

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 April 2012

## Mexican university workers walk out over salary dispute

Professors at Mexico's University of Sonora struck April 19 over the administration's last salary offer. In an assembly held that day by the STAUS academic workers' union, the vote was 801 to 661 to strike.

Negotiations began more than two months ago, with STAUS proposing a 25 percent raise; the final offer of the administration was 3.8 percent, with 2 percent for various clauses of the collective contract. Another STAUS demand is revision of clauses in the Collective Work Contract.

The University of Sonora consists of six campuses in the cities of Hermosillo, Caborca, Nogales y Santa Ana, Ciudad Obregón and Navojoa. The state government denounced the strike vote and stated that it will provide alternative classrooms in downtown Hermosillo.

## Costa Rican teachers strike to protest corruption, taxes

Teachers throughout Costa Rica struck on April 19 against government corruption and new taxes. At the capital, San José, members of the APSE secondary educators' union marched and demonstrated in front of the Social Security Fund and Public Finance Ministry buildings.

In an open letter to President Laura Chinchilla, APSE demanded that "the government desist once and for all from carrying forward in the Legislative Assembly the noxious and regressive Tax Package."

The letter refers to a proposed fiscal reform package that includes the selling of government-owned property, allowing public entities to charge for "non-essential" services and the freezing of wages and pensions.

Chinchilla's scandal-ridden government has been in crisis over a number of resignations of administration officials following revelations of tax evasion and nepotism.

APSE claimed 95 percent adhesion to the strike action in more than 30 parts of the country. Students of Costa Rica's five public universities joined in the strike as well.

## More strikes and protests in Honduras

With the cost of living climbing and with record high fuel prices, workers in Honduras continue to protest.

On April 16, anesthetists and other technicians as well as interns of the Faculty of Medicine at the Hospital Escuela in Tegucigalpa struck over the nonpayment of benefits the health department had promised 14 months before.

On April 18, police evicted some 3,500 farming families from 12,000 hectares (30,000 acres) of land in eight provinces. The farm workers had occupied the land, properties of large landowners, claiming that it was arable public lands that they had the right to cultivate.

On April 19, an estimated 10,000 workers in 18 provinces took part in marches, demonstrations and strikes. Teachers and students in Tegucigalpa, chanting and carrying signs and banners, marched from the University of Education to the downtown center, where they denounced the government of Porfirio Lobo.

## 24-hour strike by Peruvian doctors

Some 15,000 Peruvian public sector doctors held a 24-hour strike to demand a salary raise and budgeting for more contracted doctors. The doctors are members of the Medical Federation of Peru, which claimed that adherence to the strike was "forceful." The Ministry of Health minimized the action, claiming that 95 percent of doctors nationwide worked.

Doctors in hospitals in Arequipa, Tacna, Moquegua and other cities carried out actions with varying degrees of participation. In Lima, doctors and supporters marched to the Congress, where they presented a list of demands, including the hiring of more doctors in understaffed hospitals.

The principal demand, however, was that President Ollanta Humala keep his campaign promise to raise doctors' salaries. Federation president César Palomino told *El Comercio*, "In Peru there are still doctors contracted by the ministry who make barely 530 soles [US\$197] per month," and that the government has raised salaries for the military, judges and teachers, "but for doctors there's no money for salaries."

## **Argentinean subway workers hold four-hour strike**

Subway workers in Buenos Aires stopped work from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m. on April 19 to demand the opening of parity talks with the Metrovía subway enterprise over salaries and labor conditions. The workers are members of the AGTSyP transit workers union, which is calling for a 28 percent raise.

AGTSyP head Roberto Pianelli told reporters that the strike was “directly against [Buenos Aires mayor Mauricio] Macri for not taking charge of the situation.” He added, “We have to look for the boss; we don’t know if he’s National or City.”

Macri recently reversed a decision to take control of the subway system from the federal government, and his government now disavows responsibility. Macri and his right-wing PRO party have locked horns before with the ruling Peronist Justicialist party headed by President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

## **Hostess seeks to abolish labor agreements in bankruptcy court**

Hostess Brands appeared before a US bankruptcy judge in New York last week to demand that labor contracts for the Teamsters and the Bakery, Confectionary and Tobacco Workers union be nullified and the company allowed to impose drastic concessions in an attempt to restore profits to its investors. A decision will be due on May 1.

The Teamsters union offered up to \$150 million in contract concessions the previous weekend in an effort to mollify the company, but its effort was rejected. This comes on top of \$110 million in concessions surrendered by the Teamsters during the 2009 bankruptcy reorganization of the company.

Hostess Brands is demanding the suspension of pensions. Among the largest creditors in bankruptcy court is the Bakery Workers, which represents 6,000 Hostess workers and whose pension obligations total \$994 million.

About a month ago, it emerged that 11 Hostess executives had their salaries increased by 80 percent last summer. The news so rankled the 7,500 Teamster members that they voted 91 percent to authorize a strike despite warnings from the union that a strike would destroy the company.

## **Las Vegas casino workers and occupy protesters launch hunger strike and encampment**

Seventeen casino workers and their supporters launched a seven-day hunger strike April 18 to protest against a campaign to prevent union organization at Palace Station Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. The workers have set up an occupy-style camp outside the oldest of the Casino’s 17 properties.

The Culinary union has been engaged in a campaign for several years to organize the Casino’s 13,000 employees.

It charges management with intimidation and have opposed a company-suggested “secret” ballot to determine the attitude of workers.

## **Rio Tinto continues to lock out Quebec aluminum workers**

Rio Tinto Alcan, a subsidiary of the global mining and smelting giant Rio Tinto, is continuing to lock out 850 workers at its Alma, Quebec, aluminum smelting complex.

The company imposed the lockout on January 1, after the workers balked at its plans to further expand the use of subcontract workers paid half the standard wage.

Quebec’s Liberal government, which is helping the company subsidize the lockout by allowing it not to meet its normal contractual obligations with the government-owned electricity utility Hydro-Quebec, recently appointed a mediator to help bring an end to the contract dispute. But currently there are no plans for further face-to-face talks

Speaking last week, Rio Tinto Alcan boss Jacynthe Côté reaffirmed the company’s determination to resist the workers’ demands for a minimum guaranteed workforce. “That would undermine the competitiveness of the Alma plant over the long term,” said Côté. “And not just of the Alma plant. It’s a clause that could be introduced in other plants and make them as a whole less competitive.”



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