

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 October 2012

Argentinean teachers hold 48-hour strikes over salaries, parity talks

Teachers in the Frente Gremial (Union Front), which includes a number of public and private institutions, held a two-day strike on October 23 and 24. Their action was followed by the Buenos Aires Teachers Union (Udocba), which held a 48-hour strike October 25 and 26.

For the first action, the unions claimed an adherence rate of 90 and 70 percent, respectively, in public and private schools. “On finalizing the protest, the teachers participated in the mobilization that the ATE [State Employees Association] workers and judicial workers, who also demand to reinitiate salary talks, carried out up to the government center in La Plata,” according to an infobae.com report.

The demands of both mobilizations include the raising of the basic salary to 3,900 pesos (US\$820), the reopening of parity talks and the elimination of a cap on family allowances. According to the *Argentina Independent*, “Besides the main demands, strikers are also looking for better labor and health conditions and a special commission to track their salaries. Additionally, they are asking for ‘better food services,’ ‘regular school transport’ and an ‘urgent response to infrastructure issues.’”

The provincial government insists that the funds are insufficient for any of the demands and has repeatedly refused to reopen parity talks. Buenos Aires labor minister Oscar Cuartango announced October 24 that the salaries for the four days of strikes would be discounted from the teachers’ pay.

Colombian judicial workers in third week of strike over salary standardization

More than 40,000 workers—judges, magistrates and office personnel—from all levels of Colombia’s judicial system continued their strike as of October 27. At least 9,000 protesters descended on downtown Bogota that evening to press for their demands and resolve to remain out until they are met.

The National Association of Judicial Branch Functionaries and Employees (Asonal), which called the strike October 10, is demanding that the government fulfill a commitment it declared 20 years ago to standardize pay scales in the judicial sector. The latest government offer has been to stretch the process out an additional 15 years, but Asonal is demanding that it be completed in three.

Another demand is that the government deliver on the budget increase it had promised last year to help modernize the judicial branch. Authorities claim that there is no money for the increase.

Meetings between government and Asonal representatives have repeatedly broken down. President Juan Manuel Santos—whose initial response to the strike was that he would not sit down to negotiate under the pressure of a strike—has threatened to declare the strike illegal. Asonal sources say that if government intransigence continues, the organization will call for an enormous “human river” from all over the country to

converge on Bogota’s Plaza Bolivar.

Panamanian government repeals Canal Free Zone sell-off law following protests

The government of Panama backed down October 28 from a law that would have opened its Colon Free Zone (CFZ), located on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal, to purchases of parcels by private businesses, scrapping the leasing arrangement that it has had since 1948. The repeal of Law 72 (called Bill 529 during National Assembly debate) was a response to continuing working-class protests, blockades and battles with police.

Law 72 was touted as good for all Panamanians by President Ricardo Martinelli, who characterized objections to the planned sell-offs as unpatriotic and politically motivated. Protesters, however, expressed fears that CFZ workers’ jobs would be put in jeopardy, and that privatizing the CFZ would do nothing to alleviate Colon’s endemic poverty and violence.

Shortly after Law 72’s passage on October 19, protests including barricades with debris and burning tires broke out, bringing traffic and businesses to a standstill. When police attempted to disperse the protests by using tear gas and by firing live ammunition into the air, protesters threw rocks and other objects at them. In some neighborhoods, the police were fired upon.

Workers on the Panama Canal struck, leaving ships and containers stranded. Some unions threatened a general strike for October 26. A group of lawyers announced October 22 that it would file a lawsuit claiming the law was unconstitutional.

On the eighth day of protests, a funeral for Joshua Betancourt, a youth killed during the clashes and the first of three reported deaths, brought a massive turnout. Human rights organizations brought charges of police abuses and violence to regional UN and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights offices.

On October 28, Martinelli signed a Law 28 derogation decree after its unanimous passage in the National Assembly. Legislators also established commissions to investigate the three deaths and allegations of police abuse.

Members of Martinelli’s Democratic Change Party, however, said they would continue to push for a CFZ land sale law.

Puerto Rican electrical workers strike over wage, benefit issues

Workers for the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (Prepa) went on strike October 24. The Electrical and Irrigation Workers Union (UTIER) made the strike call after contract negotiations with the Electrical Energy Authority (AEE) reached an impasse, and ordered its members to take control of all the entrances of Prepa installations.

UTIER and AEE have been in negotiations for 10 months and have

reached agreement on 40 of 50 articles brought to the table. The remaining 10 articles, however, concern economic issues like benefits and wages. AEE maintains that the union's demands are excessive and that there are not enough funds. UTIER president Angel Figueroa Jaramillo "complained that if there is enough money for contractors and administration allies there should be enough for workers," according to caribbeanbusinesspr.com.

The union had already called a strike on October 17, but called it off less than an hour and a half later. Figueroa Jaramillo told reporters then that the strike "will keep increasing incrementally until management desists in taking away our acquired rights and sits down to negotiate."

He listed, as examples, the medical plan, accident leave and the clause that guarantees compliance with the pact. The union is also calling for a wage increase.

California warehouse workers at Walmart supplier charge retaliation by management for strike

More than 30 workers at the NFI Industries warehouse in Jurupa Valley, California, allege they have been laid off or had their hours sharply reduced in retaliation for a September strike and protest march. Warehouse Workers United, a United Food and Commercial Workers-backed organization, filed unfair labor practice charges October 11 with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on behalf of the victimized workers.

Besides NFI Industries, the NLRB complaint names Raritan, a New Jersey-based warehouse staffing company. While Walmart is not named, Warehouse Workers United believes the low wages and sweatshop conditions at NFI and other Walmart suppliers are dictated by Walmart.

Back in September, the warehouse workers, who are paid just over the minimum wage, struck over unsafe working conditions. The California Occupational Safety and Health Administration is currently investigating NFI and Raritan for a series state violations.

California grocery chain implements wage concessions

Raley's, the Sacramento grocery chain, will impose a wage cut on its workforce starting November 1 after the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) declined to allow a vote on the company's latest offer. Raley's CEO, Michael Teel, issued a statement, saying, "I cannot sit back while the union leadership refuses to call for a vote. This delay will only cause more economic harm resulting in more store closures and layoffs."

Raley's workers of both UFCW Locals 5 and 8 have authorized strike action, but UFCW officials have instead appealed to the company to resume negotiations—something the company has now refused. Raley's will only implement a two-year pay freeze and eliminate premium pay for holiday work shifts. It has not decided to impose health care demands it is seeking.

Recently, the UFCW made concessions to Save Mart Supermarkets of Modesto, California, and is currently in negotiations with Safeway Inc. All the unionized grocery chains are driving for concessions that will match wage and working conditions at non-union grocers.

Ontario auto parts workers strike two companies

Workers at auto parts manufacturing giant Westcast Industries, located in Strathroy, in southern Ontario, went on strike last week with the union accusing the company of trying to force a new contract on workers.

Westcast is one of the largest makers of engine parts in North America, supplying most of the engine manifolds used by the Big Three auto makers. The 75 striking workers are represented by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW).

In a related development, 400 workers at auto parts maker Lear Whitby, east of Toronto, Ontario, went on strike last weekend after contract talks broke down Saturday night.

The striking workers, who last week voted 97 percent in favor of strike action, are also members of the CAW. Contract talks have dragged on for months awaiting new contracts with the Big Three.

Workers at the plant have already suffered big setbacks in wages and benefits with new-hires earning almost half the pay of more senior workers. Now the company, which makes seats for General Motors in nearby Oshawa, is asking for deep concessions in a new contract despite posting significant gains in profits in the recent period.

School strikes in British Columbia

A union in British Columbia representing both teaching assistants at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and support staff at Vancouver Community College (VCC) has launched two strikes. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has 420 members at VCC and 2,300 members at UBC, all of whom began strike action on Monday.

Workers at VCC, who have been working without a contract since 2010, began their action with an overtime ban that was to be expanded to a one-day strike on Tuesday with other job action to follow. Workers affected include library and administrative staff as well technical support and food service workers.

Teaching assistants, tutors and language instructors at UBC have also been without a contract since 2010 and have been in mediated negotiations since April of this year. A central issue in their dispute, aside from wages, is job security for graduate students in their final years.

According to a union spokesperson, job action was only taken as a result of overwhelming pressure from the rank and file, frustrated with the slow pace of negotiations.



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