

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 March 2012

Strike and blockade by Argentine service station workers

Service station workers in Argentina's Neuquén, Río Negro, La Pampa and other provinces temporarily stopped work and blockaded the entrances to their workplaces on March 23.

The workers struck to demand that Spanish-owned combustible fuel conglomerate, YPF, which owns the stations, renew its contracts and keep all stations supplied on an equal footing. In addition, they demanded that stations that had lost YPF sponsorship be reopened and given back the franchise.

A spokesman for the Service Station Workers Syndicate (Soesgye) told *La Gaceta Tucumán* that in the last few years, 30,000 positions were lost through the closure of 3,000 outlets.

Nearly 200 stations—about 7 percent of YPF outlets according to the firm—were affected by the strike and blockade, which was originally called to take place from 10 am to 2 pm. Soesgye called the action off a half hour early following a Labor Ministry binding arbitration decree.

Peruvian wildcat miners, government sign accord

The government of Peru and “informal” miners from the Madre de Dios gold mining region came to an agreement March 20 that will grant some miners operating permits within the year. The government's agreement with the Madre de Dios Mining Federation is an attempt to “formalize” the activities of roughly 30,000 miners who have entered the region, often working in nature preserves and other environmentally sensitive areas.

The deal distinguished between “informal” miners and “illegal” miners, and is designed to provide a formalization procedure for the former as well as imposing environmental and taxation regulations. It will crack down on the latter, with prison time for those who do not “regularize.”

The week before, protests against government rulings aimed at limiting informal and illegal mining exploded into violence in which three people died, about 40 suffered injuries and more than 50 were arrested. After a number of pitched battles in the city of Puerto Maldonado, the government sent over 1,000 troops.

Mexican university workers strike, occupy department for 23 days

Professors and unionized workers at the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca, Mexico (Uabjo) ended their strike March 21. The strike included the occupation of the language faculty building for 23 days and the complete closure of facilities for 11.

Rosa Elena Jarquín López, a delegate of the workers' union, Steuabjo, told reporters that the union's executive committee “corralled” the striking workers and forced them to give up the occupation, “brought us to the assembly to vote with them in the majority, with which we were not in agreement, but so that we wouldn't be harming the students, we decided to hand everything over.”

Uabjo workers have a long history of conflict with the rector, which they accuse of damaging the institution through appointments to administrative positions of cronies who do not have the interests of students at heart, and who persecute workers. Jarquín López said that the retention of the current language faculty director, whom she alleged had caused heavy damage to the department, was inexplicable.

The main demand of the strikers is that there be no reprisals against union members by the rector or language faculty administration. Rector Rafael Torres Valdez and other officials have asked the Oaxaca Attorney General's office to arrest some of the striking workers, accusing them of robbery, inflicting injuries, looting and vandalism.

Costa Rican public sector unions accept miniscule pay raise

On March 20, unions representing Costa Rica's public sector employees accepted the government's unilaterally imposed pay raise of 5,000 colones per month. The raise, slightly less than US\$10, is the same amount thousands of workers had protested against in front of the presidential palace five weeks before. (See February 21 Workers' Struggles)

The February 15 demonstration included thousands of teachers, port workers, public health officials, telecommunications workers and government employees.

Union leaders denounced the paltry raise, which had been unilaterally imposed following a government decree giving its Budget Authority agency the power to make unilateral salary decisions.

At the demonstration, the unions demanded a raise pegged to the nation's inflation rate and threatened a general strike. President Laura Chinchilla responded with a letter calling for a meeting on February 20. Union reps have been negotiating with the government since then, finally caving in to the original raise after a 12-hour session that ended at 1:30 am March 20. After getting what it wanted, the government withdrew the decree.

The government also agreed to return to a 2007 formula for determining wages during the second half of the year and to discuss a public employment bill and come to a consensus with unions about what it should say over the next six months.

Not all the unions accepted the meager hike. The High School Teachers' Association and the General Workers Confederation walked out of the meeting, threatening to call more strikes in April.

Los Angeles airport workers demonstrate against working conditions under airport contract services

Some 600 airport workers at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) demonstrated March 22 against healthcare and working conditions they face under service contractors that hire them out to the nation's third largest airport. The Service Employees International Union, which represents 4,000 of LAX's service workers, says that one of the service contractors, Aviation Safeguard, while claiming that its employees decertified their union, refuses to appear before the National Mediation Board (NMB) and will provide no proof of the decertification.

Aviation Safeguard claims there is no legal requirement that they attend NMB hearings. The SEIU says that workers attending the rally voted to launch rolling strikes by LAX service workers against service contractors.

Picket backs Washington state Hytek workers in Kent

Over 200 workers, including machinists at Boeing, picketed March 21 in support of workers at the Hytek Finishes' production facility in Kent, Washington as they struggle for their first-ever labor contract. According to the International Association of Machinists Lodge 751, workers "are having a hard time getting management at Hytek to negotiate a fair contract."

The 175 workers at Hytek, which provide aerospace parts to Boeing, Lockheed and Bell Helicopter, voted in August 2011 to unionize. Workers have gone bankrupt due to medical costs and their current out-of-pocket medical costs at Hytek can climb to as high as \$7,200 a year. The average wage for Hytek workers is \$16 an hour.

According to the IAM, a major issue is safety. Hytek workers handle more than 100 toxic chemicals or cancer causing agents and the company only provides elementary safety procedures and does not provide the necessary personal protective equipment.

Wildcat strikes hit Air Canada

On March 22 Air Canada workers across the country launched wildcat strikes to oppose measures taken against fellow union members protesting legislation brought in by Labour Minister Lisa Raitt to prevent a legal strike.

A handful of workers were facing disciplinary action for heckling the Minister as she walked through Toronto's Pearson Airport Thursday evening. By early Friday, wildcat strikes had broken out beginning with Machinists and Aerospace workers in Toronto but quickly spreading across the country as workers from Vancouver to Quebec City walked off the job in solidarity. As a result, Air Canada flights were thrown into chaos throughout the day and into the evening, with disruptions reported through the weekend that affected over 200 flights in Toronto alone.

Earlier this year Raitt intervened to prevent job action by flight attendants and service agents. She did it again this month, introducing legislation to make any strike by Air Canada workers illegal. Air Canada was preparing to lock out pilots and baggage handlers and ground crews who were in a legal strike position when the Tory Labour minister intervened with back-to-work legislation earlier this month.

Union leaders, who neither condemned nor condoned the strike, brought an end to the action with a negotiated deal that will reportedly halt most disciplinary action and lead to the reinstatement of 37 workers who were suspended due to the wildcat.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact