

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 May 2012

Argentinean metallurgy workers' strike suspended again

A strike by Argentinean metallurgy workers May 10 was cut short by an "obligatory conciliation" (binding arbitration) decree issued by the Labor Ministry the same day. The ministry called for a two-week extension of talks that had already been taking place between the Metallurgic Workers Union (UOM) and business representatives for 75 days. Work stoppages are forbidden during the extension.

The 52 sections of the UOM had held a plenary meeting, where they resolved to strike one hour for every hour worked. This limited tactic was nipped in the bud by the conciliation decree, the second since talks began. *La Nación* reported the renewed talks as "bogged down and without agreement," and "an unexpected storm front for the government."

The UOM is headed by Antonio Caló, whom *La Nación* described as "the favorite of Kirchnerism to unseat Hugo Moyano of the CGT," the nationwide union federation. Moyano, a staunch supporter of the reelection of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, has lately taken to criticizing her and her policies.

The UOM, which represents some 260,000 workers, demands a 25 percent increase broken down into two parts and the continuation of 300 peso (US\$68) bonus payments that were made in January, February and March. This combination would raise the basic monthly salary to a little over 4,000 pesos (US\$901). Management is offering a 20 percent raise and rejects the bonus payments.

24-hour strike by Argentinean state employees

State workers in Argentina's southern Santa Cruz province struck for 24 hours May 10 to protest delays in full payment of their salaries. In 14 provincial localities, teachers and other school workers, health workers and court employees as well as sanitation, road maintenance and electrical workers struck, marched and engaged in *cacerolazos*, the banging of pots and pans (*cacerolas*). A spokesman for the ADOSAC teachers union claimed 80 percent adherence to the mobilization.

The strike action was spurred by a unilateral decision of the Santa Cruz governor, Daniel Peralta, in response to the economic crisis in Santa Cruz. Claiming, "If the money's not there, I can't invent it," Peralta ordered that salary payments to state workers be paid partially, with the remainder to be paid at an unspecified future date. The action brought denunciations not only from state employees' unions, but also from the judicial branch, which accused Peralta of usurping the courts.

Santa Cruz has about 40,000 state employees in addition to 12,000 retirees. The current budget deficit is 1,500 million pesos (US\$338 million), and this year Peralta cannot count on royalties from the YPF petroleum complex, nationalized by the Kirchner administration last month. An 800-million-peso debenture loan from Banco Nación was recently approved, and its repayment is sure to be imposed on the backs of the working class.

Nicaraguan truck drivers strike over transport fee rate

Container truck drivers in Nicaragua began a strike May 7 to demand an increase in the rate they are paid to haul cargo. The drivers, hit with rising fuel prices, have been calling for an increase of the fee—from the current rate of US\$1.10 per kilometer to US\$1.30—for two months.

At a press conference May 11, Marvin Altamirano, head of the Carriers Association of Nicaragua (ATN), blamed the shipping lines for bringing about the strike, accusing them of not showing any intention to negotiate. He questioned the share of profits that the shippers pay out: "What do the shipping lines do with the rest of the money, if they charge \$500 here and pay the carriers \$180?"

Altamirano added that the Central American Carriers Federation (Fecatran) has declared its support for the action. In fact, on May 12, *El Nuevo Diario* quoted Altamirano as saying that the strike could spread to other countries in the region, such as Costa Rica and El Salvador. "If there's no agreement, this could become a problem not only for Nicaragua, but for the region."

Peru: Four-day strike and roadblock by informal miners

On May 11, the Confederation of Artisanal Miners of Peru lifted a four-day blockade of sections of Peru's Panamericana Sur highway by its members after reaching an agreement with the government.

Informal mining in Peru has led to clashes with authorities, coming to a head in March, when three workers were killed in confrontations with police deployed to the area (see "Three workers killed in Peru mining protests" 29 March 2012). Since then, negotiations have gone on between the Confederation and the government to "normalize" informal mining.

At issue were the provision of supplies and the pace of normalization for informal miners. After the signing of the accord, Federation head Hernández de la Cruz called off the blockades, saying, "We have decided to lift the struggle measure definitively."

Venezuelan professors strike for 24 hours over salary demands

Professors at 18 Venezuelan universities struck on May 9 protesting their salaries and conditions. The University Professors Federation of Venezuela (Fapuv), which called the action, claimed 95 percent adherence by its 40,000 members. It was the fourth such action called by Fapuv this school year.

Fapuv president Lourdes Ramírez, standing outside the Education Ministry, told reporters, "The low salaries and working conditions are provoking university professors to dedicate themselves to other activities inside and outside of the country." Fapuv claims that the government's

calculation of salaries and benefits is outdated and does not reflect the rise in the cost of living.

Demands for a meeting with Education Minister Yadira Córdova to quantify salaries and benefits so far have been rebuffed. Victor Márquez, president of the Venezuela Central University Professors Association, accused the government of favoring professors who are partisans of President Hugo Chávez.

Other demands include raising of the food allowance and vacation bonus, payment of social security debts, uniformity of salaries and the installation of a joint commission of Fapuv and the Opsi (University Sector Planning Office).

Pro-Chávez student leaders have accused Fapuv of “political destabilization” in anticipation of the October 7 presidential election, in which Chávez will try for his third reelection.

Striking New York auto parts workers reject tentative agreement

Auto parts workers at a TRW plant in Auburn, New York, voted down a new tentative agreement by a 128-to-10 margin May 10 that aimed to end a strike begun two days earlier. According to the International Chemical Workers Union Local 192-C, the contract was hardly changed from an earlier proposal that received a 124-to-13 drubbing by workers back on May 6, leading to the current strike.

TRW had sought radical changes in the structure of work shifts that would end overtime and open the door to the hiring of non-union workers. In the company’s original proposal, it sought to cut wages by 93 cents an hour for a workforce that averages only \$21.13 per hour.

One worker told YNN news, “They took a dollar away. They took vacation time away. They tripled some of the people’s insurances. They took a holiday away. They took the night premiums away. They just took everything away.” These cuts follow a concessionary agreement from three years ago that cut wages by 93 cents and reduced vacation days.

TRW has 600,000 employees in 26 countries and raked in \$1.3 billion in profits last year. Forbes ranked TRW CEO John Plant this year as the 15th highest paid executive in the United States, with a total compensation package of \$41.09 million.

Solid waste company locks out workers in Indiana

The United States’ second largest solid waste and recycling company locked out 80 of its workers in the Evansville, Indiana, area May 8 and brought in replacement workers to continue its operations. Among the known issues that separated Republic Services/Allied Waste and members of Teamsters Local 215 was the company’s drive to axe pensions and replace them with an inferior 401(k) retirement plan.

The contract between Republic Services/Allied Waste and Teamsters Local 215 expired April 26, and no new negotiations had taken place since May 1. One day before the lockout, the company declared it had made its “last, best and final offer”.

In 2011, Republic Services/Allied Waste pulled in \$589 million in profits. The union represents some 9,000 workers at the company’s 150 facilities in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico.

Union offers return to work at Wisconsin plant without contract

Workers at an industrial facility in Northern Wisconsin voted May 4 to return to work without an agreement in place. According to reports, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 621 and management from Ashland Industries will hold a meeting next week to put together an agreement to settle the month-long strike and set a schedule for workers to return to their jobs.

Both the company and management remained silent about the exact issues in the strike. However, it is known that Ashland Industries was seeking an open shop agreement. While the unions have been campaigning statewide in advance of the upcoming recall election aimed at removing Republican governor Scott Walker, the Ashland strike remained largely isolated.

Two weeks ago, a number of union workers crossed picket lines after the company hired replacement workers. The IAM offered the company an agreement to settle the strike, but it is not clear what, if any, terms have been agreed to with the return to work.

Halifax recreation workers strike

Workers at the recreation facility Cole Harbour Place in Halifax, Nova Scotia, went on strike last week in a bid to boost their wages above poverty levels.

The 25 workers involved in the strike are members of the Nova Scotia Union of Public and Private Employees who are employed as Zamboni drivers and refrigeration operators at the state-of-the-art facility owned by the city of Halifax. Workers at a similar facility in the city are paid up to double what they are paid at Cole Harbour, where workers have been without a contract for more than two years.

The employer is using replacement workers and has assured the public that there will be no interruption to operations during the strike.

Home heating workers strike in Ontario

After 10 days off the job, a tentative deal has been reached in the strike by more than 300 workers at Reliance Home Comfort in centers across Ontario.

Workers at Reliance are employed to install and repair heating and air conditioning equipment for homes. They had been without a contract for over a month before going out on strike May 2. The workers are members of the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) and were facing a demand for two-tiered wage provisions and other rollbacks, which the company imposed during bargaining, a move that precipitated strike action.

Workers voted to strike after rejecting a contract recommended by their union. The company has been using replacement contractors throughout the strike.





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