

Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 March 2012

Argentine meat workers hold blockades over layoffs

Members of Argentina's Beef Industry Workers Union Federation (FGPICD) began blockades of two locations in Venado Tuerto, Santa Fe province, March 12. The blockades of the Liniers Market—the principal meat market in the region—and the JBS Swift meatpacking plant and refrigeration facility were called to protest the layoffs of more than 8,000 workers in the meat processing sector since 2009. They were originally planned for 48 hours.

On March 12, after 548 workers at the JBS refrigeration facility had acceded to “voluntary” retirement and 68 others were laid off, workers blockaded the plant, preventing all but one cattle truck from entering. FGPICD President José Framini told reporters that the workers demanded a “clear policy” regarding job security in the industry.

On March 13, Framini announced the suspension of the blockade in response to a call for a meeting with the Labour and Agriculture Ministers.

Striking Argentine transport workers ordered to binding arbitration

Long distance bus drivers in Buenos Aires's Retiro bus terminal stopped work on March 15 over nonpayment of back pay. All bus service—some 1,500 buses—at the terminal were halted beginning at midnight.

The drivers, members of the UTA transport workers union, walked out over the bus company's failure to live up to an agreement signed last year, in which the drivers were to get three installments of 700 pesos (US\$161) in 2012. The drivers have yet to receive the first, due in January. In recent discussions with UTA representatives, the company proposed paying 100 pesos, or US\$23, a week, an offer that a UTA spokesman said, “showed a total lack of respect for workers and passengers.”

The Labour Ministry quickly reacted to the strike with a decree ordering a tripartite “mandatory conciliation”—i.e. binding arbitration—which would keep bus service in effect during negotiations. UTA officials met with ministry and bus company reps at noon.

The strike remained in effect for the 24-hour period. However, the mandatory conciliation requires a 10-day period of refraining from industrial action while the parties negotiate. Bus service was renewed at midnight.

Chilean bus drivers strike

Demanding better working conditions, some 2500 drivers for the Chilean bus operator Express Santiago 1 stopped work at 4:00 a.m. on

March 14. Express Santiago 1 has the contract for Transantiago Line 3, which serves about twenty routes in the capital.

The main demand of the drivers is a maximum of four consecutive hours of driving and a pause of eight hours every day.

Rudolfo Cid, leader of the drivers' union, told the online news site Terra that complaints to the Transport Minister had fallen on deaf ears. Cid enumerated some of the problems: “mechanical failures, non-respect of working hours, drivers to earn decent wages have to work Saturday and Sunday.”

The next day, during a mediation meeting with the Labor Ministry, the union and Express Santiago 1 signed a protocol of agreement. The document establishes the payment of overtime after eight hours on a daily basis. The company promised not to fire any driver who struck, while the union pledged not to interrupt service.

The membership was to submit a counterproposal on March 19, with negotiations to be renewed on the 21st. “In this phase the syndicates will propose programming of turns for drivers and their impact on daily and weekly shifts. Likewise, improving hygiene and security in the workshops, generating good conditions in the maintenance area,” reported emol.com.

Bolivian doctors hold national 24-hour strike over workday decree

Doctors in Bolivia's National Health Fund (CNS) held a 24-hour strike March 15 to protest a recently enacted decree regarding hours of work. Supreme Decree 1126 restores eight-hour workdays for CNS doctors and other health workers.

Luis Larrea, president of the La Paz Medical College, named other issues to which the strike was directed: government measures restricting internships and probationary periods for medical students.

In addition to the strike, during which emergency services at CNS facilities were not affected, marches were held in a number of cities.

The Health Ministry claimed that the strike was illegal and has declared that it will dock the pay of striking doctors. At the same time, the health minister called for a renewal of meetings with the doctors.

Violence against union members continues to reign in Colombia

A report by the Colombia office of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has demonstrated once again that the nation, a staunch US ally, continues to be among the most dangerous in the world for union members.

Among the data generated by the report, which was released March 12, were the following: 2,800 union members murdered since 1984, with less than 6 percent of perpetrators found and punished; 216 disappearances; 83

cases of torture and 163 kidnappings. Moreover, despite a decline of actual murders in the last eight years, labor leaders have encountered increasing threats.

Although mainstream media and politicians are wont to blame leftist guerrilla groups for the violence that has plagued the country, the report points to right-wing paramilitaries as the primary perpetrators, accounting for at least two-thirds of the killings, with security forces, guerrillas and common criminals sharing the remaining third.

Clashes between police and protesting miners leave at least three dead, dozens injured

Ongoing protests by illegal gold miners came to a head in the southeastern Peruvian region of Madre de Dios on March 14 when police and protesters clashed. More than 12,000 miners were at the protest when battles with the police broke out. At least three protesters were killed and over thirty injured during the confrontations.

The protests had begun March 5 over government decrees, issued in February, restricting informal mining activities in the area. The government cited damage to the environment, the growth of social problems including prostitution and human trafficking, and tax evasion as necessitating the restrictions.

According to a gulfnews.com report, the region has seen a gold rush with a flood of tens of thousands of “wildcat” miners: “It has attracted poor farmers from the Andean highlands as well as unscrupulous investors and gunslingers, and Madre de Dios now produces about a fifth of Peru’s overall annual gold yield.”

On March 15, leaders of the Madre de Dios Mining Federation, or Fedemin, announced a suspension of the protests as they met with government representatives to attempt to bring the black market mining into the formal economy. Since the clashes, more than 1,000 police reinforcements have been sent to the area.

Contract ratification ends Phoenix transit strike

Phoenix transit workers voted by a 97-3 percent margin March 14 to end their 6-day strike and return to work under a new agreement with Veolia Transportation Services. Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1433 executive board member Dennis Paulson told the *Downtown Devil*, “I’m happy, I’m excited. We didn’t lose anything. We got everything we wanted.”

But the *Arizona Republic* reported despite the ratification “drivers continued to express deep animosity toward Veolia Transportation Services.” The agreement is reported to include a meager 11-cent raise in the contract’s second year and a two-percent increase in the third year, and it will now require drivers an additional year to reach top pay. Also, drivers will only be able to bank 60 days of sick pay as opposed to the previous 144 days.

Drivers are also unhappy with the continued high cost of family health insurance, which is purported to run as high as \$1,180 a month.

Michael Cornelius, financial secretary for Local 1433 was compelled to admit to the *Arizona Republic* that the contract was “not great... There is hatred here between the employees and their employer.”

Phoenix contracted with Veolia Transportation Services to run 31 of the city’s 64 routes. The ATU has accepted the splitting and weakening of the

transit workers against Veolia, a subsidiary of French-owned Veolia Environment, which has 110,000 employees in 28 different countries involving road and rail operations on all six continents. The ATU has limited itself to pressuring the city not to renew its contract with Veolia.

Toronto Libraries face shutdown

Ninety-eight branches of Toronto’s public libraries could be closed this week as a result of either a strike or lockout as last minute bargaining continued through the weekend.

The 2,300 workers affected are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Last week they voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action. Over half of library workers are part-time, and along with a raft of concession demands put forward by the Toronto Public Library Board, provisions for these workers are a key issue in the dispute.

Under terms of the recent settlement with Toronto’s outside city workers, only the most senior jobs would have any protection and in the case of libraries, this would mean that 70 percent could be outsourced.

Pilots disrupt Air Canada service

At least a dozen pilots phoned in sick at the end of last week, causing a number of flight cancellations according to reports by CTV News on Saturday. This comes just days after the federal Harper government passed legislation, halting any legal job action by pilots and machinists.

While the airline has refused to confirm the reports, it earlier issued a statement warning that pilots may be planning an illegal job action including coordinated sick calls. While other factors such as fog were cited as possible reasons for flight delays across the country, in Montreal alone at least a dozen flights were either cancelled or experienced extraordinary delays.



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