

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 April 2015

Latin America

24-hour strike by Argentine transport workers to protest tax on wages

Workers in the transport sector across Argentina struck March 31 to protest a so-called “profit tax” (impuesto de ganancia) imposed on higher-paid workers. The tax is levied on wages of more than 15,000 pesos, or US\$1,170 per month.

It was the fourth protest against the tax, which was passed under the government of Cristina Fernandez. Train, bus and subway systems were halted, and flights were canceled or rerouted at major airports. Many businesses as well as government institutions were closed for the day and some services like trash collection were halted. Hospitals cut services down to emergency cases.

The strike was called by the two largest labor confederations, the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) and CTA (Workers’ Central of Argentina). Other demands included the raising of the “hunger wages” of the lower-paid half of workers, the raising of payments to retired workers and measures against inflation, currently at about 35 percent.

Chilean airline workers vote to strike over pay, conditions

By a vote of over 98 percent, maintenance, passenger service and cargo workers in the LAN Express-Sidilánex airline union cast their ballots on March 31 across Chile in favor of a national strike set to begin April 6. LAN Express is a subsidiary of LATAM Airlines, which has offices or subsidiaries in seven South American countries.

Union president Luis Chavez told reporters, “we can say with accuracy that we have a total level of adhesion, which reveals the level of discontent with the enterprise and its policy of keeping us in poverty.”

The 881 workers’ strike demands include a boost of the company’s latest raise offer (4 percent over four years), incentives for night work and improvements in labor conditions. The union will be joined by the Federation of LAN Workers, the Latin American LATAM Airlines Syndical Network and other unions that operate mostly in Santiago’s international airport.

Protests by LATAM workers in other countries, particularly

Colombia, where workers have suffered a rash of firings, and Ecuador, where a union leader was sacked, were to be coordinated with the strike.

Panama Canal workers strike and blockade freeway

Dozens of Panama Canal workers blocked and burned tires on the freeway that connects the cities of Panama and Colon March 30. The workers called for the Panama Canal Authority (ACP) to comply with their demands over salaries and working conditions.

The protesting workers demanded a raise to \$10 an hour and enhanced security measures. They asked ACP administrator Jorge Luis Quijano to formalize the raise, which, over 15 years of struggle, has only gone up 83 cents.

At a press conference on April 1, the workers’ union, Untraics, announced that it was going on strike due to the refusal of the canal expansion project contractor ICA FCC Meco Consortium to perform an exhaustive audit. In all, unpaid or incompletely paid salaries are due to 1,120 workers. Untraics also demands three days pay owed every worker and payments from last December of at least a half-million dollars.

The ACP submitted a counterproposal of raises of 5, 3.5, 3 and 3 percent, respectively, in a four-year contract, but reports do not indicate that it offered to rectify the overdue payments.

16-day strike by Panamanian banana workers

After 16 days on strike, the Independent Banana Workers Syndicate of Chiriquí (SITRABICH) and the San Antonio Banana Enterprise reached an agreement ending the stoppage on the morning of April 2. The Ministry of Labor (Mitradel) mediated the talks.

One aspect of the agreement was a promise by San Antonio, which changed hands recently, to maintain and follow the existing contract. Another was for the banana company to arrange an audit with Mitradel to verify overdue wage claims. Mitradel announced that San Antonio had come to an arrangement for the paying of Social Security for March, for reestablishing the agency’s records, such as yet unpaid vacation pay.

The parties also agreed to submit an unspecified conflict to arbitration regarding negotiation of the new contract.

Salvadoran soccer team stops play over two-month delay in salaries

Players in the Salvadoran soccer team El Dragon refused to train beginning March 30 over wages that have been unpaid for nearly two months. One of the star players, Aurelio Vasquez, complained to reporters about a recurring pattern: “They have told us that in the course of the day they were going to pay us, but until now they haven’t called us to give us the time or place where we’re going to meet.”

The board of directors said that they would pay a portion of the wages—without specifying when or the percentage that would be paid. Vasquez retorted, “The majority expect them to pay us in full; we don’t want it in little bits. They haven’t paid us anything and everything is talk.”

The United States

Pennsylvania hospital workers locked out after one-day strike

Nurses and technicians at AMCH Hospital in Kittanning, Pennsylvania returned to the picket line April 1 after concluding a one-day strike the previous day when hospital management refused to allow union members back on their jobs. Management said they would recall workers over the course of the next three days while “honoring” a three-day contract signed with Huffmaster Healthcare Strikes of Pittsburgh.

The 123 members of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals walked off the job March 31 to protest the unproductive negotiations, which have failed to make progress on their most important issue that involves staffing ratios. The union is seeking to augment staff by adding one technician to each shift and also wants a cost-of-living wage increase and increased contributions by the hospital into retirement programs.

Baggage handlers strike Philadelphia International Airport

Baggage handlers who work for airline contractors Prospect Airport Services and PrimeFlight Airline Services at Philadelphia International Airport held a one-day strike April 2 demanding wage increases, affordable health care benefits and sick days. The workers, who make as little as \$7.25 an hour, are seeking to peg wages at \$10.88 an hour, which is

based on the low end of a living wage law passed by the city of Philadelphia.

Baggage handler Serina Santos told the *Philadelphia Tribune*, “I feel like I’m working for nothing because I’m working paycheck-to-paycheck, and it’s not fair for us to be living in poverty when you have companies that are making billions of dollars and we’re here struggling.”

The Service Employees International Union, which is trying to organize the workers, expected 500 workers to join the strike.

Canada

Ontario stone workers’ strike heats up

Workers at Carmeuse Lime and Stone’s Beachville operation in southern Ontario, who have been on strike since January 17 after working without a contract since March of 2014, are taking their picket lines on the road to draw attention to what is becoming a protracted battle.

Unifor, the union representing the 87 strikers, is casting this strike in nationalist terms because the company is based in Belgium and operates out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Having closed down quarries operating in the neighborhood, the company is now looking to eliminate jobs at its Beachville operation while demanding a range of concessions on the issues of work hours, benefits and pensions.

The union has done nothing to stop the use of replacement workers throughout the strike, allowing the company to operate at partial capacity. The strategy now undertaken by the union to publicize the strike by staging information pickets in nearby towns only underscores the ineffectiveness of the trade unions in fighting multinational companies.



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