

Workers Struggles: The Americas

25 November 2014

Latin America

Argentine trash collectors strike for additional workers

Trash collection came to a halt in the city of Buenos Aires and three of its neighborhoods on November 21 due to a strike by trash collectors. The action was taken by workers employed by the private contractor AESA, which has a contract with the city. Later, workers for another concession, Cliba, walked out in solidarity.

The trash collectors are affiliated with the Truckers Syndicate.

The union is currently in a dispute with the city, which is demanding more workers at concessions granted by the government to private businesses. Currently, about 5,000 workers are employed in trash collection and street cleaning. The city has already fined the enterprises for a number of infractions such as not completing routes, skipping some trash bins and sending out too few trucks and crews.

Chilean mine supervisors vote to strike

Supervisors at copper mines owned by London-based conglomerate Anglo American voted November 19 in favor of strike action to press their demands for increased pay and a productivity bonus. The supervisory employees' union claimed that 65 percent of the members voted in assembly on the 18th, and that 96 percent of them voted in favor of strike action.

The supervisors' vote took place following the firm's rejection of a petition with 20 demands, including a 5 percent annual raise, a productivity bonus—subject to meeting production targets—of about 500,000 pesos (US\$843) every two months, a year end bonus and allowances for their children's education from preschool through university. About 700 supervisors would be affected by the measures.

Management's response to the petition was to offer to leave everything the way it was. A union spokesman told reporters that the annual attrition rate for supervisors was about 50 percent. The union will submit a notice to the Labor Department, after which it will wait five days for a response before going ahead with the strike.

Chilean teachers strike, protest accord between union and government

Some 50,000 teachers across Chile reached their tenth day on strike November 21, a day on which they demonstrated for decent wages, a retirement bonus, secure tenure and other demands, which are known as the "short agenda" (agenda corta). Thousands of educators demonstrated in downtown Santiago, as well as in Iquique, Antofagasta, Valparaíso, Quilpué, Los Ángeles and other cities.

One protester's sign read, "Yo soy profesor, no pobresor," a play on the Spanish words for "professor" and "poor" (pobre).

A longstanding demand is addressing the "historic debt," dating back to the Pinochet years, when the US-supported dictator transferred the administration of schools to municipalities. According to a Terra report, "The measure drastically reduced the teachers' wages, which, added to the creation of a privatized pension system and the low pensions that it generates, shaped a pathetic labor panorama for the teachers."

In Santiago, teachers carried signs and chanted against the president of the Association of Professors (CP), Jaime Gajardo, who signed an agreement with the Education Department and called off the strike, a call that the teachers rejected. The teachers denounced Gajardo as a "traitor" and a "sellout," in addition to other epithets. CUT (Workers Central Federation) president Barbara Figueroa—who defended Gajardo—was subject to similar denunciations.

A group of teachers known as "the dissidents" are calling for Gajardo to step down. Gajardo dismissed the protests, claiming that there is "unity" in the CP: "For one moment it was in danger, but it has been retaken."

Peruvian copper miners' strike declared illegal

A strike by copper miners was declared illegal by the Peruvian government on November 20. Some 1,630 miners, members of the SUTRACOMASA mineworkers union, had walked out at the Antamina mine on November 10 to demand a bonus to counteract the decline in their incomes due to shrinking returns from a previously negotiated profit-sharing agreement.

According to Copper Investing News, "The government decree leaves the SUTRACOMASA union three days in which to appeal or send its workers back to work." Antamina said in a statement, "The company appeals to those who decided to be part of this industrial action to return to their jobs to avoid further damage to their salaries."

Antamina is located in the Peruvian highlands and accounts for about one-third of the nation's copper production. It is controlled by BHP Billiton Ltd and Glencore Xstrata.

The union called for a meeting of its members to decide whether to return or file an appeal, which would allow them to extend the stoppage for another week.

Peruvian health workers strike for three months' back pay

Public health workers, including doctors, nurses, dental surgeons, obstetricians, administrators and others in the Peruvian province of Chincheros began an indefinite strike November 20 to demand the payment of unpaid wages for the last three months.

Along with the issue of unpaid salaries, the strike is being held over shortages of supplies, the incompetence of the local health department, embezzlement of funds and lack of technical support.

A delegation of local government and union figures traveled to Abancay, where the regional government is headquartered, to discuss the problems.

Troops deployed to Dominican port in response to truckers' strike

On November 21, truckers struck the Dominican Republic's largest port, Haina Oriental, claiming that plants that process ac30, a petroleum-based asphalt cement used in pavement, are shutting them out of the asphalt transport business.

Members of the Carriers Association had met the week before with representatives of the plants, who promised to address their demands by November 19. When the truckers received no word, they decided to hold a wildcat strike, which involved about 82 trucks. Shortly after the strike began, troops arrived and militarized the area.

Union secretary Antonio de la Rosa told reporters, "What we're doing is a civic strike, without problems, and what they have is like a symbol of a war. I don't know why I see guards and police if we are doing things as they should be done."

The truckers continued their strike until about 6:00 p.m. The union is calling for further dialogue with the plant representatives.

Jamaican medical technologists strike for overdue allowances

Over 100 medical technologists at the Blood Bank and the National Public Health Laboratories in Kingston, Jamaica stopped work on November 17. The medical technologists, who conduct laboratory tests, gathered in front of the two offices to demand the payment of allowances owed to them since July.

The workers are represented by the Union of Technical Administrative and Supervisory Personnel (UTASP). The Ministry of Health scheduled a meeting with UTASP general secretary St. Patrice Ennis for the next day.

After the eleven-hour meeting, Ennis called the technologists back to work, conveying a ministry promise that they would be paid "all outstanding allowances ... no later than the end of this month." The workers resumed their jobs shortly before 10:00 p.m.

The United States

Fairpoint Communications workers rallied at the capitol in Montpelier, Vermont November 20 as their strike against unilaterally-imposed concessions enters its second month. The 1,700 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Communications Workers of America who maintain Fairpoint's telephone and Internet system in Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine are battling pension and health care cuts, the elimination of medical retiree benefits and the right of the company to hire contractors to replace workers.

Workers at the rally made clear their determination to continue the strike until the company rescinds the concessions. Sherry Willey, holding a sign that said, "Is my pension paying for your mansion?" told the *Mercer/Free Press*, "They're causing all decent, middle-class paying jobs to become low-labor jobs, low pay, to where no one can even make it and they're all doing it just for their greedy pockets and shame on that."

At the same time, the labor bureaucracy sought to channel discontent into the Democratic Party. Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin told strikers he had urged Fairpoint to reach an agreement with the union. During the recent strike by Vermont educators, Shumlin declared that teachers' strikes should be outlawed.

Canada

Ottawa recreation workers walk out

In a legal strike position for at least two months, 27 workers employed by the RA (Recreational Association) Centre in Ottawa, one of the country's largest not-for-profit recreational complexes, walked off the job last week after rejecting their employer's final offer.

The workers, who are represented by Unifor, include restaurant staff and arena employees who have been working without a contract since May. Their union has said they will only hold rotating strikes for now to allow for scheduled events. One bargaining unit that will be in a legal strike position by December, remains on the job.

The union, which accuses the employer of not bargaining in good faith, has said that they are fighting to prevent job losses at the Centre. No talks are currently scheduled and RA management has said that all programs will continue regardless of any strike action.



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