

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 March 2016

48-hour strike by Peruvian brewery workers over work schedule

The union for workers at Peru's largest brewery, Backus y Johnston, called a 48-hour strike on February 26 to protest a work schedule change at its Matupe de Lambayaque plant in Chiclayo.

Backus y Johnston, a part of the SABMiller international beer conglomerate, has six breweries in Peru. It also produces soft drinks and bottled water.

The schedule for the plants has been six days of work with one day of rest, but Backus changed the schedule at the Matupe plant, where 130 union workers are employed, to 8-10 days of work followed by a day of rest. The union says the change is unconstitutional.

Backus management maintains that the Labor Ministry had declared the strike "inappropriate," claiming that the union really opposes the implementation of a third shift, which management claims is legal. Backus brought in scabs at Matupe to take up the slack.

Nationwide one-day strike by Argentine state workers to protest firings

State workers across Argentina struck February 24 to protest the sackings of thousands of public employees by the government of President Mauricio Macri. Two national unions, the 240,000-strong State Workers Association (ATE) and the Argentine Workers Central (CTA), organized the mobilization. Missing from the strike and protest was the General Workers Central, which has been involved in dealmaking with Macri.

Since assuming office in December, Macri has spearheaded a drive to reduce the state workforce under the guise of getting rid of "ñoquis"—that is, employees who allegedly get paid but do not work—as well as "militants" loyal to former president Cristina Kirchner. However, ATE leader Hugo Godoy told reporters, "The storyline to get rid of 'ñoquis' isn't even believed by the government. They are only reducing personnel."

The government claim of only 6,200 sackings is contradicted by union claims of over 20,000.

In the state capital, Buenos Aires, 40,000 protesters defied a newly-ordered government protocol to allow five minutes to clear streets of anyone demonstrating without permission, and marched to the Plaza de Mayo, coinciding with a visit by French president François Hollande. The protocol is one of several recent measures designed to criminalize workers' protest actions.

Panamanian refuse collection workers strike for wage raise and other demands

Refuse collection workers and street sweepers employed by Panama's Urban and Home Cleaning Authority (AAUD) walked off the job February 24 to demand an increase in their wages. According to a spokesperson, workers with over thirty years of service only make between US\$500 and \$700 per month.

The workers also complained of the lack of equipment and uniforms, poorly maintained trucks, unjustified firings and the risk of exposure to various diseases in Panama City. Trash collection was recently suspended by the Health Ministry in the face of the growth of cases of Zika, dengue and other diseases.

Although AAUD promised new uniforms and trucks in December, they have not delivered. In addition, nearly 500 out of 3,000 workers were not included in a recent salary adjustment. Moreover, the workers demanded that contract workers with more than four years be given permanent status.

On February 26, after meetings with AAUD Director Eladio Guardia, the workers' representatives agreed to call them back to the job. According to *telemetro.com*, "both sides agreed to meet inside of two weeks, when it is anticipated that the workers will receive the responses to their petitions."

However, Guardia only said that he would "continue to evaluate the salary issue" and "nonetheless he denied the firings of workers and said that on this issue it was the termination of contracts that were not renewed." He also claimed that the arrival of the uniforms and equipment was "in process" without giving an expected date of arrival.

Strikes, protests continue against closure of Guyanese sugar factory

February 23, Guyana's Republic Day, was marked by renewed strikes and protest actions against the projected closure of the Wales, West Bank Demerara (WBD) Sugar Estate. About 80 percent of Wales Estate workers as well as those at another estate did not report for work, but another locale functioned at about 80 percent, while yet another, Uitvult, was "fully operational," according to the *Guyana Times*.

Uitvult, about twenty miles from Wales, will supposedly absorb some of the 1,600 workers who will be let go if the 2016 "Budget and Action Plan" proposed by the state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) goes through. Negotiations between GuySuCo and the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) over

wages and production incentives have been deadlocked, and GuySuCo threatened that the strike actions “would leave the Corporation with no alternative than to put a halt to the current crop.”

According to the *Times*, “Many workers are yet to make a decision whether to transfer to Uitvulgt or to receive severance packages. Meanwhile workers have vowed to further intensify their strike and protest actions if the decision to close Wales is not rescinded.” Residents fear that the closure of the plant will turn Wales into a “ghost town.”

Trinidad teachers protest delays in salaries, promotions and working conditions

Over 500 primary and secondary school teachers gathered in front of the Ministry of Education in Port of Spain, Trinidad to voice their anger over issues that have festered in some cases for years.

The teachers held picket signs pointing out some of their complaints: waiting up to five years to be upgraded from assistant teacher to full teacher; delays in allowances for working teachers and in payment of increments; unfilled vacancies; unpaid pensions for retired teachers, in some cases for up to 18 months; crumbling infrastructure; lack of security at high-risk schools.

The teachers are members of the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers’ Association (TTUTA). At a recent general council meeting, the teachers voted to take the action. However, the protest only took place from 10 a.m. until about noon.

The TTUTA and the ministry have been in several monthly meetings without any resolution of the issues. One TTUTA rep told *guardian.co.tt*, “We would see more protests again if the ministry continues to nothing. We have had enough.” Despite their use of phrases like “enough is enough,” “empty promises” and sending “a powerful message,” the TTUTA only recently acceded to the limited protest action, which had little impact on the school system.

United Continental mechanics demonstrate against concessions at airports across the country

United Continental mechanics and maintenance workers held protest pickets at eight airports across the United States February 26. They are continuing their opposition to a concession proposal being pushed by management under conditions where the airlines registered a \$7.2 billion profit in 2015 and while executives grabbed \$3 billion in stock buybacks. Ten days previous, the 9,000 members of the Teamsters union voted by a 93 percent margin to reject the proposal, and, in a second vote, cast an overwhelming number of ballots to strike the airline.

United Continental is demanding a lower tier wage scale for new hires that will pay half the wages and sharply curtail other benefits. Workers are also to be subjected to significant health care increases.

Workers have gone without a raise for four years and are angry about the outsourcing of aircraft maintenance jobs. One of their goals is to recover their defined pension plan that was replaced by the inferior 401(k) retirement plan in 2002.

The National Mediation Board, which has been mediating between the Teamsters and United management, has summoned the two sides to a conference on March 3.

Toronto outside workers accept concessions; work-to-rule continues inside

Garbage collectors, parks-keepers and other outside workers voted to accept a tentative contract with the City of Toronto that includes wide-ranging concessions on job security and benefits and provides for a paltry 1.25 percent wage increase in each year of the four year pact. The 5,400 workers in Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 416 ratified the contract Thursday night after union officials had recommended it.

Spokesmen for Local 416 had made it clear early on in negotiations that it would be reluctant to use the strike mandate given to them by the membership. Instead, they broke with 23,000 CUPE inside workers to negotiate an agreement that is now being used as a sledgehammer to force the inside workers to accept a similar concessions laden contract.

The Local 416 agreement destroys job security protection for any worker who does not have 15 years seniority by 2019. The City had insisted on this provision to enable it to move forward with plans to further privatize garbage collection and other services by the end of the decade. In addition, sick benefits and pharmaceutical plans were also weakened.

Union officials refused to announce the actual vote numbers. Many lower seniority workers strenuously opposed the deal.

Meanwhile, 23,000 inside municipal workers in CUPE Local 79 began a work-to-rule last week as City negotiators and Mayor John Tory attempted to push through a contract similar to the outside workers. By Sunday, negotiations had broken down. Tory then ordered the city’s “final offer” be placed on the municipality’s public website as a clear threat that its next step may be to unilaterally force the membership to vote on the deal.

With a huge portion of the Local 79 workforce subject to precarious employment conditions (temporary work, seasonal employment, part-time hours, etc.), the issues of job security and stable scheduling have become paramount amongst the membership. It is estimated that, if accepted, 30 percent of the 23,000 inside workers would become vulnerable to layoff or privatization.



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