

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 May 2015

## Colombia teachers' union-government agreement met with denunciations and defiance

In the early morning hours of May 6, representatives of the Colombian Education Ministry and the FECODE teachers' federation reached an agreement to end the nationwide strike of more than 300,000 teachers that began April 22 and had affected over 9 million students. By 1 a.m. the next day, the contract had been officially signed.

The pact was met with rank-and-file denunciations and protests and calls to continue the strike as well as to unseat the FECODE leadership and to form a new union altogether. Members of both FECODE-affiliated locals and non-FECODE unions denounced the pact, saying that it was not worth the more than two weeks of struggle.

In Bogota, Pereira, Santander, Huila and other parts of Colombia, tens of thousands of angry teachers took part in anti-agreement marches and demonstrations, some engaging in *cacerolazos*, the banging of pots and pans. Social media postings displayed photographs of graffiti denouncing FECODE. "Strong bases, weak leadership, cowards" and "Sellouts! Massive syndical disaffiliation," were some of the slogans.

Among the points in the agreement was a 12 percent raise—FECODE had demanded 28 percent—over four years, in a nation where teachers are among the worst paid in the region, bringing average pay to \$560 a month by the end of 2018. The 120,000 highest-level teachers will receive a 10 percent increase in their annual bonus.

The government will not scrap the evaluation system that teachers have strongly opposed, but will make some modifications that will include FECODE in the process. Media reporting on the agreement did not mention two major points of contention, the drive toward privatization of education and paramilitary violence, which has killed almost 1,000 educators since 1995.

## Uruguayan bus drivers strike for overdue wages

Bus drivers in Uruguay's northwestern municipality of Salto stopped work on May 8 to press their demand for unpaid wages. The striking drivers, who are members of the Salto Municipal Employees Association (Adeoms), were paid half of their wages for April and have yet to receive the other half.

About 70 workers and supporters—including some city council members—occupied the city bus station at dawn. In accordance with a request from the labor ministry, they were dislodged by police that afternoon.

Adeoms issued a communiqué stating that in addition to not receiving their full wages, the approximately 100 city bus drivers did not get receipts or other records; thus, "some have important discounts that they neither know where they went nor can they corroborate." Further, some 300 workers have not received vacation pay, according to the statement.

The total amount owed by the municipal government is around 6.5

million Uruguayan pesos (US\$246,000). The city also owes eight months of contributions to the medical coverage fund. Representatives of Salto, which was 48 hours from municipal elections when the strike broke out, did not attend a tripartite meeting called by the National Labor Directorate, and requested a postponement until May 14, when the new government will assume power.

## Partial strikes by Argentine bank employees over pay, "profit tax"

Workers in Argentina's banking sector held two-hour strikes on May 6 and 7 to advance a number of demands. Most of the nation's banks went without services from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m., though savings bank employees struck from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m., the last business hours of the day.

La Bancaria, the union representing the bank workers, called the strikes over three main demands: salary rises to counteract Argentina's rampaging inflation; improved working conditions; and compensation to soften the impact of the so-called profit tax (*impuesto de ganancias*), which is imposed on monthly wages of over 15,000 pesos (US\$1,680).

Union chief Sergio Palazzo declared May 7 that if the demands were not met, the workers would be called out on a 24-hour work stoppage this week.

## Argentine vegetable oil workers remain on strike after wage talks fall through

Following the May 6 breakdown of talks between the vegetable oil export workers' federation COPA and the Oil Industry Chamber of the Argentine Republic (Ciara), workers in the agroexport sector in Rosario, San Lorenzo and other ports continued an indefinite strike begun May 5. A union official told reporters that he had "no expectation" that Ciara would move from its salary offer.

Before the talks, Economics Minister Alex Kicillof angered the workers by saying that there should be a ceiling on raises of 25 percent. Ciara spokespeople claim that the unions' demand, 42 percent, is almost twice the inflation rate. However, the government is notorious for consistently underreporting inflation.

On April 30, the workers struck for seven hours after Ciara bargainers refused to budge from their 24 percent offer. Adrian Davalos, head of the Oil Workers Federation, told *cronista.com* that the 42 percent demand was based on "studies carried out by INDEC (National Statistics and Census Institute)" and that it "is in no way an invention."

## "Warning strike" by Panamanian elementary teachers over conditions at school

Teachers at the Evelia Dolores Carrizo elementary school in Chitre district, Panama, held a one-day “warning strike” on May 5 to bring attention to conditions that they say jeopardize not only their work, but the health and education of the students.

A spokesperson for the 46 teachers, Markelis Barba Valera, pointed out that the problems at the school have been ignored for years. “We need them to fix the lunchroom as well as the fence around the school,” she said. Barba Valera also noted that students have suffered from stomach pains, vomiting and diarrhea, most likely from the inadequately treated “black water” they drink from the fountains.

Another problem is the lack of space. Kindergarteners, for example, have to go 200 meters to the public library because there is no available area on the school grounds for them.

The teachers have resolved to take other measures if the authorities do not address the problems.

### **Jamaican health workers protest to demand delivery of paycheck deductions**

Health workers in New Kingston, Jamaica, protested outside the offices of the South East Regional Health Authority (SERHA) to demand the payment of statutory and other deductions to recipient entities. The workers complained that monthly insurance, mortgage and car payments have been delayed, resulting in embarrassment and in some cases blacklisting by lending agencies.

One protester, a midwife at Victoria Jubilee Hospital, told *rjrnews.com* that workers had spoken to the regional director and had been told that January and February payments had been made, only to find out that “our insurance policies are going in disarray.” The protesters have asked for the April deductions to be paid by mid-May.

At a press briefing the day after the protest, Health Minister Fenton Ferguson promised that the monies would be paid. He claimed that so far payments have been made up to March 2015 and that “the region is moving with alacrity to make payments up to May and, thereafter, keep up-to-date with the deductions.”

### **AT&T workers in Ohio walk out to stop victimization**

About 300 AT&T workers in Dayton, Ohio, walked off the job May 6 to protest the firing of a worker over the loss of a \$6 tool. Another 40 workers in Evansville also walked off the job. By the following day, the company claimed the issue had been resolved and workers had returned to their jobs.

“We have resolved the issue with the union and employees will return to work tomorrow,” said AT&T in a statement. “We look forward to working with the union towards an agreement in our ongoing contract negotiations.”

The Communications Workers of America is currently in negotiations with AT&T over a new contract representing some 17,500 call center, installation and repair technicians. The old agreement expired in April.

### **One-day strikes by New York Catholic school teachers against threats to close schools**

Teachers at three Catholic schools on New York’s Staten Island walked off the job in one-day protests against renewed threats by the Archdiocese to close schools if teachers demand wage increases. Similar strikes broke out at other Catholic schools four days earlier.

According to the Federation of Catholic Teachers, which represents 2,600 teachers at just under 150 schools in the New York area, the Archdiocese originally offered teachers a 1 percent wage increase. Later in contract negotiations, teachers were informed that if they accepted the meager wage increase, 10 or more schools would be closed.

In a letter to teachers and parents, Timothy McNiff, superintendent of schools for the New York Archdiocese, announced that the Catholic system of schools in a 10-county area was \$26 million in debt. He declared the threat to close more schools “is not a threat; it is a reality.”

Teachers believe the Archdiocese has long been planning on closing schools, but are simply taking advantage of contract negotiations to scapegoat teachers for the closures. Two years ago, the Archdiocese closed six Staten Island schools and merged two others.

### **Airline threatens to shut down after pilots’ union rejects offer**

The owner of Minnesota-based Sun Country Airlines told the Air Line Pilots Union (ALPA) that its refusal to put the company’s last, best and final offer to a vote by the airline’s 250 pilots would lead him to begin downsizing the airlines “for what will need to be its ultimate shutdown.” ALPA has claimed that owner Marty Davis’s threat is a negotiating ploy and points to the fact that the airline has been profitable since 2009.

Exact details of the negotiations, which have dragged on for five years, are not available. In terms of wages, the pilots’ union alleges that management’s offer merely moves Sun Country pilots from the lowest-paid pilots in the nation to second-lowest.

### **Ontario elementary school teachers take limited job action**

Pulling back at the last minute from a threatened strike, the union representing elementary school teachers in Ontario have initiated a very limited work-to-rule action, which will not limit classes or extra-curricular and year-end activities.

Negotiators for Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) have said that teachers will withdraw some administrative duties such as testing and report card comments to pressure the provincial government to back off basic concession demands such as proposed removal of caps on class size. ETFO president Sam Hammond has said that issues such as wages and benefits have not even been discussed yet, pending agreement on the bigger issues.

According to the union, administrative job action could be expanded up to and including a full withdrawal of duties if there is no movement in negotiations in the coming days.

### **Nova Scotia utility workers set to strike**

Two-hundred thirty-five outside workers and 105 inside workers employed by Halifax Water in the province of Nova Scotia are set to go on strike or be locked out this week with the end of the conciliation

process last week.

Negotiators for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) say that the main stumbling block in contract talks is the issue of pensions that the utility is looking to cut by 12.5 percent. This, after the union cut pension costs to the employer by 25 percent in the last contract, which expired in the fall of 2013.

The union says that it has gone to great lengths to avoid a strike, offering significant concessions in its latest offer, but that the employer seems bent on locking it out or provoking a strike.



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