

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 June 2015

## Argentina: Vegetable oil workers union ends strike over wage increase

Nearly four weeks after vegetable oilseed workers in Argentina's major vegetable oil export terminals walked off the job, their union federation signed an agreement May 29 following negotiations that saw the intervention of the Labor and Economy Ministries. The Oilseed Workers Federation represents about 20,000 workers in Rosario and other ports along the Parana River and nationwide.

The workers struck May 4 to demand a wage increase that would bring monthly base pay to 14,931 pesos (US\$1,660), a rise of 42 percent to recuperate wage erosion due to last year's 40 percent inflation rate. Despite inflation subsiding somewhat since then, economists predict that the rate will probably be about 30 percent for the rest of 2015.

The government claimed that anything above 25 percent was unacceptable, but inched up its offer to 27 percent as negotiations dragged on. Meanwhile, Oilseed Federation reps lowered their demand to 36 percent.

The final agreement, which one union official described as "correct, after so many days of negotiations," will raise the wage 27.8 percent.

## Brazilian teachers strike over pay, conditions

Educators in both the K-12 and university levels in Brazil held strikes and protest actions last week to demand better pay, improved conditions and increased funding for education.

Teachers in the state of Mato Grosso del Sul voted to begin an indefinite strike beginning May 27 and in the city of Salvador, Brazil's third largest city in the state of Bahia, they began a three-day stoppage. The web site *teachersolidarity.com* reported, "The state government has repeatedly failed to carry out its legal duty to pay teachers properly and has also failed to improve the crumbling infrastructure and to provide adequate training for teachers. Moreover all the other workers in schools: cleaners, cooks and administrative staff for example, are also receiving inadequate salaries." Average pay for teachers is about US\$318 per month.

At 18 universities in 12 states, professors began a strike May 29 to demand increased funding for education, better working conditions and a 27 percent pay increase. The strike followed an announcement the week before that the government, in response to

the economic slowdown, would cut education funding by at least 9.4 billion reais (US\$3 billion).

The educators are also protesting state repression and attacks on their labor rights.

## Indefinite "civic strike" over Bolivian government's unfulfilled economic development promises

On May 28, the Potosi Civic Committee (Comcipo), a coalition of popular organizations in the poverty-stricken Potosi region of Bolivia, began an indefinite "civic strike" over a list of demands for economic development. The 42 points include improvements in roads and infrastructure, the building of hospitals, hydroelectric plants, an airport and factories and preservation of the Cerro Rico silver mine, which is in danger of collapse due to over-exploitation.

Comcipo held similar protests, including strikes, hunger strikes and blockades, in 2010 to demand that the government of the Movement to Socialism (MAS) party leader Evo Morales deliver on its promises to improve conditions in Potosi. Comcipo and the government held talks, but the promises from the meetings have not materialized. Since then, Comcipo has submitted petitions several times without result.

Comcipo president Johnny Llally told reporters on May 27 that members are fed up with the "deaf ears" that the government has turned to the organization's demands. A presidential representative called on the protesters to be "respectful" of the government so as not to "distort" what the government has done in the region.

On May 28, the parties met, but discussions broke down. A government spokesman accused Comcipo of coming to the talks with "a club in its hand" and demanded that the strike be ended before they could resume.

## Two-day strike by Dominican Republic doctors over conditions, staffing

Doctors at public hospitals throughout the Dominican Republic held a 48-hour work stoppage on May 28 and 29. Emergency services were the only ones provided.

The Dominican Medical Association (CDM) called the action

over persistent problems in the public health sector, such as the lack of specialists in surgery, childbirth, orthopedics, hospitalization and consultation.

The CDM is also demanding more investment in infrastructure, renovation and equipment.

### **Jamaican teachers walk out, protest miniscule wage offer**

On May 27, over half of the 60 teachers at Cornwall College in Montego Bay, Jamaica left their classrooms to voice their rejection of the government's derisory five percent wage offer. Teachers took up placards denouncing the offer and demonstrated in front of the schools.

The protest was held the day before scheduled negotiations between the Jamaica Teachers Association and the government.

### **Tobago sanitation workers strike, protest nonpayment of overtime**

Sanitation workers for Tobago's Division of Agriculture Marine Affairs, Marketing and the Environment walked off the job and protested outside the office of the Division's secretary. The protesters, chanting, "We fed up the same thing...over and over," denounced continued delays in the payment of arrears and overtime dating back to 2005.

One worker told *Newsday*, "Is ten years now, the unions came in, administrators came in; we exploit all the possibilities within the years and to date still nothing... All they give us each and every time is promises." In a press release, the Division claimed that the overdue wages "are currently being processed" and would be paid "within the first two weeks of June."

### **Pennsylvania teachers strike after school board votes down contract**

Teachers from the Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania school district walked out on a one-day strike May 29 following a 5-4 vote by the school board the previous night to reject a new contract. About 700 parents and students packed the district board meeting to urge passage of the agreement after the 240 members of the Pennsylvania Education Association had gone without a contract for three years.

But board member Kimberly Teeters, who did most of the talking in securing the agreement, abruptly turned against the contract and voted no. The following day she resigned from the school board.

The contract called for a 3 percent annual wage increase and did

not increase teachers' contribution to health care. The contract also contained an estimated \$2.9 million in retroactive pay to cover lost income during the three years they went without a contract.

Due to state law, which requires teachers to complete 180 days of education before June 15, they were limited to a one-day strike.

### **Strike at Delaware soft drink distributor enters third week**

Drivers and warehouse workers for Canada Dry Distributing Company in New Castle, Delaware are entering their third week on strike over increased workloads. The 40 members of Teamsters Local 326 have chafed under management's policy of continually imposing greater workload responsibilities without a commensurate increase in pay.

Shop steward James Wallace told the *News Journal*, "Each one of us in the warehouse is required to move 212 cases an hour yet we bring home less than \$400 a week. We're out here living check to check, and you can't live off that kind of money. I never thought it would come to this, but we're not going back to work until they give us a fair contract."

Another worker declared, "I started working here since before some of these managers. Why should I sacrifice the weeks of vacation and benefits I built here for their rule changes?"

The company has brought in management personnel from Maryland and New Jersey to replace striking workers. The distribution center services 4,000 customers in Delaware and southeastern Pennsylvania.

### **Municipal workers set to strike on Vancouver Island**

Around 50 municipal workers employed by the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) on Vancouver Island could be on strike or take other job action this week after issuing a 72-hour strike notice last Friday.

The workers, who are represented by the United Steelworkers Union (USW), are employed in a variety of jobs at regional solid waste transfer stations, water and sewage departments and a local recreation center. After five bargaining sessions the two sides are reportedly still far apart on a number of issues including wages and benefits.

Workers recently voted nearly unanimously in favor of strike action and essential service provisions were put in place following the strike notice. While the union says the ball is now in the employer's court, no new talks are currently planned.



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