

Workers Struggles: The Americas

17 May 2016

Argentine miners strike to protest job cuts

Workers at the Cerro Negro gold and silver mine in Argentina's southern Santa Cruz province downed their tools indefinitely May 13 in the face of the implementation of plans to reduce the workforce. The workers accuse the mine operator, Canadian firm Goldcorp, of cutting positions under cover of voluntary retirement. Currently the Cerro Negro complex employs some 2,700 workers.

The directors of the AOMA miners union claimed, "They aren't retirements, much less voluntary," but rather "a systematic plan of firings." The firm has brought in management personnel, most of whom do not speak Spanish, from Canada and the US, making communication and negotiations difficult.

Workers also accuse the company of not complying with the "70/30 law" that stipulates the hiring of Santa Cruz residents for 70 percent of the workforce. A report in *Clarín* quoted a union official: "While the Goldcorp executives go around to fairs, luncheons and business meetings, promising investments that supposedly will give the impulse to the project, the reality down on the ground, which is what the workers know, is very different," with workers performing dangerous work under a cloud of possible "voluntary retirement."

Local businesses have also complained that Goldcorp has not fulfilled promises to "buy local" in the town of 5,000 located near the mine complex.

Two-day strike by Argentine doctors over wages, working conditions

Resident doctors at public hospitals in Buenos Aires walked off the job on May 11 and 12 to demand improvements in their wages and working conditions. The striking doctors also protested against precariousness, with 55-hour to 75-hour workweeks and ward duties of 24 hours or longer.

Moreover, they demanded a larger salary raise than the government's offer of 14 to 17 percent, much lower than this year's projected rate of inflation. The State Workers Association (ATE) called for parity talks and a raise of 40 percent.

The Minister of Modernization, Jorge Rey, has threatened to "judicialize," i.e., use the courts, to illegalize the strike, and to dock the pay of striking doctors. Rey claimed that the hospital functioned "with normality" despite the strike, a claim that was emphatically disputed by ATE delegates, who said that there were large numbers of doctors and nurses who participated.

Chilean taxi drivers block traffic to protest Uber, Cabify

The morning of May 12 saw massive traffic jams in Santiago, Chile as taxi drivers blocked the Alameda, the city's main avenue. At least 5,000 taxicabs clogged the major artery from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. to protest the app-based Uber and Cabify ride services.

The protesting cabbies called on the government to prohibit the operation of these and similar ride services, complaining that they skirt the law and should be investigated. A document produced by the Taxi Confederation of Chile said that the drivers "are not professionals, nor are their vehicles submitted to continuous technical reviews." The report also noted that the Uber and Cabify drivers, who are called "associates" and who work without contractual agreements, are not required to pay taxes on their pay but are charged 25 percent of their fares by the companies.

Union officials demanded inquiries of Uber et al. by the Internal Taxation Service. They also called for the National Consumers Service to investigate them, since customers "cannot complain about bad service."

Chilean drywall factory workers strike over broken promises

About 60 workers at the Novo Chile drywall plant in Santiago, Chile began an indefinite strike on May 11. The workers walked out over the failure of management to come through on promises of improved salaries and "other themes that are pending with the business," according to a diariodeldia.cl report.

The report notes, "The first days were in a closed movement, but they decided to publicly demonstrate at not seeing any advances on their demands." The striking workers have since demonstrated on a major highway.

Mexican teachers strike, march over social, political, economic demands

Teachers in Section 22 of the National Education Workers Coordinator (CNTE), and parents of students, marched in Oaxaca, capital of the Mexican state of the same name May 12. A CNTE official claimed that over 11,000 people participated in the mobilization.

Demonstrators stopped in front of various official offices along their route, including the State Institute of Public Education and the Human Rights Defender of the People of Oaxaca, before converging on the city's zócalo, or main square.

The march and rally were held to demonstrate support for a strike called for May 15 to demand dialogue with the government over pro-business education reforms.

Protests in Suriname against electricity hike, cost of living, austerity

Some 5,000 mostly working class protesters in the former Dutch colony of Suriname gathered in the capital Paramaribo on May 13 to voice their opposition to an electricity hike recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to the government. The scrapping of the subsidy, which amounted annually to over one billion Surinamese dollars, or US\$176 million, took effect on May 1, and will be reflected in electricity bills in the latter part of June.

The protesters also denounced austerity measures, including the devaluation of the Surinamese dollar in November in response to falling prices for oil and gold, two of the principal exports of the tiny nation of 600,000, and price hikes for goods and services. The closing of the Suralco alumina plant late last year also contributed to the current recession.

In April, the IMF and the government reached agreement on a two-year US\$478 million standby arrangement (SBA) that will include additional austerity measures. The protesters demanded that the SBA be rejected.

Haitian police attack protesters demanding wage improvements

Protesters in Port-au-Prince, Haiti were subjected to tear gas and water cannon in a protest May 12 demanding wages respective of the law and cost of living. The protesters demanded the activation of a law signed by former president Rene Preval to raise the minimum daily wage to 300 Haitian gourdes, or about US\$4.76.

The law was derailed during the presidency of Michel Martelly (2011-2016). Martelly, a former supporter of the Duvalier dictatorship, achieved his office as the result of electoral fraud set into motion by current US Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Clinton who, as Secretary of State, prevailed on the Haitian electoral commission to allow Martelly to remain in the race after he finished fourth in the first round of presidential elections.

Clinton had vehemently opposed the minimum wage raise during Preval's term. On taking office, Martelly dutifully and unilaterally scuttled it, lowering the already abysmal minimum wage to its lowest point in years.

Haitian resident doctors continue strike over wages, supplies

Striking resident doctors at the General Hospital in Port-au-Prince, Haiti remain on strike following the delivery of a few dozen boxes of gloves, gauze and other materials and promises of more. The doctors denounced the deliveries as insufficient and mostly a public relations ploy.

A second-year anesthesiologist called the delivery "an empty gesture" and said that they "would get used up after three days here if things were running normally." The doctors have refused to accept new patients, saying that they do not have adequate resources to treat them. The doctors are also demanding improved pay.

According to haitian-truth.org, "The walkout started after a physical fight between an administrator and a resident. Nurses and cleaning staff joined in, leaving the emergency room and wards empty except for a few stragglers or sick persons shackled to beds." The Haitian public health sector, the only recourse for poverty-stricken Haitians who fall sick, receives less than 5 percent of the national budget.

Trinidad and Tobago: highway workers protest nonpayment of wages

Workers on a highway extension project in Trinidad held an angry protest against their employer, Brazilian contractor OAS Construtora, on May 9. The workers have not been paid severance benefits for April and May. The project ends May 25, and the workers are also fearful that OAS will skip town before they get paid.

An official with the Oilfield Workers Trade Union told reporters that about 860 workers, 60 local contractors and some managers were owed over 200 million Trinidadian dollars, or US\$30 million.

When the workers gathered at OAS' Goldconda compound's main gate that morning, they found that OAS personnel had fled upon seeing them approach. They then decided on a road blockage to publicize their demands. They dragged lumber and other materials onto the roadway, snarling traffic as they chanted against their employers.

After heavily armed police arrived, the protesters moved in a convoy to another location, the Mosquito Creek Bridge, where they again blockaded the road. Once again, heavily armed police arrived and removed the debris. No arrests or confrontations were reported.

Aerospace workers strike Triumph Manufacturing in Washington state

About 400 aerospace workers at the Triumph Composite Systems production facility near Spokane, Washington, walked off the job May 11 after rejecting the company's last offer by 94 percent and then voting to strike by a 93 percent margin.

Three years ago, workers rejected a contract that eliminated pensions for new workers and put in place a two-tier wage structure that robs low-paid workers of thousands of dollars. But they failed by an extremely narrow margin to obtain the two-thirds margin required for a strike. In the current contract battle, workers are demanding a restoration of pensions and the elimination of the two-tier structure.

The Triumph plant was spun off by Boeing back in 2003 and it now supplies critical components for both Boeing and Airbus, and could cause production shortages for the giant aerospace manufacturers. Management has declared it will "meet its obligations" and "has contingency plans in place," including contracting with a firm to bring in strikebreakers.

Triumph engineers, who are represented by the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), have said their contract bars them from performing production work. But Triumph spokeswoman Lynne Warne declared, "SPEEA employees will be involved in providing support to replacement workers in a number of ways, many of which are similar to the type of tasks they already perform."

The IAM has called attention to the company's use of a state tax incentive program for aerospace companies to move Washington state jobs to Mexico. But the union seeks to use this to bolster nationalism within the workforce.

Quebec senior care-home workers launch job action

In the largest action ever of its kind, over 3,000 long-term care home workers in 42 facilities across the province of Quebec began a campaign of one-day strikes last week in a fight for better wages and working conditions.

Organized under the Syndicat Québécois des employées et employés de service (SQEES-FTQ) the mostly female low-paid workers are fighting to bring their wages up to \$15 an hour and for improvements in working conditions. Many of the workers who are covered under essential services legislation are also staging 45-minute work stoppages during their shifts. To bolster the strike action, the union is also asking its members to limit the meals served to the senior residents to one a day and to refuse some maintenance duties.

These actions are geared toward increasing pressure on the employer in negotiations that will continue in the coming days throughout the job action.



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