Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 December 2013

Latin America

Puerto Rican teachers continue protests over pension and education reform legislation

Last week, teachers in Puerto Rico maintained protest actions against a series of education reform measures promoted by the island territory's governor and most lawmakers. Among the changes advocated by Gov. Alejandro García Padilla are conversion of the current defined benefit pension plan to a defined contribution plan, increases in teacher contributions, raising the retirement age and the elimination of some "special laws" bonuses for current and future retirees.

The legislation would also open the door for privatization of the pension system. A teachersolidarity.com report, citing the FMPR teachers union, notes, "The privatization moves could see teachers' pensions being cut by as much as 50 percent, which will leave many retired teachers destitute."

The legislation is part of efforts to make the teachers and other workers bear the brunt of Puerto Rico's economic crisis. As caribbeanbusinesspr.com reported on December 24: "García Padilla already has taken other measures to appease Wall Street credit ratings agencies, including reforming the main public pension system for other types of government workers, as his administration scrambles to head off a downgrade of Puerto Rico's general obligation bonds to junk level."

For its part, the FMPR has proposed some piecemeal measures—such as increased taxes on foreign corporations and claiming funds from the lottery system—that would do little to alleviate budget shortfalls.

Teachers' protest actions, including limited strikes, demonstrations outside the Senate and disruption of legislative sessions, fell on deaf ears. The lower house passed the law on December 21, with the Senate approving the reforms two days later as protesters demonstrated outside.

The legislation has now gone to the governor for his signature. Teachers will decide this week upon whether to take strike action starting January 9.

Three-day strike by Venezuelan aluminum workers over salaries, benefits

Workers at state-owned aluminum plant CVG Venalum, in eastern Venezuela's Guayana region, carried out a 72-hour strike beginning December 23. The workers, members of the Sutralum union, struck to demand the correct calculation and application of wages and bonuses as agreed upon in the contract that was approved last October 1.

Sutralum representatives met with Venalum's president during the strike, and at the end of the three days the parties had reached an agreement. The company promised to pay retroactive wages owed in accordance with the contract and not to retaliate against the striking workers.

Among the other issues addressed and agreed upon were "housing, overtime, night shift bonus, rest periods, holidays and days off worked, savings bank and vacations," as reported by entornointeligente.com.

Argentine lifeguards strike over working conditions

Lifeguards in Rosario, a city on the western coast of the Paraná River in Argentina's Santa Fe province, struck for two days at three beaches beginning December 24. Residents of the city, the third most populous (1,200,000) in the nation, flock to the shores of the Paraná during the hot summer months, and the lifeguards complain of being stretched too thin.

Gustavo Nanis, secretary general of the Rosario Lifeguards Union, told lacapital.com.ar that lifeguards have asked for more personnel for the last eight years without any help. "Yesterday we presented ourselves at the Labor Ministry and we requested obligatory conciliation. We didn't get a response and the strike continues."

Nanis added, "The beach measure 900 meters (nearly 3,000 feet) by 100 (over 300 feet) wide… When La Florida riverside resort has 5,000 people, we have double or triple from the public sector. We have a lot of circulation of people along the beach."

The strike was not called at other beaches, but a union spokesman said that, if their demands were not addressed, the lifeguards would strike at all sites from December 31 through January 2.

Argentine municipal workers strike for end-of-year bonus

Municipal workers in the Argentine city of Mercedes struck on December 26 to demand the rest of the payment of their end-of-year bonus, known as an aguinaldo in Argentina and some other Latin American countries. The municipal workers, members of the ATE state employees union, had only received half of the payment.

The strike did not constitute a complete stoppage, with some city services being partially retained. A mobilization had been planned in front of the Banco de Corrientes, the bank that processes and disburses checks to city workers. However, on the morning of December 27, Victor Cemborain, the city's mayor, announced that beginning December 28, the bank would make the funds available to the workers. Based on that promise, ATE called its members back to work.

The United States

Overwhelming strike vote at Chicago university

Faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) voted by more than a 95 percent margin to strike if negotiations between the administration and the Illinois Federation of Teachers fail to produce an agreement. After 15 months of negotiations, there is no resolution to the demands of faculty members over wages and other issues.

Some 80 percent of both tenured and non-tenured faculty took part in the strike authorization. Non-tenured faculty are seeking to increase yearly salary from $30,000 to $45,000 and is seeking overall wage increases equal to the 4.5 and 4.75 percent increases secured by the faculty at the University's Urbana-Champaign campus. Instead, UIC negotiators are only offering a 2.5 percent wage increase.

The union at UIC was first established in 2011 and is seeking its first labor agreement.

Canada

Ontario home care strike ends

A two-week strike by 4,500 Ontario health care workers came to end on Christmas Eve when the union announced that they had agreed to third party interest arbitration. Sharlene Stewart, president of the Health Care division of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) hailed the agreement to end the strike without the resolution of a single issue as a "first step" towards declaring the bargaining unit an "essential service." In effect, by agitating for an essential service designation, the union bureaucracy has taken the lead in a process to curtail their own members' democratic right to strike.

The strikers, personal support workers, who travel to the homes of sick and elderly patients to provide rehabilitative services, overwhelmingly rejected a tentative agreement that had been placed before them earlier this month by the union and their employer, represented by Red Cross Care Partners.

The workers had not received a wage increase for five years and were seeking a wage hike and increases to gas mileage compensation and vehicle maintenance fees that had forced them to partly finance their own on-the-job travel. The workers, many of them part-time, currently earn between $13.64 and $15 per hour, well below the $19 per hour earned by workers providing similar services in the province's long term care facilities.

The employer, Red Cross Care Partners, is the largest home care agency in the province. Fully half of its yearly funding from the province goes to company profits, executive salaries and administration costs.

A January 3 date has been set for the beginning of the arbitration process.