

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 December 2013

Argentine public employees strike for end-of-year bonus and improved working conditions

On December 6, two days after police in Córdoba—Argentina's second largest city, about 700 km (435 miles) northwest of Buenos Aires—walked off the job, the Public Employees Syndicate (SEP) and two other unions began a 48-hour stoppage to demand the payment of a bonus before the end of the year. The bonus is a customary holiday season payment that has been under attack in recent years.

The SEP, the Atsa health workers union and the Civil Personnel of the Nation Union (UPCN) called for a bonus of 2,000 pesos (US\$320), the same amount that the provincial government agreed to give to the striking police. The state attorney, Jorge Córdoba, differentiated between the agreement with the police, which he claimed was "the product of negotiation," and the demands of the provincial unions, which were not part of the collective agreement that is in force "for the entire year 2013."

Other demands of the unions include the upgrading of temporary contract workers to full-time permanent status and help in providing minimum staffing for hospitals.

The Judicial Power Employees Association, rejecting a 15 percent salary raise offer by the Superior Justice Tribunal, also carried out a 24-hour strike after occupying the Palace of Justice the previous day. In addition, the ATE state employees' association called for its members to strike and occupy public hospitals on December 9.

Argentine petrochemical workers strike over labor conditions

Petrochemical workers at the Puerto General San Martín Petrobrás processing plant in Argentina's Santa Fe province went on indefinite strike December 6 to demand improved labor conditions. The workers are members of the SOEPU union, which is currently in negotiations with the Brazil-based firm.

The plant produces styrene, polystyrene, rubber and fertilizers.

SOEPU secretary general Juan Cappa told reporters, "We are demanding a collective work contract that establishes a framework for plant personnel, for maintenance workers, shifts, also for benefits for the female personnel, sick leave, among other things." Additional demands are recategorization of administrative personnel and cleaning crews.

Chilean smelters strike over pay

Smelting facility workers at northern Chile's giant Chuquicamata copper complex went on strike December 3. Smelting operations ground to a halt as the strike extended past the end of the week.

The workers walked out to demand higher pay, though other issues have contributed to tensions at the complex. From January to September, production fell by about 5 percent compared to the same period last year. Management is in the midst of an overhaul of the 100-year-old mine and has already laid off some workers, stoking fears of future layoffs as the overhaul—which includes downsizing and "boosting efficiency"—progresses.

Smelting operations have been brought to a halt by the stoppage, and Chuquicamata general director Juan Carlos Avendaño, calling the strike a "surprise" and "illegal," told reporters, "We cannot tolerate this type of breaches [to the collective contract] that put the form in which we relate between workers and administration in doubt." Though claiming willingness to engage in dialogue, the company has reprimanded, fined and docked the pay of striking workers.

Accusing the workers of acts of violence against contract workers, state-owned parent company Codelco has filed a complaint with nearby Calama's district attorney and a restraining order with the Appeals Court of Antofagasta, 215 km (133 miles) to the southwest.

Venezuelan steelworkers end 20-day strike over contract

Workers at Venezuelan steel mill Siderúrgica de Orinoco (Sidor) lifted a strike the evening of December 5. The strike had been called in mid-November to demand the signing of a contract, since the previous one had expired three years ago.

During the strike, workers had engaged in spontaneous protests such as blockades of highways. In addition to movement on the contract, workers demanded the approval of 14 economic clauses in the contract. They called for modernization of the plant and demanded that Sidor management explain what happened to resources—amounting to more than US\$300 million—ordered by Hugo Chávez to upgrade the plant.

At a December 5 assembly, the vice president of the Venezuelan Corporation of Guayana (CVG), the president of Sidor, and other business, union and political officials appealed to the workers to go back to work and resume production. According to *EL Universal*, "The workers took their word and showed that they were not in favor of continuing the strike, for they know that as a consequence of the delay of operations, productive development and operative recovery of the enterprise are put at risk."

The workers voted in assembly with the management of the CVG to return to work and postpone discussion of the contract until January.

Mexican mineworkers strike, block and occupy mine over contract

The highway and main entrance to the El Coronel gold and silver mine in Ojocaliente, Zacatecas, Mexico, were blocked by hundreds of mine and metallurgy workers on December 4. The mine is a subsidiary of the Real de Ángeles mining corporation, part of multibillionaire Carlos Slim's Grupo Frisco mine holdings.

The roots of the action go back to August, when two unions vied to represent the El Coronel workers. The Mine, Metallurgical, Iron, Steel and Similar Workers National Syndicate of the Mexican Republic (SNTMMSRM) dates back to 1934 and is headed by Napoleón Gómez Urrutia. After fleeing the country under fraud and embezzlement charges, Gómez now runs the union from exile in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Members of the SNTMMSRM are often referred to as *napistas*.

The other contender, the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants, or CROC, established in 1952, challenged the SNTMMSRM, especially in the mining sector, during the PAN presidencies of Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón.

The SNTMMSRM and CROC are both corrupt and right-wing organizations allied with two of Mexico's three main bourgeois parties, the former with the PRI and the latter with the PAN.

Last summer, the SNTMMSRM struck El Coronel for two months, in a struggle that included vandalism and clashes between *napistas* and CROC members, before gaining an August 14 agreement with management that SNTMMSRM would represent the mineworkers. CROC continues to claim the right to the contract, however.

SNTMMSRM workers demanded that the mine owners recognize their rights before the Labor and Social Security Secretariat (STPS) regarding the contract, and they requested a count of the total number of workers in order to have the majority required to qualify to represent the workers.

On December 5, a group of SNTMMSRM workers struck and occupied El Coronel's facilities, halting production. At least four people were injured during a confrontation between *napistas* and some private security guards. *El Financiero* reported that according to a government official, "at least 400 people participated in the confrontation that occurred in the interior of the mine installations.... The official determined that the state forces of order did not intervene in the conflict due to the fact that they happened in the interior of the installations."

Strike by Illinois county workers ends

About 1,000 workers for Will County, Illinois, voted to end their 16-day strike December 5 after voting by a 96 percent margin to accept a new agreement that boosts pay but increases health care costs. Workers strongly opposed the county's "last, best and final offer" last month that imposes greater health care costs on workers that will result in doubled insurance payments in some cases.

Will County officials indicate they would not budge on the new health care costs that will be shouldered by the workers. In an effort to overcome rank-and-file resistance, however, county and union negotiators agreed to change the salary schedule by shifting workers

ahead by two steps on the pay schedule.

Each pay step increases wages by 2.5 percent. When combined with a 4.5 percent cost-of-living increase, workers are given the impression of a 14.5 percent pay increase by the end of 2016. These increases will be undermined by the new burden of higher health care costs.

Canada

Home care strikes in Ontario

Personal Support Workers (PSWs) and other home care workers across the province of Ontario will either be on strike or preparing to strike this week in contract disputes within different unions and bargaining units.

Up to 35 PSWs with the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) in Owen Sound near Georgian Bay, Ontario, will be on strike this week, and another 4,500 PSWs across the province could be off the job at any time after rejecting a contract offered to their union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

PSWs at the VON are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and, although low wages are a province-wide problem, are fighting for pay that is comparable to other districts in the province that get as much as \$5 an hour more. In addition to wages, a central issue is travel and fuel costs that workers are often not paid for.

In a related dispute, 140 workers with Red Cross Partners in the Quinte area east of Toronto are poised to go on strike before Christmas after working without a contract since April.

Workers locked out in Prince Edward Island

Workers in the town of Kensington, in central Prince Edward Island, were locked out last week after their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), turned down the latest contract offer.

Their last contract expired in April of this year, but negotiations went through months of conciliation and arbitration. Last week, workers voted against an offer that contained wage increases of 7.5 percent over three years, and the town promptly issued the lockout notice. Workers affected, who include technicians and public works employees, were taken by surprise because contract talks were ongoing and it is less than three weeks before Christmas.



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