

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 June 2016

National strike in Argentina against government anti-worker policies

The Workers Central of Argentina (CTA) union federation called a national strike and mobilization on June 2 to protest the recent veto by right-wing president Mauricio Macri of an “antifiring law.” The Occupational Emergency Law, which was approved by the Congress two weeks before the veto, would have required employers to pay double the usual severance pay to employees who were laid off in the last six months.

The veto was one of the latest in a slew of anti-worker actions carried out by Macri. His administration has raised bus fares and utility bills, attacked pensions, wiped out over 100,000 public-sector jobs and increased the powers of the police and military, among other measures.

In Buenos Aires, more than 40,000 workers from the educational, judicial, transportation, media, pharmaceutical, and other public and private sectors gathered at the downtown Plaza de Mayo. Similar actions took place in other cities nationwide.

Some political figures from the Peronist Front for Victory attended the rallies, posturing as opponents of Macri’s policies. The 3-million-strong General Confederation of Labor did not participate in the mobilizations.

Colombian teachers strike, protest for improved health and social security coverage

Teachers across Colombia struck and protested on June 1 to demand improved health and social security coverage. The Colombian Educators Federation (Fecode), which called the protest, was joined by contingents of the Educators District Association, the Workers Unitary Center, the People’s Congress movement, the Patriotic Union party and other organizations.

A protester told *La Opinión*, “We are demanding the delivery of health services for the teachers and for our families. In the clinics there is no medicine. We educators have to go out to buy them so that they can attend to us in emergencies.” He added that they must wait “five or six months” for appointments and that the clinics deny treatments that should be given as a right.

In departmental capitals like Bogotá, Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, Cartagena, Cali and Medellín, heavily armed squadrons of the national police, the Fuerzas Públicas, kept watch over the marchers, who carried signs and chanted for better services and voiced support for the agricultural workers’ strike (see below).

In Bogotá, protesters denounced the possible privatization of the telephone service, the city council’s plan to urbanize a nature reserve, and broken promises made to farm workers, Afro-Colombians and indigenous people.

Colombia: Three dead, over 100 injured as farmworkers strike, block

roads to protest government policies

Agricultural workers in six departments in Colombia began strikes and blockades on May 30 to press their demands for the fulfillment of promises made by the federal government in 2013. In that year, after 12 protesters died, nearly 500 were wounded and over 600 were detained, the government promised to enact measures to improve the small farmers’ and farmworkers’ economic situation.

The promises have not been carried out. According to colombiareport.com, “Poverty levels in mainly indigenous and Afro-Colombian areas are disproportionately high after decades of state abandonment, and this year alone at least 30 indigenous children have died of malnutrition in indigenous communities throughout Colombia.”

At least 34,000 protesters participated in the blockades and demonstrations. National Police troops were deployed to clear the roadways, and three people died (two from gunshots, one from being struck by a teargas canister), over 130 were injured, and at least 136, including 15 minors, were arrested.

On June 4, protest leaders agreed to attend meetings with government ministry representatives and the blockades were called off, though not without resistance by some protesters. Farm workers’ organizations have called for the government to declare a state of emergency in poverty-stricken rural regions and allocate massive funds for development and services.

However, as the WWS reported on May 27, “In February, Colombian President Miguel Santos announced that 3 percent of the country’s budget would be cut in the coming fiscal year, with each ministry forced to cut spending by 5 percent.”

Mexican college workers strike over insufficient wage offer

In their first industrial action in the 13 years of its existence, workers at the Scientific and Technical Studies Center (CECyTEO) in Oaxaca, Mexico began a strike on June 1. The workers are members of the State of Oaxaca CECyTEO Service Workers Union (Stscecyceto), which rejected the latest administration offer of a 3.4 percent salary raise.

Stscecyceto, which has about 1,400 members, proposed a minimum raise of 4.2 percent, as was recently achieved by the state government bureaucracy’s union. Other union demands are a 500 peso (US\$27) increase in the administrative merit bonus, bringing it to 5,000 pesos (US\$270) and a raise of 50 pesos (US\$2.70) to a “culture and sport” benefit.

CECyTEO General Director Victor Raúl Martínez Vásquez claimed that “the institution does not have the financial capacity to give a greater increment.”

Union leader Clara García Velasco accused the CECyTEO administration of bad financial management and corruption, which has repeatedly given null responses to petitions. She asserted that the strike

was not illegal because Stscecyeo had exhausted all juridical procedures before making the strike call.

Mexican teachers protest education “reform”

Members of the CNTE teachers union attempted a march to Mexico City’s international airport on June 3 to protest the right-wing education “reform” enacted by President Enrique Peña Nieto in 2013. Some CNTE members had earlier gone to the office of the Government Secretariat to demand negotiations about the overhaul and had threatened to march to the airport if talks were not started.

Instead, the government called out over 4,000 police to prevent the march from being carried out as planned, keeping them hemmed in at the Paseo de la Reforma thoroughfare.

The attempted march was the latest in a number of actions carried out by the 200,000-member CNTE, which has called strikes, occupations, blockades and other mobilizations against the education reform law, mostly in the southern states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas and Michoacán.

Antiguan airport workers strike over pay discrepancies

Janitors, storeroom and accounts clerks, air conditioning technicians, plumbers, mechanics, engineers, electricians, bus drivers, car park attendants, ramp sweepers and truck drivers at the Antigua and Barbados Air Authority (ABIA) walked off the job on June 1 over discrepancies in retroactive pay.

The maintenance workers, members of the Antigua & Barbuda Workers Union (ABWU), were supposed to get back pay for 2015 on May 31. When they looked at their accounts, “the sums were nowhere close to the sums that were anticipated,” reported the *Antigua Observer*. The workers stayed off the job while ABWU reps met with ABIA.

By 1:00 p.m., the union called the workers back on the job, saying that the ABWU had recommended that the sums be recalculated, and that they would receive word the next day. Senior Industrial Relations Officer Chester Hughes told workers, “We have to stand in solidarity, and you can’t have anyone telling you to go back to work when the matter is not resolved. If you show weakness, then they will walk all over you.” He then told them to return to their duties, adding, “Do your work to your best and do it with a smile.”

Surinamese protest IMF austerity measures

Thousands of workers in Paramaribo, Suriname held a protest on June 2 against austerity measures that the government is pledged to carry out as part of a Stand-By Agreement (SBA) with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It was the second protest in three weeks over the SBA, to which the administration of president Desi Bouterse agreed as the nation slides further into recession.

The protest, organized by several unions and other organizations, included a petition to the speaker of the house, Jennifer Geerlings-Simons. The petition complained of inflation and deteriorating living standards for “public servants, pensioners, disabled persons and others who have

become victims of the ongoing financial and economic crisis” and asked for immediate compensation.

The Surinamese economy has seen a drop in gold and oil prices, as well as the 2015 closure of its alumina refinery, resulting in substantial external and fiscal deficits. The “structural reform” agenda, which an IMF statement calls “essential to ensure a prosperous future for Suriname,” predictably includes steep hikes in utility prices and other attacks on the working class. The United States

Nursing home workers gain minimal wage increases in Florida

Over 700 workers at three nursing homes in Lee County, Florida obtained their first contract agreement with Consulate Health Care, the sixth largest long-term care provider in the United States. The agreement, reached between management and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) provides an increase in the minimum hourly wage from \$8.05 to \$10.50.

The SEIU declares the contract will put workers on the path to a \$15 an hour wage by 2020. But some workers will not see their first wage increase until 2017.

Back in April, more than 1,000 Consulate Health Care workers conducted a one-day strike involving 19 of the company’s Florida nursing home facilities. According to the SEIU it was the largest private sector health care strike in Florida in the last 10 years. In the wake of the strike, workers at a Fort Myers nursing home voted to unionize and become the 20th Consulate nursing home under the SEIU. Canada

Quebec seniors’ residence workers strike

Over 3,000 workers in 38 seniors’ care homes across the province of Quebec staged a two-day strike last week in the latest round of a job action to bring pressure on the provincial government for a contract settlement.

The workers, who are represented by the Syndicat Québécois des employées et employés de service (SQEES-FTQ) are mostly women making just above minimum wage. Union negotiators say they are fighting for a \$15 an hour minimum, but the latest offer from the employer is for .5 percent annual increases in a new five-year contract, which would bring the highest paid workers to just over \$13 an hour.

Quebec care home workers staged one-day rotating strikes last month, but due to essential service obligations these actions will have little impact on the delivery of services.



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