villalobos has not released them. The shortage of medications like insulin has made the situation particularly acute for retired teachers, some of whom have had to purchase supplies elsewhere.

In addition to the supply shortages, ISSSTE has yet to complete the reconstruction of a clinic destroyed by the April 4, 2010 earthquake, leaving workers in the area without services.

A State Educational System (SEE) official announced that there would be a report on November 7 to determine which teachers did not work, and that some of them would be docked for their participation in the strike. Although the SNTE had originally claimed that adherence to the strike was in the range of 10,000, the SEE held to the 2,000 figure, asserting that some schools were not affected by the walkout.

Section 2 officials warned that they would call for a statewide general strike if the situation was not remedied.

Teamsters honor picket lines across eight states in strike against corporate food distributer

More than 2,000 Teamsters in eight states have honored picket lines at U.S. Foods distribution centers. set up by workers on an unfair labor practices strike against the Rosemont, Illinois-based company. According to the Teamsters, the strike began in Streator, Illinois over victimizations against union workers, including one worker disciplined for being absent from work under conditions where he was taking part in contract negotiations.

U.S. Foods (formerly US Foodservice) was taken over in 2007 by private equity firms Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and Clayton, Dublier & Rice in an operation that imposed $5 billion in debt on the new entity.

According to some sources also at issue in the negotiations are whistleblower protections, whereby Teamsters are able to raise food safety concerns without fear of retaliation. U.S. Foods employs over 4,000 Teamster union members and distributes food products to restaurants, military bases and hospitals.

Connecticut Red Cross workers strike over healthcare and staffing issues

Red Cross blood collection workers went on strike November 3 against the company's Connecticut branch to protest the failure of the company to come to an agreement after nearly three years of bargaining. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Council 6, called the strike after negotiations broke down the previous evening over health care issues and the number of nurses the union believes is necessary for collection drives in order to assure safety of donors and integrity of blood donations.

Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy immediately called for a cooling off period while a Red Cross spokesperson sought to pillory workers for striking during a state of emergency in the wake of the recent storm that hit the northeastern United States. The 200 striking Red Cross workers, however, are not disaster workers, but are comprised of phlebotomists, drivers and nurses involved in the normal schedule of collecting blood.

Contract talks break off in month-old Kansas City Honeywell strike

Contract talks between Honeywell Federal Manufacturing and Technologies LLC and the machinists' union broke off without agreement November 4 as the strike by 840 workers at Honeywell's Bannister Federal Complex in Kansas City reached the one-month mark.

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 778 has made three separate proposals to the company without avail. Workers at the plant rejected Honeywell's demand for a new six-year contract that imposes increased healthcare costs and institutes a new two-tier wage system that pays all new hires a lower wage.

Honeywell, meanwhile, has already begun training 55 production replacement workers and was bringing in another 130 maintenance and custodial workers as of last week. The company also announced last week that it has plans for the recruitment of an additional 500 production workers. The Honeywell Bannister plant makes non-nuclear parts for US government nuclear weapons systems.

Manitoba lab workers set to strike

One hundred twenty laboratory technicians and other workers are set to go on strike as early as Monday of next week after rejecting the latest contract offer and issuing a two-week notice to their employer, Diagnostics Services Manitoba (DSM).

Strike notice at the Westman Regional Lab in Brandon, Manitoba was delayed by several weeks due to a requirement to set essential service levels. In addition to monetary matters, main issues in the dispute include workload and contract length.

The arbitration process to designate essential services highlighted the issue of workload when it became clear that the number of workers required to fulfill essential posts exceeded the available staff. Understaffing would by made worse by the most recent offer from the employer, which includes a wage freeze. This would increase the problem of staff retention.