

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 May 2015

Chilean trash collectors' unions announce deadline for payment of compensatory bonus working conditions

On May 15, two federations of trash collectors' unions in Chile announced Friday, May 22, as the deadline for payment of a compensatory bonus that had been agreed on as a result of mobilizations in 2013. If the bonus is not paid, the workers will strike nationally the following Monday, May 25.

The federations, Fenasinaj and Fenaserch, represent sanitation workers for both municipalities and private contractors. They claim that the municipalities hold close to 200 billion pesos (US\$335 million) that, if they refuse to hand over by the 22nd, "will irreversibly detonate the strike," according to a *radio.uchile.cl* report.

Only three municipalities have paid the bonuses of about 95,000 pesos (US\$160) since January 1. The federations called on the new labor minister, Ximena Rincon, to intervene immediately, not only to expedite payment of the bonuses, but also to begin discussions over working conditions and raises.

Peruvian public school teachers strike for 24 hours to press salary demands

Peruvian teachers organized by the Sutep union struck nationally on May 14 to demand a 100 percent increase in their salaries. Sutep, which represents about 350,000 educators, is calling for a minimum monthly salary of 2,310 soles (US\$732); current teacher salaries range from about 1,000 to 1,300 soles (US\$320 to US\$410).

Other demands include the raising of retirees' pensions, the granting of full-time permanent status to short-term contract teachers, and promotions of more than 60,000 first-level teachers to second-level scale.

In Ica, more than 200 Sutep teachers marched downtown, and in the Junin region, about 500 marched along the Calle Real. Teachers in Lima gathered at Sutep headquarters and marched to the Education Ministry. Sutep declared that there would be an indefinite national strike by the end of the month if their demands were not met.

Argentine bank employees hold one-day strike over pay, tax,

After a number of two-hour work stoppages failed to win concessions from management the preceding week, banking sector workers in Argentina struck for 24 hours on May 12. The bank employees mobilized marches and protest demonstrations over a number of demands articulated by the bank workers' union, La Bancaria: a 30 percent raise to counter inflation and the "profit tax" on higher-paid workers; improved working conditions; and an end to understaffing, delays in salary payments and outsourcing.

On May 13, La Bancaria's web site stated, "The Banks and Labor Ministry are mocking us. They want a larger conflict. We hold them responsible." The communiqué noted that parity talks have been going on for over 130 days "without a proposal from the employers for overcoming the loss of purchasing power in the salary scale" due to Argentina's inflation rate. It also denounced the banks' stalling so that they can "put the money that they owe us to work."

Dominica public workers protest nonpayment of salaries

Workers at the Public Works Corporation (PWC) facility on the island of Dominica protested on May 13 over the nonpayment of their last four fortnightly salaries. The protesters locked the front gates of the PWC, preventing management and monthly workers from entering. Police were sent to the scene, but no incidents were reported.

The Dominica Public Service union (DPSU) met with management and PWC directors the next day. The DPSU called a meeting with the workers on the 15th, at which the union general secretary, Tomas Letang, announced that the DPSU and PWC would sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) by May 19.

In a radio interview, he said, "Can they give a commitment that this money will be paid by next month or whatever? That may not be possible, but in that MOU we will have an undertaking as to what will be done within a specified period of time," which PWC board chairman Titus Francis said would be "at least sometime in the course of the next week."

In addition to the pay issue, PWC owes the island's social security system more than \$700,000 (US\$260,000).

Jamaican high school workers strike over nonpayment of salaries

Support staff at the Black River High School in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica, struck on May 14 to demand the payment of overdue wages. The workers had received checks, but they could not cash them at the banks.

The striking workers arrived early at the school and padlocked the front gate, but the Fire Department opened the gate later that morning.

Some teachers expressed sympathy for the auxiliary workers, with one telling *rjrnews.com* that the atmosphere at Black River was “not conducive to learning.” In recent months, management and teachers have butted heads over deteriorating conditions.

Pennsylvania youth service workers strike for better wages

Some 100 workers for the Lackawanna County Children and Youth Services walked off the job May 15 to press their demands for better wages and benefits after a 56-to-16 strike vote one day earlier. Picketing in Scranton, Pennsylvania, they were joined by other public workers as well as building tradesmen in a strike that is expected to extend at least through May 19.

On April 29, workers voted 58-to-12 to reject the county’s final offer, which was endorsed by officials of the members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 524. That agreement offered limited annual wage increases of 2 percent, 2.5 percent and 2 percent along with a \$10 increase in monthly health care premiums and the slashing of a “sick bank” that permitted workers to donate sick days to co-workers.

What has incensed workers is the posturing of Democratic county commissioner Jim Wansacz, who characterized the wage offer as “generous” to workers who receive as little as \$23,000 a year and some of whom qualify for public housing assistance and food stamps. Meanwhile, county department heads cashed in recently with salary increases of 32 percent.

Wansacz brushed off strikers, saying, “It’s hard for us to go any higher than that without [causing] cuts to the service.” He made this declaration despite an \$8.4 million budget surplus in 2014 under conditions in which the federal government covers 80 percent of county workers’ salaries.

Nova Scotia water workers facing job action

Workers at Halifax Water in Nova Scotia have been in a legal strike position for over a week and could be locked out this week, but their union says they are not yet ready to call a strike.

About 330 inside and outside workers at Halifax Water are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Central issues in the dispute include wages, but particularly the company’s pension plan, which it says is woefully underfunded. The union disputes that claim which it says the company is using as an argument to gut the plan wholesale.

Negotiations broke off last week, but neither side has yet announced any job action.

Ontario school bus drivers set to strike

Sixty-five school bus drivers serving two school districts in the southern Georgian Bay area near Lake Huron could be on strike this week if a deal is not reached between school boards and Unifor, the union representing drivers.

The drivers are employed by First Student Inc., which is one of the largest school bus companies on the continent, but which nevertheless pays some drivers just above the minimum wage. Along with wages, outstanding issues include scheduling and job security.

Drivers at the Bluewater District School Board and the Bruce Power plant have been working without a contract since last August, and talks at several other school boards in the province are ongoing.

Nurses strike in northern Manitoba

Nurses at the Nisichawayasihk Personal Care Home in Nelson House, Manitoba, went on strike last week in their fight to bring their wages in line with community nurses in the rest of the province.

The five striking nurses are represented by the Manitoba Nurses Union who walked away from the bargaining table after talks broke down over wages just prior to the strike notice. The nurses provide care to the elderly in the community and in the care home. Union negotiators say that while the provincial government has agreed to provide funding for wage increases, the federal government has not pledged its share.



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