

Workers Struggles: The Americas

22 April 2014

Latin America

Argentine water workers strike for unpaid wages

Workers at the Potable Water and Other Services Cooperative (Cooposer) in the Argentine city of Fray Luis Beltrán struck on April 15 to demand payment of their wages for March. The strike is not complete, with minimum duties being performed, but not collections.

The striking water workers have requested an audience with the Labor Ministry because not only have they not received their pay, but Cooposer has not paid into benefits and risk insurance.

Another issue is shortages of supplies, specifically sulfates for treating the water. A delegate of the workers told reporters that “the supply could only be guaranteed for yesterday, but for today we don’t know.”

The cooperative has been the target of complaints in the neighborhood due to poor service and obsolete equipment, the result of lack of investment. On January 9, the current manager proposed municipalizing the provision of potable water, but the proposal has not been decided upon yet.

Uruguayan bus drivers strike over latest robbery and assault

Following an April 14 robbery and attack on a bus driver in the Tres Ombúes district in southern Montevideo, Uruguay, drivers for the East Micro Omnibus Corporation (COME) struck April 15 from noon to midnight.

Tres Ombúes is an area with impoverished barrios, where inhabitants cope daily with shantytown housing, unpaved roads, lack of services and inadequate educational facilities, as well as burglaries, robberies and violence.

Attacks and robberies against bus and taxi drivers in Tres Ombúes and other barrios that surround central Montevideo are common. Unott (National Transport Workers Union) president Claudio Vera noted that the crime took place in the middle of the day, before police have a presence along the route.

A young man with a knife boarded the bus and demanded money. In the scuffle that ensued, the driver was slashed on the cheek and the arm. The man then took some money and ran. The driver was taken to the hospital.

Adherence to the strike call was 100 percent, according to Vera. Unott has requested a meeting with the interior minister.

Guyanese sugar workers end strike for pay

On April 14, 137 workers for the state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation, or GuySuCo, returned to work after walking out on April 9. The workers, members of the National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE), struck to demand pay in accordance with a collective labor agreement dating from July 2011. The union had warned GuySuCo beforehand that it would take the action if the company did not comply with the agreement.

The NAACIE had actually called the workers back for April 12, a Saturday, but GuySuCo demanded that all its estates not permit them to enter. Though it sent the workers back to their jobs, “NAACIE assured that their position is non-negotiable and they could take their action to the streets and will proceed to seek solidarity from other unions in the regional and international sphere,” according to the *Guyana Chronicle*.

Colombian union office firebombed

Early in the morning of April 16, the office of the Sintraemecali municipal workers union office in Cali, southeast Colombia, was firebombed. A night watchman testified that he saw four individuals throwing incendiary bombs at the office at about 2:25 a.m.

The bombing, which blew in the doors and burst water pipes, occurred five days after a court ruling in favor of Sintraemecali and two other unions. The court ordered the current Colombian president and vice-president to apologize for accusations made in 2007 by officials in the administration of right-wing president Álvaro Uribe against union members.

The accusations—that some union members had ties to Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, guerrillas—resulted in death threats against union officials from right-wing paramilitary groups. Since the Uribe family’s connections to death squads are well known, a denunciation by his administration could constitute a death warrant in a country with one of the worst records of paramilitary violence in the world, especially against union activists.

In 2012, one former Uribe administration official did retract the statements and apologize, as did another after the recent ruling. The labor minister has called for an investigation and protection for union members.

Salvadoran bus drivers strike over gang attacks on two colleagues

Bus drivers for a commuter route between San Salvador and Cuyultitán, a municipality about 12 miles from El Salvador’s capital, struck on April 15. The strike was called following beatings that two employees suffered at the hands of gang members demanding extortion payments.

Gang extortions, beatings and even murders have been a regular occurrence along some bus routes in El Salvador for several years. Bus drivers have struck before to demand security from the National Civil

Police, but the incidents continue.

Strike at Mexican university completes seventh week

A strike begun February 28 by the University of Sonora Workers and Employees Union (STEUS) in the Mexican city of Hermosillo continues without a resolution in sight. STEUS called the strike the day after a failed Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board hearing over the administration's noncompliance with clauses in the contract regarding job security, labor conditions, the granting of permanent positions for union members, recoupment for work materials and retirement.

Five other campuses of the university remain closed in addition to the one in Hermosillo. STEUS secretary general Modesto Torres Valerio told Notimex that in the last meeting with the administration, university officials made the same claims that they had made before, "that there was no kind of violation."

Another union, the University of Sonora Academics Union or STAUS, has voted for a strike April 30 to press for a salary revision.

Barbados: Sugar cane workers called back to work after eight-day strike

On April 18, striking workers at the Portvale Sugar Factory in St. James, Barbados were called back to work by Sir Roy Trotman, general secretary of the Barbados Workers' Union (BWU), following negotiations begun April 14 with the Barbados Agricultural Management Company (BAMC). The talks were mediated by Minister of Labour Dr. Esther Byer Suckoo and Chief Labour Officer Vincent Burnett.

The walkout was a protest against the BAMC's retrenchment of 57 employees from Andrews Sugar Factory in the middle of negotiations earlier this month. BWU also requested enhanced severance packages for those workers.

A joint press release did not specify if the workers would be hired anywhere else, or whether their redundancy payments would be increased. It stated, "After in-depth discussions, the minister is satisfied that there have been misunderstandings in the redundancy consultation process. The parties agreed to seek solutions to those unresolved issues. The parties further commit to completing those discussions by April 30, 2014." *Barbados Today* reported, "The minister, in the statement, thanked both sides for their demeanour and civility during the meetings which she chaired and expressed satisfaction that the parties were able to resolve the issue in the national interest."

One-day strike by Trinidadian port workers over pay increase

Daily-paid port workers at Port-of-Spain, Trinidad stopped work on April 16 to protest a 6 percent wage increase offer and to bring attention to unsafe working conditions. The dockworkers were called back to the job by the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union (SWWTU), because, as one senior member told *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, "You really can't have industrial action taking place when you are negotiating in good faith."

The "good faith" negotiations have been going on for 29 months

without an agreement, and the workers are growing more and more impatient, at times stopping work without union consent. SWWTU President General Michael Annisette stated on April 7 that he could not guarantee smooth operations at the port.

The 6 percent offer is a far cry from the 35 percent that the SWWTU had asked for, but Port management refuses to budge. Other issues of concern to the workers include defective and insufficient equipment. Workers also told *Newsday* that "certain areas of the facility, such as the shipping shore gantry, are in a dilapidated condition."

United States

Ohio auto parts workers strike for union recognition

Auto parts workers at the Piston Automotive plant in Toledo, Ohio held a one-day strike after management refused to recognize the UAW as the workers' representative after a majority of workers signed union authorization cards.

By the end of the day, Piston officials agreed to recognize the cards. Now a so-called neutral party will verify whether a majority exists and then give the company the option of recognizing the union. The work stoppage temporarily affected production at Chrysler's Toledo Jeep plant.

One worker told the *Toledo Blade* that workers are laboring 60 hours a week, the same as Jeep workers, but they receive lower pay and benefits. The UAW has carried on two months of what they call "fruitless" negotiations with the company.

Pennsylvania teachers strike

Teachers for the Danville Area School District in Montour County, Pennsylvania went on strike April 17 after the previous day's negotiations failed to produce an agreement. The issues that have created the biggest obstacle to a new contract are wages, health care and tuition reimbursement.

It is estimated the strike will last about five school days or until teachers are ordered back to work by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The district's 200 teachers have gone for nearly two years without a contract.

Northern California workers strike Caterpillar dealerships

Workers at seven Peterson CAT dealerships across Northern California walked out on strike April 4 after contract talks broke down. The International Operating Engineers Local 3, which represents the 240 technicians and mechanics, did not elaborate on the dispute except to say that several issues are in contention.

The union planned to limit the strike to four days, returning to work on April 22.

The old agreement expired at the end of September.



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