

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 October 2012

## 24-hour strike by Brazilian oil workers for wage increase

Workers for Brazil's state-led oil company Petrobras held a 24-hour "warning strike" over wage demands beginning at midnight, September 26. Workers at refineries, terminals and land-based oil fields stopped work completely, while offshore workers limited their labor to routine tasks.

The workers had approved the strike in a vote the day before. The vote was a rejection of a company offer of a 6.5 percent pay raise. The Brazilian Oil Workers Federation (FUP), which represents the workers, is demanding a 10 percent hike. FUP negotiates on behalf of 12 affiliated unions across Brazil, and represents about 60,000 of Petrobras's 75,000 employees.

As with previous strikes in the petroleum sector, the action is hampered by the FUP leadership's reluctance to break Brazilian law, which prohibits the total shutdown of operations at refineries and offshore platforms. A Petrobras press release claimed, "The company's operational activities are working normally," and added, "Petrobras awaits the return of unions to the negotiation table, and expects to reach a deal."

On September 28, FUP announced that it was giving Petrobras five days to improve the offer, or it would call for "an open-ended strike to begin October 11."

## Chilean dockworkers strike against changes in retirement policy

Activities at the Chilean port city of San Antonio, one of South America's principal terminal sites, were paralyzed for the fifth day due to a strike by dockworkers. The workers went out to protest changes to retirement policy due to privatization of terminals.

The traditional retirement age has been 55, but the employers, with the support of the federal government, are pushing to increase it to 65.

Sergio Vargas, a spokesman for the San Antonio Port Workers Front, told reporters that the strenuous and perilous nature of the work accounts for large numbers of accidents, back injuries and cancers. He added that many workers started at 18 years of age, and by the time they reach 55, their health has been too compromised to expect them to work 10 more arduous years. "For that reason, the granting of pensions is not something privileged, but a real necessity."

According to a report in *La Prensa*, "The workers demand that pensions be given after 55 years of age at double the base salary, and inheritable by widows."

Cristián Cuevas, a negotiator for the Unitary Workers Central, warned that conversations are already taking place at other ports for solidarity actions including slowdowns, short stop-work actions and strikes.

## Paraguayan teachers strike for increase in education budget

Calling for an increase in Paraguay's budget for education, teachers at schools and colleges in Asuncion and other cities in the nation's Central Department went on strike September 27. The teachers, members of the Education Workers Syndical Unity Command (CUSTE), want the Education Ministry to augment the education budget by 43,000,000,000 guaranies (US\$9,707,000).

The increase would be used to pay overdue benefits like teacher seniority, family allowances and equalization of salaries, according to CUSTE.

CUSTE claimed a 75 percent adherence rate for the action among its members. However, the Education Federation of Paraguay (FEP) did not participate, since it had agreed to put any strike action on hold until October 1. FEP is awaiting the return of President Federico Franco from New York, where he is attending a United Nations General Assembly meeting, after which it will resume negotiations.

## Mexican teachers' strike over security issues passes two-week mark

Some 400 teachers in the Mexican city of Acapulco, in the southern coastal state of Guerrero, completed two weeks of strike action September 27 over continued security concerns. On September 28, teachers from three school districts demonstrated for two hours at the city's central La Diana fountain for the third time to demand the government increase security measures.

Last year, teachers came under threats from criminal gangs demanding half their salaries, leading the educators to strike and demand better security. In addition, teachers called for an end to President Felipe Calderon's militarized "war on drugs." The disastrous policy, which has led to tens of thousands of deaths nationwide, has received strong support from the Bush and Obama administrations.

In September 2011, teachers ended a month-long strike after gaining assurances that security measures would be increased. However, according to a *La Jornada* report, "Teachers consulted on the issue indicated that the security measures have not been applied in a consistent form."

The state's governor, Angel Aguirre Rivero, affirmed that he has personally made the rounds of the schools and that security has improved. He threatened sanctions if the teachers do not return to class.

## Protests in Haiti against rising prices, scarcity of food

Marches took place in Cap-Haitien, Les Cayes and other Haitian cities on September 28 to protest food scarcity and rising food and fuel prices.

In Cap-Haitien, located on the northern coast, protesters confronted not only attacks by police, but by supporters of President Michel Martelly.

Among the chants at the mobilizations were calls for the resignation of Martelly, whose US-orchestrated election in 2011 was marked by wholesale fraud and disenfranchisement. Under his administration, conditions for the Haitian working class and poor have stagnated or worsened.

Last August, tropical storm Isaac caused extensive damage and killed 29. Recently, prices for food and fuel have risen sharply. The protesters denounced Martelly's response to these disasters as too little, too late.

While the media reported that the mobilizations were called by "political organizations and civil society groups," a number of bourgeois politicians opposed to Martelly wasted no time taking advantage of the public mood. In fact, Frandy Giles, a delegate of deposed president Jean Bertrand Aristide's Lavalas party, denounced the actions, claiming that opposition senator Moises Jean-Charles had handed out more than \$50,000 to his supporters to promote the protests for his own ends.

On September 29, supporters of Martelly marched in Haiti's third largest city, Gonaives, chanting, "Martelly should finish his term!" Media accounts give no figures on any of the protests, merely saying that "thousands" participated.

### **Dominican police fire on demonstrators protesting mine hiring policies**

At least 25 people were reported injured on September 27 by shotgun pellets fired by police during a protest in Cotui, a city in the north of the Dominican Republic.

Cotui is the site of a mine owned by Canada's Barrick Gold. The protesters' main demand was that Barrick hire more local workers. Another demand was the reversal of Congress's recent approval of a revision of the original contract. The lawmakers inserted a clause allowing Barrick to defer payment of money owed to the government until after it achieves a profit margin of over 10 percent.

Some protesters accused the company of contaminating the area and demanded the government hold it to account.

In the morning, the protesters assembled and began their march through town. However, later that day, some individuals fired shots and burned tires en route.

When the marchers reached the entrance to Barrick, police fired tear gas and pellets at the crowd. Among the injured were a press photographer and the secretary of the provincial branch of the Dominican Journalists Association.

### **Nevada hospital workers picket against contract proposal**

Workers at Northeastern Nevada Regional Hospitals (NNRH) picketed at the Elko, Nevada, facility September 27 to protest a proposed management contract offer. Members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1107 voted strike authorization after NNRH, the most profitable hospital in Nevada, demanded workers accept a 28.3 percent hike in their portion of health care premiums.

According to the SEIU, NNRH employees make \$7 to \$8 an hour less than hospital workers in other states, and the union alleges that the hospital's parent company, LifePoint, doesn't plow profits back into the hospital. Workers are demanding better equipment, improved staffing and

a wage scale that awards years of work experience. The workers are also protesting management's heavy-handed policy of disciplining workers, which has involved firings.

### **Steelworkers' union offers unconditional return to work in Ohio refinery strike**

The United Steelworkers (USW) Local 624 sent Husky Energy an unconditional offer to return to work September 27 after four months on strike over a deadlock on safety and vacation issues. The union's decision came after workers at the Lima, Ohio, facility overwhelmingly voted down the company's final offer, which then led to Husky's declaring an impasse and advertising for "permanent" replacement workers.

The union's letter to the company set no conditions for returning to work. The action was triggered by a September 27 company ad that stated: "The Lima Refining Company's employees are currently on an economic strike. The Refinery is looking for Process Operator Trainees. These positions are available as permanent replacements for those employees on economic strike."

The 230 gas refinery workers walked off the job back on May 25. The old contract agreement between Husky and the USW expired on April 14.

### **Teamsters union files charges with labor board over four-month Michigan strike**

Teamsters Local 164 filed a series of unfair labor-practice charges last week against Jackson, Michigan-based Hendrickson Trucking. Some 25 workers, who say they have gone without raises since 2002, have been on strike since June against company demands to pay more for health insurance and other concessions.

Current negotiations are at an impasse, and Hendrickson Trucking has hired replacement workers and is continuing operations. The union charges filed with the National Labor Relations Board include bad-faith bargaining. The old agreement expired back on April 1.

### **National demonstrations in support of Ontario teachers**

Hundreds of teachers and students came out to demonstrate at a number of schools across the province and at the provincial legislature at Queen's Park in Toronto last weekend as part of an ongoing campaign by various unions against legislative attacks launched by the Liberal government.

The government of Premier Dalton McGuinty recently passed sweeping legislation under Bill 115 that, among other attacks, freezes teacher's salaries for two years and cuts sick days in half, effective December. In addition, the Ministry of Education has outlawed all demonstrations by public service workers for at least two years.

The latest protests follow widespread demonstrations earlier in September against these attacks on public education by the McGuinty government. The one last weekend was called by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF), whose leaders are calling the offensive by the Ontario Liberals undemocratic and "an abuse of legislative authority." They further express their hope that such demonstrations will compel the government to reconsider the legislation.



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