

Workers Struggles: the Americas

1 July 2014

Latin America

Argentine teachers reject pay offer, remain on strike over pay demands

Representatives of the Conadu Histórica national preuniversity and university professors' confederation met in San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina on June 27 and voted to reject the latest salary offer from the Education Ministry.

The strike began June 14 after a meeting with education minister Alberto Sileoni failed to reach agreement. Sileoni's offer of 28.15 percent in two installments, which would not keep pace with inflation, was called "shameful" by Conadu spokespeople.

Conadu adjunct secretary Claudia Baigorria told reporters that the offer "does not contain any clause for monitoring and leaves first-class aides with five years of seniority below the minimal salary guarantee that the government gave to CTERA" (another educators' union) of 4,400 pesos (US\$540). "We do not accept a salary agreement [in effect] until July of next year, so that this agony takes us until 2015."

The reps resolved to prolong their strike until July 3, when they will meet again. However, they said that upcoming first semester exams would take place.

Chilean teachers strike nationwide against education reforms, working conditions

Teachers, students and supporters across Chile struck and demonstrated June 25 to protest the direction of the education reform agenda of the administration of Socialist Party president Michelle Bachelet. The National Assembly of Teachers of Chile, which organized the protests, claimed that 150,000 protesters attended demonstrations, with 50,000 of them in the capital Santiago.

In Santiago, some clashes between police and demonstrators were reported, with the *Carabineros* national police using water hoses and tear gas against some protesters, some of whom were throwing rocks. Several protesters were arrested.

Bachelet ran on a program that included progressive reforms to the education system, a voucher-based model imposed by dictator Augusto Pinochet. Although the bills introduced so far would make some minor changes to tuition and entrance exam requirements, the system would still heavily favor the children of the wealthy elite, whose parents can afford to send them to pricey private schools, while public schools remain underfunded.

One student leader told fsm.org that in Bachelet's proposals, "one can see that there's not a real desire to make progress and to end the neoliberal education model: an education model that promotes individualism, that promotes the direct relationship between education and the market."

Teachers' protests revolved around base pay, working conditions, job security and retirement. Public school teachers are only paid for

class time and are uncompensated for lesson planning and other paperwork. Teachers also denounced the lack of job security and the inadequacy of pensions. One protester told reporters, "Many teachers want to finish at 65 but have to keep working because they cannot afford to retire." In addition, the Assembly called for the "establishment of a dialogue to discuss historical debt."

Colombian security workers end strike and blockade of mine

Shipments of coal from the Cerrejón open-pit mine in Colombia's far north region resumed on June 26 as contract security workers ended their week-long strike and blockade.

The security workers walked off the job and blockaded a 150-km (93 miles) stretch of railway upon hearing that their contract, which ends at the end of July, would not be extended. Shipments to Puerto Bolívar on Colombia's Caribbean coast were halted, and Cerrejón was considering declaring force majeure.

The protesting workers lifted the blockade after signing an accord with Cerrejón, which promised to seek a solution to the anticipated layoffs. About 80 percent of the 771 security workers are currently employed by private security firms.

Cerrejón is the property of a consortium comprised of BHP Billiton, Anglo American PLC and Glencore Xstrata. Due to attacks on the tracks by Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas, as well as social protests by inhabitants, private security firms are contracted to protect the rails.

Costa Rican municipal workers strike to demand payment of annuity

Municipal workers in Santa Ana, a city in San José Province, Costa Rica, began an indefinite strike June 26 following a confrontation between the ANEP public workers union and city council members the day before over annuity payments.

According to ANEP spokesperson Ligia Lacayo, the council and the union have met four times to put into effect the payment of an annuity approved four years ago, but without any explanation, discussions at the June 25 meeting were ended. "Five council members roundly refuse to open channels of negotiation with respect to an accord taken in 2010 and are trying to pass an annuity in this municipality of 2 to 4 percent," said Lacayo.

ANEP has accused the councilpersons, members of the Citizens Action Party and the Party of the Sun, of "closing the door to dialogue" and has called on the Labor Ministry to intervene.

Salvadoran bus drivers strike over extortion and death threats

Three separate routes in El Salvador's public transportation system were paralyzed June 26 when drivers and fare collectors struck. The drivers complained that they had received death threats from gangs demanding extortion payments the week before.

The suspension forced multitudes of passengers, who rely on public transportation to get to their jobs, schools and other destinations, to seek other means of travel. On Route 30, which runs between the Mejicanos suburb and the capital, 41 buses were out of circulation.

Police have beefed up security along Route 30, but the bus drivers refused to work nonetheless. The police have admitted that they cannot guarantee the employees' safety in all cases.

According to police reports, at least 31 bus drivers and fare collectors have been killed in various parts of the country, though police said that they could not confirm that all the deaths were the result of killings for extortion nonpayment.

Barbadian community college workers strike for payment of overdue wages

Workers at the Barbados Community College in the city of St. Michael struck June 26 to demand the payment of overdue wages. The striking workers assembled in the corridors of the college to demand answers to a problem that has been ongoing for over a year and a half.

The employees had been promised that deposits of their wages into their bank accounts would be made on June 24, a promise that was not kept.

The National Union of Public Workers had met with the administration numerous times and had been promised that the situation was supposed to have been rectified. The workers have decided that they will not return to work until they receive their overdue payments.

Two-day slowdown by Jamaican health workers over cuts to allowances

Doctors, nurses and ward assistants at the Cornwall Regional Hospital in Montego Bay, St. James, Jamaica scaled down their duties beginning June 25, slowing the delivery of services. The health workers carried out the action to protest the unilateral cutting of their call-in and emergency duty allowances.

Dr. Dane Miller, president of the Jamaica Medical Doctors Association, told *RJR News* that the cuts in the allowances—up to fifteen percent—had been done without any prior notice or consultation. Nurses and ward assistants claimed that their allowances had been slashed by 20 percent. Dr. Miller also complained about the deterioration of services at Cornwall due to the reduction in staff for on-call and emergency duties.

The health workers returned to the job on June 26 following a meeting with officials from the Western Regional Health Authority and the issuance of a written promise that the payments would be delivered on June 30. Representatives of the health workers were scheduled to meet with the health minister on that date to discuss the issues.

The United States

Workers strike Rhode Island concrete firm over reduction to part-time status

Teamsters at the concrete firm DiGregorio in Smithfield, Rhode Island went on strike June 25 after the company insisted on cutting full-time jobs to part-time. The 22 workers are opposed to a new agreement that could have them working as little as four hours a day as opposed to the guaranteed 8 hours under the current agreement.

Workers indicate they will remain out as long as it takes to defeat the measure. The Teamsters union filed a complaint with the labor board in Boston.

Office workers for pilots' union reject contract offer

Office workers for the Allied Pilots Association (APA) have voted

down a contract offer by the union bureaucracy. The labor group APSEA, which represents workers in the offices of the APA, complains that they have gone since 2011 without a wage increase.

The APSEA is not at this point considering strike action. They have requested new talks with the APA and the union has agreed. The APA represents pilots at American Airlines.

Canada

Car hits pickets in Toronto-area city workers strike

Two strikers were injured and required hospitalization last Friday after being struck by a car on the picket line of a strike by Durham Region inside workers east of Toronto that began June 19.

While police have downplayed the incident which took place in front of Durham Region Headquarters in full view of police and surveillance cameras, a spokesperson for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents the strikers, has said that this is the fourth time strikers have been hit on the picket line and this is by far the most serious.

These latest injuries follow the collapse of negotiations between CUPE and the Region the previous day. The main issues in dispute concern benefits and sick pay for paramedics who are required to work during the strike due to essential service provisions.

Unionized Wal-Mart closure deemed illegal by high court

Reversing a previous decision, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled last week that the closure of a Wal-Mart outlet following union certification in Jonquiere, Quebec north of Quebec City, was illegal and the company will now face an arbitrator's decision that will determine compensation for the 190 workers who lost their jobs.

The Wal-Mart in Jonquiere was the first to unionize in North America in 2004 and when first contract negotiations went to arbitration, the company shuttered the store citing financial problems. Employees were organized under the Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), which lost a court challenge in 2009 to have workers reinstated which it has now successfully appealed at the country's highest court.

The decision may not have wider implications for other Wal-Mart stores attempting to unionize since the ruling hinged on the timing of the closure relative to the certification bid. Wal-Mart has said it is considering its options.



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