

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 April 2016

Higher education instructors to strike this week in Argentina

Last Friday, unions representing public university instructors called for strike action this week. The issue is wages. In response to an accelerating inflation rate, university professors are demanding a 40 to 45 percent wage increase for this year. An offer from the Education Ministry—15 percent in May and an additional 10 percent in August—was summarily rejected, as was a second offer of 15 percent in May and October and a wage reopener in November.

Leaders of the National Federation of University Instructors (CONADU) representing various public universities declared a 48-hour strike this Wednesday and Thursday, combined with teach-ins to discuss the issues with students, and a mass rally at the Education Ministry in Buenos Aires in the first week of May.

Other university unions declared their intention to strike the entire week, combined with teach-ins, the barricading of streets and mass picketing.

Bank Workers strike in Buenos Aires

A two-day strike by Buenos Aires bank employees took place on Thursday and Friday last week. The bank workers are demanding the rehiring of 47 employees of the Argentine Central Bank, and a wage increase above 30 percent.

The firing of the Central Bank workers took place several weeks ago, when newly-appointed Central Bank chief Federico Sturzenegger sacked the 47 workers claiming that these had been employed by the government of president Cristina Fernandez as a political favor. The union (la Bancaria) rejects that pretext and claims the sackings targeted two groups of employees, those that were in charge of investigating economic crimes during the Videla dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, and the group in charge of money laundering investigations.

On Thursday, April 14 the bank workers carried out a 24-hour strike over the issue of the layoffs.

Colombia: Health workers protest

Doctors, nurses and other health workers from hospitals and Clinics across the city of Medellín, and of western Antioquia Department rallied last Thursday to protest and call attention to the health crisis of that region, and of the rest of Colombia, and to demand that the government of president Juan Manuel Santos provide adequate funds. The demonstrators chanted, “without health care there is no peace,” in reference to the peace treaty that the Santos administration has negotiated with the FARC guerrillas.

Protesters pointed out that just as the conflict with the guerrillas left thousands of dead, the present health system is responsible for the deaths of many others on a daily basis. “How can we provide adequate care under the health conditions of the present system? How can we care for the new citizens [the former FARC fighters] and still care for those that always have relied on us?” asked Juan Manuel Serra, of the San Vicente University Hospital.

Students occupy Río de Janeiro high schools

Río de Janeiro high school students have occupied twenty-eight state-run schools, normal and technical, since March 21. The students have declared that they are acting in defense of public education and against the attacks on education from the state and federal governments. Students feel that this is the only way to capture the government’s attention.

The wave of occupations represents an escalation from the mass demonstrations that took place across Río de Janeiro State earlier this year demanding the rebuilding of schools, the expansion of education and the provision of needed

resources and equipment. The students point out that if the government at the state and federal levels has enough revenues to subsidize big business, it is imperative that it come to the aid of the school system.

Ohio auto parts manufacturer agrees to unionization after workers threaten strike

Some 60 workers at an auto supplier in Avon, Ohio, voted to join the United Auto Workers. The workforce is entirely comprised of temporary workers paid \$11.50 an hour or less and they are demanding higher wages and benefits.

According to the United Auto Workers, Detroit Chassis, which owns the plant, agreed to union recognition after workers threatened to strike. A cessation of work would have brought production at Ford's Avon assembly plant to halt.

Two workers fired in wake of one-day strike at Chicago O'Hare airport

Two security guards at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport were fired April 15 for speaking to the media about their strike. The one-day strike by security officers, baggage handlers, cabin cleaners, custodians and wheelchair attendants was over demands of \$15 an hour and health care benefits. Sadaf Subijano, one of the fired security guards, declared, "I was shocked. Twenty years and this is what I got."

Subijano's employer, Universal Security, informed her by letter: "Your comments have included sensitive security information... As you are aware... Universal personnel are not permitted to speak to the media regarding security operations at the airport."

Subijano said she had experienced previous retaliation for union activity such as being scheduled for double-shifts and being reassigned to a different location. In comments during the strike about lack of paid sick days and past retaliation to the *Chicago Tribune*, she mentioned security officers only have a radio to communicate with the command center.

Toronto food terminal workers strike

Over 20 workers, employed at the Ontario Food Terminal in Toronto's west end, are on strike for a first contract with the Teamsters union to bring wages and working conditions in line with other unionized workers.

According to the union, many of these workers who are mostly immigrants earning between \$14 and \$17 an hour, have not seen a wage increase in 10 years. The main issue in negotiations are wages and benefits with the union fighting to bring their pay up to the industry standard of around \$20 an hour. Picketers who spoke to the media report high turnover at the non-union companies at the food terminal with shift calls that can be highly erratic.

Picket lines went up outside the food terminal last week. Trucks entering and leaving the giant food distribution facility were delayed and stalled traffic along the busy route. There have been reports of vehicles charging through the picket line but no charges have been laid and no serious injuries have yet been reported.

Toronto Hydro engineers move closer to strike

Around 60 engineers employed by the giant electric utility, Toronto Hydro Corp., voted nearly unanimously last week in favor of strike action after months of combative contract negotiations with management.

The union reports that this is the first time they have ever taken a strike vote. They say it was necessary in order to fight major concession demands by the employer including the elimination of retirement benefits and parental leave for new-hires in a new contract. Members of the Society of Energy Professionals, these engineers are responsible for work on the city's hydro vaults, poles and wires.

Following the vote last week, the union held informational pickets at Toronto Hydro offices across the city in what was termed "a normal part of the bargaining process." Bargaining is scheduled to continue this week.



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