

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 March 2014

Latin America

Argentine street sweepers and trash collectors strike over salary impasse

Street sweepers and trash collectors in Corrientes, capital of northeast Argentina's province of the same name, struck February 27 following salary talks with the mayor, Fabián Ríos. The workers rejected an offer of 30 percent in installments for the current financial year.

A representative of the workers told reporters that the only change to Ríos's previous 30 percent raise offer was to pay it in three installments instead of four. "We already earn very little and with this increase we're going to arrive at the end of the year and we're going to be in the same state," Eduardo Portillo said. He pointed out that the inflationary process would cancel out any gains.

One-day strike by Argentine hospital workers over unanswered demands

On February 24 members of the Public Health Syndicate (SSP) in Argentina's Buenos Aires province struck for 24 hours. Participation in the stoppage was nearly universal, with only security staff maintaining their positions.

The SSP called the action to pressure the provincial governor and Justicialist Party president Daniel Scioli to address a number of demands that he has so far ignored. The main issues are: delays in convening salary talks that had been scheduled for January; the failure to act on a decree regarding the unhealthy state of hospitals; shortages of supplies; and the acute state of insecurity and danger in hospital wards.

SSP secretary general Miguel Angel Zubieta told reporters, "if the police got it in time, we want the same, not in installments paid who knows when." Last December, police struck for higher pay. Following looting, injuries and at least three deaths, police demands were met. The reference to installments is a rejection of frequent government offers of

partial payments over months or even years, in a nation notorious for its inflation rate.

Brazilian postal workers continue strike over health plan change

Following a conciliation hearing February 24 at Brazil's Superior Labor Court, workers for the state-owned postal operator Brazil Post remain on a strike they began at the end of January. The hearing had been requested by Deputy Attorney General of Labor José da Silva Neto.

Neto told the postal workers federation, Fentect, that it should return to work while the courts decide the matter. So far, Fentect has refused to call the workers back to the job in the 13 states where the strike is in effect. Brazil Post has brought in workers from other areas to deal with the backlog.

The cause of the strike is the transfer of the postal workers' health care system to a privately run agency called Postal Saúde. Fentect claims the transfer will mean new fees for workers.

Costa Rican public workers protest minuscule salary increase

Costa Rica's capital San José was the scene of a march February 25 by public workers protesting the government's recent imposition of a 0.43 percent wage increase. The public sector unions had called for 3.62 percent.

Participation was estimated at between 4,000 (police) and 7,000 (unions). Since teachers made up a significant contingent of the protest, classes were canceled at most schools. Another major group consisted of workers for the Costa Rican Electricity Institute.

The march began in the central Parque La Merced and proceeded down Avenida Segunda, with marchers carrying signs and chanting denunciations of the increase, which they called "starvation wages" and "a joke." It ended at the Finance Ministry building, where union leaders denounced the outgoing

administration of president Laura Chinchilla and claimed to be “sending a message” to the two runoff candidates from the February 2 presidential elections. Second-round elections are scheduled for April 6.

Jamaican tanker truck drivers set to strike over unfulfilled agreement

The patience of tanker truck drivers in Jamaica is wearing thin a month after they struck for two days for wage and benefit raises. The strike was called off on January 29 when the drivers’ union, the National Workers’ Union (NWU), signed an agreement with the Petroleum Haulage Contractors Association (PHCA). The PHCA agreed to increase their wages and fringe benefits retroactive to January 1.

So far, the increases have not come through for most of the drivers. The PHCA claims that it is unable to pay the drivers because petroleum marketing companies have not honored their end of the deal. The NWU, according to one of its delegates, has been “having constant dialogue with them [PHCA], but I don’t know how long the drivers can keep out for.”

Rather than call another strike, the NWU has continued “informal talks” with the PHCA. NWU president Vincent Morrison “is urging the Ministry of Energy to arrange talks between haulage contractors and petroleum marketing companies,” according to an rjrnews.com report.

United States

Strike at Illinois food-processing plant ends

The strike at the Bay Valley Foods plant in Dixon, Illinois ended February 27 after workers voted by a 2-1 margin to end their strike over benefits and attendance policy. Earlier last week, Teamsters Local 722, which represents the 112 striking workers, said pension and benefit issues had been resolved.

Nevertheless, workers held out over the stubborn refusal of management to grant language that would allow them to use a doctor’s note in order to obtain an excused absence from work. The union said that a compromise on the attendance policy finally led to a settlement, but no details were given.

Workers went on strike February 6 after working without a contract since December 28. Big Valley Foods, based in Green Bay, Wisconsin, has plants in at least five states. At one point in the latter part of the strike the Teamsters were compelled to discuss sending pickets to the company’s other locations to shut down production.

Canada

Truckers strike in Vancouver

Over 1,400 nonunionized truck drivers went on strike last week and may be joined by up to 1,200 more unionized truckers this week who voted unanimously to go on strike at Canada’s busiest port in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The unionized drivers are represented by the newly formed union giant Unifor and both groups are members of the United Truckers Association (UTA). UTA has been in negotiations for months with Port Metro Vancouver to reduce increasingly long wait times that have resulted from a jump in trade between Asia and Canada in recent years.

Drivers with Unifor-Vancouver Container Truckers’ Association (VCTA) have been working without a contract since June of 2012 and union negotiators are fighting to increase pay and standardize rates to discourage undercutting.

Nova Scotia government outlaws support workers strike

A strike by 440 Northwood Home support workers in Halifax, Nova Scotia was ended after only one day when the provincial Liberal government extended the legislative sitting into the weekend to pass essential service legislation, effectively making the strike illegal.

The new law, which will require many workers to remain on the job during a strike, also affects another 1,200 personal support workers across the province, who were set to strike later this month. Along with workers at Northwood they are represented by the Nova Scotia Government Employees Union (NSGEU) and have been fighting for wage parity with workers in hospitals who do comparable duties but who are paid considerably more.



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