

Workers Struggles: The Americas

5 May 2015

Latin America

Seven-hour strike by Argentine port workers for pay increase

Operations at a number of Argentine ports were halted from 5:00 a.m. until noon on April 30, as 13 unions in the grain and vegetable oil export sector struck. The workers are members of the Port Agroexport Oil Complex (COPA) union federation, which includes ship captains, inspectors, river workers and dockworkers.

The main ports hit were Rosario and San Lorenzo, which are major inland grain and vegetable oil export hubs on the Parana River. Striking workers set up pickets at Puerto San Martin and Timbues as well.

The CGT confederation and COPA are demanding a raise in the monthly base pay to 14,931 pesos (USD1,674), an increase of 42 percent from 10,500 pesos (USD1,177) agreed upon in April of last year. The Oil Industry Chamber of the Argentine Republic (Ciara) most recently offered 24 percent at a tripartite meeting at the Labor Ministry. COPA is also calling for contributions from Ciara to build housing for workers.

COPA and Ciara have agreed to meet again, this time without government mediation, on May 14.

Colombian teachers' strike continues as talks restart

The Colombian teachers federation Fecode resumed negotiations with the labor and education ministries May 1, as the national strike begun on April 22 continued. Regarding the resumption of talks, the Education Minister, Gina Parody, told reporters, "The return of children to the classrooms is the priority. We are restarting dialogue with Fecode to seek agreements and solutions."

However, the government and Fecode had held fruitless negotiations for nearly two months before the strike was called, at which point Parody demanded that the teachers return to work before negotiations could resume and threatened to dock the pay of striking teachers. Regarding her most recent statement, a Fecode spokesperson said, "The end of the strike will only take place when our requests are resolved."

Among the teachers' demands are improved pay and health care, the elimination of an exam that determines their chances for promotion, and more funding for school meals, equipment,

supplies and infrastructure. Another critical demand is safety for teachers in a nation where labor activists and workers are regularly murdered by paramilitaries and security forces.

A so-called People's Defender, Jorge Armando Otalora, appointed by President Juan Manuel Santos to act as mediator, claimed that the talks would take place with an "open and frank disposition," and spoke of "respectful" and "warm" dialogue. At the same time, Department of Revenue Minister Mauricio Cardenas insisted that the teachers should "remain within the limits of fiscal realities."

Police, marchers clash at Colombian May Day demonstration

On May 1, about 400 demonstrators battled police in downtown Bogota during the annual International Workers Day march. Upon reaching the Plaza de Bolivar, the demonstrators encountered heavily armed riot police, who attacked them with tear gas, stun grenades and clubs. The protesters threw rocks, bottles and sticks.

Police repression of May Day mobilizations is a regular occurrence in Colombia. Protesters use the occasion to demand jobs, better pay and improved working conditions, as well as to denounce the right-wing policies of politicians.

Jamaican teachers protest government wage increase offer

Teachers at several schools in Kingston's Corporate Area protested on the morning of May 1, following a miniscule five percent wage offer announced by Jamaica's Public Service Minister the day before. Some teachers staged sit-ins, while others marched to Heroes Circle, site of the Education Ministry.

Horace Dalley, from the ministry of finance and planning, claimed the government is not able to increase the raise beyond five percent. The wage would apply through the 2015-17 contract period. Jamaica's official rate of inflation from March 2014 to March 2015 was four percent.

One protesting teacher, calling the raise an "insult," told *rjrnews*online, "We would love the government to tell us what it is they expect us to do with five percent; it can't buy anything at all in the supermarket," adding that the teachers "are suffering and we can't hold any more strain."

The teachers held the protest on their own initiative, though

Jamaica Teachers Association head Doran Dixon claimed that the union had given them the go-ahead to “demonstrate their distress, in a way that they see fit.” Dixon said that the union might organize more protest actions soon.

Protest by Trinidad nurses calls for health minister’s ouster

Scores of nurses from hospitals across Trinidad and Tobago traveled to a protest in front of the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex in Mt Hope. Shouting “We not going, you go!,” the nurses denounced recent remarks made by Health Minister Fuad Khan and called for his ouster.

The nurses are angered over recent changes in policy that Khan unilaterally imposed, such as extending hospital visiting hours, allowing fathers in delivery rooms and overnight stays for relatives of patients. Khan had not consulted with the nurses on the feasibility of the measures or on extra precautions to take in instituting them, according to Trinidad and Tobago Registered Nurses Association (TTRNA) president Gwendolyn Loobie-Snaggs.

Khan’s disrespectful attitude toward nurses is another sore spot. In a recent interview on a local TV station, Khan had said that nurses who weren’t happy as caregivers should leave the profession, further enraging the nurses.

The protest served to highlight deeper problems in the country’s health care system and the treatment of workers. In conversations with the *Trinidad Express*, protesting nurses complained of shortages of medication, tools and beds, faulty equipment and overwork, with one nurse being assigned to 20 patients at a time. At times, nurses’ lives are put in danger, for example, when a victim in a shooting is admitted, and the perpetrator comes to the hospital to “finish the job.”

Several weeks ago Khan’s refusal to reveal the report resulting from an attack on a nurse by a patient at Port Of Spain General Hospital led to three days of protests and demands that the TTRNA be given the report.

The United States

Federal judge blocks strike by Allegiant pilots

A US District judge blocked a strike May 1 by Allegiant Air pilots over their demands to restore past concessions. In opposing a release from federal mediation for over 500 members of Teamsters Local 1224, Judge Andrew Gordon claimed a strike would lead to irreparable damage to the airline by causing an estimated \$7.7 million per day in losses.

Pilots are demanding that Allegiant, the most profitable US airline, restore benefits and work rules that the court ordered restored in July 2014. Allegiant, which posted increased earnings in the first quarter, had also promised to raise wages by seven percent starting May 1.

One issue that pilots are rebelling against is a new scheduling

system implemented by Allegiant. Judge Gordon acknowledged the “understandable frustration” of pilots, but nevertheless imposed his decision against a strike.

Given the anger of rank-and-file pilots, the judge warned the Teamsters bureaucracy it would be held accountable for any job action, saying that “their officers, agents, employees, and members, and all persons acting in concert or participation with them, shall immediately take all reasonable steps within their power to prevent the aforesaid actions and to refrain from continuing the aforesaid actions, if commenced.”

Meanwhile, Allegiant flight attendants, who are currently in negotiations, said they would support pilots if they struck. In another development, the National Mediation Board ruled that the Teamsters had been decertified as representatives for Allegiant’s flight dispatchers. The decision to decertify came after workers deadlocked 7-7 in a vote on whether to retain the union as their representative.

Canada

Ontario teachers’ strikes expand

Last week, high school teachers at the Rainbow District School Board in Sudbury, Ontario, joined Toronto-area teachers in the Durham Region who have been on strike since April 20. Meanwhile, high school teachers in Peel Region north of Toronto are set to go on strike this week if no deal is reached.

A key issue for teachers is the current limit on class sizes, which their union, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF), is trying to maintain and which the provincial Liberal government is trying to remove while expanding teachers’ other duties.

Union leaders in District 3, or the Rainbow District, have said that management has refused to engage in “real negotiations,” and they point to working conditions as the main issue currently in dispute, along with salaries, sick leave and other matters.

Contract talks for teachers in Ontario have two levels, with the Ministry of Education dealing with the broader issues of class size and salaries, and individual school boards negotiating non-monetary issues. The strike at Peel is only the latest in a series of actions that could affect at least three more school boards in the coming weeks.



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