

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 November 2013

Latin America

Argentine petroleum workers renew strike for unpaid wages, improved conditions

Specialized petroleum workers contracted by the Chevron oil firm in the eastern Argentine province of Neuquén struck for the second time November 6. The specialists, known as “hierarchical” employees, stopped work and held demonstrations at two sites.

The workers demanded the delivery of unpaid holiday earnings and improvements in working conditions. Chevron employs around 350 hierarchical employees—who are primarily charged with inspecting and supervising drilling and pumping sites—in Neuquén.

Manuel Arévalo, secretary general of the hierarchical petroleum workers union, told lmneuquen.com.ar that Chevron frequently flouts its contract with the union: “Chevron believes itself to be very powerful in Argentina; therefore it doesn’t comply with the collective agreement nor with norms of security.” He voiced fears that Chevron would attempt to blame the striking workers if an accident should occur during the strike.

Chevron management did not respond to the stoppage. “Therefore, we are evaluating the hardening of measures,” Arévalo added.

Argentine teachers end two-and-a-half-month strike over salaries

On November 6, teachers in Argentina’s southern Chubut province accepted a proposal from the provincial government and returned to work the next day, ending a strike begun on August 11.

The strike began as a 48-hour protest during salary talks between the government, headed by Governor Martin Buzzi, and the ATECh educators union’s proposals, but government negotiators’ intransigence prompted the continuation of the stoppage for two and a half months.

Teachers escalated the action by blockading some of the main highways, causing fuel shortages in Chubut and in Santa Cruz province to the south. At one point, gendarmes were deployed to clear the roads.

Recent electoral setbacks suffered by Buzzi’s

Justicialist/Front for Victory (FvP) party weakened his government, forcing him to reshuffle his cabinet, including the Ministry of Education. Under the new minister, Guillermo Firmenich, “the government tried to trace a new line of dialogue with the teachers, who finally accepted the proposal for salary improvements and the return to the classroom,” reported *Ámbito*.

The terms of the agreement, accepted in assembly, establishes a raise of 55 percent for the month of November of 1,836 ARS (US\$308) and rising another 10 percent in February 2014.

Strike by Chilean public workers over salaries continues

Chilean public sector workers, including teachers, health care workers, prison employees, and trash services, continued a strike begun October 22 over pay and other issues. The strike was called by the CUT labor coalition, which demands an 8.8 percent hike with 10 percent for lower-paid workers.

Trash collection halted, bringing denunciations from Cecilia Pérez, spokesperson for President Sebastian Piñera, who blamed the striking workers for causing damage to the population and characterized the strike as illegal. She claimed sympathy for the workers’ concerns, but said that changes must be “gradual.”

In a number of provincial capitals like Santiago, O’Higgins and Rancagua, workers belonging to the National Fiscal Employees Association (ANEF) marched, blocked streets and demonstrated. Union leaders denounced the breakdown in negotiations, but expressed hope that talks would restart.

Puerto Rican teachers protest against pension cuts

Several thousand Puerto Rican teachers protested November 3 against a plan by the government to change their pension system. The teachers assembled in the capital San Juan carrying signs and chanting, then marched to Fortaleza, seat of the executive. The mobilization was organized by a coalition of educators’ unions, including the Puerto Rican Teachers Federation (FMPR), the Puerto Rican teachers Association and the

National Union of Educators and Education Workers.

Puerto Rico has about 1,400 public schools that employ around 36,000 teachers, who are eligible to retire after 30 years of service. The pension system is currently running a deficit of about US\$333 million, and according to *Latino Daily News*, “Some forecasts indicate the Teachers Retirement System will run out of money in 2020.”

The proposed pension overhaul would follow recommendations by the ratings agency Moody's. It would cut pensions by as much as 50 percent and place the onus of financing the system upon the teachers, with the state contributing little or nothing.

The unions have their own proposals that they will present to the governor.

Antigua: Pilots strike over suspensions

Pilots employed by Leeward Islands Air Transport (LIAT), based on the Caribbean island of Antigua, refused to show up for work on November 5 over the suspensions of two pilots stemming from an incident involving technical repairs on November 2.

On that date, Captain Neil Cave was placed on suspension for voicing dissatisfaction with testing procedures and for pointing out discrepancies with the paperwork on the repair of a plane that he was scheduled to fly. Captain Carl Burke, president of the Leeward Islands Airline Pilots Association (LIALPA), was also suspended when he intervened in a meeting with the LIAT director of flight operations.

The pilots struck, demanding the end of the suspensions and a written apology from LIAT. Several flights in the region were delayed and/or canceled.

LIAT, which employs about 500 workers in the region, charged LIALPA with not giving the company sufficient notification of the strike and threatened that it would request the government declare their job an essential service to force them back to work.

However, the union and management held meetings over the next few days, after which, on November 8, the pilots went back to work. News reports did not reveal the outcome of the meetings.

United States

Illinois county workers' strike postponed after intervention of federal mediator

Will County, Illinois, workers voted November 9 to postpone a possible strike this week after the intervention of a federal mediator. The mediator did not indicate any backing down by the county's negotiators in their demand to impose increased health care costs on the members of the American Federation of State, County and

Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1028.

Members of AFSCME are covered by seven separate contracts that expired a year ago, which involve a wide variety of workers in nursing homes, the highway department, health department and other agencies. Workers voted by a 90 percent margin to strike the county, and the union announced a strike on November 7 after neither side could agree upon new contract talks.

The strike was only averted when both sides agreed to the mediator's request for new talks this week. The Will County board, which comprises 13 Democrats and 13 Republicans, has insisted that county finances will not support continued health care unless workers shoulder a substantial increase in their share of the costs.

Previously, workers only paid 1 or 2 percent of health care costs based on their salary. According to the union, the county's offer of a 4.5 percent wage increase over the course of a four-year contract will be obliterated by the demands for increased health care payments by workers.

Canada

Ontario home care workers set to strike

A total of 4,500 personal support workers (PSWs) across the province of Ontario who are employed by Red Cross Care Partners (RCCP) could be on strike within a week following a video statement by Sharleen Stewart, president of Service Employees International Union Healthcare (SEIU).

PSWs provide home care to seniors using their own vehicles, and those at RCCP earn an average of only C\$15 an hour, yet are often required to pay for gas out-of-pocket.

The company has reportedly proposed a five-year wage freeze with no improvement in working conditions. Having carried out various campaigns to exert pressure on RCCP since the last contract expired in April, Stewart stated that the union was not taking this step lightly but was left with no choice but to proceed with strike preparations.



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