

# Workers Struggles, the Americas

16 October 2012

## Argentina: strikes, protests across several sectors

Last week, Argentinean workers in a number of sectors launched strikes and protests.

The SOMU maritime workers' union called an indefinite strike October 9 at grain terminals in the Rosario area to press demands for better salaries and labor conditions. However, the union called off the stoppage the next day after meeting with terminal operator representatives and agreeing to return to negotiations.

On October 10, thousands of protesters converged on the Plaza de Mayo across from the Presidential Palace, to demand the lowering of the income tax and other salary demands. The action was called by the Argentinean Workers Central (CTA) state workers' confederation and was supported by sections of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT).

The CGT's support was not unanimous, a reflection of the divisions in the labor bureaucracies between supporters of the administration of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and former allies who have fallen out over her labor and tax policies.

In the education sector, the 6,000-member Buenos Aires Education Federation (FEB) called a strike October 10 that was followed the next day by a walkout by Udocba, the Buenos Aires Teachers Union. Both unions claimed an adherence rate of between 85 and 90 percent. The main demands of the teachers are raises to keep pace with rampaging inflation and the reopening of parity talks. Other issues include universalization of family allowances and elimination of a recently passed income tax.

On October 11, bus drivers for metropolitan Buenos Aires's Line 60, which serves around 200,000 commuters a day, struck for one day to protest the firing of four of their co-workers in April. A group of about 50 Line 60 drivers blocking the Pan American Freeway was dislodged by 200 members of the National Gendarmerie, who themselves had just ended a nine-day strike over salary issues. Some other drivers marched to the Labor Ministry where, with drums and protest signs, they called for reinstatement of the fired drivers and for other labor demands.

Also in Buenos Aires, station workers for the Sarmiento commuter rail line struck briefly October 12 to demand the reinstatement of a recently laid-off employee, whom management accused of "sabotage" after his train derailed. At the same time, supervisors for the same line held a 24-hour strike to press their demand for salary talks.

## Protests in Colombia over inequality, privatization, peace talks

Hundreds of thousands of protesters from more than 100 organizations protested in Colombian cities on October 13. Thousands of participants marched in Bogota, Cali and other urban areas, but even some remote rural areas witnessed mobilizations. In all, 25 of the nation's 32 provinces reported protest actions.

Principal among the complaints of the protesters was Colombia's status as the 10th most unequal country in the world, according to the Gini index, a measure of national social and income inequality. Organizers dubbed their protest actions the "National March of the Indignant" after the massive protests last year by the *indignados* in Spain.

Students shouted slogans denouncing plans to privatize higher education, saying that these plans would put it out of reach of many working-class young people. Student groups already launched a national strike on October 10 over the issue.

Other groups represented at the mobilizations called for broader participation in peace talks set to take place between the government and the FARC guerrilla movement. Also participating were members of the 40,000-strong National Association of Judicial Branch Functionaries and Employees (Asonal), who began an indefinite strike on October 10 to demand that the government comply with a mandate dating 20 years ago that standardizes pay scales for judicial branch employees.

The demonstrations were peaceful for the most part, though scattered acts of vandalism and graffiti were reported. However, in Bogota, police attacked demonstrators with tear gas and water cannons. At last count, at least 71 people had been arrested.

## Mexican hospital workers strike

Workers at the Children's Hospital of Oaxaca, Mexico, went on strike October 12 to demand the removal of the facility's director. The 200-plus workers, members of the National Syndicate of Health Secretariat Workers (SNTSS), accuse Ernesto Garzon Sanchez of diverting 3 million pesos (US\$233,182) from hospital funds.

The strikers pointed out that Garzon Sanchez awarded himself an end-of-year bonus, estimated at more than 300,000 pesos, although he had only worked eight months at the hospital. The rest of the diverted funds were shared among 20 members of the hospital's board of directors.

The workers have warned that they will radicalize their protest if the Oaxaca Health Services head and the state government do not intervene immediately to dismiss Garzon Sanchez.

### **Dominican Republic: Protests against mining company spread**

Protests in the Dominican Republic begun last month against Canadian mining firm Barrick Gold have continued and spread. Residents of the northern town of Cotui, where Barrick maintains its Pueblo Viejo mine, have since been joined by people from the neighboring villages of Zambrana, Tocoa and La Piñita.

On September 27, a march to demand the hiring of local residents, renegotiation of Barrick's contract with the government and attention to environmental concerns was attacked by police, who injured 25 protesters with shotgun shells. The following week, dozens of protesters were hurt, spurring provincial organizations to set an October 11 deadline for Barrick to meet their demands.

On October 11, a Barrick food service bus was set afire as protests took place in the villages. Police shot and seriously wounded one man who was caught in the middle of one of the ensuing clashes. A few hours later day, National Police reinforcements were sent in, and there were several arrests.

### **Protest over lack of jobs in Trinidad neighborhoods**

Residents of the Nelson and George Street Plannings in East Port of Spain, Trinidad, protested October 12 over the lack of jobs and infrastructure. Minister of National Security Jack Warner had come to the neighborhood the week before and had made promises, but residents had not heard from him since. Angry demonstrators blocked the streets, and some of the protesters set debris aflame.

Residents complained to reporters not only about the lack of jobs in the area, but also about their poor living conditions, such as dilapidated apartments and the need for electrical rewiring.

Once he heard about the protests, Warner returned and met with some neighborhood representatives to reiterate his promises. According to a *Trinidad Express* account, "The residents said if Minister Warner does not keep [his] promise to provide something viable by Wednesday [October 17], they will continue protesting until the end of the year."

### **Trinidadian hospital workers protest minuscule wage increase offer**

A group of hospital workers gathered outside the Port of Spain General

Hospital on October 12 to protest the chief personnel officer's wage hike proposal. The workers' union, the National Union of Government and Federated Workers (NUGFW), had originally demanded a 10 percent raise, which it later lowered to 9 percent.

On October 11, bargainers attended a meeting at which Regional Health Authority (RHA) negotiators countered the union's demand with an offer of 5 percent. NUGFW president of the 200-member health workers' section Clifford Halls said, "We were shocked, shocked and dismayed," and vowed to continue the protests at RHA facilities until the demand is met.

NUGFW has been in discussions for months with RHA officials, still trying to close negotiations for the period 2008-2010.

### **Scattered strikes hit Walmart stores across United States**

More than 80 workers at 28 Walmart stores in California, Texas, Florida, Washington, Maryland, Illinois, Kentucky and Minnesota walked off the job October 9 in an ongoing campaign to protest working conditions at the nation's largest retailer. The following day, workers and their supporters gathered at Walmart's headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, to further their protests.

OUR Walmart (Organization United for Respect), which organized the protests and is backed by the United Food and Commercial Workers, has now announced that it is planning a nationwide strike of Walmart stores for Black Friday, November 23. Black Friday, which occurs one day after Thanksgiving, traditionally registers the largest sales of the holiday season that extends until Christmas.

OUR Walmart is campaigning for a \$13-an-hour minimum wage, full-time work available to those who desire it and affordable health care. While Walmart claims its US employees are paid an average \$12.40 an hour, others charge it is below \$9.00 an hour. The October 9 strikes come on the heels of an October 4 strike that affected nine stores in Los Angeles and previous strikes of warehouse workers in Illinois and California that store and transfer Walmart products.

### **New England nursing home operators use racketeering statute against health care union**

Two companies operating nursing homes in Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Jersey have filed a RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) lawsuit October 10 against the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). HealthBridge Management LLC and CareOne Management LLC charge the union with "criminal sabotage, intimidation and other acts of extortion" and a "coordinated illegal campaign" relating to a strike by 700 health care workers that began back

on July 6.

The RICO statute has been used by the federal government to counter mafia elements. Usually, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is used by corporations to curb unions and settle disputes. However, HealthBridge has been charged with several violations of federal labor laws and is next scheduled to appear before an NLRB court on October 17. Further, on October 22, there will be an injunction hearing that could allow striking workers to return to their jobs under the old contract.

The SEIU claims its contract proposals were based upon a pattern agreement accepted by 50 other nursing homes. The NLRB ruled that HealthBridge refused to bargain in good faith with the union, making unrealistic demands. Among those were a steep increase in health insurance payments, the termination of the pension and its replacement by an inferior 401(k) plan, and reductions in sick days, vacations and holidays.

HealthBridge runs 34 facilities in New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts while CareOne has 17 operations in New Jersey.



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### **Crew for Hollywood reality show strikes over lack of benefits**

Crew workers for the non-union NBC TV reality series “Fashion Star” launched a strike October 13, shutting down the scheduled taping of a fall show. The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) is seeking union status for the workers in an effort to get the producers to pay workers pension and health benefits.

About 75 workers are picketing outside the Hollywood Center Studios. Currently, there are no talks between the producers and the union. IATSE says the strike will be ongoing until the benefits issues are resolved.

### **BC Transit strike on hold**

The union representing 650 transit workers in Victoria, British Columbia, has backed down from a scheduled strike last week as contract talks resumed on Monday, but other job action has not been ruled out.

The Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), representing bus drivers, skilled trades and maintenance workers at BC Transit, had issued a strike notice, but the only action taken, that will continue until a deal is reached, is to have workers refuse to wear job uniforms.

The backdown comes as other union disputes, including those involving government workers and nurses in the province, were settled earlier in the week. BC Transit maintains that the union must strike a deal similar to those accepted by other unions, saying that the Crown Corporation cannot meet CAW demands for a wage hike within its budgetary constraints.