Workers Struggles, the Americas

10 July 2012

Argentinean public workers strike for one day over delay in bonus payments

Tens of thousands of teachers, doctors and judicial employees in Argentina's Buenos Aires province struck on July 4 over the payment of a bonus. The public workers were protesting a decision by the provincial governor, Daniel Scioli, to change the scheduling of the payment.

Customarily, Argentinean workers get an additional month's pay, half of which is paid on July 1 and the other half on January 1. Scioli announced that, due to the province's budget deficit, the payment would be split into four installments.

Scioli made the decision after the federal government of Cristina Fernández—caught in a debt crisis of its own—announced it would only apportion a little more than one third of the amount he had requested to pay the bonuses.

Other demands of the protesters were the elimination of a controversial income tax imposed by the federal government and expansion of the limits of the Universal Child Allowance. These were the same demands as those of a one-day general strike called the week before by the CGT federation.

Participation among teachers, represented mostly by the Suteba educators union, was particularly high, estimated at about 95 percent.

Chilean marchers for higher minimum wage attacked by police

On July 5, a group of Chilean protesters, demanding an increase in the nation's minimum wage, attempted to march from a Santiago metro station to La Moneda presidential palace. Police broke up the march after it had gone half a block.

The Congress is currently debating a bill to raise the minimum wage to 193,000 Chilean pesos per month (USD386). The protesters, mostly members of the CUT labor federation, numbered between 800 and 2,000, respectively the police and CUT estimates. They had set off to present the legislators with a list of demands, most prominently the call for a raise in the minimum wage to 250,000 pesos (USD500).

According to a *Santiago Times* report, "As protesters shuffled into the street to begin the march, they met a wall of armored police, water cannons and tear gas. Corralling the protesters, police quickly thinned out their numbers, though a handful of demonstrators, led by CUT President Arturo Martínez, eventually made it to La Moneda." Twelve protesters were detained.

The purported basis for the police action was the rejection by the regional government of the CUT's request for authorization of the march. The government claimed that, although the request was submitted 48 hours before the march, there was insufficient time for processing it.

María Eugenia Puelma, the group's human rights director, denounced the decision, deeming it "completely illegal." CUT head Martínez told reporters that the federation would file a lawsuit against the government over its refusal of the authorization.

Peruvian teachers protest, blockade, clash with police

Teachers in a number of locales in Peru carried out protest actions last week, some of which resulted in clashes with police.

In Abancay, capital of the southern Andean region of Apurímac, striking teachers blockaded a major highway on July 4. Police arrived to unblock the highway and violently dislodged the protesters. At least 49 people were hospitalized as a result of the confrontation.

In the capital Cusco, some 300 teachers who had been on strike for two weeks staged a sit-in at Machu Picchu Pueblo. In Canchis province southeast of Cusco, teachers blockaded some bridges. The daily *El Comercio* reported, "Another group directed itself to the Alejandro Velasco Astete Airport, but it was repelled by police with tear gas bombs."

The report added that police launched tear gas at another group of teachers farther south in Puno as they staged a sit-in at the Regional Education Board office. Actions also took place in Ayacucho, Tacna and other locations.

The main demands of the teachers are higher salaries and payment for preparation time. The teachers belong to the Unitary Syndicate of Education Workers of Peru or Sutep. However, the Sutep national leadership—which was engaged in discussions with the government last week—distanced itself from the protest actions. Sutep president René Ramírez told reporters, "Unfortunately, these comrades do not respect our organic instruments ... We have not called any strike in the country."

El Salvador: Customs workers' strike lifted

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A strike by workers at El Salvador's border customs posts was lifted on July 3 by the Sitramha Treasury Department union. The strike began on June 25 over the union's demand for compliance by the Finance Ministry with an arbitral award dating last December that stipulated a $1,000 payment per employee. An additional demand was the payment of overtime due since the beginning of this year.

The strike snarled commercial import and export traffic as well as private vehicle travel at checkpoints along El Salvador's borders, prompting calls from business groups to bring it to an end. At some customs offices, the National Civil Police was deployed to dislodge strikers and take over customs clearance and fee collection duties. Nonetheless, the strike continued in other locations.

The lifting of the strike followed threats by President Mauricio Funes to fine the union and hire replacement workers. Sitramha representatives announced that, as a "good will gesture," the union had suspended the strike while they engage in talks with government officials. Sitramha has given the talks a one-week deadline to resolve the issues, after which it says it will resume the strike.

Honduran auxiliary nurses on strike

As of July 6, over 6,000 auxiliary nurses at 28 public hospitals and healthcare clinics throughout Honduras remained on strike. The nurses, members of the Association of Auxiliary Nurses of Honduras (ANEEAH), walked off the job June 25 over unpaid wage adjustments and benefits going back 12 years.

The total amount of wages and benefits owed to the nurses comes to about 450 million lempiras (USD23.6 million). The Ministry of Finance claims that it only has 20 million lempiras (USD1.5 million), and that the nurses' demands are "a quantity that is impossible to approve."

The nurses also demand that the government create 250 new positions to ease their workloads, and to reassign 143 auxiliary nurses who have earned their nursing licenses.

Nurses demonstrated in front of the Finance Ministry on July 5, denouncing the government's inaction in addressing their demands.

Meanwhile, the government has sent military medical personnel to some hospitals and has brought in temporary replacements as well.

Connecticut nursing home workers strike against concessions

Some 700 nursing home workers went on strike July 6 at five HealthBridge-owned care facilities in Connecticut after the company unilaterally imposed cuts in hours, pension and medical benefits. HealthBridge made a "last, best, and final" offer back in June and terminated negotiations with the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199. The union voted on June 23 to strike if HealthBridge failed to return to the negotiating table.

HealthBridge said it would raise wages by 17 percent over the course of a six-year agreement. But those raises are obliterated by the imposition of health care premiums that will add up in some cases to as much as $8,000 during the course of a year where previously none or minimal amounts were required. Previously, HealthBridge had paid 8 percent of payroll into a pension fund. That has been terminated and replaced by a 401(k) that will require a company match that will not rise higher than .75 percent of pay.

Earlier this year, HealthBridge locked out workers for four months in an effort to force workers to accept concessions. The five Connecticut nursing homes affected by the strike are located in Danbury, Milford, Newington, Stamford and Westport.

Ohio transit workers end strike and accept original contract offer

Transit workers in Columbus, Ohio voted to end their three-day strike July 4 and approve the same agreement they had previously voted down. On July 2, workers had voted to strike by a 270-238 margin. The Transport Workers Union Local 208 president Andrew Jordan only claimed there was a "misunderstand" that initiated the strike and clarification led to the eventual ratification of the contract by a vote of 353 to 158.

The Central Ohio Transit Authority offered workers a 7 percent wage increase over three years, but also reduced the amount paid into retirement accounts by 2 percent. In addition, many transit drivers object to the fact that their eight-hour driving schedules can be spread across a 14-hour day. Drivers are only compensated for time behind the wheel.

Nuclear power engineers walk off job across Canada

700 nuclear engineers at the Candu Energy subsidiary of Canada's SNC-Lavalin Group Inc walked out Monday to join 144 others who were on strike for 5 weeks. The engineers have been working without a contract since January 1, 2011. The disputed issues are pay, pensions and seniority rights.

The engineers are members of the Society of Professional Engineers and Associates (SPEA). Picketing locations are being planned across Canada.

About 15 percent of the country's electrical power is generated at nuclear facilities.

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