

Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 June 2015

24-hour strike by truckers in Argentina

Argentina's SICHOCA truckers union stopped work on June 4 to demand a 35 percent raise and the end of the "profit tax" levied on workers above a certain income level. The strike stopped or interrupted deliveries of gasoline to stations, merchandise to supermarkets, money to ATM machines and mail. Garbage collection was halted as well.

The demand for the 35 percent raise follows the agreement between the official General Confederation of Labor (CGT)—which supports the government of Cristina Kirchner—on a 27 percent raise. Hugo Moyano, formerly a CGT official and Kirchner supporter, fell out with Kirchner following her 2011 reelection, leading to a split within the federation. Moyano's son Pablo heads SICHOCA, which is affiliated with the elder Moyano's CGT-Azopardo.

The government, which habitually underestimates inflation figures, claims the nation's consumer price index rose 23.9 percent in 2014; thus the refusal to budge from 27 percent. Private economists put the figure closer to 38.5 percent. The one-day strike was a prelude to a June 9 general strike.

Argentine pharmacy workers strike for pay raise

Pharmacy workers, members of Argentina's FATSA health workers federation, began a series of intermittent strikes in drugstores in Buenos Aires and its suburbs on June 2. The union is demanding a 33.8 percent raise as opposed to the 28 percent offer by the Specialties Distributors Association (ADEM).

Charging that the strike was causing impediments to the preparation and filling of prescriptions, paralysis of deliveries and shortages of stock, ADEM called on the Labor Ministry to intervene. The Ministry obliged on June 5, ordering the workers to return to their jobs as their negotiators attend five days of "obligatory conciliation" talks. The union's compliance with the order scuttled a 24-hour strike planned for June 8.

Two-day strike by Chilean student support workers

On June 3, workers for Chile's National School Aid and Scholarship Board (Junaeb), which serves students in the areas of learning support, medical and food aid and scholarships, began a 48-hour strike to bring attention to a number of demands. Among the problems cited by the striking workers are poor working conditions and infrastructure, as well as a faulty computer system, all of which inhibit their ability to help students.

The problems have prevented numerous students from getting promised scholarship funds, and at least 25,000 students are yet to receive their National Student Card, through which they get discounts on transportation.

As the nexus between the government and the students, the Junaeb workers have often borne the brunt of frustrated students' anger. The workers took the strike action after complaining for months to authorities and getting no response.

Chilean teachers strike, protest against education bill

Teachers in Chile's National Teachers Union began an indefinite strike June 1 to protest an education bill currently in the Congress. The bill, which the union says would place onerous certification requirements on new teachers as well as erode teachers' salaries, working conditions and rights, is being promoted by the government of President Michelle Bachelet.

The teachers have been joined by student organizations, which have carried out their own protests against the nation's expensive and heavily class-skewed education system, a product of the Pinochet dictatorship. The CUT, Chile's largest labor federation, also officially supported the strike.

On June 3, about 70,000 teachers, students and supporters marched in the capital, Santiago, and demonstrations took place in other cities. The next day, the Education Minister sent a letter to the union president, Jaime Gajardo, telling him to present the teachers' case to the Congress. Gajardo called the response "insufficient," adding, "We haven't had any previous conversation with the authorities. This letter is the first contact that the government has had with us."

A June 4 meeting with the Education Ministry ended with no agreement. On June 7, union representatives met in an extraordinary session and voted to continue the strike.

Peruvian dockworkers' three-week strike called off after deal

A three-week strike by Peruvian longshoremen ended June 5 with the signing of an agreement between their union, SUTRAMPORPC, and APM Terminals.

About 650 dockworkers at the Peruvian port of Callao walked off the job on May 13. The strike followed ten months of fruitless negotiations. The workers' demands included raises, health care—critical in an occupation exposed to weather extremes and hazardous materials—and training.

The workers also demanded that APM, an international shipping giant that pulled in nearly \$17 billion from its operations in Peru in 2014, scrap its newly installed system for assigning shifts.

Union officials mentioned few specifics, aside from saying its proposals "include improved benefits and modifications to a system for scheduling shifts," according to Reuters. APM "did not respond to requests for official comment."

Mexican teachers strike, protest against education "reforms"

Protests by the Mexican teachers union, CNTE, against a raft of pro-corporate education "reform" measures promoted by the government of Enrique Peña Nieto took place last week. The measures, as *teachersolidarity.com* reported, "amongst other things would see more privatisation, more standardised testing and teacher pay and tenure resting on flawed evaluations." The government has backed off from the evaluations for now, but CNTE is calling for the entire reform package to be scrapped.

The protests coincided with the run-up to the June 7 mid-term elections, seen as a referendum on the Peña Nieto administration. CNTE's strategy was to disrupt the elections, which it has called a farce.

CNTE members and students in the southern states of Michoacan, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Veracruz, as well as in the national capital, Mexico City, engaged in blockades, occupations of buildings and destruction of ballot materials. In some cases, police and army troops clashed with demonstrators.

In Tixtla, Guerrero, a group of normalistas (student teachers) from the teachers college in Ayotzinapa—where 43 normalistas were abducted and murdered last September—were attacked and

tear-gassed by a large group of State riot police, Federal police and Military police.

St. Louis construction workers strike large contractors

Construction workers in St. Louis, Missouri, walked off the job June 1 after the employers' association rejected a proposal from Bricklayers Local 1. Details are limited, but, according to the union, one issue that may have triggered the strike is a change in pensions demanded by the Mason Contractors Association.

The union has separate contracts with some 53 independent contractors and a number of them have accepted new agreements. But the Mason Contractors Association, which represents 42 companies, refused to accept similar terms.

The strike affects only work sites of the Mason Contractors Association, which tend to be large construction projects. "We have no desire to shut down the construction industry so there will be no blanket picketing of construction jobs, declared Don Brown, business manager for the Bricklayers.

Transfer workers strike at Vancouver area hospital

Patient transfer drivers at SN Transport serving the Vancouver area and the lower mainland of British Columbia went on strike June 1 in their bid to obtain a first collective agreement with the company.

The 115 workers joined the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in July of last year but even after mediated talks have been unable to win a contract settlement. The main obstacles in reaching an agreement reportedly involve wages and scheduling.

The transfer drivers and other workers are responsible for the movement of patients between over 250 health care sites and have been joined on the picket lines by workers from other hospital unions. SN transport is a privately owned company operating in the region.



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