

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 July 2012

Argentinean public employees strike again over bonus payment

Public employees in Buenos Aires province's education, judicial, health and other sectors struck on July 11 and 12 to protest the provincial governor's plan to pay their midyear bonus in four installments. The bonus, called an *aguinaldo*, is equivalent to one month's pay and has always been paid in two installments, in January and July.

Last month, Governor Daniel Scioli, citing the province's budget deficit and the federal administration's refusal to provide enough funds to cover the expense, announced plans to pay the bonus out in four installments. The public employees struck for one day July 4 to demand full payment of the portion.

The Education Union Front (FGD), which embraces a number of teachers' unions, claimed 98 percent participation by educators. The teachers were joined by the UPCN civil service workers' union, the FEGEPPBA state and private workers' union federation, the AJB judicial workers' association and a number of other unions and federations. The protest included a march and rally in front of the provincial legislature.

On July 11, the provincial court ruled that Scioli had to pay the full amount of the *aguinaldo*; nonetheless, the unions went ahead with the actions, and have called for a 48-hour strike on July 18-19 if the bonuses are not paid.

Brazilian GM plant workers vote to strike

On Thursday, July 12, members of the Metalworkers Union of São Jose dos Campos voted to go on strike this week over General Motors' plans to stop production of the Zafira minivan. The vote was taken after a meeting of union reps, GM executives and labor ministry officials fell through.

Some 1,500 workers stand to lose their jobs if production of the minivan is halted. GM and the Brazilian government signed an agreement in May in which the auto giant was given a tax cut in exchange for guarantees of no job cuts. GM says that it is in compliance with the pact because it is hiring at other plants in Brazil, and it blames the union for not agreeing to convert the plant to the production of three other car models.

The union and GM are slated to meet again on either July 20 or 25.

Guyanese sugar workers protest delays in insurance claims, strike over job evaluations

Workers in Guyana's sugar plantations and processing plants continue to struggle against the policies of the GuySuCo state sugar company and the National Insurance Scheme (NIS).

On July 9, disgruntled workers picketed the NIS office in New Amsterdam over claims that have not been processed since February. The NIS claims that a leak in the roof damaged the computer system. Protesting workers told reporters that despite being constantly told about "the roof leaking" whenever they try to collect benefits, "NIS is still collecting people contribution...and when the time comes to get our benefit we can't get it. That is high class nonsense!"

Meanwhile, about 165 workers at the Blairmont and Berbice estates struck July 11 and 12 over their job evaluation reports. About 100 workers struck a site in Skeldon over transportation and pricing issues, and another 314 stopped work at Albion over transportation issues for injured workers.

The unrest in Guyana is not confined to the sugar industry. In Georgetown, public employees—including koker men (drainage control ditch workers), garbage collectors, weeders and marker cleaners—converged on City Hall July 9 to demand payment of wages owed for June. After the failure of the city to come through on the promised paychecks, the workers went on a "go-slow." The city promised to have the money in the bank on July 16.

Venezuelan firefighters march, strike over salary, working conditions

Several hundred firefighters in the Venezuelan state of Miranda marched from the Firefighters Central Headquarters in Los Teques to the city's Bolivar Plaza July 12 to bring their demands to the state government.

At the rally, Erick Vega, the head of the firefighters, declared a general strike in solidarity with 14 firefighters who were on their third day of a hunger strike. Vega accused the state governor, Adriana D'Elía, of ignoring the firefighters' demands "more than 30 times."

According to *El Nacional*, "High-level functionaries, made up of commanders, officials, lieutenants and sublieutenants also united in the struggle of the firefighting troops and showed their unconditional support."

The firefighters ended their strike—and the hunger strikers ended theirs—on July 13, claiming victory and declaring that they would “continue fighting and demanding workplace improvements,” as the daily quoted one of the demonstrators.

Among the demands that the firefighters gained were approval of payment of a night bonus, a “risk premium” of 500 bolivares (US\$116) per month and an extension of the “*cesta ticket*” (family expense allowance) from 22 to 30 days.

Striking California tomato pickers vote to unionize

Farm workers who harvest tomatoes for Gargiulo, Inc. in California’s San Joaquin Valley voted July 11 by a 186-to-40 margin to unionize with the United Farm Workers (UFW). The vote came in the third day of a unfair labor practices strike alleging intimidation by Gargiulo against the 250 workers.

Workers will meet to determine their contract demands while the company can either agree to begin negotiations or file an objection with the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board, which sets up a future hearing to consider any issues.

Two weeks earlier, the UFW signed a new agreement on behalf of 800 workers at Pacific Triple E in Tracy, California. That agreement contained wage increases between 12.0 percent and 57.4 percent over the course of a three-year contract. Also included were pensions, a grievance procedure and job security provisions.

Ohio workers end strike under company threat to eliminate jobs

Workers at Moyno, Inc., a pump manufacturer in Springfield, Ohio, ratified a new contract on the heels of a company threat to outsource production or hire permanent replacements. About 130 members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 902 walked out on strike back in March when Moyno demanded a freeze of pensions, \$7-an-hour wage cuts, hikes in health care costs and the scrapping of pension benefits for retiree and current workers.

On June 28, management sent out a letter that threatened to “(1) permanently move work to other Robbins & Myers’ facilities where there is more long-term certainty; (2) enter into a more permanent arrangement for outsourcing, or (3) keep the work in Springfield and hire permanent replacements.”

Union officials would only say that the new agreement limited wage cuts to 23 out of 88 workers and that increased health care costs for retirees under the age of 65 would not kick in until 2014.

Wildcat strike at Newfoundland nickel mine

As many as 2,000 workers at Vale Inco’s processing plant in Long Harbour, Newfoundland, remain off the job in a wildcat strike action that began last week despite a court injunction ordering them back to work.

The strike was triggered when around 100 crane operators walked off the job in protest last Thursday over a number of issues, including wage parity with other provinces and travel and living allowances, that have persisted for years. The crane operators are represented by the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE), whose leadership, along with the heads of other unions involved in the walkout, has disavowed the strike.

Operations at the nickel mine have been halted because of the job action. The recent injunction prevents the strikers from blocking access to the plant. Many workers have expressed anger with their union leaders for not addressing their concerns over the company’s attacks on workers’ rights and wages over the past three years.

Nuclear scientists strike

Around 800 nuclear scientists and engineers went on strike last week at three nuclear reactors owned by energy giant SNC-Lavalin in the eastern half of Canada.

The strikers are represented by The Society of Professional Engineers and Associates, whose leadership reports that proposed changes in how the company determines wages are among the chief issues in dispute, with the company looking to shift away from industry standards. The union warns that the dispute could bring dire consequence for the nuclear industry in Canada if it pressures its technical staff to move elsewhere for employment.

Northern civic employees set to strike

Sixty municipal workers employed by the town of Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories are set to go on strike this week after their union, the Union of Northern Workers, served strike notice last week.

The workers are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), whose bargaining team claims that the town is going back on a deal to bar contracting out jobs, now insisting that workers must accept a reduced wage increase in exchange for job security.



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