

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 May 2012

Argentinean hotel workers protest wages

One day before a four-day national strike called by Argentina's FEHGRA hotel workers union federation, Argentina's Labor Ministry issued an "obligatory conciliation" decree April 27, making strike action illegal for 15 days while tripartite negotiations take place. In response, FEHGRA called off the strike.

Nonetheless, protest actions took place in some areas. In the southwest Buenos Aires province city of Bahía Blanca, about a hundred members of the Tourism, Hotel and Gastronomic Workers Union (UTHGRA) marched through downtown carrying picket signs and noisemakers and passing out leaflets until they reached the city's Teatro Municipal, where they dispersed.

UTHGRA is calling for a 35 percent raise, as opposed to management's offer of a 20 percent raise over 10 months. Graciela Kundt, the local UTHGRA general secretary, told reporters that 20 percent amounted to 70 pesos (US\$15.85) per month. Maximum wages for hotel, bar and restaurant workers vary between 4,000 and 4,500 pesos (US\$900-1,019).

Brazilian dam construction workers strike for improved conditions

Some 7,000 workers at Brazil's gigantic Belo Monte hydroelectric dam construction site struck on April 23 over working conditions and benefits. Workers blocked the main road leading to the dam as well.

The demands revolve mostly around the remoteness of the worksite, located near the town of Altamira on the Xingu River in the northern Brazilian state of Para. The workers, most of whom come from other parts of Brazil, are demanding to be allowed to visit their hometowns every three months, instead of the current six-month gap. Workers also demand free airfare, since the cost of flights is prohibitive. Another demand is an increase in the value of meal vouchers.

The Belo Monte job action follows strikes at the Santo Antonio and Jirau sites, located on the Madeira River near the border with Bolivia. Workers there struck for wage increases in March, returning to the job in early April.

Brazilian Foxconn workers threaten strike over poor conditions

Workers at a Foxconn electronics assembly plant in the city of Jundai in Brazil's Sao Paulo state have threatened to strike May 3 if a number of complaints are not addressed. The workers, numbering about 2,500, assemble electronic products for firms like Dell, Microsoft and Apple.

Chief among the complaints are poor food, shortages of water and transportation problems. The food has to be sent in, and its quality is low. In addition, service in the cafeteria is poor, resulting in long lines. The water supply is inadequate for the size of the factory, and has at times been cut off. Similarly, the number of buses that take the workers to and from the plant has not increased in spite of the growth of the workforce at Foxconn, forcing some workers to walk to work.

Foxconn gained notoriety last January when workers at one of its Chinese plants threatened to commit mass suicide over poor wages and working conditions.

Mexican teachers strike, blockade freeway, occupy offices

Some 25,000 teachers in the Mexican state of Guerrero went on strike April 23. The teachers are members of CETEG (Guerrero State Coordinator of Education Workers), considered a dissident split-off of the SNTE national teachers federation.

In addition to the strike, teachers occupied the offices of the Guerrero Education Secretariat. On April 25, a group of teachers blockaded the Autopista del Sol, a freeway connecting Acapulco with Mexico City, for four and a half hours. On April 25, CETEG lifted the strike, but rejected a call for dialogue from the Public Education Secretariat.

According to an *El Universal* report, "The central points of the teachers' protest are against a planned universal evaluation that the Public Education Secretariat will put into effect and a social pact for education signed by the state government in past weeks.

"Since this last point, according to the director [CETEG head González Juárez Ocampo], makes it impossible for any teacher to hand down his or her post to a relative, and this decision, according to him, does violence to the struggles that for years they have led, therefore they ask for its cancellation in a definitive manner."

Ocampo warned that CETEG would escalate its actions on May

15 with an indefinite strike if the demands were not met.

Two Peruvian protesters die, 26 wounded during fishing quota protest

On April 28, hundreds of fishermen in the northern Peruvian port city of Paita ended their strike and highway blockade begun six days before. The fishermen, members of the Paita Fishermen's Union (Sindicato Único de Pescadores de Paita), were demanding that the government raise the fishing quota.

The fishermen's demand was to raise the quota of Peruvian hake from 8,600 tons to 14,500. According to FIS, a fishing industry web site, some dockworkers joined in the strike as well.

On April 26, a demonstration turned violent as police fired into a group of protesters attempting to take over a police station. One man was killed and 26 were injured. Some hours later a teenager died from a bullet wound in the head he suffered during the confrontation.

The Minister of Production announced the quota increase on April 27 and the government and fishermen's union have since agreed to engage in dialogue.

In the interim, the fishermen added a number of other demands, among them improvement of the Paita water supply, revision of the port concession, labor rights, modification of the law concerning pensions for retired fishermen, and addressing health and education issues.

Machinists strike over pensions at Texas defense plant

Three thousand five hundred machinists went on strike April 23 at Lockheed Martin's aircraft defense plant in Fort Worth, Texas over cuts in pensions and benefits. Members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 776 voted one day earlier to reject the defense contractor's offer by a 94 percent margin and a second vote to strike passed by 93 percent.

Lockheed Martin had offered workers three percent raises in each of the three years of the new contract, a \$3,000 signing bonus and an \$800 supplement to the annual cost of living increase. According to the IAM, changes to the medical portion of the contract would result in higher deductibles and out-of-pocket maximums. But what galvanized opposition to the proposal was Lockheed's insistence on wiping out the traditional defined benefit pension plan for all new workers hired after the ratification.

According to some news sources, the pressure to attack pensions at Lockheed Martin originated with the Obama administration and the Defense Department. The Fort Worth plant produces the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and the F-16 for the Pentagon.

Tentative agreement in Oregon teachers strike

A 24-hour negotiating session produced a last-minute tentative agreement April 25 that cut short a strike by Oregon teachers for the Gresham-Barlow School District. The district's 600 teachers had been on the picket line a mere three hours when the announcement was made.

Tensions began to build in the contract negotiations when the school district unveiled a plan to replace teachers in the event of a strike. Parents held a rally in support of teachers on April 19 outside the school districts headquarters. "The teachers are our lifeblood," Melissa Roethe told KATU News. "I mean, they've worked endlessly with each of my children ...we've really felt supported by them and I feel like it's our turn to support them."

One day before the strike deadline, students walked out of school and marched to the site where negotiations were being held carrying signs saying "Support Gresham Teachers." The school administration responded by closing the school system. Neither the teachers' union nor the school board would reveal the contents of the new agreement pending a mass meeting of teachers on April 30 and the final acceptance of the agreement by the school board some time in May.

Strike looming at Ontario Works

Some 600 employees at Ontario Works in Peel Region north of Toronto could be on strike this week after conciliated talks failed to produce an agreement last week.

The workers, who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), recently voted 89 percent in favor of strike action and will be in a legal strike position as of May 2. Ontario Works is a provincial agency that provides social and community services to the disadvantaged. According to the union, major issues in the dispute include not only wages, but also demands by the employer for major cuts to benefits.

Three other bargaining units in Peel who are organized under the same local also recently voted overwhelmingly to strike, but union leaders are treating them separately, effectively quarantining their struggles. The union has made it clear that they still hope for a negotiated settlement even after Ontario Works negotiators abruptly left the final bargaining session last Friday.



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