

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 January 2012

## Forty-eight-hour strike by Argentine health workers

Health workers in Argentina's Neuquén province voted in assembly to hold a two-day strike beginning January 10 over a number of salary issues. The workers are members of the ATE state employees' union.

Among the workers' outstanding demands is the payment of wages and overtime pay, which has been delayed for more than 40 days, and reincorporation of lapsed contracts.

One worker at the assembly was quoted by *El Civismo* as saying, "We don't demand a raise, which would be needed, but that they pay something that we have coming. We're working and we aren't getting paid." However, the ATE is calling for a raise of 500 pesos (US\$116) to bring the health workers' base pay in line with other state workers. The government's previous offer was about 40 percent of that amount.

Health is the only sector that has not reached an agreement with the provincial government.

On the second day of the action, workers picketed and blocked the entrance of the Neuquén Ministerial Administrative Center to demand the reactivation of salary talks with the provincial government. An assembly was called for January 13 to decide on future actions if there is no response.

## Colombian contract petroleum workers protest labor insecurity

At least six protesters were injured and seven arrested during a "civic strike" and protest January 11 in the Colombian district of Barrancabermeja. The region is home to state-run oil firm Ecopetrol, which operates the La Cifra Infantas oilfield in a joint venture with Occidental de Colombia. The protesters were demonstrating against the chronic labor insecurity in the region due to Ecopetrol's use of contract labor.

In 2011, about 3,000 workers—the majority of the district's working population—labored in La Cifra Infantas under temporary contracts. With the expiration of many of the contracts at the end of the year, assurance of employment for many inhabitants in 2012 is in doubt.

In addition, residents criticize Ecopetrol's poor record of promised deliveries of gas and water to the community and its lack of social investment in general.

About 500 workers and supporters assembled in central

Barrancabermeja to demand that these issues be addressed. Responding to company claims of vandalism and threats to other workers, riot police attacked the protesters. In one instance, police fired tear gas into a church where protesters sought refuge.

The mayor and the state governor have arranged for dialogue sessions, but the atmosphere remains tense, with Ecopetrol accusing "dark forces" of attempting to "destabilize the order in the region." In fact, Barrancabermeja has a long history of violence against workers, journalists and city officials committed by right-wing paramilitary forces as well as the police and military.

## Strikes by Mexican education workers

Workers at the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca in southern Mexico held a 12-hour strike on January 12 to pressure the university administration to comply with their demands and avoid a broader strike action planned for February 1. The stoppage affected classes for some 25,000 students on campuses in Oaxaca, Huajuapán de León and Tehuantepec.

The strike followed a meeting of the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Committee on January 10 between the university authorities and the STEUABJO university employees' union, which is demanding a 25 percent salary increase. According to *El Universal*, "Other demands consist of the activation of a salary schedule, incorporation of all the workers in the quality and efficiency program, and the discharge of all personnel foreign to the syndicate."

In the north, about 1,000 temporary teachers in Tijuana, Baja California, struck over nonpayment of their wages by the Baja California Educational and Pedagogical Institute for the last two-week pay cycle. The teachers are members of Section 2 of the SNTE teachers' federation.

A SNTE communiqué stated that the temporary teachers would not work until the State Educational System (SEE) simplifies its selection and contracting process and guarantees payments of salaries and benefits.

## Grenada brewery labor dispute continues

A tripartite meeting on January 12 failed to resolve the ongoing

conflict between workers and management at Grenada Breweries Ltd (GBL). The meeting was held at the office of Prime Minister Tillman Thomas with GBL and Technical and Allied Workers Union (TAWU) representatives.

About 120 brewery employees were barred from the brewery in late December after ending a one-week strike for a pay increase. TAWU president Senator Chester Humphrey called for a boycott of GBL products, and joined workers last week in blocking the GBL entrance. He was arrested for refusal to obey a police order.

Humphrey has since threatened a national strike by the TAWU, which includes utility and port workers. The Trade Unions Council has pledged its backing.

### **Candy strike ends with concessions contract**

Workers at the American Licorice Company factory in Union City, California, voted to accept concessions and end their month-long strike. According to management, the contract is the same agreement that the 178 members of Bakery Workers Local 125 rejected back in November, but came with the added threat that the company would hire permanent replacement workers.

Police were called in when a contingent of Occupy Oakland protesters joined picket lines to stop scabbing. But the AFL-CIO kept the strike isolated from wider support.

Opposition to the contract centered on the company's demand that workers should pay a portion of their health care benefits. Previously, deductibles were paid by the company. Under the new agreement, the company will continue to pay these costs in the first year. In the second year, workers will bear half the costs, and in the third year, all deductibles will be paid by workers.

### **Illinois teachers' strike settled**

Teachers for the Zion-Benton School District in Illinois ratified a new contract January 10 that brings a five-day strike to a close. The district and the 280 teachers, hall monitors and secretaries have clashed over wages and benefits ever since negotiations began in April 2011.

Neither side revealed the final details of the agreement. Back on October 31, the school board declared an impasse and the union authorized a strike the following day. More than a month passed without negotiations. On January 12, teachers finally walked out.

### **Union for Toronto city workers offers wage freeze**

In an unprecedented and cowardly maneuver, the president of the union representing inside workers for the city of Toronto made a

public appeal last week to the city to accept an offer of a wage freeze in a new contract.

Outside city workers have been without a contract since December, and the city last week filed a no-board report that would set the stage for a strike or lockout by the end of the month.

In a clear bid to avoid a confrontation with the anti-union administration of Mayor Rob Ford, Mark Ferguson, whose union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), represents 6,000 outside workers, called his offer of a wage freeze a "goodwill gesture...to help Torontonians weather the storm".

City negotiators did not respond to the offer other than saying that there were other issues at stake besides wages and benefits. The city has already presented a long list of concession demands in keeping with an ongoing campaign to cut public sector jobs and gut union rights.

### **B.C. legal aid lawyers take job action**

As part of an ongoing protest over funding cuts to legal aid in British Columbia, the Trial Lawyers Association of B.C. has initiated a campaign of job action, removing duty counsel from over half of the province's courtrooms and limiting access at dozens more.

The Association says they are seeking to draw attention to a woefully underfunded legal aid program in the province, which means that many who can't afford a lawyer are forced to do without proper legal representation. They have also said that if they don't get a response from the provincial Liberal government, they will escalate their action to include criminal trials.

The province has responded, saying that limited duty counsel will continue to be offered during any job action.



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