

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 May 2013

Buenos Aires state workers strike, protest violent police attack at hospital

On April 30, workers in Argentina's ATE state workers union struck for 24 hours to denounce police brutality against protesters at the Hospital Borda, a psychiatric facility in Buenos Aires. Members of the Workers Central of Argentina (CTA) joined political, social and student groups and marched downtown to the City Government House to denounce the police violence.

The earlier protest stemmed from the plans of the city's right-wing mayor, Mario Macri, to demolish a building housing several rehabilitation workshops connected to the hospital in order to build a civic center. The controversial plan was opposed by the Borda's Workshop Board, which obtained a court injunction against the project in December.

Early in the morning of Friday, April 26, workers and other protesters gathered at the site, where a demolition crew began to empty out the carpentry and blacksmith workshops. A contingent of over 300 Metropolitan Police in full riot gear arrived to prevent staff from entering the workshop. They soon attacked the protesters with tear gas, rubber bullets and batons.

At least fifty protesters were injured during the attack and eight arrested. Among the injured were journalists and city lawmakers, in addition to Borda employees. (A video of the confrontation can be seen [here](#).)

CTA bureaucrats and opposition politicians have called for Macri's impeachment for flouting the ruling and they demanded the resignation of the city's Security Minister.

Police violence has escalated recently in Argentina. In January, Buenos Aires police attacked residents protesting plans to fence in a popular park, arresting 21 and injuring an undisclosed number.

Massive Chilean May Day March against austerity

Thousands of Chilean workers demonstrated in Chile on May 1, International Workers Day. In the capital Santiago, the CUT labor federation claimed that over 100,000 attended a demonstration and rally it organized. Police estimates put the crowd at 25,000.

Three main issues dominated the Santiago mobilization: taxes, pensions and labor regulations. The CUT is attempting to channel growing opposition to austerity and inequality into appeals to lawmakers to pass measures in these and other areas.

Speaking at the rally, CUT president Barbara Figueroa called for changing the tax code to reduce the high levels of inequality and fund more government programs. She criticized the privatized pension

system, imposed during the Pinochet dictatorship and infamous for shorting retired workers while enriching private fund managers.

Figueroa also called for raising the monthly minimum wage from 191,000 Chilean pesos (US\$408) to 250,000 pesos (US\$530), because "despite having work, we remain poor."

Meanwhile, in other parts of Santiago, riot police used tear gas, water cannons and batons to repress crowds of angry protesters who set fire to barricades and threw rocks.

Trinidadian highway workers strike over pay, working conditions

Workers on a highway extension project in Trinidad struck over working conditions and wages April 28. The 350 workers are nonunion contract workers for a Brazilian construction firm, Constructora OAS. The extension goes along the island's southwest coast from Point Fortin to San Fernando, a distance of about 20 miles.

The workers have a number of complaints about their jobs. For one, the job site is unsafe and unsanitary, with portable toilets not being cleaned regularly and no place to wash hands. Drinking water is in an unsanitary location and there are no first aid kits available. Workers eat in their cars so as not to eat in the lunchroom.

A representative of the workers told the Trinidad Express that workers make 24 Trinidad dollars (US\$3.74) per hour. "The workers signed contracts with the promise that appraisals would be done every six months, but up to now that has not happened," he noted. Workers do not receive overtime or traveling allowances.

Workers also fear that management is hiring non locals to do their jobs. In its contract with the government, Constructora agreed to hire 40 percent local labor.

Although workers appealed to management, Constructora put off addressing the issues.

The workers asked for help from the Oilfield Workers' Trade Union (OWTU), which began negotiations with management. On April 30, OWTU official Aaron Moyne addressed the workers and told them to go back to work because, as a result of a four-hour meeting, management "agreed to revisit" the issues. "So the union gave the company 13 more days to review the proposal and make a presentation to workers," Moyne added.

Costa Rican electrical workers hold one-day strike, protest against privatization

Thousands of electrical workers, including customer service

personnel, struck on April 29 over Costa Rica's ICE state electrical agency's privatization plans. According to La Nación, the strike affected about 50 percent of ICE offices.

Striking workers marched from ICE headquarters to the Legislative Assembly building, where speakers from Asdeice, the electrical and telecommunications union, denounced the signing of a contract between ICE and a private company giving the firm the rights to provide "number portability," the ability of customers to change telephone service providers without changing their phone numbers.

Asdeice officials claim that ICE signed the contract as the result of threats and blackmail. Union coordinator Fabio Chaves asserted, "while in other countries the user must pay for the portability when switching from one operator to another, in Costa Rica it will be free. But since there is a cost for conducting this process, customers will end up paying for it with higher rates."

Other objects of the protest were the "General Electricity Bill," currently being discussed in the Legislative Assembly, which would increase private firms' participation in the generation of electricity, and political appointments in top posts at ICE.

Asdeice delivered a document to the Legislative Assembly demanding an investigation into the signing of the "number portability" contract. According to a Tico Times report, "He [Chaves] added that workers could strike indefinitely during the month of May if Monday's protest fails to generate results."

Investment firms to reopen four Hostess bakeries

Two investment companies will be reopening four former Hostess bakeries in July under the name Hostess Brands LLC and produce Hostess Twinkies and other products of the former company. Metropoulos & Co. and Apollo Global Management acquired a total of eleven bakeries after last year's bankruptcy, but indicated that the four bakeries, located in Georgia, Indiana, Kansas and Illinois, are expected to produce the equivalent of the overall total of eleven after a \$60 million upgrade.

The investment firm briskly rejected an appeal by David Durkee, president of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTWG) union to permit the labor bureaucracy to collaborate with management in establishing the new company. Durkee issued a press release which stated in part, "We all want the same outcome: that the brands should prosper and endure. This is what the next stage of this saga is all about—implementing a new ownership and manufacturing structure worthy of the brands themselves and America's manufacturing prowess."

The BCTWG was compelled to call a strike after Hostess imposed an 8 percent wage cut and slashed benefits by 27 to 32 percent. The strike had nothing to do with defending the interests of the workers but in furthering the union's collaboration with management.

Hostess finally filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, which led to the closure of 33 bakeries, 565 distribution centers and 570 outlet stores. A total 18,500 members of the BCTWG and the Teamsters lost their jobs in the shutdown. The new company expects hire 1,500 workers to run the four plants slated for reopening.

Las Vegas taxi cab strike settled

The strike by Las Vegas taxi cab drivers for Yellow Checker Star Transportation ended May 2 after management and the Industrial, Technical and Professional Employees (ITPEU) Union signed a new agreement. Neither side would divulge exact details of the new contract except to say that there would be higher commissions and that cab drivers would not be compelled to work additional days during a workweek in cases where they worked four 12-hour days.

Back in January, the ITPEU leadership backed a management proposal. But 70 percent of the union's membership voted down the proposal. In March, the company unilaterally imposed their demands, which included a mandatory five-day 12-hour workweek for workers with less than six years seniority. Hundreds of taxi drivers responded with a strike and a strong core of the workforce stubbornly refused to give.

Yellow Checker Star is Las Vegas' second largest cab company. Approximately 1,200 of its 1,700 drivers are unionized.

Ontario elevator workers on strike

Fourteen hundred elevator workers in Toronto, Hamilton and the Ottawa Hull region went on strike last week including 800 in the Toronto area alone.

The strikers, who are members of three locals of the International Union of Elevator Constructors (IUEC), work repairing and maintaining elevators across the province. It is the first time all three locals have been on strike since 1988. While the employer has agreed to some wage increases, outstanding issues include work jurisdiction, premium pay for expanded work hours and travel time.

The union has said that public safety may be a concern during the strike since safety standards for elevator operations can't be enforced. Members of the IUEC service over 50,000 elevators across Ontario.



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