

Workers Struggles: The Americas

30 June 2015

Riot police attack Chilean teachers as strike continues

In an assembly June 24, delegates of Chile's National Teachers Union voted 131 to 41 (with 6 abstentions) to continue their strike. A number of delegates called for the demand that the minister of education be sacked, but the motion did not come to a vote.

Following the assembly, the striking educators were joined by students and took to the streets of the capital, Santiago. As they approached the education ministry building and attempted to block the street, police attacked them with water cannon.

The strike began on June 1 as an education reform bill was being discussed in the legislature. According to *teachersolidarity.com*, "Teachers are demanding improved working conditions, smaller class sizes, more time for planning and an end to precarious contracts. Another main bone of contention is a method of evaluation, which is based on a distrust of the profession and disciplinary measures."

Liquefied natural gas workers in Argentina strike for higher pay

Members of the Argentine Oil, Gas and Biofuels Union Federation went on indefinite strike nationwide June 23 over salary demands. The union reps and natural gas producers have been engaged in government-mediated negotiations for two months. Talks broke down June 22 as the producers refused to agree to a 32 percent wage hike. The nation's inflation rate has been running at about 30 percent.

The walkout began on the second day of a 48-hour stoppage by natural gas pipeline workers in northern Argentina.

Some 30 to 40 percent of Argentine households use liquefied natural gas (LNG). Demand for LNG has risen with the onset of winter, and some neighborhood dispensaries have raised their price for a 10-kilogram cylinder to 200 pesos (US\$22), more than twice the price that the commerce secretary says they should charge, 97 pesos (US\$10.67).

As of June 26, talks between the federation, which has 52,000 members, and the producers continued while the strike remained in force. Vendors and distributors were closed to the public.

72-hour strike by Paraguayan airport workers against

privatization

Technical workers at Paraguay's international airports in Asuncion and Ciudad del Este held a three-day strike beginning June 24. The action was called the day after failed tripartite negotiations to protest a 2013 law allowing foreign investors, which a union official called "nothing more than the privatization of state resources, among them airports."

About 200 workers demonstrated at the Asuncion airport, carrying signs and chanting, "No to the public-private alliance," which they believe will lead to mass firings. Other demands of the striking workers include bonuses for working in high-health-risk areas and for seniority, permanent status for some 350 contract workers, recognition of the collective contract and a severance pay formula for voluntary retirement.

At least three demonstrators were injured on the first day, when police fired buckshot at workers blocking a highway leading to the Asuncion airport. A union official claimed that he had been run into by a vehicle as well.

Since only four of the ten unions representing airport workers adhered to the walkout, it was of limited effectiveness, with a Civil Aeronautics Board (Dinac) spokesman claiming that flights were continuing, with empty posts being filled by members of other unions and the Air Force.

By June 26, one of the unions had announced that it no longer supported the strike, and those workers who continued the protest ended their blockade.

Peruvian hospital workers strike to demand unpaid bonus and dismissal of director

Workers at the Regional Hospital of Ayacucho, Peru, began a 48-hour strike June 25-26 to demand the sacking of the director and the payment of an overdue bonus.

The workers' union pointed to a court ruling that ordered the payment of the Extraordinary Allocation for Health Care Work (Aetas), which the regional government has owed the workers for seven years. According to the ruling, each worker is owed 30,000 soles (US\$9,456).

The director, William Espino, denounced the strike as illegal and the demands as inappropriate, and threatened to dock the workers' pay.

The strike was called off when the regional governor agreed to

sack Espino. The governor also promised “to carry out the procedure before the corresponding authority for the payment of their debts.”

Mexican teachers suspend strikes against evaluations

Teachers in Michoacan and Chiapas, Mexico, returned to their classrooms June 23, suspending their strike begun June 1. The teachers took the action in Guerrero, Chiapas, Oaxaca and Michoacan against the imposition of evaluations that they say would scapegoat teachers for the poor performance of the chronically underfunded schools in those states. Teachers staged protests, blocking buildings and otherwise interfering with and impeding the completion of the evaluations.

By June 18, most of the teachers in Guerrero and Oaxaca had returned to work, though they vowed to continue their protests. Michoacan’s members of the National Education Workers Coordinator (CNTE) continue to hold protests and blockades in front of the Morelia Institute, the Industrial Technology and Services Bachelor Degree Center No. 149 and the Technological University, where evaluations have been planned.

In Chiapas, teachers belonging to the Education Workers National Syndicate (SNTE) voted in assembly to end the strike and reinstall discussions with state authorities. SNTE said that it would maintain a “state of maximum alert” and hold protests during evaluations. The Education Ministry is adamant in its determination to carry out the evaluations.

Service workers strike Homeland Security facility in New Mexico

About 50 maintenance, custodial and grounds-keeping workers at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Artesia, New Mexico, went on strike June 25 against Omni Corporation. Omni, a Texas-based company, took over the federal contract for services at training center in on June 1.

According to the Operating Engineers Local 953, workers struck due to a campaign of intimidation by Omni management. Workers are not asking for a raise, but are simply requesting that Omni Corporation accept the existing bargaining agreement that has been in existence since 2007.

The training facility in Artesia is operated by the Department of Homeland Security. The national spotlight focused on the facility last year when some 1,200 Central American immigrants were detained there for six months.

Striking BC steelworkers in standoff

Ten workers at Emterra Environmental recycling plant in Kamloops, British Columbia, who went on strike last week were forced into a standoff with non-union truck drivers as they attempted to enter the facility.

The strikers are members of the United Steelworkers Union (USW) and are fighting for improvements in wages and other provisions in a new contract. They were joined by at least 10 other union members last Friday in their attempt to prevent work from continuing during the strike, but with the intervention of the RCMP they were forced to step aside and allow trucks to enter the recycling plant.

Emterra is under contract to the City of Kamloops to collect and distribute recycling but, according to union leaders workers at its plant, are paid “ridiculously low wages,” often little more than minimum wage. Their last contract expired in March and the company rejected the latest proposal from the union and walked away from the bargaining table.

Ontario grocery workers set to strike

At least 1,600 workers at grocery chains in southern Ontario will be in a legal strike position as of July 2 after rejecting a proposed new contract, even as 12,000 union members in other locals voted to ratify a new deal.

The workers are represented by the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) and are employed at Zehrs and Superstore outlets that are owned by Loblaw Companies Limited across the region. Workers voted to give their union a strong mandate in May, with 97 percent voting in favor of a strike.

Some of the issues in contention include wages and benefits, work hours and scheduling. It is possible that workers at other stores in the province could also be in a strike position once all the votes are tallied through the week.



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