

Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 April 2016

Bank employees in Argentina strike for one day over salaries, sackings

Following the breakdown of talks between representatives of the Banking Association (AB) and private and public banks, bank workers in Argentina held a one-day strike on April 14. In addition to salary demands, firings and planned branch closings were the primary issues.

Sergio Palazzo, AB secretary general, told reporters that “the banks in their reports to their clients are indicating that according to their studies an inflationary rise of between 35 and 40 percent is expected, and they offer us a salary increase below that figure.” He called the banks’ offer of 25 percent “unacceptable.”

Palazzo also denounced the attempts by Juan Curuchet, head of the Banco Provincia in Buenos Aires, to close 42 branches. Curuchet, a member of the right-wing PRO party of President Mauricio Macri, assumed the post in December 2015. The AB is also calling for the rehiring of 47 Banco Central employees who set up an encampment in front of the institution three weeks ago.

There was a high level of participation in the strike. Delegates and workers in Buenos Aires gathered in front of the encampment and then marched through downtown. AB vowed to strike for 48 hours this week if its demands are not met.

Three-day strike by Argentine professors over salary, contract demands

Pre-university and university professors throughout Argentina stopped work for 72 hours from April 13 to 15. The educators, members of the CONADU, CONADU Histórica and FAGDUT education federations, took the action in rejection of the latest offer by the Education Ministry of 25 percent in two payments: 15 percent on May 1 and 10 percent on August 1. The unions, calling the offers “unacceptable,” are demanding 40 percent.

CONADU and CONADU Histórica claimed high adhesion to the strike nationwide—between 80 and nearly 100 percent. At least 27 universities across Argentina were affected by the walkout. Conflicts in talks between the government and unions have dragged on for three months. The teachers already held a one-day strike, which included a march by more than 2,000 teachers to the ministry, on March 30.

A list of demands by striking professors in Catamarca—paralleling those in other locations—included the following: “free parity negotiations, without a ceiling...equal application of the nomenclature for (pre-university and university) teaching posts, effective financing for the application of the Collective Work Agreement (CCT) and for the educational improvement in charge of the institution, a complete national timeline for the implementation of the...CCT, financing of Ad-Honorem positions, elimination of the Profits Tax [a tax on incomes of higher-paid workers].”

Colombian teachers strike over health care

Last week, teachers in the southwestern Colombian department of Cauca struck from April 11 to 15 over health care demands. The teachers are members of the Schoolteachers and Education Workers Association of Cauca (Asoinca). More than 300 occupied offices of the Education Secretariat in the departmental capital, Popayán. On the fifth day, some 6,000 teachers and supporters marched through the city.

Asoinca called the strike to advance its petition that the government turn over funding for health care directly to an entity to be run by Asoinca, called ASOPROSALUD. Funding currently is channeled through the Education Ministry to private providers, an arrangement that Asoinca president Miguel Burbano, in an interview with *desdeabajo.info/colombia*, said “has pummeled the Colombian people.”

Burbano also criticized the Fecode national teachers federation executive, which he said “has been inefficient because instead of counteracting the structure of the health care model, has converted it into a business.” Fecode, however, supported the mobilization, in which Burbano claimed about 95 percent participation.

Education vice minister Victor Saavedra called the strike and its demands “unviable,” citing the 1989 Law 91 that established that “the administration of the resources of the National Educators Social Provision Fund must be through a state or mixed-economy fiduciary entity, in which the state has more than 90 percent of the capital.” He claimed that ASOPROSALUD does not comply with that requirement.

The Education Workers Unitary Syndicate of Cauca (Sutec), which has about 3,500 members, rejected the strike call and the ASOPROSALUD demand, contending that the agency would further deepen the trend toward privatization and would only apply to Asoinca members.

Strike in Dominican Republic for infrastructure, public service improvements

Strikes broke out in a number of northern communities in the Dominican Republic on April 12 over the woeful state of infrastructure and services. An organization called the Broad Front of Popular Struggle (Falpo) organized the work stoppages in Los Ramos, Juan Antonio Alix, Licey-Uveral, Los Arias, Los Paulino, El Pico and other locations. Schools, businesses and transport of cargo and people were affected.

Police arrested some protesters but did not divulge any numbers.

A Falpo spokesman listed demands in some or all of the communities: repaving of streets; provision of drainage systems; electricity 24 hours a day (which in some communities has been cut to 10 or 8 hours); and provision of potable water.

Falpo extended the strike the next day, but called it off on April 14 after reaching an accord with Public Works Ministry engineers, the police and local business representatives.

More Guyanese sugar workers face layoffs as company expands closure plans

On April 12, state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) announced its plans to shut down operations at its La Bonne Intention (LBI) Sugar Estate. GuySuCo already declared its intention to shutter its Wales, West Bank Demerara (WBD) Sugar Estate in the course of the year, putting in jeopardy over 1,700 jobs, on January 18. The LBI closure will add another 800 to the number of workers at risk. GuySuCo already closed some departments in 2011.

The announcement followed a meeting between GuySuCo and the sugar workers' two unions—the Guyana Agriculture and General Workers Union (GAWU) and the National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE). Following the January announcement, workers held a number of protests both with and without the unions' leadership, to no avail.

According to the *Guyana Times*, “Both unions have since expressed utter surprise at this decision by GuySuCo,” with GAWU president Komal Chand complaining that GuySuCo has “once again changed its commitment and position.” The *Times* noted, “Both unions explained that during the meeting, GuySuCo did not disclose when the operations would be closed nor was vital information about employees' future provided.”

A GuySuCo statement contradicted the unions: “Since in 2011, GuySuCo, GAWU and NAACIE met with each worker in the LBI factory over a five-day period to discuss the closure of the LBI factory and their redeployment. The factory was then closed in the same year and workers were redeployed to other positions within the Enmore Estate.” GuySuCo expressed disappointment in the unions' complaint, saying that both were “well aware from the inception that the complete closure of the LBI was in the making.”

Fired Trinidadian steel workers protest government inaction over pensions

In the early morning hours of April 15, dozens of former workers for ArcelorMittal in Trinidad held a sit-down protest at a roundabout near the corporation's Pt Lisas facility. The workers, who lost their jobs as the firm shut down operations, have held several protests since being told that they would not receive any severance pay and that their pensions were being handed over to an insurance company.

According to a *T&T Newsday* report, the protest “came after [Prime Minister Keith] Rowley announced that Government would honour a \$52 million payout to former Caroni 1975 Ltd cane workers, many of whom have also received pensions and acres of state lands.” Christopher Henry, president of the Steel Workers Union (SWUTT), pleaded with Rowley to “clear the air” regarding legislation to safeguard the ex-workers' pensions.

Las Cruces, New Mexico, bus drivers union signs agreement with bus company

The union for bus drivers at the Las Cruces Public Schools accepted a tentative agreement with private contractor School Transportation Service-New Mexico (STS-NM) April 13 after weeks of acrimonious negotiations. The next day, bus drivers ratified the agreement, which the union claimed

contains mechanisms that would resolve outstanding issues, as well as giving a raise to the drivers.

Safety and overcrowding on buses were major issues in the contract dispute.

In the two weeks since 160 union bus drivers for the Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) voted unanimously on March 31 to strike, they had been subjected to a restraining order. Despite this, they held protests—though the restraining order prevented them from picketing at LCPS properties.

The protests, held at the bus yard of their employer, private contractor School Transportation Service-New Mexico (STS-NM), also drew support from retired drivers, nonunion STS-NM employees and residents. However, union officials from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) affiliate Las Cruces Transportation Federation (LCTF) Local 6341, made sure that no disruption of bus service occurred while it negotiated with STS-NM and a federal mediator.

Negotiations had dragged on since last July. After the LC School Board voted April 10 against requesting a further injunction—the temporary restraining order was set to expire that day—LCTF local head Marcos Torres was quick to say that the union would not call the workers out on strike, though the two sides were still far apart. “Right now, we're going back to the table,” he told reporters.

On April 13, about 50 drivers protested in the rain outside STS-NM, as union reps said they were growing more frustrated, making a strike inevitable. Torres complained, “We're tired of this, not really having any meaningful movement.” AFT New Mexico president Stephanie Ly told reporters, “At any point in time, a strike could happen. We're talking, but it looks like a strike is inevitable. We're fed up.”

Later that same day, Torres, AFT New Mexico president Stephanie Ly and STS-NM general manger Van Wamel issued a statement: “The parties have reached a tentative agreement that is subject to ratification by the parties. No specific detail of the tentative agreement will be released at this time.”

Pennsylvania hospital workers press for earlier implementation of \$15 wage

Dozens of hospital workers at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) walked off the job April 14, to demand an earlier implementation of a \$15-an-hour wage and an end to harassment. UPMC issued an announcement two weeks earlier that it would hike starting wages to \$15 an hour, but the measure would not be implemented until 2021.

A press release by striking workers railed against “UPMC's practices of harassing, surveilling, discriminating against and illegally disciplining workers who want to form their union.”

The future wage hike will be lower for workers at UPMC East, an outlying facility. Among those facilities targeted for the \$15 wage hike are UPMC Presbyterian, UPMC Shadyside, UPMC Mercy, Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC, and Children's Hospital of UPMC.

Earlier this month, workers at 42 Pennsylvania nursing homes represented by the Service Employees International Union negotiated contracts that have a \$15-an-hour minimum.

Ontario golf course workers set to strike

More than 100 full and part-time workers at the Beach Grove Golf and

Country Club in Tecumseh, Ontario, outside of Windsor, could be on strike this week if a last-minute deal cannot be reached.

The workers, who are represented by Unifor, voted unanimously in favor of strike action earlier this month after their contract expired April 1. That contract included a wage freeze that the union leadership supported to help pay for a C\$5 million renovation of the Country Club. Now that the work has been completed, workers are determined to get a wage increase in a new contract, and the strike deadline was set for April 19.

Worker hit by car on Rideau Carleton Raceway picket line

Police arrested a 26-year-old man after the vehicle he was driving plowed through a picket line of locked-out Rideau Carleton Raceway workers and injured a man on April 16. The 54-year-old picket was thrown through the air and suffered serious, but not life-threatening, injuries.

The driver of vehicle has been arrested and is facing charges of dangerous operation of a motor vehicle, assault causing bodily harm, assault with a weapon and obstructing or resisting arrest.

Workers at the Rideau Carleton Raceway who have been locked out since December of last year voted last week to reject a new contract offer that, despite some improvements, still contained a three-year wage freeze.

The lockout affects 124 workers including attendants, cashiers and housekeepers who are employed by the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG). The offer for a five-year deal would freeze wages for the first three years and only increase by 1.75 percent in the final two, and this follows a wage freeze that has been in place since 2009. The union is asking for annual wage increases of 3 percent in a new contract to bring them closer to parity with workers at other OLG operations in the province.



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