Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 May 2016

Three-day strike for wage raise by Argentine health and judicial workers

Hospital and judicial workers in Argentina's Buenos Aires province began a 72-hour strike April 27 to press their demands for improved salaries and working conditions. The striking workers, members respectively of the Cicop health professionals union and the AJB judicial workers union, are demanding between 45 and 50 percent raises, in opposition to the provincial government's offer of 16.7 percent. In a press release, the unions denounced the offer, which "wouldn't even mange to cover inflation accumulated in the first four months of the year."

On the second day of the walkout, striking workers and their supporters in the provincial capital La Plata marched to the mansion of Governor María Eugenia Vidal, a member of the Cambiemos ("Let's change") alliance of right-wing president Mauricio Macri, who has overseen massive attacks on the working class since taking office in December.

The three-day stoppage is the latest in a series of limited actions by Cicop this year to pressure government negotiators in parity talks. Emergency services continued at hospitals, but Cicop head Fernando Corsiglia told reporters that "today the hospitals are empty." He warned that the actions would continue this week if the government did not improve its salary proposal.

Protests in Argentina over layoffs, price hikes, taxes

Tens of thousands of workers held an early May Day gathering on April 29 in the city of Buenos Aires to protest the policies of reactionary president Mauricio Macri. The actions were called by five union federations, or rather three factions of the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) and two wings of the CTA (Workers' Central of Argentina).

Since Macri took office, about 120,000 public and private sector workers have been laid off. Withholding taxes on workers and retirees have been raised, utility rates and prices have gone up and legislation against protests has been passed. In March, members of both Macri's PRO party and former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's FPV (Victory Front) passed a debt deal with vulture fund holders that imposes the repayment burden on the backs of the working class.

At the Buenos Aires rally, CGT head Hugo Moyano revealed the union bureaucrats' real attitude toward the "reforms," which had already begun under Fernández and with the collaboration of the unions. He denounced Macri's unilateral imposition of the austerity measures, saying, "We do not seek to govern jointly, but he must consult the unions."

Bolivian minibus drivers protest restrictions, block roads

Minibus and taxi drivers in Cochabamba, Bolivia, blocked at least 19 traffic points on April 28 to protest a proposed city ordinance that would limit their numbers. Included in the targeted points were the central bus depot and a bridge that connects the cities of Quillacollo and Cochabamba, which were blocked in the early morning. Later, traffic was obstructed on the principal highways in the city center.

The proposed ordinance, currently awaiting analysis and approval in the Municipal Council, would gradually reduce the number of "minitransporte" vehicles—i.e., minibuses and taxis—in favor of larger, mass transit vehicles, within three years. The Cochabamba Free Transit Federation, which consists of urban and interprovincial drivers in 10 lines, agreed to meet with government authorities for talks.

Peruvian sugar workers' strike reaches 40th day

A strike by workers for Peruvian sugar firm Casa Grande reached its 40th day on April 30 with no sign of ending. The 1,000 sugar workers, members of the Casa Grande and Annexes Sugar Workers Syndicate, downed their tools on March 22 following the company's refusal to meet their wage demands. The company called the demand to raise their monthly wages by 260 soles (US$79) and add a 1,800 soles (US$548) bonus "disproportionate."

Casa Grande is Peru's largest producer of sugar for national consumption, producing 305,000 tons per year, and the nation's second-largest exporter of sugar.

The latest meeting between the union and management broke down, with a union advisor saying that "it is unheard of that a man can be so stubborn, Stanley Simon is no good for negotiating," referring to the superintendent, who has stonewalled in negotiations from the beginning.

The strike, which has been declared illegal, has been marked by confrontations with the police, with at least 22 striking workers having been arrested. Responding to company expressions of "fear of excesses," about 300 cops are currently guarding the plant. The company has requested the intervention of a mediator from the Labor Ministry.

Uber drivers in Dominican Republic strike to protest fare change

Drivers for the Uber app-based ride service in the Dominican Republic cities of Santiago and Santo Domingo refused to drive April 27 following the company's announcement of a fare decrease. On that day, the company contacted its users with this message: "Starting today, your trips will be 30 percent more economical! Know the new fares and start to travel more." Shortly afterwards, the message "There are no available vehicles" appeared on many Uber users' cellphones.

The fare drop announcement was made without the knowledge or consent of Uber drivers, called "socios" (associates) in Spanish, who use

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their own or rented cars to transport customers. Since Uber does not own the vehicles, it maintains the fiction that the drivers are “independent contractors,” responsible for the expenses and upkeep of their cars, not subject to labor laws or regulations, and not entitled to benefits.

Some cities have imposed regulations on the service, and it has also been subjected to a number of lawsuits brought against it by individuals, private entities and organizations, including the National Federation of the Blind. Uber lawyers’ usual claim is that it is not responsible for the actions of “independent contractors.”

Some 6,000 Uber drivers operate in the two Dominican cities. Somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 drivers disconnected from the app. Driver Juan González told *diariolibre.com* that the drivers on average have cars that cost “400,000 to a half-million pesos” (US$8,700-US$11,000) and that carrying a passenger for 50 to 60 pesos (US$1.10-US$1.30) “isn’t viable.”

Bermudan teachers protest public schools’ deplorable conditions

About 50 public school teachers held a demonstration along a roadside in Bermuda April 26 to bring attention to the deplorable condition of the island’s public schools. The protest followed the release last February of a Ministry of Education report, the School Reorganisation Score, which highlighted a number of problems in primary schools, including termites, rats, leaky roofs and mold.

The teachers, members of the Bermuda Union of Teachers, have complained about the conditions for months—in some cases, for years—but the Education Ministry has turned a deaf ear. Union secretary-general Mike Charles said that following the report, Minister of Education Wayne Scott visited 18 schools. “Since that visit, there has been absolute silence until last night, when he appeared on TV just because of the demonstrations.”

The union is calling for the One Bermuda Alliance (OBA) government to allocate more money for education. The OBA has cut the education budget every year since it took power in 2012.

Maryland food warehouse operation closes after workers refuse concessions

Some 190 drivers and warehouse workers went on strike April 27 at a US Foods distribution center in Severn, Maryland. The unfair labor practices strike comes on the heels of a company announcement that it plans to close the facility and transfer work to other facilities in Virginia and Pennsylvania.

According to the Teamsters, which represents the workers, US Foods demanded $8 million in concessions, including wages and switching from a defined pension plan to the inferior 401(k). The cuts would translate into an annual loss of about $40,000 in wages and benefits per worker.

US Foods is the second-largest food distributor in the United States, operating in 48 states with 25,000 workers. It was purchased by Kohlberg Kravis Roberts and a second private equity firm in 2007. The company recently filed to go public and carries some $4.7 million in debt.

Workers strike Colorado food distributor

Members of Teamsters Local 455 walked off the job April 28 on an unfair labor practices strike at a Fountain, Colorado, food distribution center owned by Advantage Logistics, a subsidiary of Supervalu Inc. The 270 workers are seeking parity with workers at another of the company’s operations in Aurora.

Fountain workers, who start at $13.11 an hour, make an average $2.57 an hour less than Aurora workers and have inferior pensions and health care. Supervalue said it will continue operations with non-union employees.

Toronto library workers to strike

More than 2,000 library workers in 100 libraries across the city of Toronto are set to go on strike this week in a fight against a new round of contract concessions and possible layoffs.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), and more than half of them are part-time with little job security, and even that is now in jeopardy in a new contract. In addition, the employer is offering wage increases below the rate of inflation and the elimination of job security of all staff with less than five years’ seniority.

Negotiation are set to continue past the strike deadline, but in the event of a work stoppage, all libraries in the city would be closed and mobile and delivery services halted.

City workers stage one-day strike in Quebec

Blue-collar workers in the city of Côte St. Luc, adjacent to Montreal, Quebec, staged a one-day strike on May 2 after working without a contract for three and a half years.

Members of the Syndicat des cols bleus regroupés de Montréal, which is part of CUPE, voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action in February, but union leaders have to date resisted any action beyond this one-day strike. The city claims that wage demands by the union are greater than what workers in Montreal receive, but union leaders say that elected officials have chosen to ignore workers, which does not serve their constituents.

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