

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 September 2016

Argentina: “Federal March” protests government attacks on workers, retirees

Protests against austerity measures, fare and fee hikes, firings of public-sector workers, growing unemployment and inflation began across Argentina on August 31. The protesters, convoked by unions and social and human rights organizations, marched to Buenos Aires. There they joined a five-columns-wide “federal march” to the Casa Rosada, headquarters of current president Mauricio Macri’s government on September 2. According to the organizations’ spokespeople, over 200,000 protesters converged on Buenos Aires, blocking bridges and roads.

Marchers carried signs with slogans like “Macri = poverty” and “If they don’t let us dream, we won’t let them sleep” and chanted against Macri’s “neoliberal” policies. Since assuming office in December, Macri has intensified the moves by the previous Kirchner administration to place the burden of the nation’s economic crisis on the Argentine working class. One union leader decried the “savage adjustment that we Argentineans have suffered in only eight months.” Private economists estimate the inflation rate at around 46 percent.

Macri, often with the collaboration of kirchnerista legislators, has pushed through a raft of reactionary measures: hikes in the cost of public services, ending of utility rate subsidies, downward recalculations of pensions, a “profit tax” on relatively higher-paid workers, sackings of thousands of state workers, and caps on wage raises, to name a few. In addition, he has beefed up police powers and rehabilitated military and business figures who are associated with the brutal dictatorship of 1974-1983.

The unions have threatened a national general strike if Macri continues his anti-working class policies.

Colombian oil workers union calls for strike vote over privatization plans

Colombia’s Workers Syndical Union (USO) issued a call to its members on September 2 to hold a strike authorization vote. “We have already authorized the committees, representations in said committees, and we have designed a timetable of activities tending to the preparation of a strike movement in all the Ecopetrol installations,” a USO bulletin announced.

Even though nine months of fruitless negotiations with the management of Colombia’s state-owned oil firm Ecopetrol have passed, the strike would not go into effect until October 2 at the earliest. The USO and Ecopetrol have been at odds over the firm’s decision to sell a subsidiary, Propilco, and its professed intention to sell 20 oilfields for over two years.

The USO has requested the Labor Ministry to declare the strike, if it takes place, as legal and has asked it to act as an intermediary. Earlier in the week, the president and vice president of the union’s local in Tibú received threats calling them “guerrilla fighters” and accusing them of

“disturbing people so that good businesses don’t come.” Colombia has a long history of killings of union activists and officials by paramilitary “self-defense” forces.

The union portrays its opposition to the selloffs as a defense of national sovereignty. According to www.sputniknews.com, “Colombia, though it does not take part in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), is a small producer of crude oil and its income has been decimated over the last year-and-a-half due to the low price of crude on the international market.”

Costa Rican teachers protest planned changes to salaries

Thousands of secondary school teachers in Costa Rica participated in protests on September 1 against changes to their wages and working conditions under discussion in the Congress. Schools across the nation were closed or operated partially due to the mobilization, called by the Secondary Education Professors Association (APSE).

Teachers met at the Hispanic Rotunda in east San José, the capital, and marched to the Congress building to demand to meet with Antonio Álvarez Desanti, the legislative president. They objected in particular to a proposal to institute uniform pay scales, i.e., blur categories in order to avoid paying yearly bonuses and benefits for special skills.

They also denounced a government project to establish “dual education,” which would combine classroom “theoretical” education with employment in private enterprises, a development that could undercut adult employees’ job security. The APSE president told reporters, “This doesn’t just have to do with educators, but with all public employees and is the preamble to an indefinite strike against the public employee projects,” referring to other legislative proposals regarding public-sector workers.

Strike at Haitian public hospitals ends after five months

On August 30, doctors and medical staff at 13 Haitian public hospitals ended the strike they began 154 days ago. By September 1, all medical staff had returned to their posts.

Resident physicians at the State University Hospital of Haiti (HUEH), the nation’s largest public hospital, had walked off the job March 28 over a number of issues including chronic shortages of supplies, medicine and equipment, understaffing, unsanitary and unsafe working conditions including threats and violence, low budgets and poor pay.

Doctors, nurses and support staff at 12 other public hospitals followed suit. The media and government denounced the medical workers as selfish and greedy and alleged manipulation “by a political hand” close to the former government. When some patients died, the media denounced the doctors, not government intransigence.

On announcing the return to work, Dr. Roosevelt Aubourg of the inter-hospital committee told *Haiti Libre*, “We have decided to lift the strike, following the commitments made by health authorities to satisfy our demands,” including sanitation and rehabilitation work on the facilities and a gradual pay raise.

Aubourg also approvingly mentioned the passing of the 2016-2017 budget by the Chamber of Deputies the week before. However, the budget, which would add an additional 800 million gourdes (US\$12.7 million) to the health sector, still has to be ratified by the Senate.

Dominican Republic doctors protest to demand payment of overdue wages, infrastructure improvements

Doctors in the Dominican Medical Association (CMD) protested the delay in payments of their salaries on August 30. They marched from La Altagracia Maternity Hospital in Santo Domingo to the National Health Services building to demand payment of overdue wages adding up to 30 million pesos (US\$655,000).

CMD President Waldo Ariel Suero announced a strike planned for September 1 to press several demands, including commitment of 5 percent of GDP to the health sector, a salary raise, permanent hiring of new staff and completion of remodeling at 56 hospitals.

On August 31, the CMD announced that the strike had been called off and that talks with the government would be resumed the next day “in the hope that they will take place with the utmost sincerity for improving conditions for the health system and its workers,” reported www.dominicantoday.com.

St. Louis painters reject contract proposal and strike

Some 1,400 painters went on strike September 1 after their three-year contract with 160 painting and drywall taping contractors in the St. Louis, Missouri area expired. According to the Painting and Decorating Foundation, which is negotiating on behalf of the contractors, the union rejected a new agreement that offered an 85 cent wage hike in each year of a new three-year proposal.

Painters District Council 58 did not discuss issues concerning the contract with the media except to say the companies’ proposal “was rejected substantially.” Workers had already rejected a 60 cent annual wage hike and the employers’ group announced on the first day of the strike that they would increase the annual wage hike to 90 cents.

The strike only affected union workers on jobs of the Painting and Decorating Foundation. Other painters working for companies under national agreements and project labor agreements with no-strike clauses continued to work.

Brief strike by construction workers in Illinois over grievance

Members of the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 150 set up a picket line September 1 at a construction site on Interstate 90 near Des Plaines, Illinois to compel Stalworth Underground to settle an outstanding grievance. A \$40,000 check to settle the 15-month-old grievance was delivered to the union the following day.

The brief confrontation took place amid the construction work on the Jane Addams Tollway between Elgin and O’Hare International Airport and there is pressure to complete the project by the end of 2016. Previously, strikes on the Illinois Tollway had been proscribed under a 21-year agreement in which construction companies hired union labor in exchange for a no-strike clause.

In 2015, Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner appointed new tollway board members who proceeded to tear up the project labor agreement and sanction the hiring of non-union labor. Given that development, unions are now claiming they are not obligated to honor the no-strike clause. James Sweeney, president of Operating Engineers Local 150, is also a tollway director and is alleged to have “orchestrated” the grievance strike.

Quebec hotel workers poised to strike

Five hotels in the area of Montreal, Quebec are set to strike this week after adopting separate unlimited strike mandates last week.

The workers are represented by the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN), whose representatives have stated that they are fighting for employment protection and increased vacation in a new four-year deal.

This move comes after workers at four hotels in the Quebec City area delivered their own strike mandate while CSN workers in several other Quebec hotels will be taking strike votes in the coming days.

Workers in Labrador town set to strike

Forty-six workers employed by the town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador voted to go on strike last week after rejecting the town’s latest contract offer, but could be locked out before taking job action.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and include laborers, maintenance workers and office staff who are fighting for increased wages, although it is not clear how far apart the two sides are on the issue.

Workers in Happy Valley-Goose Bay were locked out for a week last winter but have been working without a contract since their last one expired in December 2015.



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