

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 April 2014

Latin America

General strike in Paraguay over privatization law and wages

Workers throughout Paraguay held a general strike on March 26, paralyzing traffic and shutting schools and businesses in the capital Asunción, Concepción, Ciudad del Este and other cities. The strike was called by a coalition of union federations as well as peasant, student and neighborhood organizations.

The first general strike in Paraguay in two decades, it dovetailed with a march of thousands of campesinos to Asunción to demand land reform.

The two major demands of the strike were a 25 percent wage raise and derogation of the Public-Private Alliance Law, a privatization scheme instituted by the government of Horacio Cartes to attract foreign investment. The range of other demands included price controls on the family food bill; no rise in fares for public transportation; protection of the right to organize and exercise labor rights, against the neoliberal model and for an economic model of inclusive development; end of the persecution and criminalization of social struggle movements; and agrarian reform.

Another demand was the release of campesinos imprisoned as a result of a 2012 confrontation between police and landless campesinos who had occupied farmland owned by a wealthy senator. In the ensuing battle—which pitted 150 farmers against more than 300 police and special forces—11 farmers and 6 police died.

The incident provided an opportunity for the impeachment and removal of the president, Fernando Lugo, whose reformist policies were considered by the conservative Colorado party-dominated Senate as too “left.”

Hoping to head off the general strike, the government decreed a 10 percent raise to the minimum wage in February, but only for the private sector. The minimum monthly wage went from 1,658,232 guaraníes (US\$373.37) to 1,824,055 (US\$410.70).

Interior Minister Francisco José de Vargas claimed to have information that the strike would be marked by violence. The government also threatened to declare the strike illegal and to dock the pay of workers who participated in the strike.

Union sources claimed 90 percent adherence to the strike. Victor Ferreira, secretary general of the Workers Unitary Central-Authentic (CUT-A), told reporters that if Cartes did not respond to their demands, the unions would call another general strike...in four months.

24-hour strike by Argentine hospital workers over salaries, firings

Doctors and other medical professionals at the Ricardo Gutiérrez children’s hospital in Buenos Aires walked off the job for a day on March 25 and blocked traffic at a nearby intersection.

The medical workers, members of the Health Professionals Association, held the strike and blockade to protest the attacks on the public health system and to press their salary demands. The city government has dismissed more than 1,500 health professionals from hospital programs since last November, “something that deepens the shrinkage of the sanitary system in the city,” a union spokesperson told reporters.

The sackings and program cuts stem from the passage last October of Resolution 1657, which eliminated various programs from public hospitals. A judge ruled against the law in January, saying that it “puts the health of the citizens at risk.” Nonetheless, the city government has not reinstituted the programs.

The medical workers are also demanding the return of a 15 percent salary cut—imposed in 2011 and over which they have struck 18 times—and a raise.

Mexican professors strike against salary offer, contract violations

On March 25, members of the SPUM professors’ syndicate and the SUEUM employees’ union at the University of Michoacán at San Nicolás de Hidalgo (UMSNH) voted in assembly to strike against the rectory’s salary offer. The unions have been negotiating with the rectory, but the administration’s refusal to budge from its offer of salary and benefit raises of 3.5 percent and 1.2 percent was voted down by the members.

Among the violations of the contract on which the rectory has dragged its feet are failure to promote professors and to convert interim professors to full professor status. For nonteaching personnel, the issues of seniority, promotions, retirement and pensions are the main bones of contention. In addition, the administration has only partially complied with the paying of overdue wages.

Antiguan bus drivers end strike under threats from management

School bus drivers for the Antigua and Barbuda Transport Board began a sit-in on March 17 to press for the removal of their operations manager, Anderson Carty. According to an *Antigua Observer* report, “The workers accuse Carty of continually using insulting and threatening language, habitually insisting that drivers carry more passengers than they are licensed to and refuses to authorize overtime

pay.”

On March 19, the drivers returned to work under the assurance of Transport Board management and the Antigua & Barbuda Workers Union that the issues would be addressed by March 24. The date came and went without any resolution, so the sit-in resumed.

Instead, the deputy general manager of the Transport Board, Hudson Joseph, signed a letter stating that if the workers did not return to work, management would have “no other choice than to conclude that you are no longer interested in continuing to work for the Corporation and therefore will review your ongoing employment thereafter.”

Two years ago, a similar industrial action had resulted in firings of some strikers and pressure on others to quit. Regarding this most recent turn of events, Transport Board General Manager Harry Josiah told reporters, “The Antigua Workers’ Union addressed us on matters affecting workers and we have responded to the union.”

Barbadian auto workers strike to demand payment of overdue wages

On March 25, about 140 workers at United Commercial Autoworks Ltd. (UCAL) in Bridgetown, Barbados, went on strike to demand the payment of their wages and salaries.

UCAL, which has been chronically late with the payments for months, blames the Transport Board, which forwards the money to UCAL. The Transport Board reportedly owes UCAL some \$18.4 million (US\$9.2 million) for maintenance, repairs and wages.

Richard Newton, a UCAL worker, told *Barbados Today* that some UCAL workers had gone to the Barbados Workers Union (BWU) headquarters to request that the union intervene. The BWU is headed by Sir Roy Trotman. On March 6, when asked about the persistent payment problems, Trotman, who is also chairman of the UCAL board, told the *Daily Nation* that he was unaware of the problem and “would have to investigate.”

“We are very disappointed, not only in the union, but also Sir Roy,” said Newton. “Sir Roy is general secretary so he know[s] what going on. He should be here first thing this morning to meet the workers unless he want[s] to continue with the work stoppage and that is why he ain’t coming. He should be here this morning to show us support.”

Another worker said, “We are totally frustrated by that. If nothing happens today we are going to take it another step further.”

Eventually, Dwayne Paul, a BWU deputy general secretary, held a meeting with workers on March 27. However, as Newton told reporters, “Very little was achieved at the 30-minute meeting. We are still off the job. Paul told us the union will try to have the wages and salaries paid. However, he said we may have to wait until the beginning of the new financial year in April before we get paid. He also said that there was very little he could do about the millions of dollars owed UCAL by the Transport Board.”

On March 28, Trotman, claiming to have gotten a commitment from the Transport Board chairman “that the master check to cover the wages would be forthcoming,” held a meeting with workers and told them to return to work, which they reluctantly did. The *Nation News* quoted one delegate as saying that if they did not get their wages by next Wednesday (April 2), “they will be downing tools again and “things will happen more serious.”

United States

No resolution despite concessions by Vermont bus drivers’ union

A 17-hour bargaining session failed to resolve the two-week strike by 70 Chittenden County transportation workers despite concessions by the workers’ union. Teamsters Local 597 caved in to Chittenden County Transportation Authority’s (CCTA’s) demand to hire an unlimited number of part-time workers.

But management objected to the union’s new request to allow split shifts for drivers to be spread across 12.5 hours instead of the earlier concession to give management a spread of 13.5 hours. No new negotiations have been scheduled as the strike enters its third week.

Besides providing transportation to 9,700 commuters, the strike has affected 2,400 students—about 60 percent of Burlington school students. A considerable number of students took the side of drivers, submitting petitions denouncing management’s attack on the drivers.

Canada

Nova Scotia nurses set to strike

A total of 2,400 nurses employed at Capital Health hospitals, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, will be in a legal strike position April 3, but have threatened to walk out before then if the provincial Liberal government introduces legislation declaring them an essential service.

The nurses affected are represented by the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU/NUPGE). The union is under pressure from its membership, who have threatened a wildcat strike to challenge legislation that would make a strike illegal. The central issue for nurses is severe understaffing, which they say is making it impossible for them to provide safe care for patients.

Mediated talks broke down a week ago amid union reports that there was no progress on the issue of nurse-to-patient ratios. The provincial government has rejected a union proposal for binding arbitration, instead threatening to introduce essential service legislation this week when the legislature resumes, a move that would bypass a negotiated settlement.



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