

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 June 2012

Argentinean workers federation stages one-day general strike

Workers across Argentina struck on June 8 to protest deteriorating living standards for large sections of the nation's working class. The "National Day of Protest" was called by the CTA (Workers Central of Argentina) federation, usually referred to as a "dissident" organization, as opposed to the CGT federation headed by truckers union boss Hugo Moyano.

Demands included a minimum monthly wage of 5,000 pesos (US\$1,115), elimination of a tax on earnings above salary, child benefit allowances without a ceiling for families, a movable 82 percent pension and the institution of policies to end hunger. According to a *Demotix* report on the strike, despite a growth of the economy Argentina "has a high percentage of its population under the poverty line and too many children underfed and out of the education system."

CTA spokespersons reported that more than 500,000 workers throughout Argentina, including 25,000 in Buenos Aires, participated in the protests. Actions included marches and blockades of main thoroughfares in the capital and other cities. At a rally in the Plaza de Mayo, CTA chief Pablo Micheli denounced the "arrogance and incomprehension" of the government and called on the CGT to add its support to the protests.

The CGT issued a communiqué expressing "solidarity with the protest" and "total agreement" with the demands. Moyano and Micheli plan to meet this week to discuss a possible mobilization at the end of June.

Puerto Rican truck drivers strike over fuel prices

Truck drivers in Puerto Rico struck last week to demand that the government address the high cost of diesel. The strike, called by the Truck Drivers Broad Front (FAC), began at 1:00 a.m. June 4 and was originally planned to last 48 hours.

That same day, Department of Consumer Affairs (DACO) Secretary Luis Rivera Marín called the strike "unnecessary," claiming that diesel and gasoline prices in Puerto Rico were at their lowest in years and that any attempts to control them would "be to the detriment of the consumer."

One of the complaints of the truckers was that wholesalers and distributors were making excessive profits. FAC asserted that there were discrepancies between the statistical data gathered and processed by DACO and the truckers.

By that afternoon, FAC had reached a preliminary agreement with DACO through which "working groups" will compile statistical data to track fuel prices and produce a report. They will have 10 days to create and file the report, after which DACO will "make a determination," according to Labor Secretary Miguel Romero.

As the *Puerto Rico Daily Sun* reported, FAC leader "Víctor Rodríguez said that he was satisfied with Monday's results. 'The storm became a drizzle,' he said moments after the meeting concluded."

Banana plantation workers bring lawsuit against companies

Over 1,000 banana workers from Central and South America have brought lawsuits in the last two weeks against Dole Food Co., Dow Chemical and Fresh Del Monte Produce for health problems they have suffered as a result of exposure to the pesticide DBCP while working on banana plantations. According to a Bloomberg report, DBCP "has been linked to sterility, miscarriages, birth defects, cancer, eye problems, skin disorders and kidney damage, according to eight separate complaints filed since May 31 in federal court in Delaware."

The plaintiffs allege that they were not informed of the risks of exposure to DBCP, nor were they issued protective clothing or gear while working around it. They have suffered deleterious health effects since then.

Over 16,000 workers from Nicaragua, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica and other countries have brought DBCP-related lawsuits against Dole and other agribusiness companies. Some cases have been settled before reaching the courtroom. In one instance in 2007, a jury awarded \$2.3 million to six Dole workers, but the case was thrown out on appeal in 2010. In the majority of cases, judges have dismissed the lawsuits, ruling that the plaintiffs would have to take them to courts in their home countries.

Strike, dissension in Guyana sugar cane workers union

Sugar cane workers for the state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) struck the company's Wales plantation for three days starting May 25 after it made an announcement that it would not pay the traditional Holiday With Pay—equivalent to one week's pay—this year. The company cited unmet production targets, which it blamed on poor harvests and strikes, of which there have been 145 this year.

Holiday With Pay, or HWP, is paid two weeks after the end of the sugar cane harvest and grinding season. This year, on May 11, GuySuCo sent a letter to the headquarters of the field and factory workers' union, the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union (GAWU), which stated: "As you are aware by practice, qualified workers are usually awarded Holiday With Pay no more than two weeks after the closure of a crop. Toward that end, those estates which ceased grinding during week-ending May 11, 2012 should be effecting payment of the award on week ending 25 May 2012.

"Unfortunately due to our unfavourable cash flow situation, we are not in a situation to make that payment."

The workers struck without the authorization of the GAWU. Some workers vented their frustrations with the union to *NewsWatch* following the walkout. One worker said, "We need a union that will properly represent our cause, we pay union dues every day we worked and now the union is nowhere to be seen, we are here alone."

Another added, "Many of our benefits were cut out since this union

started to represent us under the current president Komal Chand Cummings.”

In another action, workers picketed the Enmore plant, carrying signs reading, “Shame on GuySuCo,” “No money, no work” and “Stop blaming workers for shortfall.”

Cleveland Gladiators carry through one-day strike against Arena Football League

Members of the Cleveland Gladiators failed to appear on the field June 8 in a game against the Pittsburgh Power. The action was a selective strike by the players union against the Arena Football League to pressure the owners for improved working conditions, including better coverage for injuries, to be considered in ongoing bargaining.

Cleveland quarterback John Dutton told the *Plain Dealer*, “I’m definitely for the cause, because players need protection, but I was not in favor of this method,” Dutton said. “I was not for the one-team strike, and I made it clear to the guys and our union representation. I was adamant.”

Dutton said the entire league had voted to walk out during the opening of the new season. When the owners fired certain players and used replacements in the game opener between Pittsburgh and Orlando, the players union backed down.

Cleveland receiver Robert Redd said, “I can’t sit here and tell you my job is secure. I hope we can move past this, but you never know.” Scott Woodruff, operating officer for the Gladiators, told the media the owners would decide over the weekend how to proceed against the players who struck.

Houston, Texas building services contractor victimizes striking janitors

Eleven janitors who work for Pritchard Industries in Houston, Texas were barred from returning to work June 8 after a one-day strike. The SEIU says it will file an unfair labor practices charge with the National Labor Relations Board.

About 3,200 members of the Service Employees International Union struck Houston’s downtown office buildings two days earlier over a wage dispute. Currently janitors make \$8.35 an hour and about \$9,000 a year. In the current contract negotiations they are seeking to raise their hourly wage to \$10 an hour over the course of three years. The old agreement expired on May 31.

Strike for union recognition by reality TV crew

Crew members who work for the reality TV show “The Great Escape” walked off the job June 8 after talks between the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the show’s Los Angeles producers broke down. IATSE has been trying to organize non-union crews for cable television.

IATSE also declared the show and company “off limits” for all its union members. “The Great Escape” is a new reality TV series scheduled to premier on June 24.

Public works strike hits Toronto suburbs

Over 300 city workers in the sprawling suburb of Mississauga west of Toronto, Ontario went on strike June 4, joining a strike by 500 Ontario Works employees in the same region, Peel, that began over a month ago.

Although garbage continues to be collected throughout the region, yard waste and recycling pickups have been largely halted as a result of the strike. The workers in both actions are represented by the same union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), who called the strike when talks broke down last Sunday.

Main issues in the dispute include wages and employer demands to cut benefits, with the union saying they are only seeking wage parity with other municipal workers in the region.

Retirement home workers strike in Alberta

Around 80 health care workers at the Riverbend Retirement Home in Edmonton, Alberta went on strike last week against low wages and understaffing after giving their union a near unanimous strike mandate.

According to the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, which represents the strikers, nurses and health care aides at the facility, which is owned by retirement home giant Revera, are paid well below the industry standard. The union claims that wages at the home are 11 to 40 percent below what workers earn at comparable facilities elsewhere. In addition, they say that recent staff cuts have jeopardized care for patients at the home even as replacement workers are being brought in to take the jobs of striking workers.

UBC strike on hold for mediation

After giving strike notice last week when negotiations collapsed, 2,000 support workers at the University of British Columbia have been forced to await the outcome of mediated talks before taking any job action.

Those affected are employed in a range of jobs from custodial and grounds workers to skilled trades and support technicians. Central issues in the dispute include job security, pensions and benefits. The workers are represented by CUPE, which has two other locals at the school that are not on strike.



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