

Workers Struggles: The Americas

10 May 2016

Latin America

Twelve-hour strike by Argentine petroleum workers against firings

Petroleum industry workers in Comodoro Rivadavia, the largest city in Argentina's southern Chubut province, stopped work from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on May 6. The Chubut Private Petroleum and Gas Syndicate called the action to protest recent firings in the petroleum and gas sector, which accounts for 80 percent of the province's economy.

Truck drivers, mechanics, propane service station workers, teachers, municipal workers and others joined the temporary walkout and mobilization. Organizers claimed that 50,000 people participated; police estimated half that number, out of a total population of about 200,000.

Union leaders called the strike to denounce the breaking of promises signed in February and April by the national government and businesses to maintain production and not to fire personnel. At least 55 workers have been terminated by the private Pan American Energy and state YPF firms.

At a rally in the city's downtown, the gas workers' union secretary general warned, "They take away one more position and we go on a general strike."

Honduran transport workers union calls off national strike against violence

Representatives of workers in the overland cargo, interurban and urban mass transit, and taxi sectors voted on May 5 in a closed-door meeting not to carry out a national strike planned for May 6. The job action had been proposed in response to violence committed by criminal gangs against drivers, their helpers and passengers.

Instead, their union federation, the CNT, issued a statement calling for "public policies against violence and extortion" and for "judicialization"—i.e. use of the courts—of crimes perpetrated against bus owners, drivers, helpers and passengers.

More than 2,000 people have died from violence committed by criminal gangs who demand a "war tax" from their victims, and who kill drivers and burn buses if they do not get it. The CNT complained, "We have met an infinity of times [with police and authorities] and in all the meetings we plan measures and of all of them none have been carried out, and that is what has us worried."

The statement lamented that authorities show positive indications

regarding the fight against violence and insecurity, but the reality is otherwise. For example, although the Military Police promised to assign 500 officers to guard terminals, "not even 150 arrived, and now there are no military police." The CNT reps will meet again on May 19.

Strike by Haitian public hospital workers enters sixth week

A strike begun March 28 by doctors, nurses and maintenance staff at four public hospitals in Haiti was still in force as of May 6, marking five weeks that they have been out. The hospital workers, who primarily serve Haiti's poor, "have walked off the job to protest a chronic dearth of even the most basic medical supplies, dismal pay and unsafe working conditions," according to an AP report.

The unsafe working conditions include exposure to violence and sometimes armed threats by patients and their relatives, in a situation where the hospitals are chronically understaffed and lacking adequate equipment and supplies.

The government and media have depicted the strikers as unreasonable, due to the dire state of the economy. They claim that their salary demand is extravagant, and further allege manipulation by "a political hand" close to the former government.

The resident physicians deny the accusations. Dr. Joseph, a third-year resident in obstetrics and gynecology, told reporters that the residents earn \$120 a month, a figure that has not changed for over 20 years.

St. Lucian metal workers protest pay, conditions, layoffs

Holding hand-painted cardboard signs with slogans like "We want Justice," "Exploitation, then Redundancy?" and "No More," a group of workers at Saint Lu Metals Limited in Vieux Fort, St. Lucia held a protest at the entrance gate of the premises on May 5. The workers decided independently on the action the day before a meeting of management and the National Workers Union (NWU), which was recently recognized as the workers' bargaining agent.

Saint Lu management had locked out the workers for four days after they walked out April 28 upon hearing of plans to restructure the workplace and lay off 11 workers. Management claims that the lockout was a response to an "unsanctioned industrial action." On one day, "the company had two armed police security at its operational gate," reports *St. Lucia News Online*.

After consulting with the union, the company laid off "only" six

workers, causing fears of job insecurity. Workers have also accused Saint Lu of unfair treatment, poor pay and working conditions, and overwork.

The United States

Protest in Albuquerque at Verizon shareholders meeting

About 200 Verizon workers and supporters gathered May 5 in front of the Hotel Albuquerque, where Verizon shareholders were holding their meeting. The protesters demonstrated in support of the strike by 39,000 Verizon workers in northeastern states. They also denounced the \$48 million compensation package being awarded to the communication giant's top five executives.

In addition to the executive payout, "shareholders also rejected three union-backed proposals to name a board chair independent of Verizon's CEO and impose more control over compensation and severance payments for executives," according to the *Albuquerque Journal*.

The protesters marched outside the hotel, which is located in the city's historic Old Town, with some blocking traffic, staging a sit-in on Rio Grande Boulevard. Police removed 15 protesters and issued citations for obstructing traffic.

Strike against giant food distributor spreads in southwest United States

Some 100 workers at the US Foods distribution facility in Corona, California went on strike May 1 and have spread their picket lines to 10 other facilities in southern California and Arizona. The strike called by the Teamsters comes as negotiations have bogged down, and is an unfair labor practice stoppage based on technical issues and discrimination. In California, some 300 workers at La Mirada and Vista are honoring picket lines while another 220 workers in Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona, who struck for four days back in February, are refusing to cross picket lines.

Back on April 27, workers in Severn, Maryland, went on strike after US Foods announced it would close the warehouse operation affecting 190 workers. At that facility, the company was demanding \$8 million in concessions amounting to average annual cuts of about \$40,000 per worker in wages and benefits. On May 5, US Foods declared that workers in Baltimore, Maryland had launched a sympathy strike on behalf of the Severn workers.

US Foods is the second largest food distributor in the United States, operating in 48 states with 25,000 workers. In 2014 it brought in \$23 billion in annual revenue. The company recently filed to go public and carries some \$4.7 million in debt.

Canada

Strikes hit residential construction in Ontario

At least 6,000 workers in construction trades across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) are on strike after their contracts expired at the end of April.

Various bargaining units of the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) along with other unions representing frame, trim, drywall and tile trades are either on strike or preparing to go on strike, bringing housing construction to a halt just as it enters the busiest season.

Provincial legislation limits the duration of strikes in the construction industry, meaning that four of the unions currently on strike would be required back on the job by the middle of June, with any outstanding issues going to binding arbitration. While wages remains among the most contentious issues, payment of safety and insurance premiums are also in dispute.

BC bus line locks out workers

Seventy drivers, mechanics, and other staff at Pacific Coach Lines (PCL) in southern British Columbia are locked out this week in what their union says is an effort by the company to avoid paying severance to laid off workers.

According to Unifor, which represents workers at the company, most of PCL's 77 employees were laid off last year when they lost a bid for the coastal shuttle service. Although workers were promised a severance package, the company has since reneged on that deal, forcing a confrontation. Union leaders point out that although workers gave them a strike mandate last year, they chose not to exercise it in the hope they could negotiate a severance package.

While the dispute has been sent to arbitration, the lockout could still affect shuttle service on coastal routes in BC.

BC concrete workers strike

Sixteen workers employed by Hyland Precast Inc. in the town of Cumberland on Vancouver Island, walked off the job last week after two years of negotiations failed to produce a first contract.

Striking workers at the concrete plant are represented by the International Union of Operating Engineers and negotiators for the union say they are hoping the job action will lead to binding mediation. The union says that in addition to winning standard terms and conditions of work in a contract they are fighting to have three workers reinstated who were fired after voting in favor of strike action last week.



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