

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 April 2016

## National strike, protests by teachers in Argentina against president's policies

Teachers, students and other workers across Argentina participated in a work stoppage and protest actions on April 4 against the policies of the administration of President Mauricio Macri.

The mobilizations were called by the CTERA and SADOP teachers' federations, but a number of other union members and supporters joined in.

In Buenos Aires, over 6,000 education workers marched to protest Macri's first 100 days, which were marked by layoffs and firings, inflation, repressive anti-protest "protocols," attacks on pensions and subsidies and the rises in utility bills and transportation fares. Banners and placards calling for justice for Carlos Fuentealba, a teacher and left-wing activist shot in the back at point-blank range by police in an April 5, 2007 protest, peppered the march.

A particular target of protesters' ire was the approval by the House of Deputies of a debt deal with "vulture" fund holders that will bring yet more hardship upon the Argentine working class. The deal was approved not only by members of Macri's right-wing PRO party, but by Peronist Justicialista and FPV legislators as well.

Large mobilizations also took place in other locations, including Río Negro, Neuquén, Tucumán, Santiago del Estero, Mendoza, Santa Cruz and Tierra del Fuego, where protesters were joined by a group of state workers who have inhabited an encampment for over a month to protest the governor's austerity measures.

## Argentine medical workers hold two-day strike over salaries, labor conditions

Doctors and medical professionals at hospitals in Buenos Aires province struck for 48 hours on April 7 and 8 to press their demands for a higher raise and improved working conditions. The walkout was observed at 80 provincial hospitals and also affected eleven other provinces: Tucumán, Córdoba, Chaco, Santa Fe, Neuquén, Mendoza, Jujuy, San Juan, Tierra del Fuego, La Rioja and Formosa.

The Cicop health professionals union is demanding a 40 percent raise, while the provincial government offered a 5 percent raise for January and February, with a 15 percent increase between March and June, an offer that Cicop secretary general Fernando Corsiglia called "notably insufficient."

A Cicop congress rejected the offer and voted for the two-day strike, voting also to hold a 72-hour strike beginning April 12, "if possible, coordinating with the other provincial state unions." Cicop affiliates have engaged in six short strikes since the beginning of the year: four 24-hour stoppages in February and March and four 48-hour strikes in March.

## Chilean airline workers strike for better pay, conditions, job security

Over 340 pilots, crew members and operations workers at Sky Airlines, based at Comodoro Arturo Merino Benítez International Airport in Santiago, Chile, walked off the job at midnight, April 4. The strike, originally planned for 48 hours, followed the failure of talks between the Pilots, Cabin Crew and Operations Workers Union (EOV) and Sky management. The union had already postponed the strike for five days while talks continued.

Sky is "the second largest airline in the country behind rival LAN Airlines. It serves international routes to Argentina, Brazil, Perú and Bolivia. It operates under a semi-low cost model. Compared to other European or US low cost carriers, it has a smaller business model, lower wages for its employees, and lucrative regulatory requirements."

Workers complain that with the lowering of ticket prices, their wages are falling and the quality of their work has suffered, putting their job security at risk. Union president Cristián Neira told Radio Cooperativa, "The principal demands are to regularize salaries, because we need worthy wages that are in accord with the market; we also need to regularize our workdays, which have doubled."

About 15,000 passengers were affected by the strike. Sky canceled or delayed flights, arranged with interurban bus companies to provide some trips, and rescheduled or offered flights through other airlines, but refused to return to talks. The union, which had promised to resume work as soon as an agreement was signed, was compelled to extend the strike indefinitely.

## Mexican technical teachers strike for salary raise, school director's dismissal

Teachers at 57 educational centers of the Scientific and Technological Studies College (CECyTE) throughout the state Guanajuato, Mexico went on strike and occupied buildings March 30. The teachers, members of the 1,300-member STESCyTE union, demanded a ten percent raise and the removal of the school's director, Virginia Aguilar Santoyo.

The teachers' salary demand was rejected by the administration and by the state's governor, Miguel Márquez Márquez as "totally outside of reality." He claimed that such a wage demand was in the hands of the federal, not state, government and that the state government would ask the Conciliation and Arbitration Board (Julca) to declare the strike illegal.

STESCyTE accused Aguilar Santoyo, who took over in August, of authoritarian, vertical leadership with the imposition of harsh treatment, including "arriving on occasions to provoke confrontations with the teachers in front of groups on the part of management personnel and the legal department. They also alleged harassment "that gravely affected the labor climate, human relations and as a consequence the processes of teaching and learning in many of the schools."

Since the strike began in the midst of the Easter break, it had no effect

until the following Tuesday, April 5, when students returned from vacations. The Julca declared that day against the teachers and ordered them to stop their strike and occupation and return to work. The next day, classes resumed.

### **Terminated Trinidadian steelworkers protest denial of pensions, severance pay**

Former workers for international steel manufacturer ArcelorMittal's Trinidad plant held protests last week against the corporation's policies toward its terminated employees following its recent decision to shut down operations on the island.

On April 4, scores of former workers entered the Point Lisa Industrial Estate facility and chained the gate shut to dramatize their demand that the company break its silence on pensions, savings and outstanding wages owed them. Rajkumar Narinesingh, second vice-president of the Steel Workers' Union of Trinidad and Tobago (SWUTT), told reporters that the workers "want answers and we want them now," and said that the "lockdown" was decided on to pressure the company to meet with the union and the government.

ArcelorMittal reps met with its creditors on April 5, after which they announced that the workers would not get any severance packages apart for one month's pay. The pensions, over a billion Trinidadian dollars (US\$153 million), were placed under the control of an insurance company. Both union bureaucrats and Labour Minister Jennifer Baptiste-Primus bemoaned the situation, with SWUTT president Christopher Henry telling members, "This morning comrades, our worst fears have been realized," and Baptiste-Primus describing the day as a "sad day" for the workers.

Baptiste-Primus noted, "If they were retrenched, they would have been eligible for payment of retrenchment and separation benefits, but they have been sent home with one month's salary." Without explaining how the situation developed in the first place, she offered the workers some cold comfort: "This government will ensure that another ArcelorMittal does not take place in this country," then added right away, "We will have to strike the right balance because we do not want to develop laws that are so draconian that it does not provide an inviting scenario for foreign investors."

On April 9, hundreds of former workers were joined by members of the Joint Trade Union Movement and National Trade Union Centre in an early morning protest march to demand to know how the pension money would be managed. Henry told *Newsday* that the SWUTT and an investor had "written the liquidator to have a meeting to put forward our liabilities that we think should be paid through this process, and we await this response." He also mentioned that the union was, rather belatedly, requesting changes in labor laws.

### **Texas inmates launch strike against slave-like working conditions**

Prisoners incarcerated in seven Texas facilities have been refusing to perform prison labor since April 4 and authorities have responded with a lockdown. The workers accuse the authorities of "slave-like" conditions under which they are forced to work for no compensation or pennies an hour. The prisoners also suffer from poor working conditions, overcrowding and low quality food.

The 172,000 Texas prisoners, the country's largest inmate population,

fabricate products and process food in an industry that is estimated to be around \$2 billion annually. While the prisons are built by taxpayers, the profits from this oppressive system go to private corporations.

Participation in strikes will likely subject prisoners taking part, and particularly the organizers, to severe punishment, including solitary confinement.

### **Toronto area social workers on strike**

One hundred thirty child-protection workers employed by Family and Children's Services (F&CS) of Guelph and Wellington County, west of Toronto, Ontario are on strike this week after rejecting the employer's "final offer" last Wednesday.

This is the second time this year that the workers have rejected a contract proposal brought to them by their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Among the outstanding issues are inequality and fairness in the workplace with the union citing wage increases for management of up to nine percent while workers had their wages frozen for two years.

Workers at F&CS have been without a contract for over a year and while the union said they extended an invitation to the employer to continue negotiations, none are currently scheduled.

### **Ontario upholstery workers on strike**

Workers employed by Morbern Inc. in Cornwall, Ontario, east of Kingston, went on strike last week after contract talks broke down the week before.

The United Steelworkers Union (USW) is the bargaining agent for the 220 workers at the plant, which produces vinyl upholstery fabric for a range of industries from transportation to health care. Their last contract expired at the beginning of the year and the union says the strike is not about wages but largely over inadequate contract provisions for 12-hour shifts, which are becoming more common at the plant. In addition, the union says that payment for disability at the plant is well below the industry standard of two-thirds regular pay.

While the union says that labor relations at the plant have historically been good, a recent change in management has seen such an increase in frictions that a strike was unavoidable.



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