

Workers Struggles: The Americas

11 August 2015

One day national strike in Uruguay

Workers in Uruguay struck nationwide on August 6 to push for better wages and more public spending. The strike and protest demonstrations were coordinated by the 400,000-member PIT-CNT labor confederation, which claimed that 1 million workers, both unionized and nonunion, in a nation of 3.4 million, participated.

Since civil servants, teachers, banking industry and hospital workers joined the strike, services in those sectors were stopped or limited. Bus services slowed to a trickle and a number of small businesses shut their doors.

The action took place in the context of a slowdown in the economy—projected to be 2.7 percent for the next four years as opposed to a previous four-year average of 5 percent—and a growing inflation rate, currently 9 percent. Annual wage negotiations between unions and industry negotiators are set to begin soon. The current monthly minimum wage is 10,000 pesos or US\$345. Some 600,000 Uruguayan employees earn less than 15,000 pesos (US\$520).

In addition to the calls for wage hikes and an increase in education spending to 6 percent of GNP, the protesters demanded the passage of an “employer insolvency law” that would assure that employees receive their due wages if their bosses’ businesses fail. They also demanded that Uruguay withdraw from negotiations on the Trade in Services Agreement (TISA). The free trade pact, currently being secretly negotiated by 50 nations, would deregulate financial services and attack public services.

Talks break down between Chilean copper bosses and striking contractors

Striking contract workers at Chilean copper producer Codelco suspended talks with company representatives on August 7 after management refused to guarantee there would be no retaliation or firings of strikers. Manuel Ahumada, president of the 40,000-strong Copper Workers Federation, told reporters, “We can’t guarantee the reestablishment of operations. We’re not going to permit any worker to be fired. There are no

guarantees to generate conversation.”

Codelco, the world’s largest copper-producing firm, employs nearly 20,000 full-time workers, but relies on contractors to provide outsourced workers, who receive lower pay and fewer benefits. The contract workers walked out on July 21 to demand pay, benefits and conditions equivalent to those of full-timers, and they blockaded and occupied some facilities.

Codelco claims the contract workers have to negotiate separately with each contractor, and that due to the current slump in copper prices, their demands are unfeasible anyway. However, the two sides agreed to start a “dialogue board,” though the union balked on company demands that they order their members back to work while talks were being held.

Blockades and occupations at some mines have continued. Although Codelco has accused the strikers of violence, the only fatality so far has been a worker who died of a heart attack after being shot in the leg by a riot cop. Meanwhile, full-time workers continue working at their respective sites.

Two-day teachers strike in Buenos Aires

Teachers and teacher’s aides in Buenos Aires, Argentina struck for 48 hours August 3 and 4 to protest the policies of the state’s governor, Daniel Scioli. The action was called by the Buenos Aires Education Workers Unified Syndicate (SUTEBA) and the State Workers Association, or ATE. SUTEBA claimed educators in 70 to 100 percent in schools around the state joined the walkout.

According to ATE sources, the strike demands included “a salary recomposition, the immediate passing to permanent status of thousands of teachers who complete tasks without stability in the state, the hiring of personnel in critical areas and the setting up of an administrative career route for state employees.” Other demands were for infrastructure improvements and regularization of health insurance.

Most of these demands were the impulse for a 17-day strike that ended in March with the signing of an agreement between the unions and the Scioli administration. Workers complain the payment of the agreed-on raises was made in stages that eroded their salaries and that other provisions of the agreement have not been carried out.

The Scioli government agreed to meet with union reps on August 6, but ruled out salary demands, with Cabinet Chief Alberto Pérez claiming that the issue had “already been sorted out.” He added that the teachers’ pay would be docked for the days on strike.

Peruvian health and medical workers hold strikes and protests

A number of industrial actions in Peru’s health sector took place last week. Administrative and auxiliary workers at the Honorio Delgado Hospital in the southern city of Arequipa held a 72-hour work stoppage beginning August 5. At 6 a.m., external consultation services were suspended. The striking workers, members of the Auxiliary Workers Syndicate, are demanding a pay raise of 55 percent, full-time status for contract workers and standardization of incentive pay. The strike was also a protest against privatization of the health sector.

In the southeast, workers at two hospitals in Puno stopped all but emergency services for 72 hours beginning August 5 to protest the nonpayment of a promised raise in addition to voicing demands similar to those of the Arequipa workers. In health facilities in Cusco, administrative and auxiliary workers walked out in a three-day protest.

Health workers in the northern San Martín region joined other public sector workers in agriculture, education, transportation and production August 5 for a 48-hour strike as well as marches and internal meetings to demand the reinstitution of incentive pay that was cut in January. Their unions are calling for meetings with the regional government and say that they will escalate their protests if their demands are not met.

Arizona bus drivers strike over wages and safety

About 550 drivers, mechanics and other workers for Sun Tran, Tucson, Arizona’s transit system, walked off the job August 6 after negotiations failed to meet their demands on wages and safety. On August 1, workers voted 363 to 4 to reject a contract offer by Professional Transit Management, the private contractor that runs the Tucson transit system. The contract was then extended for three days to allow mediated talks, but according to Teamsters Local 104, management refused to amend their offer.

On wages, management would only offer a 50-cent wage increase for new hires, essentially freezing wages for all other workers over a three-year period. Pensions also remain frozen

while the Tucson city council has imposed a \$2.4 million cut to Sun Trans budget this year.

Another issue that has angered transit workers is that an audit has brought to light the fact that in 2013 and 2014 Professional Transit Management returned \$2.2 million to Tucson’s general fund that had been earmarked for wages and benefits.

Ontario university set to strike

Two hundred support workers at Brock University near Niagara Falls, Ontario could be on strike this week if mediated talks fail to produce an agreement. The workers are represented by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) and union negotiators say the main issue remaining is job security, which the university has been reluctant to discuss.

The school has said that all classes and activities will continue in the event of a strike.

City rejects deal for locked-out workers in Vancouver Island

After locking them out the week before, the town council in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island last week rejected a deal proposed by the union representing 75 municipal workers, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

Last month the workers issued a strike notice, but their union limited job action to an overtime ban just before the city locked them out. Union negotiators say the only outstanding issue is wages and that they are only asking for the same 2 percent annual increase workers in neighboring towns have been given.

The workers, who include inside and outside staff, have been working without a contract since 2013. Management has filled in to avoid any service disruptions but no new talks are currently scheduled.



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