

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 June 2013

## Four-day strike by Argentine teachers for pay raise

Teachers in Argentina's Buenos Aires province struck for four days, from May 27 to May 30, to demand that salary talks with the provincial government be reopened. The strike was originally planned for two days, but it was extended in rejection of a government-decreed raise that would incrementally increase base monthly pay from 3,248 pesos (US\$616) to 3,415 pesos (US\$648) by December. The teachers are calling for a raise to 5,000 pesos (US\$949).

The teachers are members of the Frente Gremial Docente (Educators Union Front). The Buenos Aires Educators Federation (FEB), which embraces a number of public and private unions and is part of the Frente, did not join the action, declaring that it is engaged in "obligatory conciliation" with the government.

The teachers struck despite government threats to dock their pay for the four days. Participation in the action was high, from 80 to 100 percent, according to news reports. This stoppage brought the number of strike days to twelve since the academic year began in March.

## Venezuelan Coca Cola workers on strike over working conditions, wage demands

Workers at the main Coca Cola-Femsa bottling plant in the northern Venezuelan city of Valencia are continuing their strike begun May 20. On that day, some 50 workers soldered the gates closed because of poor working conditions and wages.

Coca Cola-Femsa, a joint venture of Coca-Cola Co and Mexican company Femsa, has 34 bottling plants in Latin America. Venezuela accounts for about 18 percent of Coca Cola sales.

Media coverage has concentrated mostly on the effects of the strike on Femsa's sales, company accusations that the strike is "illegal" and "arbitrary," and denunciations of the workers' demands as "crazy." The company has claimed that the strike is "promoted by a group of no more than 25 workers, out of a universe of more than 1,000 workers," and worst of all, "without the support of the union."

However, a response to a Reuters article on the strike was posted on democraticunderground.com, in which the poster stated: "The 'outrageous (crazy) claims' from the workers are a proposal for a 44 percent salary increase, 140 percent of the food basket and health/emergency services coverage to 300,000 bolivars [US\$63,000] per claim and 25,000 [US\$3,976] for paternity."

After the last strike at Femsa in 2011, daily pay was raised from 89 bolivars (US\$20.72), to 119 bolivars (US\$27.70). A 44 percent increase would result in daily base pay of about 171 bolivars, less than US\$40.

## Dominican hospital workers hold strike actions over pay, benefits

Doctors, nurses, bioanalysts, pharmacists and other public hospital employees throughout the Dominican Republic held staggered strike actions over three days last week. In the capital of Santo Domingo, medical consulting services and elective surgeries were stopped for 12 hours on May 27.

The Dominican Medical Association (CMD), which called the action, claimed 100 percent adherence.

The next day, hospitals in the north, including in the city of Santiago, were struck, and on May 29, medical workers in the south walked out.

In all the actions, workers demonstrated in front of the facilities, carrying signs with their demands—wage increases, full payment of pensions, better travel and overtime pay and improved health insurance.

## Mexico City teachers walk out over job security, benefits

Teachers at 27 campuses of the National College for Professional and Technical Education (Conalep) in Mexico City stopped work on May 30. The main purpose of the strike is to guarantee job security for the 2,300 teachers and 2,000 administrative workers at Conalep. Other issues include vacations, pensions and retention of the traditional year-end

bonus or *aguinaldo* .

As is customary, members of the teachers' union, SUTDCONALEP, placed red and black flags around the campuses signaling the strike. Although Conalep has campuses around the nation, the union limited the action to schools in the capital.

Union secretary general Gustavo Salazar told *Milenio* that SUTDCONALEP is ready to restart talks with the authorities, despite the latest offer, which entailed signing four contracts a year: "They propose to us to untangle the matter something that is unviable: a contract for five-and-a-half months, then another for 15 days to complete a semester."

One professor at the Coyoacán campus complained, "We are called federal employees; the reality is that we are casual employees, because we have contracts of five-and-a-half months, we don't have seniority, we lose up to twenty days in a semester break without a wage, without knowing if we are going to have work or not."

Conalep teachers are the worst paid mid-upper level educators in the nation, earning about 4,000 pesos (US\$312) per month.

SUTDCONALEP and Conalep authorities have continued negotiating during the strike, but as of May 31 no agreement had been reached.

### **Nestle Jamaica workers strike to protest sacking of coworker**

On May 30, workers at the Nestle Jamaica plant in Bog Walk, St. Catherine Parish walked off the job to protest the firing of a fellow worker. The worker was dismissed after a hearing in which he was found to be "disrespectful to a manager."

The National Workers' Union (NWU) referred the matter to the Ministry of Labour, claiming that the worker had been denied due process. NWU vice president Howard Duncan told *Go-Jamaica* that video evidence refuted company claims of gross misconduct.

The Ministry of Labour called for an "emergency conciliatory meeting," but Duncan did not attend after his request to interview the manager who made the claim was rebuffed by management. He later called on the workers to go back to their jobs.

This is the second industrial action by Nestle Jamaica workers in three months. On March 26, about 130 workers left their posts to protest the firm's refusal to pay union officials for time away from the plant to attend a meeting at the Ministry of Labour.

### **Washington state college service workers strike over wages and job security**

Student service workers at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington went on strike May 28 after 16 months of bargaining failed to bridge differences over wages and job security issues. The 57 members of Washington Federation of State Employees Local 443 want to implement a system of step increases while administration negotiators are offering 4 percent over a two-year agreement. The union points out that the offer falls short of the 7.5 percent faculty members received in their contract.

The student service workers, comprising academic counselors, advisors, mental health advisors, career development staff, coaches and other support staff are also seeking language similar to other college labor agreements that provides for "just cause" in the event of disciplinary measures and a firings. The administration is insisting discipline remain in the hands of college managers, while the union wants an independent review board to take up such issues.

On the first day of the strike, faculty members and students joined picketing student service workers and some campus buildings and operations had to be shut down due to the walkout. Workers voted by a 45-5 margin to authorize a strike on May 15. This is their first contract negotiations.

### **Nova Scotia paramedics threaten strike action**

800 air and ground paramedics employed by Emergency Medical Care Inc. (EMC) in Nova Scotia could be on strike as early as June 8 after voting to reject the company's latest contract offer, a deal recommended by the leadership of their union, the International Union of Operating Engineers.

EMC is the company contracted by the provincial government to deliver emergency services in Nova Scotia and company representatives have said that contingency plans have been put in place in advance of any strike action.

Despite the participation of a conciliator, outstanding issues in stalled negotiations include wages, pensions and working conditions. Nova Scotia paramedics have been without a contract since 2011.



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