

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 February 2012

Costa Rican public employees protest unilateral, inadequate raise

Thousands of Costa Rican public sector workers gathered February 15 in front of the Casa Presidencial, the presidential headquarters in the capital San José, to protest the minuscule wage increase decreed by the Labor Ministry for the first quarter of 2012. According to the *Tico Times*, the demonstrators included “teachers, port workers, public health officials, telecommunications workers and even government employees.”

Last November, the government granted the Budget Authority, a government agency, discretionary power to make unilateral salary decisions. On January 25, union reps met with government officials to discuss issues raised by the decree, but the talks failed.

The public employees denounced the monthly raise of 5,000 colones—less than US\$10—as insufficient to keep pace with inflation. Instead, they are demanding a 4.16 percent raise, which the Central Bank projects as the inflation rate for 2012. The Labor and Finance Ministries claim that the percentage raise would aggravate the country’s fiscal deficit.

The public workers’ unions issued a declaration that they would call an indefinite strike if President Laura Chinchilla did not agree to meet to discuss the issue. Chinchilla responded with a letter calling for a meeting on February 20.

Chilean port workers hold 2-day strike protesting Pinochet-era tax

Workers at several Chilean ports struck February 15 and 16 to protest the government’s refusal to consider the refund of a tax enacted against port workers during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. The law, decreed in 1981, taxes the wages of port workers who receive more than 17,600 pesos (currently US\$36.40) per month.

It is not surprising that the government of president Sebastián Piñera—who profited handsomely during the dictatorship—has ignored the port workers’ demands. Piñera’s brother José in fact served in Pinochet’s cabinet and was responsible for the privatization of retirement funds and health care, as well as a number of pro-business changes to the labor code.

Other demands of port workers included job security, better labor conditions and retirement support, all of which have been undermined by decades of free-market policies including the privatization of port facilities.

Port unions claimed an adhesion rate of over 80 percent, and various student and social organizations supported the action with marches and demonstrations.

The union heads held out the possibility of an indefinite strike in March, though they continue to call for “dialogue” with the government.

Partial work stoppages at Brazilian grain port

A pair of two-hour work stoppages at the Brazilian port of Paranaguá slowed the export of corn and soybeans on February 16. Stevedores and other dockworkers carried out the limited strikes to protest the slow pace of negotiations on reaching a new labor agreement with terminal operators.

With the harvest season of soybean and corn in its early stages, the dockworkers union hopes to apply pressure on the terminal operators to resolve the issues—mostly involving the calculation of salary rates—before the harvest picks up speed.

The week before, in the port of Santos, dockworkers suspended a threatened 24-hour strike and resumed contract negotiations with the government.

Bermuda: public sector workers accept wage cut and pension freeze

After initially rejecting it, public sector workers in Bermuda agreed February 17 to a proposal by Premier Paula Cox to take an 8 percent pay cut. The pay cut represents the percentage of gross earnings that is deducted from the civil servants’ pension fund, which will be frozen for a year, supposedly to offset the cut. The government will refrain from paying its contribution for that year as well.

Premier Cox expressed confidence that the proposal would go through, despite its initial rejection. “The budget will be done whether the agreement is done or not.”

Shine Hayward, president of the Trade Union Congress, which represents five of the seven government employee unions, said, “The alternative is job cuts. We can appreciate that the government would like to go through this process without losing any jobs.”

Hayward attempted to put a positive spin on the giveback, claiming that the take-home pay will be more than at present, since other deductions are based on gross earnings, ignoring the fact that the workers will lose one year of their pension fund.

The vote for the measures met with significant skepticism and resistance. At a meeting February 15, the Bermuda Public Services Union (BPSU) presented the proposal to a standing-room-only meeting of over 1,000 members. A number of members angrily denounced the proposal, and 75 stormed out of the meeting in disgust. “One woman called the proposal “harsh punishment.”

Nonetheless, faced with the job-loss threat, government intransigence and the impotence of the BPSU, the members eventually voted to accept the proposal.

Guyanese sugar workers strike against pay changes and work regimen

Some 500 sugar workers at a plantation owned by the Guyana Sugar

Corporation (GuySuCo) began a strike on February 10. The workers at Blairmont Estate are protesting changes in pay rates and working conditions. In addition, they are demanding the removal of the estate manager and the field manager, whom they accuse of “dictatorial policies.”

According to a fact-finding delegation, pay for harvesters will drop from 25,000 Guyanese dollars or GYD (US\$125) per week to 17,000 (US\$84) under the new pay calculation. One worker said, “Are we going to work and starve? It’s best we stay home and starve. It’s unfair to the working class of people.”

Pay for the weed cleaning crew has been halved.

Cane cutters complained of inadequate equipment and footwear. Regarding conditions, one change has workers having to ask permission to leave after finishing work, whereas before they could go home at the end of the workday.

Another issue is the mishandling of documentation for the country’s pension system, the NIS. Typographical and other errors often result in delays or lost records.

Hundreds of tons of cane have not been processed, yet GuySuCo CEO Paul Bhim rejected any basis for the strike and would not consider demands by the workers for a review of the pay given for the clearing of obstacles, which is being cut by 85 percent.

The company has locked all gates to the estate, while the leadership of the sugar workers’ union, the GAWU, known for its close relationship with management and lack of communication with the rank and file, has not called for any concerted action.

The workers have vowed to remain out until their grievances are addressed.

Northern Ohio Red Cross workers strike over wages and benefits

Some 250 Red Cross workers spread across 19 northeastern Ohio counties went on strike February 14 to demand higher wages, more accessible healthcare benefits and better working conditions. Teamsters Local 507, which represents the striking workers, claims workers are unhappy with Red Cross’ health care proposals that include higher co-pays and deductibles and yet, fewer benefits.

Red Cross management declared they were “stunned” by the strike and called it “irresponsible”. However, contract talks have been ongoing since May 2011 and the union gave a 10-day strike notice hoping Red Cross would return to the bargaining table.

The Red Cross’ Northern Ohio Blood Services Region has targets of 12,000 blood transfusions weekly, which supply more than 50 hospitals in the region. But hospitals are able to stockpile supplies and Red Cross is capable of pulling supplies from other regions. According to the Teamsters, contracts were settled with Red Cross in several other states.

Toronto city workers concession contract rammed through

Against the backdrop of loud protest by Toronto Paramedics, a new four-year contract for 6,000 outside workers was pushed through last week by the local leadership of the Canadian Union of Public Employees local 416 (CUPE).

Although the union has refused to reveal the vote count, only saying it passed by “a large majority”, many workers, including paramedics who

are fighting to be in a separate bargaining unit, continue to protest the deal.

The contract contains an onslaught of concessions stripping all but the most senior workers of any job security and seniority rights. Workers will get no pay increase in the first year, with small increases through the rest of the contract. Toronto city council unanimously approved the deal with ultra-right Mayor Rob Ford calling the victory, “the greatest day in this council’s history.”

Wildcat strikes at Alberta hospitals

Over 800 support workers at numerous hospitals and health centers across the province of Alberta took part in a one-day wildcat strike last Thursday before their union reached a deal to end the job action.

The walkout began at a dozen hospitals but quickly spread to smaller centers across the province throughout the day. Leaders of the Alberta Union of Public Employees intervened to end the strike after agreeing with negotiators for Alberta Health Services to have the dispute sent to binding arbitration.

Most of those taking part in the action are designated as essential service workers who recently overwhelmingly rejected a 3-year deal recommended by their union. They have been without a contract since March of last year and are seeking wage and benefit increases that will at least keep them ahead of the rate of inflation.

New Brunswick airport workers strike

Maintenance and service workers at Fredericton International Airport in the province of New Brunswick went on strike February 13, after mediated talks failed to produce a new agreement.

The 25 workers affected are members of the Union of Canadian Transportation Employees (UCTE) who have been working without a contract for nearly 3 years. Outstanding issues in the dispute center on wages, benefits and job classification.

Most of the strikers are designated as essential service workers and if deemed necessary, would have to return to work. Managers have nevertheless been filling in for the striking workers and airport authorities say there has been no disruption to service.



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