

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 April 2014

Latin America

Brazilian protesters demand labor reforms

Thousands of demonstrators marched through Sao Paulo on April 9 to demand changes to Brazil's labor laws. Among the demands were the reduction of the workweek to 40 hours, improvements in public education, more investment in education and health care and control of inflation.

Estimates of the number of protesters ranged from 9,000 to 40,000. The Workers Central (CUT) and several other union organizations participated in the march, which they characterized as a means of putting pressure on lawmakers. The Landless Peasants Movement also participated, demanding land reform.

Guyana: Sugar workers protest plan to defund industry

Hundreds of workers in Guyana's sugar industry converged on the Parliament in the capital Georgetown April 11 to denounce a proposal to cut a GY\$6 billion (US\$29.6 million) subvention for the state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation, or GuySuCo. Opposition coalition A Partnership for National Unity (APNU) MPs had earlier threatened to cut the subsidy.

APNU backed off from its threat on April 9 during a parliamentary session in which ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP) officials answered questions about the troubled enterprise's "turnaround" plan after three years of failing to meet production targets. About 100 sugar workers had gathered that day to protest planned cuts. Despite the APNU decision to back off from its threat, protesters came out in force on the 11th.

The protesters were vocal in denouncing the APNU threat, according to caribseek.com, "stating that closure of the sugar industry could see tens of thousands of people being directly and indirectly without a source of revenue and daily livelihood."

Panamanian teachers hold one-day strike over salaries, conditions, privatization

Sixteen teachers' unions held a 24-hour strike throughout Panama on April 11 to demand improvements in salaries and labor conditions. A particular concern of the action was the imposition of a raise that would be conditional on evaluations.

Other issues over which the teachers have been fighting the Education Ministry include privatization plans, infrastructure improvements and labor rights.

The unions claimed that the strike was a success, with 95 percent of schools closed. The unions met on the 12th to decide on future actions.

Dominican air traffic controllers protest firings

On April 9, members of the Dominican Air Traffic Controllers Association (ADCA) demonstrated in front of the National Palace in Santo Domingo to protest the recent sackings of 12 of their colleagues and plans by the government to fire another 48. The action, which included a petition to president Danilo Medina to stop the firings, was joined by members of the National Dominican Workers Confederation (CNTD).

ADCA president Wellinthon Almonte claimed the firings were a reprisal by the Dominican Civil Aviation Institute (IDAC) for ADCA's exposure of the difficulties experienced by air traffic controllers, which an ADCA statement denounced as "the unbearable labor environment that they live under." Almonte also pointed out that the average salary of a Dominican air traffic controller is US\$2,000 a month, while the regional average is around US\$7,000.

The ADCA had called a strike for April 7, but only around 80 of the 192 air traffic controllers complied with the call, avoiding a complete shutdown of operations. Almonte told reporters that the workers stayed on the job "owing to pressure and the threat of cancellations." The ADCA announced that there would be more strikes and protests at airports around the country beginning April 14.

Puerto Rican Supreme Court strikes down parts of pension overhaul law

Puerto Rico's Supreme Court struck down a significant portion of a recently passed teacher pension overhaul on April 11. The overhaul was promoted by governor Alejandro García Padilla and passed by the legislature late last year amidst widespread teacher protests and strikes.

The pension overhaul, Law 160, has been but one of several means of offloading the island territory's fiscal crisis onto working people. (See: "Puerto Rico's pensions in the crosshairs")

It would raise the retirement age and increase teachers' contributions while shrinking the pension by around 50 percent. The Teachers Association and other groups challenged the overhaul's constitutionality.

The five-judge majority ruling—with three dissents and one recusal—states: "We find the law unconstitutional in the

measure that it substantially diminishes and in an unreasonable form the contractual rights of the petitioners in terms of their retirement plan.”

“However,” according to an EFE report, “the court upheld parts of the law that eliminated additional benefits granted to teachers through special laws that became part of their pension package, such as summer and Christmas bonuses, and contributions for medicines and health plans. It also ruled that the Law 160 could apply to new teachers entering the system after passage of the law.”

Predictably, government and financial officials denounced the ruling. A joint statement by the Government Development Bank for Puerto Rico and the treasury said, “We remain committed to tackling the pension liabilities of the loss-making Teacher Retirement System with a view to protecting our retirees and ensuring the fiscal stability” of Puerto Rico’s economy. In other words, attacks on teachers’ and other workers’ living standards will continue.

Antiguan public hospital workers strike for overdue risk pay

On April 8, about 50 workers at the Mount Saint John’s Medical Centre (MSJMC) in St. John’s, Antigua walked off the job to protest management’s nonpayment of risk allowances dating as far back as 2010. The workers, members of the Public Service Association (PSA), are part of about 100 radiology, laboratory, dialysis, sterilizing unit, orthopedic technicians, laundry, nursing, orderlies, maintenance and engineering employees.

This was the second industrial action over the issue. On April 1, workers struck after failed efforts to get management to hold talks with them. Management had promised to provide a list of payees, but instead sent out an email after their shift had ended saying that the list was not ready.

Barbadian sugar cane workers strike to demand negotiation over sackings

Some 160 workers at the Portvale, St. James sugar factory, the only one now operating in Barbados, struck April 10, putting a stop to the island’s sugar harvest. The Barbados Workers’ Union (BWU) is calling on management to return to negotiations over the terms of the redundancy of 57 workers at another factory, which permanently shut down operations April 4.

On April 7, talks between the BWU and the Barbados Agricultural Management Company (BAMC) broke down when the parties could not come to agreement on severance pay and other issues. Another meeting April 12 failed as well.

The BWU has put its members working at the Bridgetown Port on standby, in case they are called to walk out in solidarity with the sugar factory workers. After the breakdown of the second set of talks, Minister of Labour Senator Dr. Esther Byer Suckoo was called in to mediate at a new set of meetings beginning April 14.

The United States

Baltimore hospital workers conclude three-day strike over wages

The 2,000 workers at Johns Hopkins hospital in Baltimore, Maryland returned to work April 11 after concluding a three-day strike aimed at pressuring the hospital to raise wages. Members of Service Employees International Union Local 1199, representing cooks, housekeepers and surgical technicians voted by more than 90 percent to reject hospital management’s last, best and final offer.

Under the old agreement, some of the workers make as little as \$10.71 an hour. Johns Hopkins offered a five-year contract with annual raises that do not rise above 2 percent on the new minimum. Workers are demanding a \$15 minimum wage for workers with 15 years or more while other workers would be brought up to at least \$14 an hour.

Johns Hopkins management is defending their miserly wage proposals. It claims a new plan adopted by the state eliminates the old reimbursement system whereby hospitals were paid based on the number of patients they admit. Instead, the plan requires more treatment in urgent care centers, clinics and other smaller facilities. Johns Hopkins and other hospitals are claiming they are unable to anticipate how the new system will affect revenues.

Canada

Saskatchewan transit workers look to strike

415 transit workers in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan voted overwhelmingly for strike action last week after the city rejected the union’s latest contract offer that was made in February.

Members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the public transit workers have been working without a contract since the end of 2012. With wages at the center of the dispute, union leaders say they are not trying to win wage gains to put them at the top of the industry scale but only in the middle. Currently, Saskatoon transit workers are among the lowest paid in Western Canada.

Negotiations are ongoing and a bargaining date has been set for later in the month, but workers could go on strike before then with 48 hours notice.



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