

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 March 2016

Two-day strike by Argentine municipal workers over wage raise

Municipal workers in Argentina's Santa Fe province struck on March 10 and 11 to press their wage demand. The workers, members of the Festram provincial city workers union federation, had voted for the strike action in assembly the week before.

Festram and municipal negotiators have held a number of parity talks, with the city holding fast to its 28.5 percent offer, while Festram so far has refused to budge from its 32 percent demand. A Festram official called the officials' offer "below the salary guidelines of last year and in spite of the new inflationary outbreak."

Nonetheless, the parties resumed talks on March 11 during the second day of the strike. Festram claimed "the highest" adherence to the walkout of "superior to 90 percent throughout the province."

The strike went forward despite a call by the Labor Ministry for "obligatory conciliation" talks and a halt to the strike. Ministry head Julio Genesini announced that "the law foresees the application of legal proceedings and sanction of" for those who do not observe the "respite" in the conflict.

Uruguayan "supergas" workers strike, occupy plant to demand salary board representation

A group of workers at the La Tablada liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) plant in Montevideo, Uruguay, stopped work and occupied the facility on March 10. Since the use of tanks of LPG—called "supergas"—is widespread in Uruguay, the stoppage sparked fears of shortages.

A report in *El País* cited remarks by a spokesman for the Uruguayan Commercial and Services Employees Federation regarding the action. He said that the workers are not members of the plant's Sole Supergas Syndicate and that the union does not support them. The workers demand that they be given the right to represent themselves in the Labor and Social Security Ministry's Salary Councils.

Guyanese teachers protest appointment, promotion policies

Teachers in Guyana have been picketing in front of the office of the Teaching Services Commission (TSC) in past months to protest the commission's policies, especially regarding appointments and promotions. The Guyana Teachers Union (GTU), which has organized the pickets, claims that the TSC has been breaching laws governing the promotion process, and that they are biased and demoralize teachers.

GTU General Secretary Coretta McDonald complained to *Guyana Times* reporters, "We have made our demands and we are hoping that at that meeting, our demands are going to be met. If not, then we will have to

do what we have to do ... we should start thinking of having a nationwide protest or a nationwide shutdown of the system." McDonald added, "The huge change we want to see is the removal of the TSC, the members of the TSC and have a new commission established."

Dominican Republic hospital workers hold 72-hour walkout over wages and pensions

Doctors at state-run hospitals in the Dominican Republic began a three-day strike March 9. Health care workers reported to their workplaces but performed no duties. Emergency services and attention to patients in critical condition were not suspended, but consultations, lab tests and elective surgeries were.

Striking workers demonstrated in front of public hospitals, chanting and carrying picket signs. The protesters included doctors, nurses, bioanalysts, pharmacists and psychologists.

The strike call was made by the Dominican Medical College (CMD), which is demanding decent salaries for doctors, who average about US\$800 per month. CMD is calling for a 60 percent hike. Other demands include better pensions, improved working conditions and investment of 5 percent of gross domestic product in the health sector.

Antiguan dockworkers strike to protest inadequate safety equipment

On March 7, some 120 workers at St. John's, the chief port city of the Caribbean island of Antigua, clocked in but refused to go onto the port grounds. The workers' stoppage was meant to dramatize the lack of safety equipment and clothing.

Workers at the facility, who are members of the Antigua & Barbuda Workers' Union (ABWU), have complained to the Port Authority (PA) repeatedly without result. ABWU deputy director Chester Hughes told the *Antigua Observer*, "The port is a very dangerous place to work—a high-risk workplace. The necessary gear and equipment must always be in place."

However, within hours the PA had met with ABWU reps and reached an agreement. The PA promised that the workers would receive hardhats in a week, illuminated vests in a month, and additional safety gear ... in 45 days.

Trinidadian asphalt workers protest deadlock in negotiations

Scores of workers held a protest at the headquarters of Lake Asphalt of Trinidad and Tobago, an asphalt mining, processing and exporting

company products company located near Pitch Lake in southwest Trinidad. The workers were protesting the lack of progress in talks with the Contractors and General Workers Union (CGWU).

CGWU Vice President Joseph Phillip told reporters that Lake Asphalt verbally agreed to a 14 percent wage increase last September, but it has not signed anything. Nor has it said anything about the “position of this acceptance.” “Workers need to know what is going on,” Phillip said.

The union now says that it has given an ultimatum to the company: meet for dialogue or the union will call massive protests outside the Chief Personnel Officer’s office.

Phillip was quick to add that the CGWU is willing to reopen talks to see what the CPO feels the union should settle for. “We might accept ... but nobody is telling us anything,” he said. “Nobody has seen it fit to call the union and say, ‘look we cannot pay Y, we could pay X.’ We are asking the powers that be, please call us and let us have some dialogue.”

Strike continues at Missouri industrial plant

The strike by members of United Steelworkers Local 11-770 against the Polar Tank Trailer plant in Springfield, Missouri, has entered its sixth week with no resolution in sight. Somewhere between 135 or 160 workers walk the picket line, depending upon whether one accepts the company or union’s figures. More than 70 workers have resigned from the union and many have crossed the picket line to work alongside management and nonunion workers.

Since the old agreement expired in October, the company has terminated 15 workers. Among the contested contract issues is a lower-tier wage for new employees, a new attendance policy and contract language referred to by the company as “Standards of Conduct,” which workers believe will allow management to fire employees at will.

Picket line clashes during the first week of the strike led the Steelworkers’ union to enter into a voluntary “Joint Stipulated Preliminary Injunction” that limits picketing to six workers at an entrance. Union officials have sought to condition workers to a protracted strike and illusions that the National Labor Relations Board will provide a favorable ruling based on infractions committed by the company to intimidate workers in the run-up to the strike.

United Airlines workers protest contract negotiations at corporate board meeting

Hundreds of airline mechanics protested at an investors’ conference March 8 of United Continental Holdings, the parent company of United Airlines. Some 9,000 mechanics, represented by the Teamsters union, voted down a contract February 16 by 93 percent and authorized strike action.

The proposal, rife with concessions, included: a lower-tier wage scale for new hires and hefty increases for workers to maintain health care coverage. Past cuts in pensions, four years without a wage increase, and the outsourcing of jobs have added to the tension.

The investors’ conference highlighted a proxy contest between two factions of investors who are seeking to fill six board positions for the company. Teamsters President James Hoffa is seeking to line up with one faction of investors in the proxy fight. Hoffa claimed the union was “neutral” in the proxy contest, but he went on to say, “The Teamsters have respect for how Gordon Bethune addressed labor and operational

concerns when he was at Continental.”

Hoffa attempted to palm off the fiction that support to one faction could “realign executive pay, improve passenger service and reach a fair contract for their mechanics.”

Saskatoon transit union begins job action

Bus drivers and other transit workers in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, are preparing further job action after refusing to wear their uniforms to work this week, with union leaders saying they hope to avoid an all-out strike.

Transit workers in Saskatoon have been without a contract since 2012 and are fighting to win gains in line with eight other public sector union deals that were recently struck. A continuing obstacle in negotiations for a new contract between the city and the Amalgamated Transit Workers Union (ATU) is proposed changes to the pension plan that would increase payments from workers.

Since 2012 transit workers have faced an illegal lockout and another lockout notice from the city. While they have shown their determination to mount a challenge to these attacks, union leaders remain determined to avoid any escalation of their job action.

Manitoba distillery workers on strike

Fifty-three workers at the Crown Royal plant in Gimli, Manitoba, north of Winnipeg, went on strike last week after voting 98 percent against the company’s last contract offer.

The Gimli plant and the Crown Royal label are owned by global liquor giant Diageo, while workers at the plant are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Wages, vacation time and various benefit provisions remain obstacles to a new agreement. The contract that workers rejected included a 4.5 percent wage increase, according to company negotiators.

Supply for Crown Royal is in great demand since being named whiskey of the year, but Diageo North America has assured customers that it does not expect a supply interruption due to what it ominously calls its “robust continuity plans”.



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