

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 March 2012

Argentine teachers, state workers hold one- and two-day strikes

For the second week in a row, teachers in 18 of Argentina's 24 provinces held a 24-hour strike March 6. In Buenos Aires, where a third of the country's population lives, the strike was extended another day.

Participation in the walkout was high, with reports of well over 90 percent—nearly 100 percent in some provinces—among public education teachers, and over 70 percent in the nation's private schools. Janitors, cooks and other workers in the state education sector walked out as well.

One reason for the high turnout was outrage over a remark last week by president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner that teachers work four hours a day and have three weeks vacation. A spokesperson for the Sadop private sector teachers union asked, "What can you ask of a worker if the president herself denigrates educational activity? It was a low and unnecessary blow."

But the main reason is the government's refusal to meet the teachers' demand for a raise in monthly pay to 3,100 pesos (US\$715). The latest government offer is 2,800 pesos, or US\$645.

Union leaders, despite government intransigence, still hold out the hope to achieve the raise demand by means of limited strike actions. "We remain in permanent session to determine which actions to follow," SUTEBA teachers union head Sergio Romero told reporters after a post-strike meeting of five national unions.

Meanwhile, workers in the Association of State Workers, or ATE, struck for one day in all 24 provinces, accounting for over 700 municipalities. ATE is demanding a salary that corresponds to the estimated basic "family basket" of 5,270 pesos (US\$1,215). They also called for an end to salary caps.

In addition to salary demands, the union called for improvement in family allowances. One ATE Buenos Aires local functionary denounced "the ignominy of having family allowances of 30, 40 and 50 pesos when the real value is 270 pesos." A peso is currently worth US\$0.23.

After the latest salary offer by Buenos Aires governor Daniel Scioli fell far short of its demands, ATE has called for another limited strike March 14 and 15.

Argentine port workers strike

Dockworkers walked off the job at Argentina's ports on March 6 over demands for better staffing of shifts and improved working conditions. The dockworkers union, SOMU, has declared that the strike will continue until staffing levels are increased. The strike affected about 20 ships at various ports, mainly at Argentina's primary grain shipping hub Rosario.

Usually, dockworkers' strikes take place later in the year—in May and June—in the midst of the harvesting and loading of soy, corn and grain crops for export. This strike, however, came just as farmers were preparing to harvest corn and soy.

SOMU actually called a strike on Thursday, March 1, and the strike was widely reported to be over the next day. According to the CAPYM port chamber, the dockworkers ended the strike on Friday, worked through the weekend and struck again late on Monday, March 5. SOMU president Omar Suárez, however, denied the claim and said that the strike had continued uninterrupted through the weekend.

As of March 9, no negotiations had been set. "We don't have anything to negotiate," said SOMU chief Omar Suarez. "They either assign the number of crew members that are necessary or the coast guard can do the work."

Brazilian fuel truck drivers strike

Drivers of gasoline and ethanol delivery trucks in the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo stopped work on March 5. The approximately 800 drivers service about 2,000 gas stations throughout the city.

The stoppage led to fuel shortages and reports of the jacking up of fuel prices. The city's Consumer Protection and Defense Department received over 200 complaints of gouging by up to 20 percent at gas stations. The strike was called to protest the city government's attempt to limit delivery hours and routes for the big trucks in the city, which is notorious for congestion and smog. Truckers' union spokesmen declared that the restrictions would increase driving time and transportation costs.

City government accused the truckers of "blackmail" and in a communiqué "vehemently" repudiated the union's offer to negotiate more flexible restrictions. On March 7, a state court judge ruled that 1 million reais (\$565,000) a day would be levied against the truckers' union for the duration of the strike.

The night of March 8, the strike was called off and truckers began delivering fuel under police escort.

Protests by Mexican electrical workers

On March 8, a group of women members of the SME electrical workers union and their families carried out a four-hour protest in front of the Mexico City headquarters of the ruling National Action Party (PAN). The protesters threw eggs at the building and carried signs that read, "Not one vote for the PRI-AN" and "Say no to Mota."

The first sign refers to the right-wing PAN (National Action Party), which over the last 12 years has shown itself to be every bit as anti-working class and corrupt as the Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI,

whose seven-decade rule was sidelined with the election of PAN candidate Vicente Fox in 2000. Fox and his successor Felipe Calderón's policies not only have drastically eroded the living standards of the Mexican working class, but also have led to tens of thousands of deaths via the militarized "war on drugs."

One of those policies was the October 2009 sacking of 44,000 electrical workers as part of the dissolution of the state-owned *Luz y Fuerza del Centro electrical utility*. Police seized the offices and its operations were put under the control of the Federal Electrical Commission or CFE.

The other sign refers to the candidacy of PAN presidential hopeful Josefina Vázquez Mota, the former secretary of education who beat out Calderón's handpicked candidate to become the nominee. The promotion of Vázquez Mota as Mexico's first female presidential candidate is meant to obscure the fact that her policies would fundamentally be no different from Calderón's.

Despite the anti-PRI posturing, the SME bureaucracy in fact supported the PRI until recently, last month swinging its support behind the left-bourgeois Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and its candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

In a separate action, a group of SME protesters demonstrated outside CFE headquarters, blocking the entrance. Dozens of club- and shield-bearing federal police surrounded the building, dislodged the protesters and arrested about a dozen of them.

Trinidad and Tobago: Cement workers' strike completes second week

Six hundred workers for the Trinidad and Tobago cement company TCL remain out on a strike called February 27 over wage demands. The workers' union, the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union (OWTU), is demanding a 16 percent raise for the years 2009-2011. TCL is sticking with its original offer of 6.5 percent, after raising it briefly to 7 percent.

TCL locked out the workers and is importing cement from Jamaica and Barbados. The price for a bag of cement at hardware stores has risen, in some cases as high as twice the usual 50TTD (US\$8.22) per bag. Construction companies are resorting to the black market as well.

The company has emailed all of the workers, calling on them to negotiate individually to return to the job. Its claim that some workers are breaking ranks is contested by the OWTU. On March 5, the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturing Association (TTMA) issued a statement calling on the Labour Ministry to intervene.

On March 9, a small number of workers at the TCL strike camp in front of the Claxton Bay plant were confronted by police officers who ordered them to allow trucks to enter the plant to load bulk cement. According to a *Trinidad Express* report: "The workers locked arms and circled the entrance to the gates at Claxton Bay. They prayed for guidance and warned that no police officers can break their chain.

"But the officers, contracted by management to secure customers entering the plant, outnumbered the striking workers and ordered them to clear the entrance to the plant. The first truck drove through the gates at 7.20 a.m."

OWTU President General Ancel Roget was not at the site at the time. According to the TE report, "He was attending a workshop at the union's

headquarters in San Fernando."

Guyanese cane cutters strike another sugar plantation

Cane cutters for the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) struck the state-run company's Enmore estate March 8. The strike was called to protest the treatment of injured workers, who the workers say were inadequately cared for by the company and the National Insurance Scheme (NIS).

At a gathering of workers in front of the Enmore Martyrs Monument, injured workers and their family members told reporters a number of complaints: inadequate benefits based on inaccurate evaluations, delayed payments, benefit cutoffs and bureaucratic delays, which the wife of one worker called "the royal run-around."

Angry workers blocked a returning ambulance to show reporters the dilapidated state it was in: bald tires, a smoking and sputtering engine, gasoline fumes inside the vehicle. The day before, the ambulance had broken down before it could get an injured worker to the hospital.

The complaints about the NIS service come on top of a number of demands concerning pay schedules and working conditions, the causes of a walkout at a different estate a few weeks earlier. However, NIS and GuySuCo were not the only targets of the workers' scorn. Some workers suggested changing their current union, the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU), which they accuse of impeding progress on medical claims. One worker told *Kaieteur News* that workers are convinced that "GAWU and the government are one."

Arizona transit workers strike against concessions

Six hundred Phoenix transit workers walked out on strike against Veolia Transportation Services March 10 after 22 months of negotiations failed to resolve a number of disputed contract issues. A leading issue that aggravated transit drivers was Veolia's demand to eliminate the right of drivers to receive a cash settlement for up to six months of accrued sick time upon retirement.

Veolia is attempting to insert language that will make the city of Phoenix responsible for providing the money to compensate drivers, given budget constraints that guarantees the wiping out of the benefit. Other sticking points between Veolia and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1433 include retirement, health care, work rules and language governing holiday and vacation benefits.

The strike affects only 31 of 64 routes in Phoenix. Other metropolitan-wide transit services operate under separate agreements with the Valley Metro system. However, another 300 transit workers in nearby Tempe, Arizona voted down a separate contract with Veolia and granted strike authorization to Local 1433. Veolia also has a transit contract in Mesa,

Arizona. The company is currently flying in drivers to provide strikebreaking services to Phoenix.

Veolia Transport is a subsidiary of French-owned Veolia Environment, which as of last year had 110,000 employees in 28 different countries involved in road and rail operations on all six continents. In 2009 the company had revenues of \$7.8 billion. However, disappointing revenues in 2011 have led the company to prepare a spinoff of its transportation services.

Maritime paper workers on strike

One hundred eighteen paper products workers in Halifax, Nova Scotia walked off the job on March 9 in a fight against major concession demands after being without a contract for almost a year.

The workers, who are employed by Maritime Paper Products Ltd., are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP) and, along with a number of other issues, are fighting to keep a defined benefits pension plan. The employer is insisting on a two-tiered plan, which would see new hires placed under a defined contributions plan, which does not provide a defined benefit at retirement.

The company has said it intends to maintain operations during the strike—it produce cartons and custom packaging—using management staff and by increasing production at three other plants in the region.

Developmental workers on strike in Ontario

Over 150 developmental service workers in Elmira, Ontario, west of Toronto, are set to strike this week after working without a contract since April of 2010.

Provincially funded Elmira District Community Living employs the workers, members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). They provide services to adults and seniors with disabilities throughout the region. The strike comes after workers gave their union a strong strike mandate and rejected the company's latest offer by a margin of over 70 percent.

The union argues that the provincial Liberal government needs to step up funding for developmental services which they say is in crisis. The latest offer from the company included a mere 16 cent wage increase over the term of a four-year contract to workers who are already some of the lowest paid in the province.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact