

Workers Struggles: The Americas

29 October 2013

Latin America

Chilean public service workers hold nationwide strike for wage hike

Thousands of public sector workers across Chile struck October 25. The action was called by the CUT labor coalition, which embraces more than 14 public sector unions. In a few public services like health care, police and civil registry, participation was limited or absent, but overall adherence was high.

Public services were affected in some municipalities like Valparaiso, where trash piled up, and Arica, where traffic lights malfunctioned from no maintenance. In the latter, the Chilean national police, or *carabineros*, were dispatched to do the work.

The CUT is demanding an 8.8 percent raise for most public sector workers and 10 percent for workers on the low end of the wage scale. The demands would apply to several public institutions including government ministries, municipalities, schools and prisons. Chile's minimum wage is equal to US\$416 per month.

One-day strike by Argentine medical workers over shortages, infrastructure, wages, conditions

On October 25, medical professionals in Tartagal, a city in northern Argentina's Salta province, went on strike for 24 hours. The strike was called by the APSADES union to pressure the provincial government to make improvements regarding health center infrastructure, staffing shortages, wages and labor conditions.

An APSADES spokeswoman told reporters that the government has already called obligatory conciliation (a type of binding arbitration) "twice over the same theme" with no results. She added that in one hospital, there were

only resident doctors, "implying irresponsibility by the Health Ministry."

Participation in the stoppage was spotty, with some hospitals showing up to 70 percent adherence to the strike, while others functioned normally.

Brazilian oil workers end strike over wages and auction of deep-water oilfield

A strike begun October 17 by 40,000 Brazilian oil workers was suspended on October 24 in six states and partially shelved in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. The strike had been called by the FUP oil workers' union to press for a wage raise and to protest the scheduled auction of a huge deep-water oilfield to international oil corporations (see October 22 report). The winner of the bid would form a joint venture with the nation's semi-public oil corporation, Petrobras.

The FUP agreed to accept the latest Petrobras salary offer of an 8.56 percent raise—up from its previous offer of 7.7 percent but significantly below FUP's 11.6 percent demand—in addition to a bonus equivalent to a month's earnings and some increases in benefits.

For the auction to go through, the government dispatched more than 1,000 soldiers to the Windsor Hotel in Rio de Janeiro. The FUP and other unions held some protests with nationalistic overtones there. As it turned out, all but one of the potential bidders—which had included such heavy-hitters as Exxon, Chevron and BP—bailed out before the auction began.

The rights to exploration and drilling in the Libra oilfield, located 500 miles off the Brazilian coast, were awarded to a consortium consisting of Royal Dutch Shell, France's Total and China's CNOOC and CNPC along with Petrobras in what Ildo Sauer, head of the University of Sao Paulo's Energy and Environment Institute (IEE) and former Petrobras manager, called a "handover."

Trinidadian environmental agency workers protest board of directors' policies

On October 25, employees of three branches of Trinidad and Tobago's Environmental Management Authority (EMA) protested recent changes in the board of directors' policies. In Port-of-Spain, La Romaine and St. Augustine, the workers held a silent protest outside the offices during their lunch hour.

The workers made previous attempts to address outstanding issues with management, but were rebuffed. They say that they will continue their protests until management agrees to discuss the issues "in an timely, open, transparent and acceptable manner."

Newsday listed some of the workers' complaints: "the 're-alignment' of staff within various departments without proper consultation; the disbanding of the Corporate Relations and Public Education Departments; recruitment of staff without the involvement of the Human Resources Department; the creation of new positions and hiring of persons for these jobs; alteration of internal policies and procedures that govern technical assessments such as the Certificate of Environmental Clearance (CEC) process; and a lack of transparency and accountability as it relates to board/management directives."

United States

Los Angeles County workers take strike vote as contract negotiations stall

Some 55,000 Los Angeles County workers began voting October 23 on whether to authorize the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to call a strike unless a deadlock in negotiations can be overcome on wages, health care and staffing. The contract covering various sections of county workers, including social workers, nurses, park employees and librarians, expired September 30.

The county has put forward a 4 percent raise, saying it will concede a percent raise if the union gives up on increasing staff, decreasing workloads for social workers and the adding of a holiday in the name of Cesar Chavez. Also, the county has refused to cover any increases in health care premiums.

The SEIU called a limited strike of about 2,000 workers on October 1. The strike vote is expected to take one week to complete.

Canada

Manitoba personal care workers set to strike

Workers at the Lions Housing Personal Care Home in Winnipeg, Manitoba, are set to go on strike this week after delivering an 85 percent strike mandate to their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), two weeks ago.

Union leaders say that workers at the seniors' home are overworked and paid well below comparable similar facilities elsewhere in the province. Workers are fighting against extreme short-staffing in this struggle as part of a province-wide campaign against understaffing in long-term care homes in Manitoba.

Workers at the home have been without a contract since September 2012, and despite having previously voted in favor of strike action, to date their union has only called for two information pickets in July and August.

Nova Scotia nursing staff vote to strike

Workers at two nursing homes in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, have given a strong strike mandate to their union, CUPE.

About 100 workers at Shiretown and Terrace Nursing Homes, including cooks, maintenance, housekeeping and continuing care staff, are fighting for pay equity with similar institutions in the province. In addition, central issues in the dispute concern proposed benefit reductions and the conversion of full-time to part-time positions.

Conciliation is scheduled to begin next in talks that have been ongoing since last spring.



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