

Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 July 2013

Argentine dockworkers strike over tax on earnings

Dockworkers throughout Argentina paralyzed port activity on July 12 to protest a tax on their earnings. The strike mainly affected the agricultural export sector, blocking about 80 percent of those exports and delaying the departures of over 100 vessels.

The 24-hour action was called jointly by the Grain Receivers Union of the Argentine Republic (URGARA) and the United Port Workers Syndicate (SUPA). In some parts of the country, hundreds of workers demonstrated and blocked traffic.

The primary demand of the striking workers was the rescission of a tax—called a “profit tax”—on earnings above a certain level. SUPA secretary general Juan Corvalán told *La Nación*, “This is not a political strike. It is a strike of necessity. It is unjust that from a day laborer who works for 12 hours a day and earns 9,000 pesos [US\$1660] this month they have discounted 2,500 [US\$461] through the profit tax.”

The “profit tax” was not the only source of the protests. Other issues included working conditions, subcontracting and family allowances.

Nationwide strike, marches in Chile demand better working conditions

Thousands of workers marched through the streets of Chilean cities on July 11 to demand improvements in labor conditions. The actions were called by the Workers Unitary Central (CUT) labor confederation, supported by student and social organizations.

Demands included the raising of the minimum wage from the current US\$386 per month to \$500, an end to the privatized pension system, protections for striking workers and tax reform, among others.

Organizers claimed that over 200,000 protesters amassed in the capital Santiago, and nearly half a million throughout Chile. Police estimates, as per custom, were vastly lower. In Santiago, two marches—one of state workers, and the other of mineworkers, postal workers, supermarket, bank and call center employees—converged to rally downtown.

Sporadic confrontations between police and protesters occurred, with some 67 protesters arrested.

Brazilian unions call nationwide “Day of Struggle”

Following on the heels of last month’s massive protests, some of Brazil’s biggest labor unions organized a nationwide work stoppage on July 11. Dubbed the “Day of Struggle,” the actions were adhered to by teachers, civil servants, hospital workers, metalworkers, dockworkers, transportation and construction workers and others. Strikes, marches, blockades and clashes with police occurred.

Subway, bus and train workers did not join in the actions.

Among the demands of the protesters were a shorter workweek, higher salaries, better working conditions and affordable housing. Higher budgets for education, public transit and social services also figured among the demands.

A July 12 *rt.com* report notes, “Brazil’s unions...appear to be trying to give the protests direction while they fight for political and social goals.” In fact, one salient feature of last month’s protests was the rejection by the majority of demonstrators of participation by the unions and traditional political parties, which they viewed correctly as part of the corrupt established regime.

The unions have steadfastly supported the “left” Workers Party (PT) governments of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, both of which oversaw increases of social inequality, privatizations and corruption as living standards for the Brazilian working class deteriorated. They are now attempting to corral and defuse the anger expressed in last month’s protests. The “Day of Struggle” must be seen in this light. (See 8 July, “Workers Party and pseudo-left work to dissipate protest movement in Brazil”)

24-hour strike by Uruguayan petroleum workers over decree against job actions

Workers at Uruguay’s state-owned Ancap (National Administration of Combustibles, Alcohol and Cement) plants and refineries held a one-day strike Friday, July 12 to protest a decree that imposes fines on workers engaged in slowdowns and work-to-rule actions. The decree, 401/008, established “salary discounts” for the nation’s Central Administration workers who adopt measures that “involve the diminution of their jobs in their regular schedules.”

Ancap directors applied the decree in May 2012 when tank truck drivers and dockworkers, demanding safety and security improvements in the handling of gasoline and liquefied petroleum

gas, impeded the unloading of a shipment from a tanker. The decree was applied again last April, when dockworkers refused to work overtime, delaying the departure of a tanker for two weeks.

Ancap, in anticipation of the strike, had stockpiled supplies, thus minimizing the effects of the strike. The workers were set to return to the job on July 15.

Trinidadian health workers protest for implementation of salary rise

Health workers at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex (EWMSC) in Mt Hope, Trinidad demonstrated July 12 over a salary increase for the years 2008 to 2010. They demanded an additional four percent over what they have received, and which they have been promised.

The workers are members of the Public Services Association (PSA). As employees of Regional Health Authorities (RHAs), they are not classified as officers of the Civil Service, and they were not included for the four percent raises agreed to between the PSA and the Chief Personnel Officer (CPO) last year. However, the CPO granted approval for the raises for some RHA employees. Since then, there has been no movement on implementing the increases.

PSA members have raised the matter repeatedly at union meetings. The PSA wrote a letter to the North Central Health Authority (NCHA), which has jurisdiction over the EWMSC, in December. According to a *Newsday* report, “Management subsequently agreed ‘in principle’ to the increase, but no action has followed.”

PSA President Watson Duke, who is known for calling obstreperous but toothless protests, said, “we want a document we can sign, not just talk.”

Indiana auto parts workers in third year of strike

Workers at Coupled Products in Columbia City, Indiana are into their third year on strike over wage and benefit cuts. Several dozen of the original 53 members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2049 continue picketing the plant that provides products for the auto industry.

Back in 2011, management demanded wage cuts of 33 percent and the termination of all benefits. Once the strike began, Coupled Products brought in permanent replacements and have been running production throughout the strike.

The UAW left the workers—many of them with 30 to 40 years seniority—isolated and limited their activity to making appeals to the National Labor Relations Board on the basis of an unfair labor practices strike. Coupled Products has additional operations in Rochester Hills, Michigan and Mexico.

Striking writers for “Fashion Police” target Joan Rivers

Nine striking non-union writers for E! Network’s “Fashion Police” launched an attack on Joan Rivers last week for not “putting down her pen” in support of the writers’ struggle to gain union recognition. The writers first went on strike back in April of this year, charging E! with \$1.1 million in unpaid overtime wages.

The Writers Guild of America, which is seeking to represent the striking writers, attacked Joan Rivers, a member of the WGA, for not standing up for the writers. Rivers is president of Rugby Productions, which jointly employ the writers with E! Networks.

The writers filed a complaint back in April with the California Division of Labor Standards Enforcement against E! Networks. One week later, they filed a second complaint for \$400,000 in overtime owed them by Rivers’ Rugby Productions.

Picket lines up at Manitoba care home

In preparation for a possible all-out strike, workers at Maples Personal Care Home in Winnipeg, Manitoba held information pickets this week after voting overwhelmingly in favor of a strike last month.

The 130 workers affected, who include health care aides and kitchen staff at the long care home, are represented by the largest union in Canada, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Union negotiators are fighting to increase staffing levels and to gain wage parity with other facilities in the region.

Conciliation talks are set for next week, in advance of a strike deadline of July 22.

Thunder Bay child welfare workers strike

350 workers employed by Dilico Anishinabek Family Care in Thunder Bay and nearby regions in northern Ontario went on strike last week in a fight over issues arising from funding shortfalls.

Most of the strikers, who are members of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union, (CEP) work providing child welfare services to First Nations communities in the region. The issues they are striking over include wages, unmanageable caseloads and inadequate staffing levels, all of which relate to notoriously inadequate funding from the federal government to First Nations agencies.



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