

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 March 2013

Limited strikes by Argentine state workers, hospital workers, teachers

Workers in several sectors held limited strike actions in Argentina last week. A 72-hour walkout was called by the SUTE education workers union in the eastern province of Mendoza for March 13-15. The teachers rejected the government's March 1 salary offer as insufficient in assemblies held across the province. SUTE delegates convened in a plenary session on March 8 and voted to call the strike.

Some 10,000 teachers and supporters marched on the provincial capital on the first day of the action. Over 90 percent of public schools reportedly participated, but only around 50 percent of private institutions were represented.

On March 13 as well, members of the State Workers Association (ATE), the National Civil Personnel Union (UPCN) and other unions in Buenos Aires struck for 24 hours against the salary proposal by the government of between 18 and 19 percent, which is below Argentina's inflation rate.

Buenos Aires health and judicial sector employees walked out on March 14, again over insufficient wage rise offers, and marched on the House of Government, where they held a rally. Hospitals continued to function, providing only basic services.

In Buenos Aires, the government of Daniel Scioli called leaders of five unions of the Educational Union Front (Frente Gremial Docente) after 48 hours on strike to meet again March 14. Scioli made an offer of 22.6 percent in three stages, which the unions rejected.

The government then held a press conference, declared the parity talks concluded and decreed the raise, a move denounced by the unions as unilateral. The Front called for a two-day strike March 18-19.

Chilean forestry workers strike for improvements in wages, working conditions

Contract forestry workers at a plywood plant in Nueva Aldea, Chile began a strike March 15 over longstanding issues of wages and other matters. Since last year, the workers have awaited a response by the management of Arauco, the plant's holding company, to a 22-point petition—in which wages figure most prominently—but have received no response. The workers decided to hold a two-day warning strike at five plants around Chile.

An Arauco executive accused the workers of "criminal" acts like destruction of property, throwing rocks at buses of workers and at watchmen, intimidation of workers and breaking of windows. He claimed that the company has always been "disposed to dialogue" and that, because of the alleged violence, Arauco has been "in coordination" with the Carabineros, the country's national police known for its participation in the 1973 coup and for its violent repression of indigenous communities.

In an interview with biobiochile.cl, Jorge Gonzalez, president of the Forestry Workers Confederation, disavowed violence and said that the

business left the workers no other option but to strike. He noted, "Chile is the land of inequality. Here there are people who earn very little..." and added that since Arauco is "a gigantic enterprise, comparable only to [copper mining giant] Codelco ... it must share this money and agree that its workers are the ones who generate this wealth and live in the most poverty-stricken places in the country."

Chilean hospital workers strike over delays in post-earthquake reconstruction

On March 13, doctors, office workers and other employees at the San Borja Arriaran Hospital child neuropsychiatry department in Santiago, Chile went on indefinite strike to protest delays in the reconstruction of installations three years after the 8.8 earthquake that devastated the area on February 27, 2010.

According to anthropologist Irene Schoefberger, "The San Borja is a hospital intended for the poorest clients of the National Health Service. Most of the Indios living in the city are among them." Mapuches are the largest indigenous group living near the hospital, which serves over 3,000 clients every month.

The striking workers—which include psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and hearing therapists, assistants, paramedics, nutritionists, social workers and office personnel—protested in front of the hospital. The following day the protest continued with demonstrators, carrying whistles, signs and balloons, being "guarded" by Carabineros.

Patricia Parra, a child neurologist, told *La Nación* that services were compromised due to severe defects in the buildings. "In the walls there are deep cracks ... and we cannot continue attending in those conditions." Doors are missing, denying patients their privacy. About 75 percent of the beds were lost and patients are treated in the area formerly occupied by management.

After the earthquake, the Comptrollers Office set a date for building new facilities, but "then there were various directors and they didn't carry it out." Parra said that the striking workers are calling for the authorities to "sign a letter for us in which they assure us that the resources for construction are going to be there, that they're going to realize the project," and that the priority is "to have a new space with norms of security, good illumination, comfort for the patients in force."

The response of Health Minister Jaime Mañalich was to call the protest "extremely violent" and plotted by two doctors and one "particular person" who oppose the recent signing of an agreement between the Health Ministry, the Finance Ministry and the Medical College to increase the number of specialists in public hospital emergency rooms.

St. Lucian public sector workers vote for strike action over wage offer

Public servants on the Caribbean island nation of St. Lucia voted for strike action on March 15 after rejecting a 4.5 percent wage hike, or 4 percent “with conditions,” offered by Prime Minister Kenny Anthony. The workers’ union, the Civil Service Association (CSA), had demanded a 9.5 percent raise.

The CSA vote ran counter to the trend among other unions in the Trade Union Federation or TUF, which embraces nurses, firemen, teachers and police. All of those unions accepted the 4 percent with conditions option.

One of the reasons for the rejection had to do with the unequal pay grades across the sectors. CSA President Mary Issac pointed out that teachers and police, for example, start at grade 7, a higher grade than the civil servants, most of whom occupy grades 1 through 5.

Issac also accused Anthony of insulting the civil servants in broadcasts, making empty promises and using negotiations as a “smoke screen.” The PM denied the charges.

As reported by the Barbados daily *Nation News*, “Members of the TUF were meeting on Friday to discuss the CSA position but stopped short of indicating if it would join the industrial action even while expressing solidarity.”

Trinidadian oil workers strike over unpaid wages, other complaints

Thousands of workers for Trinidad’s state-owned oil company Petrotrin stopped work on March 13 to protest the firm’s failure to honor various aspects of the collective bargaining agreement signed with the Oilfield Workers’ Trade Union (OWTU) last year.

The primary demand is that Petrotrin make good on its promise to settle outstanding payments dating back to 2009 and 2010. Other issues were Petrotrin’s failure to fill vacancies, make temporary workers permanent, improve the health plan and reintroduce an apprenticeship program that it had previously discontinued. OWTU President Ancel Roget also claimed that management was being selected based on political affiliation instead of on qualifications.

Petrotrin issued a “no work, no pay” warning to the workers, who nonetheless stayed out. Workers gathered in front of the company’s administration building in Pointe-a-Pierre to picket and block the entrance beginning March 13. Roget told reporters that Petrotrin’s operations in Penal/Barrackpore, Forest Reserve, Point Fortin and Santa Flora were all affected by the industrial action.

Petrotrin issued a press release March 14 stating that management and OWTU negotiators were engaged in “intense negotiations.” As of March 15, the strike and picketing were still in effect.

California garbage and recycling workers protest firings, intimidation

About 200 landfill and recycling workers in the Oakland, California area walked off the job for five hours March 15 charging the nation’s largest recycler, Waste Management, Inc., with firings, threats and the implementation of new work rules while refusing to bargain for a new contract. The Teamsters union did not call a strike, but their members who haul trash refused to cross picket lines during the early morning picketing at sites in Oakland, Altamont and San Leandro, setting back garbage collection for parts of San Francisco and the East Bay until the following day.

The strike was prompted after Texas-based Waste Management used the federal E-Verify system to check whether their workers are eligible to

work in the United States. One day after the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 6 held a strike vote, Waste Management fired three workers for failing E-Verify’s residency status requirements.

Union attorney Peter Saltzman told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “It was intended to send a signal to an almost 100 percent immigrant workforce that they’d better not engage in concerted union activity like that.” According to the ILWU, federal law only allows Waste Management to determine the status of newly hired employees using E-Verify. Instead, the company is using the system against veteran employees.

Waste Management and the International Association of Machinists Local 1546 reached a new six-year agreement on February 23. Currently, the ILWU and the company are engaged in federally mediated talks. The ILWU says it has no plans at this point for future actions.

Janitors call one-day strike at Virginia military base

Some 70 janitors at Fort Belvoir, Virginia Army base carried out a one-day unfair labor practices strike February 21 to protest a cleaning contractor’s refusal to pay back wages and benefits and charging the company with firing five workers and disciplining another. According to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ, Brown & Pipkins owes the workers nearly \$300,000 in wages and benefits.

The SEIU says that the company has been shorting workers since September 1, 2012. At the same time, it has demanded workers accept \$2-an-hour wage cuts and is seeking to slash benefits. On February 1, the company fired five workers. SEIU charges before the National Labor Relations Board include the allegation the company disciplined two workers and fired another for union activity.

The shorting of workers is not exclusive to the Fort Belvoir military base. Two months ago, Escab Enterprises, a federal cleaning contractor, initially failed to pay nearly 300 janitors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and the Uniformed Services University before being compelled to do so.

Migrant workers targeted in B.C. raid

At least 29 construction workers were arrested in Vancouver, British Columbia last week in a raid by the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA), who suspected them of working illegally in Canada.

Dozens of CBSA officers moved in on an East Vancouver construction site accompanied by a television crew from the National Geographic reality series *Border Security*, who filmed the arrest for the show. The CBSA says they were looking for one migrant with a criminal history but found many more who working without proper documentation.

At least one of the men arrested will be deported and sent back to Honduras and another is returning to Mexico following the ordeal. It is not known what charges or treatment they may face upon their return.



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