

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 December 2015

## Chilean customs officials hold 48-hour strike over salary readjustment

Cargo traffic across Chile was halted or slowed for two days, November 25 and 26, as members of the ANFACH customs officials union heeded the call by the National Fiscal Employees Association (ANEF) to stop work in a protest against a proposed 4.1 percent readjustment of salaries and benefits for public sector workers.

Striking customs and public health workers and supporters demonstrated and marched in cities across Chile. The ANFACH web site claimed 20,000 marched in Valparaíso to the National Congress to denounce the 4.1 percent proposal in favor of the 5 percent demanded by ANEF.

The proposed 4.1 percent increase was originally rejected by the lower house Chamber of Deputies on November 25, but it passed in the Senate. After Treasury Minister Rodrigo Valdés reiterated his claim that the funds for the increase did not exist, the lower house approved the 4.1 percent.

## 24-hour strike by Argentine newspaper vendors over restoration of commission

Newspaper kiosks throughout Buenos Aires and its suburbs were shuttered November 27—Argentina’s National Sovereignty Day—as vendors struck to demand the restoration of a 20 percent commission on the cover price of newspapers and magazines. The SIVENDIA newspaper and magazine vendors union called the stoppage against the newspapers’ unilateral action.

The SIVENDIA press secretary accused management, primarily represented by two of Argentina’s largest newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, of having “pretended not to hear” the labor ministry’s repeated calls to begin parity negotiations to resolve the issue. SIVENDIA said that it would continue the one-day actions on national holidays until the businesses “sit down to negotiate.”

## Paraguay judicial workers strike over planned budget cuts

Judicial workers in the southern Paraguayan city of San Juan Bautista, capital of Misiones department, began a phased strike November 24 to protest budget cuts being discussed in the National Congress.

Laura Soloaga, San Juan Bautista coordinator for the Sifupar judicial workers union, told abc.com.py that the strike, which lasted two hours on the November 24, increased to three hours the next day and would continue to grow if the Senate approved the budget cuts.

She added that the cutbacks would affect numerous contract workers, functionaries, the purchase of supplies and the future construction of major infrastructure.

## Ecuadoran soccer players strike for overdue pay

The Soccer Players Association of Ecuador (AFE) called an indefinite strike November 26 to demand the payment of overdue salaries. Jorge Guzmán, AFE director, told reporters, “They surpass [US]\$20 million and there are clubs that they owe up to five months’ wages.”

The strike involves 24 first-category Ecuadorian teams, as the second round of National Championship playoffs nears its end. Eleven teams affirmed their participation in the strike immediately following the strike announcement.

Two teams scheduled for a November 27 game, Catholic University (Quito) and Mushuc Runa (Ambato), did not refuse to play, but turned their backs for a minute following the pitazo, the referee’s whistle signifying the beginning of the game, before playing “under protest” to a 1-1 tie.

## 24-hour “warning strike” by Panamanian construction workers

Thousands of Panamanian construction, education and other workers participated in a one-day nationwide “warning strike”

November 24, led by the National Front for the Defense of Economic and Social Rights (Frenadeso) with the support of the Suntracs construction workers union.

Frenadeso “brings together diverse organizations of the worker, education, peasant and indigenous sectors,” according to *La Estrella*. The Electoral Tribunal recently recognized the organization’s political arm, the Broad Front for Democracy, as a “party in formation.”

Frenadeso issued the strike call November 19 to voice demands over a range of issues, such as poverty, corruption, attacks on labor rights, the cost of living and judicial toleration for police impunity. The last demand referred to the recent fatal shootings in separate incidents of two workers by police officers who were not punished.

Marchers in Panama City blocked traffic as they made their way to the Supreme Court building. Another group assembled in front of the Social Security offices, where speakers denounced judicial corruption, the government’s plans to raise the retirement age, and the poor condition of the health and education sectors.

### **Bermudan electrical workers protest proposed changes to medical benefits**

On November 26, over 100 workers for Bermuda’s Belco electrical firm struck and marched to the company’s headquarters to protest proposed changes to their pension plan. The workers, members of the Electrical Supply Trade Union (ESTU), had met at the headquarters of the Bermuda Industrial Union the previous day and voted to stay off the job until management agreed to include ESTU reps in discussions of the changes.

Belco had already made some changes to the workers’ medical benefits with no consultation. ESTU President Ray Bean and others met with Belco management while workers waited in front of the headquarters. When Mr. Bean emerged, he announced, “Management have agreed to put a stay on this,” and told the workers to return to their work.

A Belco spokeswoman said, “The matter has been referred to the Department of Workforce Development. Management and the ESTU have agreed to meet to discuss the issue.”

### **Pennsylvania teachers strike ends**

The 21-day strike by 285 teachers of Peters Township, Pennsylvania, ended under provisions of state law and students and faculty headed back to classes November 27. Members of

the American Federation of Teachers began their strike on October 28 when they were unable to come to an agreement over wages, class size and the length of workdays.

Negotiators for the school district have claimed teachers’ demands are “beyond our means.” Paul Homer, staff representative for the American Federation of Teachers, called the school board’s position a “myth.” “They have over \$24 million in the bank,” he said.

In order to curb teacher strikes, Pennsylvania state law mandates that students complete 180 days of school by June 15. At this point, an arbitration panel will be set up and the union and school board have 10 days to submit their final offers. The panel then has 20 days to compile a nonbinding agreement.

If the union rejects the panel’s proposal, a second strike can be called. But enormous media pressure is being brought to bear on teachers by accusing them of ruining the students’ futures.

### **Vancouver port truckers strike**

Fifty unionized truck drivers employed by Port Transport Inc. went on strike last week and could be joined this week by another 90 drivers at Harbour Link Container Services in Vancouver, British Columbia after working without a contract for 18 months.

The job action could expand to include over 400 drivers who work at other companies serving Port Metro Vancouver and who are also supposedly protected by a deal that was struck between government and employers last year. That agreement provided for wages and conditions that employers have failed to comply with, prompting drivers to withdraw services.

The conflict that arose last year was due to companies colluding to pit workers against each other and cut wages, sparking roadblocks that shut down the Port of Vancouver for nearly a month in March of 2014. Federal and provincial governments were forced to bring in legislation to regulate rates under the oversight of a Trucking Commissioner but many companies continue to ignore their legal obligations.



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