

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 July 2012

One-day strike by Argentinean workers' confederation over income tax, child allowance

Tens of thousands of workers converged on the Argentinean capital Buenos Aires June 27 to protest government labor policies. The rally took place in the midst of a one-day national strike by the CGT, Argentina's largest labor federation. The protesters, mostly consisting of members of the CGT, came together at the Plaza de Mayo, where they heard CGT boss Hugo Moyano denounce the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

The main demands of the protest were the raising of the floor of a recently legislated income tax and expansion of coverage for the universal child allowance. However, the fact that Moyano was the only speaker—and that his demagogic speech accused Fernández of “extortion,” “arrogance” and “acting as if she were a dictator”—suggests another reason for the calling of the rally.

Since falling out with the Peronist Fernández government, former close ally Moyano has faced repeated challenges from within the CGT ranks, some of them encouraged by the government. This week's mobilization—like the strike last week by truck drivers—was seen by many Argentinean workers as an attempt at a show of strength by Moyano.

In fact, a group of anti-Moyano unionists, while supporting the income tax and child allowance demands, declared in a statement: “The great majority of the syndical organizations cannot remain silent when, suddenly and without any debate, it is decided to use the needs of all the workers in the search for miserable personal benefit.”

Puerto Rican airport workers strike, protest privatization plan

Workers at Puerto Rico's Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport struck for 24 hours June 26 to protest the governor's plan to privatize its operations. The workers are members of the Brotherhood of Port Authority Employees.

The plans, promoted by right-wing governor Luis Fortuño, have been criticized for the secrecy under which they have been negotiated and for the lack of information on how privatization will affect the workforce. The Port Authority claims that privatization is necessary and that no employees will lose their jobs.

Union president Astrid Rosario Ortiz told reporters at the protest that the deterioration of services at the airport was part of a deliberate plan to provide a pretext for the privatization scheme. Ortiz also denounced the Port Authority for irregularities in hiring of management and awarding of contracts.

Costa Rican social security system workers, teachers protest

government policies, corruption

Members of Costa Rica's High School Teachers' Association (APSE) joined several hundred employees of the country's Social Security System, the CCSS or Caja, in a march and protest in downtown San José June 26. The protesters gathered outside the National Children's Hospital and marched to the Legislative Assembly.

Caja employees called on the government to pay off debts to the agency. The teachers denounced President Laura Chinchilla's “Plan B” fiscal reform proposals and called for an end to corruption, which has been a salient feature of Chinchilla's administration. Plan B, according to *Inside Costa Rica*, “introduced a series of tax changes that included adding more than 90 food items to the taxable list.”

CCSS Workers Union secretary general Luis Chavarría claimed that his union's participation was not high because the workers did not want to affect health services. Chavarría, nonetheless, declared support for the action, telling *EFE*, “One of the principal objectives is to make a denunciation against the corruption and the sacking of public institutions that practically are responsible for the grave crisis in the public health sector.”

The nation's largest union confederation, the National Public Employees Association, announced earlier that it would not participate, because it was not “officially invited.”

El Salvador customs house workers strike over bonus and overtime

Employees at border crossing customs houses in El Salvador began a strike on June 26. The strike was called by the Union of Workers of the Ministry of Finance (Sitramha) to demand the payment of a \$1,000 bonus (per employee) as stipulated in its contract signed last December, as well as the payments for overtime so far for the first half of the year.

After three days of the strike, the government responded to complaints from the export/import business sector. “At the customs border posts of El Poy, El Amatillo, The Chinamas and The Hachadura, staff of the National Civil Police (PNC) was deployed during the morning to streamline administrative processes and prevent transit through them being further affected,” *La Prensa Gráfica* reported. “Yesterday at 6:00 p.m., the border at Amatillo had free passage, after the PNC intervened in the process of reviewing documents and goods.”

As of June 30, the strike still held at other customs houses.

Judge rules Indiana labor conflict is an “economic” strike

An administrative law judge declared the year-long strike at Coupled Products, LLC in Columbia City, Indiana, an “economic” strike. The June

20 decision came two days after the one-year anniversary of a strike by about 30 members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2049.

Workers voted to strike Coupled Products after the company demanded a 33 percent wage cut and the slashing of vacation. The UAW labeled its strike an unfair labor practices strike, which under labor law is supposed to prevent a company from permanently replacing its striking workforce. The year-long duration of the strike now opens the door to permanent replacement of the striking workers.

Tina Johnson, operations manager for the company's operations, declared, "Right now I wouldn't replace one of my full-time replacements with a picketer who chose to go out on strike." The UAW, which has completely isolated the strike, declared the decision merely "a set-back" and says it will look into appealing the judge's decision.

Month-long strike at Kentucky plant ends

Workers at Valspar Paint Industries voted 24-15 to end their month-long strike against an attempt by the company to control work schedules. According to Teamsters Local 783, workers obtained only partial concessions from the company that will provide some ability to anticipate work hours, although few details were made available.

Workers initially voted 34-6 to strike Valspar Paint after being forced to work 6- and 7-day weeks since the beginning of the year without any advance warning from the company about overtime. According to the union, workers will have some advance warning that will permit them to plan their weekends while the company agreed to hire five additional workers.

Judge implements new union election rule retroactively

A US District Court judge in Texas issued an injunction June 22 blocking a union certification election that affects some 10,000 passenger service agents at American Airlines. Judge Terry Means declared a new standard under the Railway Labor Act requiring 50 percent of workers to sign union certification cards should be applied retroactively to the American Airlines election.

The new 50 percent standard was passed by Congress back in February. The Communications Workers of America (CWA) had already achieved the old 35 percent requirement before the new law came into effect and had an election scheduled to begin on June 21.

American Airlines filed for bankruptcy back in November 2011 in an effort to avoid obligations to its old labor agreements to previously existing union contracts.

United Airlines pilots' union reprimands union pilots over alleged sick-out

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) reprimanded union pilots over the use of sick leave against United Airlines during contract negotiations. A United Airlines spokesperson announced an abnormal rise in sick leave over the weekend.

"Improper use of sick leave or decisions that impact operations in order to pressure the company threaten everything we have been trying to

accomplish in recent months," declared ALPA chairman Jay Heppner, on the union's web site. "Any such activity must stop."

ALPA is currently in negotiations with United and Continental over a joint contract in the wake of the 2010 merger of the two airlines. The union has asked a federal mediator to declare an impasse in negotiations. United won a court action against the pilots in 2008 when a sick-out resulted in the cancellation of 330 flights.

Strike action at B.C. liquor stores

Government workers at a number of liquor stores and facilities in the province of British Columbia will be off the job this week as the union representing 65,000 workers currently in contract negotiations launches a campaign of limited strike action.

Talks between the B.C. Government Employee Union (BCGEU) and government negotiators broke down last week after 6 months of fruitless bargaining that included mediation. Nearly 27,000 workers who have been without a contract since March may ultimately be affected by job actions. Currently, only a handful of outlets and warehouses in various centers will be subject to one-day strikes.

The union is asking for wage increases of up to 3.5 percent annually, pointing to their acceptance of a wage freeze in the last contract and government plans to privatize Liquor Distribution services in the province.

Strike/lockout spreads at Alberta day cares

Over 200 day care workers in the Calgary area will be on strike by the end of this week after 90 were locked out last week. Another 80 nurses and health practitioners will join the strike of day care workers at a separate facility who have been on the picket line since the end of May.

The affected workers, who are employed at day care centers in Calgary and Edmonton, are represented by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE). Union negotiators say that they are just seeking to achieve wage parity with other workers in the industry who are paid up to 30 percent more.



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