

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 December 2014

## Latin America

### Argentine chemical workers end 12-day strike over job cuts

Some 3,000 workers at chemical plants in Zárate and Campana, cities in northwest Buenos Aires province, returned to work December 24 following the suspension of a strike they had begun December 12. The workers had walked off their jobs to protest the announcement of planned layoffs by chemical supplier TFL.

Having been impacted by recent changes in the exchange rate, TFL had gone into a “crisis prevention process,” deciding to cut about 70 higher-paid employees from the workforce and import some products instead of producing them locally. The Chemical and Petrochemical Industry Personnel Syndicate of Zárate called an industry-wide strike that paralyzed production and shipping at close to 40 firms in the area, including Bayer, Agrofina, Dow and Monsanto.

The Labor Ministry stepped in to initiate negotiations that resulted in an agreement and the lifting of the strike at 1:00 am. Workers returned to their jobs at 5:00. “However,” reported *La Nación*, “the conflict between the union and the German dye enterprise TFL entered into a parenthesis, but is far from resolution.” The union is now committed to a 30-day negotiation interval, during which no job actions will take place.

### Uruguayan supermarket workers strike over deducted pay

Workers for Uruguayan supermarkets Disco, Devoto and Géant—all belonging to the Grand Casino supermarket chain—stopped work and blocked store entrances on December 24. The workers were protesting the deduction of half their pay for not coming to work on two national holidays, July 18 and August 25, Constitution Day and Independence Day, respectively. Since they are national holidays, the workers’ union (Uruguayan Commerce and Services Employees Federation, FUECYS) demands that the workers should not be

penalized for nonattendance.

The amount of the payment comes to 2,300 pesos, or US\$95. FUECYS cites the contract as allowing the workers to take the day off without repercussions. Following a union threat to strike and blockade stores, management said it would pay the full amount, but did not say when. Since then, workers have complained of “labor harassment, antiunion repression and arbitrary schedule changes,” as reported in *LaRed21*.

FUECYS and management representatives held a meeting on December 27, but did not reach an agreement. If the parties fail to reach an agreement, the union said that it would call another strike and blockade for the 31st. However, FUECYS head Ismael Fuentes told reporters that, “the measures that are taken will be lighter than those of last December 24, when a 24-hour strike was carried out.”

### Colombian hospital workers blockade highway to demand overdue wages

Workers for the ESE (State Social Organization) Local Hospital of Santa Catalina in Colombia’s northern Bolívar province blocked a major highway for several hours in the municipality December 26. The blockade, which included ex-employees and community members, was held to protest delays of up to ten months in the payment of their salaries.

A protesting worker told *El Universal*, “They owe the workers from four to ten months of wages; on December 24 they only paid 15 days of wages, which showed a lack of respect; neither have they paid social security. Last October 18, the Bolívar Health Secretariat closed the odontology section and so far has not reopened it. The patients don’t have bathrooms and they lack air conditioning in the emergency room.”

The protesters also demanded better services in nearby small towns and denounced the closings of several EPS (subsidized ‘health promoting entity’) facilities in the region. Patients now have no choice but to travel to get to other facilities. Protesters blamed the mayor’s office, which transferred some 100 EPS clients to another town. One protester said, “The result is that now many of them are not attended to because they seem blocked. Health care here is going to collapse.”

them. Official tournament play begins January 16.

### **Panama Canal construction workers strike over contract violations, safety concerns**

About 1,000 workers on the Panama Canal expansion project downed their tools December 24. Some workers blocked a bridge running over the canal to dramatize their demands over safety, maltreatment and contract violation issues.

The expansion project, begun in 2007, is contracted to a consortium of Spanish (FCC), Mexican (ICA) and Costa Rican (MECO) firms. Originally budgeted for \$5.25 billion and scheduled for completion in 2014, it has racked up over \$1.6 billion in cost overruns and has been entangled in lawsuits with subcontractors, disputes with the Panama Canal Authority (ACP), and strikes by construction workers. Its completion date has been pushed back to 2016.

There have been a number of job actions at the project, including a six-day strike last March and one for four days in July. This time, the UNTRAICS construction workers union accuses the FCC-ICA-MECO consortium of violations of the contract that was signed following the July strike.

One demand is enhanced safety for workers, three of whom suffered electric shocks recently when their foreman told them to work while it was raining. Another is the firing of foremen who workers accuse of mistreatment and arrogance. In one case a foreman came to blows with a worker that management wanted fired. The reinstatement of a fired union official is an additional demand.

In a letter to the ACP, the consortium claimed that it has strictly adhered to the terms of the contract and Panamanian labor law and that the firing was justified. Talks mediated by the Labor Ministry so far have failed. UNTRAICS announced that it would file a complaint with the International Labor Organization.

### **Strike by Honduran soccer team over delayed pay enters second week**

On December 20, the San Pedro Sula, Honduras soccer team Marathón struck to demand over three months' back wages. As of the 27th, the team remained on strike, refusing to show up at team headquarters to practice. The team's trainer joined the players in the action.

During that time, there were two preseason "friendly games" scheduled, but the players did not show up for either one. The players have said that they are open to negotiation, but they will not return to practice and play until they get the wages owed to

### **Jamaican government intervenes to end oil refinery strike**

Technicians for Jamaica's sole oil refinery, Petrojam, did not go to work on December 25 to protest hazardous working conditions. The no-show and de facto strike followed meetings between the Union of Clerical, Administrative and Supervisory Employees (UCASE), of which the Petrojam Workers Association is an affiliate, and Petrojam managers on December 22. Those and previous meetings with the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Labour have failed to bring any improvement in working conditions.

When the workers did not show up, Labour Minister Philip Paulwell immediately called for meetings between UCASE and Petrojam beginning December 27, and ordered the technicians back to work. UCASE president Vincent Morrison called the intervention "a welcome development," and expressed hope that "we will have a resolution in the interest of all parties." However, he also noted that the last investigation of Petrojam occurred "nearly ten years ago" and that its findings were not shared with the workers and their unions.

#### **Canada**

### **Historic mill closure hits Ontario town at Christmas**

After over a century of operation, the paper mill in Iroquois Falls in northern Ontario will be shut down for good over the holiday season, devastating the town of nearly 5,000.

The plant, which is owned by Resolute Forest Products, closed on December 22nd, cruel timing for the entire town, which relies almost entirely on jobs related to the mill. The workforce at the plant, which once numbered over 1,000, has dropped to 180, all of whom will lose their jobs.

All four unions in the plant are cooperating with the employer to carry out the job cuts. The company president, Richard Garneau, cites a slowdown in global demand as well as the interference of environmentalists, who have attacked the company for not abiding by sustainability requirements. The company is also cutting production at two other mills in Quebec.



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