

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 May 2013

Striking Argentinean teachers clash with police

Teachers in Argentina's southern province of Tierra del Fuego held a 48-hour strike May 23 and 24 over stalled salary negotiations. The educators are members of the SUTEF teachers federation, which is demanding a 50 percent raise to keep pace with Argentina's galloping inflation rate. School authorities have offered 8 percent. Other issues include the percentage of the budget to be allocated for education, school infrastructure, promotions, medical benefits and pensions.

The teachers, joined by members of the truck drivers union, held a protest at the Government House in the provincial capital Ushuaia on May 23. When the protesters broke through barricades and entered the building, riot police used tear gas, pepper spray and billy clubs to drive them back. Over 30 protesters and police were injured in the melee.

After Governor Fabiana Ríos, who was with her cabinet on the second floor, promised to meet later with SUTEF secretary general Raúl Arce, tensions subsided, only to flare up again when she failed to show up. The Labor Ministry has called for a "mandatory conciliation," i.e., binding arbitration.

Colombian coroner's office workers strike over salary

On May 21, nearly 2,000 workers for Colombia's Legal Medicine Institute, which performs autopsies and other forensic duties, went on strike in a number of large cities, including Bogotá, Medellín and Cali.

The workers walked out mainly to demand wage parity with the judicial branch, which received a 26 percent raise after a protracted nationwide strike late last year. The last raise for coroner's office workers was for 4.7 percent.

Workers made allowances for performing autopsies in exceptional cases, such as evidence of sexual abuse or high alcohol levels in the blood.

On May 22, representatives of the government and the coroner's office—with the addition of an ombudsman—took up discussions as the strike continued. In the course of talks, coroner's office officials threatened to petition the permanent assembly to declare the strike illegal and to punish striking workers.

The union called off the strike on May 25 after reaching a *preacuerdo* ("pre-agreement") that purportedly will address the salary issue, labor conditions and concerns about retaliation as

negotiations continue. The coroner's office dropped the illegality request. A union official told Radio Santa Fe, "We understand that in only one negotiation not everything is resolved; therefore it is a process in which we will do follow-up."

Uruguay: Limited strikes over minimum wage, education budget, teachers' salaries

Workers under the umbrella of the Uruguayan PIT-CNT labor federation held a number of limited strikes, their first of the year, throughout Uruguay on May 24. Most of the stoppages were for only four hours, between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., although health workers struck from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.—attending only to emergencies—and teachers struck for the whole day.

The PIT-CNT, as well as the Stalinist Communist Party of Uruguay, whose members hold positions in various union bureaucracies, supported the 2009 election of former Tupamaros guerrilla José Mujica, touting him as a progressive who would improve conditions for the working class and poor. Since his election, this progressive façade has been limited mainly to issues like abortion rights, alternative energy, legalizing marijuana and his much-vaunted modest lifestyle.

Meanwhile, Mujica's popularity has been steadily eroded by the lack of improvement in the lives of workers in the face of persistent inflation and stagnating wages. The union bureaucracies have held periodic limited strikes in an effort to defuse their growing anger.

At a mobilization in Montevideo, Sutel telecommunications union head and CP official Gabriel Molina and Uruguayan Teachers Federation president Elbia Pereira were the main speakers. They called on the president and the national legislature to increase the education budget, raise the minimum wage and increase teachers' salaries.

Mujica was not in Uruguay at the time. He is currently on a trip that includes stops in China, where he is seeking investments in Uruguay's railways and ports, and Spain, where he will meet with right-wing president Mariano Rajoy and the head of Banco Santander for business talks. Then he will fly to Italy for lunch with Pope Francis.

Trinidadian highway workers stop work again over wages, conditions

For the third time since April 28, workers on a highway extension project in Trinidad refused to work in order to bring attention to poor wages and working conditions.

The 350 workers are nonunionized contract workers hired by Constructora OAS, a Brazilian firm that is overseeing construction of a 20-mile stretch of highway on Trinidad's west coast. On April 28, after a number of fruitless appeals, the workers struck due to unsanitary and unsafe conditions, as well as poor pay and no performance evaluations for raises.

The workers asked for help from the Oilfield Workers' Trade Union (OWTU), whose representative, Aaron Moyne, met with the firm, after which he told them to go back to work while management considered their complaints. On May 15, workers walked off the job again when management refused to grant any of their requests. This time, the labour minister entered the picture, asking Moyne to step aside while the workers and management held talks, which he immediately did.

The only response the workers got was a warning by the company that they can be disciplined or fired for an illegal work stoppage.

On May 18, the workers downed their tools a third time. Workers' representative Vishnu Ramdhan told the *Trinidad Express*, "Workers have still not seen any improvement or any signs of action by the company to meet their needs. As a result of that, workers decided not to strike, workers are not striking, what is taking place is workers are demanding that we get better safety and health and wages conditions. We are awaiting that from the company and this is why we are not working."

On May 23, Labour Minister Errol McLeod declared at a press conference that the project would be completed on time and within budget. However, he would not intervene in the case, instead insisting that the issues should be settled "bilaterally," i.e., between Constructora and individual contracted workers, "because there is no RMU (registered majority union) there. Each of the workers there have an individual contract of employment, and we at the Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) have ensured that the conditions under which they are asked to work are conditions under which they should work."

The *Express* noted, "OWTU Health, Safety and Environment/Labour Relations Officer, Aaron Moyne, remains an adviser."

San Francisco Giants food workers carry out one-day strike over benefits and wages

Food workers at AT&T Park in San Francisco carried out a one-day strike May 25 against the threat of increased health care costs and lagging wages. Several hundred workers set up picket lines asking fans attending a game between the San Francisco Giants and the Colorado Rockies not buy food from management and replacement workers.

Centerplate Inc., which operates concessions for the stadium has demanded that medical benefits for the 750 members of UNITE

HERE Local 2 be capped. Workers are also calling for increased wages after going without any wage increase since 2009 and working for three years without a new contract. Centerplate has only offered workers 25 cent wage increases in each of the first two years of any new agreement.

Workers have also asked management to permit them to sit down during breaks. Centerpoint insists that workers must remain standing during the course of a whole game.

Local 2 represents cashiers, cooks and food sellers. However, Teamsters Local 7, whose members worked through the one-day strike, represents concessionaires who work outside and carry on sales by filtering through the stands.

Toronto Casino workers set to strike

400 workers employed by OLG Slots at the Woodbine racetrack, north of Toronto, Ontario, are set to go on strike this week after a midnight deadline passed on Sunday with no new contract in place.

The workers are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and could also face a lockout by the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG). Union leaders say they are seeking improvements in working conditions, job security and wages in a new contract.

The majority of workers employed at OLG Slots are part-time with no job security and they face the threat of job losses due to plans to privatize slot operations at Woodbine.

Alberta Postal workers stage wildcat strike

At least 50 postal workers in Fort McMurray, Alberta walked off the job last Wednesday to protest against government plans to contract out parcel delivery service starting this fall.

The workers, who are members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), walked out following an announcement that, starting in October, parcel delivery would be done by outside contractors. Union leaders say that a number of unionized jobs would be lost as a result and that the move is due to the inability of Canada Post to attract sufficient postal staff at the relatively low wages they offer.



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