

Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 May 2013

Latin America

Argentinean air traffic controllers hold 24-hour privatization protest strike

Air traffic controllers, members of the ATE state employees association, struck for 24 hours throughout Argentina on May 10. Radar, flight scheduling, technical, rescue and ground security personnel were included in the action.

Protesters picketed entrances, slowing entry and exit. Flights were delayed or canceled at Buenos Aires' Aeroparque Jorge Newbery as well as at airports in Salta, Mendoza, Jujuy and Córdoba.

The strike was called to protest the government's decision to change the state-operated Aeroparque to a publicly traded company, called a Sociedad Anónima (SA) in Spanish. The switch would create the Empresa Argentina de Navegación Aérea SA (Argentine Aerial Navigation Enterprise PLC) and substitute functions now performed by the Air Force.

A Mendoza ATE official told *Los Andes* that the privatization would leave workers outside of public sector labor contract laws. "We are asking the State to tell us what will happen with the workers. In Mendoza about 50 employees fear for their positions." He added that this week the outcome of a meeting of ATE reps with aeronautic board coordinators would determine whether the union would return to industrial action.

Argentinean long-distance bus drivers strike

Argentina's Urban Transport Workers Union (UTA) called a strike for all long-distance bus routes on May 2. Bus service for about 100,000 passengers a day was stopped. About 22,000 drivers participated in the stoppage.

Negotiations with the bus companies have gone on since January 1. The main UTA demand was a 23 percent wage increase, but other issues included job security and retention of secondary drivers and eight-hour shifts.

The National Commission for Transport Regulation (CBRT) fined over 500 bus companies for failure to guarantee service, but at the same time lambasted the strike as "extortion" and threatened to impose sanctions on UTA if the strike continued. On May 6, after meeting with the government, UTA lifted the strike.

According to the *Buenos Herald Herald*, union press secretary Mario Calejari "confirmed that the union agreed on an 18 percent increase for January, February and March and a 23 percent hike starting on April with the national government as the 'guarantor' of salary negotiations."

Chilean vineyard workers strike for raise against antiunion practices

The 532 workers at Viña Concha y Toro, Chile's largest and the world's second largest wine producer, began a strike May 8. The action, which was approved by 97 percent of the workers, is a response to the company's antiunion practices and failed negotiations.

On May 10, striking workers picketed company headquarters in Santiago "to find the response that they still haven't given us." Carlos Montanares, director of one of the unions, denounced "salary differences, inequality among workers, discrimination between workers and employees and the minimal wage that we have." He added that "as an enterprise we are the second in the world and the first at the national level, but regarding wages we are the last."

César Cerna, president of the three-union organization representing the workers, told reporters that after a year of contract talks, the firm's bargainers "came to say things like our demands would oblige them to close plants in Chile, something that is totally outside any context." The unions are demanding a 10 percent raise.

However, Cerna was quick to declare the unions "open to dialogue in the hard work of arriving at the best end in this conflict..." Cerna concluded, "We want to be part of the Concha y Toro family."

Strike at Mexican high schools

On May 7, workers at Mexico City high schools, called *prepas* in Spanish, struck the city's 20 schools. The workers, members of the Federal District Medium Superior Institute Workers Union (SUTIEM), included in their demands a 3.9 percent pay hike and ten more vacation days.

The director of Federal District Medium Superior Education, Freyja Doridé Puebla López, called the strike "unjust," since she had only been on the job for a short time and had not been given the chance to get to know the staff and union. SUTIEM president Miguel Ángel Hernández claimed that one of the reasons for the strike was "the poor handling of resources by the directorship" and "for her lack of preparation."

However, on the morning of May 8, a SUTIEM permanent assembly voted to lift the strike. The union decided to accept the administration's proposal, "which would commit to establishing workplace regulations and initiate procedures to regularize those employees who receive honoraria," as well as agreeing to the salary and vacation demands, according to Milenio.

Since there are other pending issues, the assembly voted for a renewal of the strike for violations of the collective contract, but without a definite date.

Salvadoran hospital workers strike

Workers at the Hospital Zacamil in San Salvador, El Salvador began a strike May 2 over a number of issues. The workers, members of the Sintrosalud (health workers) and Simehzac (doctors) unions, have held protests at the hospital as well.

Emergency services and some appointments were not interrupted.

The unionized workers accused the health ministry (MINSAL) of not having complied with commitments established in talks held last February, which included contracting of personnel for emergency areas and for attending to bedridden patients; obtaining of new equipment for surgery, laundry, radiology and freezers for the morgue, and the provision of medical supplies.

In addition, the workers have asked for the firing of the hospital's administrator, Guillermo Flores, who they claimed did not carry out the promised measures.

The workers asked the Attorney General's Office for the Defense of Human Rights (PDDH) to function as a mediator between the hospital personnel and MINSAL. The unions feared that the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) government, using neglect of patients as a pretext, would attempt to turn the public against the workers.

"Margarita Posada (head of the Salvadoran Association of Community Health Promoters) is an FMLN activist who has tried to disperse and confuse the union members, since the government is interested in the hospitals falling into a tremendous crisis that permits the privatization of public health," protester Fernando Zelada told *La Página*.

On May 11, Health Minister María Isabel Rodríguez confirmed that the unions and the hospital arrived at an agreement. The workers returned to work when she explained that MINSAL is finishing plans to supply medical supplies and equipment. She also promised that washing machines would arrive by May 30.

United States

Iowa carpenter strike ends, new agreement ratified

Union carpenters in Iowa City, Iowa ended their 10-day strike after ratifying a new three-year agreement. Dave Hogan, president of Local 308 of the International Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners informed the press he could not divulge the details of the new contract based on an agreement between labor officials and negotiators for the contractors.

Reports indicate that the 425 Cedar Rapids carpenters in Local 308 wanted to match the four percent wage increases gained by Iowa City carpenters last year. But Cedar Rapids construction firms stubbornly insisted that they could only offer raises between 2 to 2.5 percent.

Cedar Rapids saw increased construction activity after the devastating flood of 2008. But that activity has begun to diminish. It also brought with it a growth of non-union construction firms that are now putting pressure on the unionized firms given the recession is limiting the number of new projects.

Several building trades locals saw their agreements expire on May 1 and are without agreements, but the labor bureaucracy has acted to isolate the carpenters from the broader section of construction workers and new agreements are being crafted with varied expiration dates to split up workers.

NLRA rule requiring posting of union-organizing rights struck down by appeals court

The US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit struck down a longstanding National Labor Relations Act rule known as "Subpart A" of the "Final Rule" that required employers to post an official notice advising workers of their right to organize a union.

Previously, the National Association of Manufacturers and other organizations had won a decision under the US District Court for the District of Columbia to eliminate "Subpart B" which referred to the enforcement of Subpart A. When the decision was appealed to the court of appeals, that decision was upheld and the court pressed further to eliminate the requirement that companies be required by law to post the requirement.

Canada

IKEA workers locked out in B.C.

Picket lines went up this week at the IKEA store in Richmond, British Columbia, south of Vancouver after the company locked workers out last Friday.

350 workers at the store, who are members of the Teamsters union, voted overwhelmingly against two contract offers brought to them by the union. The offers reportedly contained a wide range of concession demands including a return to a tiered wage structure.

The Richmond store is one of only two unionized IKEA outlets in Canada. Store managers have said that the store will remain open, but at reduced hours, and that their lockout will only be in effect for one hour each morning.

Thunder Bay roofers on strike

Sheet metal workers and roofers in Thunder Bay in northern Ontario, went on strike last week after being without a contract since May 1, shutting down a number of construction projects in the city.

A key issue in the dispute is the demand by contracting companies for roofers to work weekends to make up for days lost to bad weather. A spokesperson for the Sheet Metal Workers Union says that because of the large geographical area of work, such a concession would mean that workers would be spending more time away from home. Talks broke off last Wednesday and no talks are currently scheduled.

Ontario Liquor Board facing strike threat

The Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO), a provincial crown corporation, has issued public warnings of possible store closures this long weekend with the approach of a May 17 strike deadline.

7,000 workers employed at the LCBO represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) returned a vote of 95 percent in favor of strike action after their contract expired at the end of March. The employer is reportedly demanding a four-year freeze on wages along with a number of other concessions.

Both sides in the dispute say they are not hopeful a deal can be reached before the Victoria Day holiday weekend and the LCBO is telling customers to stock up in preparation for possible store closures.

At the same time, the LCBO is facing action from OPSEU in an Ontario Human Rights Tribunal over pay equity for female employees.



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