

Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 April 2013

Chilean port workers expand strike

A strike begun March 16 by workers at the northern Chilean port of Angamos spread to nine other terminals on March 27. The primary export from all of the port cities is copper from state-owned Codelco, the world's number one copper producer.

The strike was precipitated by disagreement on the issue of the *colación*, the 30-minute midday meal. Since 2005, after the passage of a labor law establishing a maximum of 48 hours a week, management has resisted providing for the meal, while workers insist on the necessity of having a break for nourishment and rest and a safe place for it.

Management has offered to pay workers 3,200 Chilean pesos (US\$6.79) in lieu of the break, while the workers want 4,000 (US\$8.49). The conflict over the *colación*, however, is part of a broader struggle over the general worsening of working conditions resulting from Codelco's attempts to stave off declining profits at some of its older mines.

The expansion of the strike has stopped nearly all copper exports from the far north to the central southern coast. Although Codelco cannot ship its copper, it continues to receive copper from its various mines.

That condition is not assured, as the Copper Workers Federation voted for a national strike and march April 3 over job insecurity due to privatization plans. Already, on March 30, workers at the Radomiro Tomic open pit mine in northern Chile downed their tools to demand the firing of a pit boss at a mine where a worker was killed.

Chorus and administrators at historic Chilean theater vote to strike

On March 28, chorus members and administrative staff at Santiago, Chile's Teatro Municipal rejected, by a 94 percent majority, the last offer made by management in negotiations. The outcome is in effect a vote to strike.

Inaugurated in 1857, the Teatro Municipal has survived fires and an earthquake and has undergone periodic rebuilding to feature world famous performers and house such institutions as the Santiago Philharmonic Orchestra, the Santiago Ballet and the Teatro Municipal Chorus. It was declared a National Monument in 1974.

The unions asked for a 10 percent raise since, as Teatro Municipal Chorus Union president Loreto Mardones told cooperativa.cl, "it's been eight years that we haven't received a real increase; we've had only the IPC (consumer price index) adjustment and we also have had some points of an artistic nature that contain no cost for the theater."

The unions lowered their demand to 8 percent, but management held to its offer of 3 percent, which "contains absolutely nothing of what we had discussed at the table; it's a total setback," Mardones said, adding, "And we have said also that we are willing to reconsider that quantity, but that is done through a process of negotiation, it is done conversing; when the doors are closed there is no possibility to negotiate."

Despite the unions' accommodating gestures, Mardones lamented that "they don't want to come to an accord and it appears that they are forcing us to put a strike into effect that we don't want and that we have not sought." According to Mardones, Teatro executives make 12 to 14 times the salaries of the chorus and staff members, which averages 660,000 Chilean pesos (US\$1,400).

The president of the administrative workers union, Pedro Muñoz, decried the "perverse" nature of the labor laws. "If we go out on strike, the theater administration is authorized to contact people to replace us," adding that due to the close family ties among the directors and Chile's cultural and political elite, the situation is a "conflict of interest."

Argentine state workers protest salary adjustment

On March 27, thousands of public health, judicial and education workers in Argentina's Buenos Aires province marched through the capital La Plata over salary demands. The protest occurred on the second day of a 48-hour strike called by the Argentine Workers' Central (CTA) to reject the unilateral imposition of a pay adjustment—which the CTA denounced as "absolutely insufficient" in addition to being antidemocratic—by the governor, Daniel Scioli.

The 22 percent raise proposed by government negotiators in parity talks would be paid in three quotas, the last in December. A number of unions accepted the offer. The CTA-affiliated unions demanded one payment of 30 percent. Scioli then decreed the 22 percent unilaterally.

Among those present at the march were members of the State Workers Association (ATE), the National Teachers Federation (FND), the Unified Syndicate of Education Workers of Buenos Aires (SUTEBA), the Health Professionals Syndical Association (CICOP) and the Buenos Aires Judicial Association (AJB).

The protesters marched from the Municipal Palace to the Economics Ministry building, overflowing the streets and chanting. Union bureaucrats spoke at the rally, condemning "a salary accord that condemns the majority of workers to misery," as Buenos Aires ATE secretary general Oscar Isasi characterized it.

The day before, SUTEBA initiated a "Torch March for Public Education" that converged on the provincial congress to demand a resolution of the crisis of public education.

SUTEBA voted for a 72-hour strike starting April 8 if the issues are not resolved.

Guyanese nurses perform “go-slow” over delays in payments

Angered by continued delays in the payments of uniform allowances, bonuses and maternity leave, nurses at the Linden Hospital Complex (LHC) decided to take industrial action March 27. Some 75 nurses and assistants had not received the payments in addition to their regular pay on March 21.

The nonpayment of gratuities and benefits has been a problem for two years for some of the nurses, with authorities promising to rectify the problems, only to delay the payments again. On March 22, nurses struck and picketed the hospital, but returned to work after yet another promise to pay them.

When the payments did not materialize, the nurses went on go-slow and work-to-rule, i.e. “the nurses are working strictly according to their job descriptions and are attending only to pregnancies, accidents and other emergencies,” reported *Demerara Waves*.

The hospital, located in Linden, Guyana’s second largest city, was opened in December 2009 as a state-of-the-art facility. It has since been the subject of controversies including complaints of inadequate equipment and poor infrastructure, the deaths of two newborns in 2010 and the indictment in January 2013 of two employees for fraud in which they stole around 12 million Guyanese dollars (US\$56,000) from the government. Several of the nurses blame the fraud for the nonpayment.

The nurses will continue with the industrial actions, but have vowed to strike if the problem is not remedied by the next payday, April 4.

Ohio sanitation workers strike over attempt to gut pensions

Sanitation workers at Republic Services/Allied Waste’s Carbon Limestone Landfill outside of Youngstown, Ohio, walked off the job at midnight on March 27 on an unfair labor practices strike. Republic officials have countered that the strike is “illegal.”

Whatever the legal wrangling involved in negotiations between Teamsters Local 377 and the company, pensions are a major part of the contract struggle. Republic is pressing to force the withdrawal of the 110 landfill workers from the Teamsters’ Central States Pension fund and make them accept a lump sum payment and the inferior 401(k) plan.

Teamster trash haulers are honoring picket lines of landfill workers and union members at Republic’s Evansville, Indiana and Urbana, Illinois locations carried out a sympathy strike on March 29. The company has responded by bringing in personnel from other operations to replace striking sanitation workers.

The move by Republic will increase profits for executives and stockholders while at the same time put further pressure on the Central States fund, which is expected to be insolvent by 2023. Republic Services/Allied Waste is estimated to control about 42 percent of the US sanitation services industry. Its revenues in 2011 were \$8.2 billion and profits topped \$589 million.

Bill Gates, former Microsoft CEO, holds some \$2.4 billion of stock, or 25 percent of the company, and his investment manager, Michael Larsen, sits on Republic’s board of directors.

Newfoundland brewery workers on wildcat strike

Around 50 Labatt brewery workers in St. John’s, Newfoundland went on illegal strike last week just before their contract was set to expire at the end of March.

The workers, who are represented by the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE), walked off the job to protest management demands to train replacement workers in preparation for a strike. Despite a well-manned picket line at the plant gates, when asked, union leaders refused to confirm if the workers actually were off the job.

The company has pledged to continue production regardless of the walkout with the use of scab replacement workers. In 2005, seven workers were suspended following a legal strike at the same plant that lasted three weeks.

Chemical workers on strike in Quebec

Workers at chemical giant Arclin Canada in Sainte-Thérèse, Quebec went on strike last week to demand earlier retirement due to the long and arduous shifts they are asked to work.

The workers at the plant are represented by the Syndicat des Métallus, or United Steelworkers union and according to one union official, “People here work with really toxic products. They have to lift really heavy weights. It’s really hard for their health and they cannot afford to be working until they’re 65.”

The workers are seeking to have the retirement age lowered from 65 to 62, which is the retirement age at a number of other Arclin facilities outside of Quebec.



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