

Workers Struggles: The Americas

24 February 2015

Latin America

Chilean doctors stop work to demand improved working conditions

Doctors in the Chilean coastal city of Viña del Mar announced an indefinite strike February 21 to push for improved working conditions. The doctors' union stated that their employer, the Viña del Mar Municipal Corporation, has not agreed to maintain incentives to stay and work in the community's public health centers.

A union communiqué claims that a large gap exists between fees paid for consultations in Viña del Mar and in other communities, causing a high turnover rate among the professionals, "more than 40 percent in some offices." Three months ago, the union had signed an agreement with the mayor's office, but the city has yet to fulfill its end of the agreement, according to the statement.

Emergency services remain in force, but other consultations have been postponed.

Strike by Argentine space station construction workers over labor conditions, union threats

Workers building a Chinese space station in western Argentina's Neuquén province downed their tools February 19 to demand better conditions and denounce threats made by the Construction Workers Union (Uocra). The workers are employed by Esuco, a subcontractor for the China Harbour Engineering Company, Ltd. (CHEC), and 230 of the workers in the project are members of Uocra.

About 100 of the workers showed up for their shifts and took their posts, but did not work, a tactic known as *huelga de brazos caídos* (hanging arms or "shrug" strike). Demands included compliance with the contract agreement of three days of work for one day of rest, recategorization of personnel, a higher percentage of local workers, 100 percent holiday pay, a change of the food vendor and no docking of pay or reprisals for industrial actions.

Workers denounced not receiving changes of work clothes in over four months, having to share shoes, lapses in safety and the provision of "two bathrooms for 80 people" in which there is often no water.

Another complaint dealt with threats made against workers by Uocra. A relative of one of the workers told *Cronista* that when the workers announced that they were going to strike, a union delegate came to the site "with thugs with knives to put the squeeze on the personnel because they didn't return to work and to warn them that in March they would bring in outsiders to work." In another instance, a man brandished a gun while threatening workers.

Uocra reps met with management and held an assembly with the

workers on February 20 over the talks. One delegate claimed that "over 90 percent of what we asked for is resolved" without elaborating. The company also agreed not to let the gun-toting thug onto the premises. The assembly voted to return to the job.

Brazilian auto workers strike over planned layoffs

Over 5,000 workers at a General Motors auto plant in São José dos Campos, 55 miles from São Paulo, Brazil, stopped work February 20 to protest planned layoffs of around 800 workers. The workers had been suspended in September, but had returned to work the week before. GM proposed to furlough the workers before laying them off in April.

In an assembly called by the metalworkers union, workers voted for an open-ended strike. GM, claiming that the strike is invalid because it was not announced beforehand, said that it "will take necessary legal measures." With the Brazilian auto industry still in a slump, factories throughout the São Paulo industrial region have cut staff by the thousands in the last two years.

According to union general secretary Luiz Carlos Prastes, GM had threatened to slash jobs if the workers did not accept layoffs. This was in spite of an agreement signed in August to retain staff levels until the second half of the year.

The strike follows a 10-day walkout last month at a Volkswagen plant in the São Paulo metropolitan area over the same issue. The company and the union eventually signed an agreement that retains the laid-off workers, but that "includes mechanisms for staff adjustment by means of voluntary retirement with financial incentives and by curtailing temporary hiring of subcontractors to use employees in those positions."

Colombian informal miners strike, protest for changes in mining code

On February 18, tens of thousands of workers in Colombia's informal mining sector stopped work and marched to protest the government's failure to address their demands. The protesters, who extract gold in the department of Antioquia, marched to six assembly points in the city of the same name.

The informal miners mostly extract gold and coal, and have protested several times over four key demands, as reported in *colombiareports.co*: "Submit to Congress a project to reform the Mining Code, the development of mining guides, environmental order to regulate the activity and the creation of special reserves for small miners."

The vice president of the National Confederation of Miners (Conalminercol), which called the action, told Caracol Radio, "We have signed three agreements with signatures of government ministers, but these are apparently useless as we are not included in the law. They treat us like criminals."

Informal mining in Colombia has a long history, and over two

million people directly or indirectly depend on it. In recent years, successive Colombian governments have attempted to destroy informal and “artisanal” mining in favor of large enterprises.

According to a report in *La Patria*, the government has carried out a two-pronged strategy: “following the demands of the World Bank, a mining, taxation and environmental policy favorable to transnational mining enterprises was designed and perfected, finally consecrated in the 2001 Mining Code; on the other hand, norms against small miners directed at imposing enormous obligations, hindering their formalization and denying them the right to work have been expedited.”

In fact, buyers and sellers of gold in Zaragoza, El Bagre, Nechí and Medellín in Antioquia, and Marmato in Caldas, have closed their doors to informal miners due to pressure by the government. Less than one percent of 3,600 formalization applications have been granted. As a result, mining communities “are beginning to endure a grave social crisis,” according to the report.

Conalminercol lifted the strike on February 20 after a seven-hour meeting with government officials, in which the government promised to “keep constructing tools that permit differentiation in mining and inclusion.”

Mexican university workers strike to demand social security payments

More than 3,000 workers at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas (UAZ), Mexico walked off the job February 18 to demand that the rector pay funds into the social security system. The workers, members of the university’s Academic Personnel Union (Spauaz), also demand that each department be subject to a diagnosis.

Spauaz secretary general José Crescenciano Sánchez told reporters that the problem was not the money, since the funds had been paid for January and February, but that “there is no signed and written agreement in which the rector commits itself to pay the social security in a calendared and punctual manner.” He asked the rector “to move closer to dialogue to find a solution; the time delayed will probably be the time the strike lasts.”

UAZ refused to comment on the strike, telling reporters that the rector, Armando Silva Chairez, was in Mexico City negotiating resources to permit him to cover a debt of 67 million pesos (US\$4,457,000) for social security payments for the teachers’ social security fund.

The United States

Northern New England telecom strike ends with concessions

The 1,800 telecommunications workers for FairPoint Communications in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont ratified a new three-year agreement bringing the longest strike of 2014 to a close. “We lost a lot,” said one worker at the conclusion of the 131-day strike that will see retiree health care benefits eliminated for current workers and work rules governing the contracting out of jobs “liberalized”, according to the company.

FairPoint CEO Paul Sunu was upbeat. “We are glad that the

unions have ratified these agreements … to rationalize its employee costs to position the company to compete…” With the announcement of the settlement, FairPoints stock rose 5.5 percent before Friday’s close of the market.

Wage increases will be a mere one percent in August of 2016 and two percent in August of 2017. The new agreement removes old contract language that restricted the company in carrying out layoffs. In addition, future benefit accruals to pensions will be cut by 50 percent.

The union claimed the company withdrew its two-tier pay scale proposal, but according to news reports new-hires will see the pay scale advancement drawn out. What seems to have pleased the bureaucracy of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Communications Workers of America was an agreement for a union-administered health plan. Peter McLaughlin of the IBEW declared that under union management it would cost the company less money.

Canada

Ontario government workers demonstrate

Hundreds of Ontario public sector workers gathered last week in front of the provincial legislature in Toronto to protest against the Liberal government’s demand that they accept a new four-year contract that provides for no wage increases.

If the Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne is successful in achieving a new austerity contract, the 35,000 workers organized in the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) will not have had a wage increase for six years. Already, in 2013, their union agreed to a two-year wage freeze that also included a 3 percent cut in entry wages for new-hires and benefits concessions.

The OPSEU membership authorized a strike mandate for the union last November with a 90 percent vote. Their contract expired the following month at the end of December. Last summer, during the provincial election campaign, the Liberal government was supported by most of the trade unions in Ontario (although not OPSEU) who characterized Wynne’s budget as “progressive”. The Liberals are pursuing a decade-long austerity agenda to reduce wages, jobs and public services. Ontario spends less per person on public services than any other province. The government has committed to slashing another \$12.5 billion from the budget over the next three years.



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