

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 May 2015

Argentina: vegetable oil workers strike

On May 21, several hundred strikers and their supporters rallied at the grain terminals against the leading transnational exporters of soybean and other oils and soy meal, such as Cargill and Louis Dreyfus. Argentina is the world's leading exporter of soy meal and soy oil.

May 23rd marked the twentieth day of a strike by oil seed workers in the Paraná River port of Rosario, Argentina. The strikers, members of The Industrial Oilseed Complex Workers Federation and the Vegetable Oil and Cotton Workers Federation, struck against associated firms in both those cities and are demanding a 14,900 peso monthly minimum wage to correspond to the constitutionally mandated living wage. The workers' demand, a 42 percent raise, exceeds the government-imposed 27 percent wage ceiling (in a nation in which the median wage is five thousand pesos, and many workers make three thousand). Argentina's high rate of inflation has been accompanied by an economic slump.

The oilseed workers' struggle began in San Lorenzo and Rosario on May 3, with mass protests at the oil docks. While the San Lorenzo workers, locked into a pro-government "kirchnerista" trade union, have gone back to work, the struggle continues in Rosario.

The Argentine General Confederation of Labor (CGT) has isolated the strike, which has come under pressure from the Kirchner administration, which itself is being pressured by employer groups.

Miners Strike in Peru

Miners belonging to the Peruvian National Federation of Mine, Metal and Steelworkers went on strike on May 18 against the Humala administration's rules that threaten wages and working conditions.

Key to the dispute is a law that supposedly controls contingent labor. Mine companies make use of the legislation to push their permanent work force aside and replace them with contingent workers provided by labor brokers, merely by claiming financial hardship. According to union official Marco

Sarca, 70 percent of the miners have been replaced by temporary workers since the law and an accompanying presidential order went into effect.

The miners are also demanding that Humala withdraw pending labor legislation that would allow companies to pay up to 20 percent of wages in company bonds.

Customs workers strike in Chile

Customs workers in Chile began an indefinite strike on Wednesday, May 20 over jobs, wages and working conditions. The National Association of Chilean Customs Workers (ANFACH) called the strike.

ANFACH is demanding more jobs and a bigger budget for Chilean customs, in accordance with an increased volume of goods going through the nation's ports.

In addition to paralyzing the ports, custom workers also stopped regulating highway traffic into the country.

Sao Paulo teachers' strike enters its eleventh week

Striking teachers rallied on May 22 in downtown Sao Paulo and decided to continue a strike that began in March. Following the assembly, tens of thousands of strikers and their supporters marched and rallied at the headquarters of the State Education Secretariat.

The strikers are demanding parity with other professionals in the state, which means a 75 percent salary increase. The strike is approaching the length of the record 80-day teachers strike that took place in 1989.

Mass protest against government austerity in Puerto Rico

Hundreds of students and their supporters marched in San Juan Puerto Rico on May 16 as part of a popular reaction

against enormous attacks on university and public education. In addition to cutting back the University of Puerto Rico's budget by \$166 million, the administration of Governor Alejandro Garcia Padilla announced that it intends to close nearly 600 of the island's 1,460 public schools in order to save \$249 million.

Police SWAT teams menacingly flanked the demonstrators at the protest ten days ago. Students responded to their presence with chants of "We are students, not criminals."

The cuts and closures are part of a recommendation by the Boston Consulting Group, hired by Puerto Rico in 2013 to "restructure" public education in the interest of big business, and are part of budget cuts totaling \$1.5 billion.

On Wednesday police reported an improvised explosive had detonated near the governor's mansion, La Fortaleza. Student leader Chris Torres Lugo questioned the police account: "We don't have much information concerning the 'explosive' and it comes directly from the police, which makes us doubtful of its accuracy," he told the *Huffington Post*.

There have been many protests against Padilla's austerity proposals in the last few weeks across Puerto Rico.

Non-union workers strike against Washington state construction contractor

Non-union workers at Instafab Company in Vancouver, Washington are into their third month on strike over unfair labor practices and poor working conditions. Initially five workers, including a job superintendent and a foreman, went to the company with a list of complaints ranging from wages and benefits to rest breaks and safety issues.

When management refused to engage in discussions, the workers followed through on a threat to strike and were fired. In ones and twos, other workers followed their example until the entire crew of thirteen walked off the job.

The workers are paid from \$13.25 to \$25 an hour. They lack a pension and Instafab does not match their 401(k) contributions. They shoulder the major portion of the monthly health care premiums and the plan includes a \$20,000 deductible.

The workers appealed to Iron Workers Local 29 seeking union representation. Instafab is a primary subcontractor for other construction companies that employ building tradesmen, and the striking workers are seeking their support. The labor bureaucracy, seeking to divide the Instafab strikers from the building workers, is directing them to Democratic politicians like U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley.

Teamsters end Las Vegas valet strike

Teamsters Local 986 called off a three-day strike May 22 by 50 valet parking attendants at SLS Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. The strike was triggered by management's attempt to halt a unionizing drive by interrogating workers, threatening pay cuts, outsourcing jobs, and the firing of three workers.

When the strike first began, Teamsters officials said it would be ongoing until "SLS management stops breaking the law and respects the workers' right to form a union." The Teamsters said the halting of the strike was "temporary" and it could resume, but there is no indication that management has agreed to terms with the workers.

Sergio Cruz, one of the striking valet parking attendants, said, "Ever since we first went public expressing our desire to form our union, management has threatened valet parking with outsourcing and threatened us with the loss of benefits and wages."

London, Ontario city workers strike

Over 750 inside municipal workers in the city of London, Ontario are on strike this week after a strike deadline passed over the weekend with no agreement in place and negotiations stalled.

The city had asked for an extension to the strike deadline, which the union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), rejected.

While the city has offered some wage increases and improvements to benefits in a new contract, it is also demanding a range of concessions, according to the union, to allow for what the city is calling "operational flexibility." These include contracting out of work, reductions in work hours, and cuts to retiree benefits.

Inside workers provide various administrative and inspection services that will affect road and building construction as well as numerous other operations.



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