Workers Struggles: The Americas

16 June 2015

Chilean teachers vote to continue strike over education reforms

In assembly June 12, members of Chile's National Teachers Union voted to continue the strike they began June 1 in protest against an education bill being discussed in Congress. The union has criticized the bill for its attacks on teachers' salaries, rights and working conditions, as well as its certification requirements.

One item of discussion was the idea of calling for tripartite meetings with the education ministry and congress members. Another was to call a new national march for June 17. About 70,000 protesters marched on June 3 in Santiago.

Uruguay: Four-hour strike over budget

Some 40,000 workers held a four-hour strike in Montevideo, Uruguay June 10 to demand that the upcoming five-year national budget increase investment in education, health, housing and infrastructure. The stoppage, called by the PIT-CNT labor federation, was the first during the administration of Tabare Vazquez, who was elected for a second term beginning March 2015 following five years out of office.

Teachers, who closed classes for the entire day, are demanding a monthly salary floor of 30,000 pesos (US$1,120), double their current wage. An additional demand by teachers unions is a commitment to invest 6 percent of gross domestic product in education.

Another object of the protest is the Trade in Services Agreement, or TISA, a proposed trade agreement that would liberalize the worldwide trade of services such as banking, health care and transport. The content of TISA, which had been classified, was revealed in June 2014 by WikiLeaks. TISA—whose main proponents are the US and the EU—has been criticized for the secrecy of its negotiations and for provisions attacking public services and weakening financial regulation and data protection.

On June 12, the Secondary Education Teachers Association (Ades) of Montevideo resolved in assembly to take strike action if budget negotiations do not meet their demands. Ades will hold another assembly in the last week of June to analyze the progress of the budget talks and decide on the date of strike action. According to *El Observador*, "The idea of beginning a strike is also being analyzed by the National Secondary Professors Federation (Fenapes), which combines all the educators' unions."

Brazilian autoworkers protest layoffs

To protest the terminations of contracts for over 500 autoworkers, about 300 metalworkers camped out at the Brazilian Mercedes Benz auto plant in Sao Paulo on June 10. The company had announced on May 25 that the workers' contracts would be suspended for at least a year.

With the Brazilian economy—and auto production in particular—in a slump, automakers have imposed a so-called "layoff regime" upon workers under temporary contracts. Mercedes Benz has said that it plans to idle a further 7,250 workers until June 16, as well as imposing hundreds more permanent or long-term layoffs.

Galapagos Island workers strike, protest wage-

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cutting legislation

On June 12, hundreds of residents of the Santa Cruz and San Cristobal islands, the main islands in the Galapagos Islands, held a nine-hour strike and protest actions against a new law ratified by the Assembly of Ecuador. The Organic Law of Special Regime for Galapagos, passed on June 9, rescinded a 1998 law that paid subsidies to public and private workers, which the islanders claim are essential to meet the high cost of living there. The law also discontinued free flights to and from the mainland for residents.

The Galapagos Islands are over 500 miles (920 km) west of Ecuador, to which they belong, and have a population of about 25,000. They are a popular tourist destination, due to their variety of plant and animal life, and also a favorite fishing spot.

Residents voiced other complaints about the law. One protester told reporters, “We are also worried about conservation. We are worried about big investors building on areas that belonged to the National Park.” Another protester said, “We are appealing to UNESCO because we are worried about the law making it easier to build hotels in San Cristobal.”

Classes were called off at schools, some businesses closed and taxis did not run during the strike. Some commercial flights were canceled and protesters blocked roads. According to *Galapagos Digital*, “There were reports of police firing tear gas at demonstrators blocking roads leading to the airports serving the two main populated islands, Santa Cruz and San Cristobal.”

Lockout ends at Kentucky Aluminum plant

Workers at the Century Aluminum plant ratified a new five-year contract June 13, ending a month-long lockout at the Hawesville, Kentucky facility. The 560 members of United Steelworkers Local 9423 voted by a 68 percent margin to ratify the agreement after previously voting down four tentative proposals.

Details on the agreement are limited. Wages will be increased 14 percent over the course of the new five-year agreement, and contract language governing overtime was modified. The latest agreement reportedly lowered future health care premiums from previous offers.

The Swiss commodities trade house Glencore has a 41 percent ownership of Century Aluminum. The company reported its most recent quarterly profit at $73.8 million, up by 19.4 percent over the previous quarter. The company has three other plants in the United States and one in Iceland, with a second under construction there.

Winnipeg transit workers vote down union-approved contract

In a narrow vote last week, 1,350 transit workers in Winnipeg, Manitoba rejected a proposed contract that had been recommended by their union leadership, beginning a countdown to possible strike action.

To the surprise and dismay of union leaders, 51 percent of workers last week rejected a tentative deal reached with the city in May that had lifted a temporary overtime ban. According to a union spokesperson from the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) the main concern of workers was not wages but safety, citing 39 assaults on drivers last year alone.

As a result of the vote, the two sides have been sent back to the bargaining table, with union leaders saying they are hopeful a deal can be reached to avert what would be the first strike of its kind in almost 40 years.

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