

Workers Struggles: the Americas

1 November 2016

Argentine bank employees strike over parity talks, “profit tax”

Argentina’s banking employees’ union, the Banking Sector Association (AB), claimed a “total” shutdown of the nation’s public and private financial institutions due to a strike October 28. The AB had called the action for all 53 of its sections to demand the reopening of parity talks and the repeal of the “profit tax,” an extra tax on workers above a certain income level.

The AB had signed an agreement before, but Argentina’s notorious inflation has eaten up any salary increases that were gained. The AB has called six partial work stoppages so far with no result. AB head Sergio Palazzo told reporters that not only were the banks refusing to bargain in good faith, but “the government doesn’t come through with its commitment to repeal the tax on salaries, which is added to inflation and damages bank workers’ families’ incomes.”

Thousands of bank workers protested and marched in Buenos Aires and other cities. In Buenos Aires, union leaders threatened further mobilizations if there was no response by the banks and the labor ministry.

Taxi drivers protest Uber in front of Argentina’s appeals court

Taxi drivers in Buenos Aires held a protest in front of the Court of Appeals on October 28 to protest a recent court decision regarding the Uber ridesharing service. A Buenos Aires judge ruled October 24 to dismiss a lawsuit that asked that Uber be declared illegal in the capital.

Taxi drivers in numerous countries have protested against Uber, which they denounce for not being subject to the same regulations and taxes that cabbies labor under and for driving down their incomes. The protest coincided with the filing by the Capital Taxi Drivers Association of an appeal of the October 24 decision.

Chilean fishermen protest law that “privatizes” ocean

Small fishermen and their supporters held massive protests in several Chilean cities October 26. Actions including blockades, demonstrations and marches took place in Iquique, Arica, Tarapaca, Coquimbo, Valparaiso, Bio Bio, Los Lagos and other locations across the nation. In Iquique, confrontations with police and Carabineros (Chile’s militarized national police) resulted in seven arrests. Police have refused to release figures on arrests and injuries in other regions.

The fishermen demanded the repeal of the so-called Longueira Law, named after Pablo Longueira, economy minister during the 2010-2014 administration of right-wing president Sebastián Piñera. Longueira is under nighttime house arrest for his involvement in a number of corrupt practices.

Investigations confirmed that legislators accepted bribes to write the law to heavily favor the seven largest fishing firms. At least one senator, Jaime Orpis, currently under house arrest, “for years...received monthly payments from one of the country’s main fishing firms, whose directors changed and revised, before it was voted upon, the law’s articles,” according to an EFE report. Protesting fishermen say that the limits imposed on “artisanal” fishing in essence “privatizes” the ocean to the benefit of the large firms.

Three-day strike by Chilean public employees for higher salaries

Public employees in Chile completed their third day of a strike for better wages on October 28. The workers are demanding a 7 percent pay increase beginning in December.

The workers resolved to take a break from the strike on October 31 and November 1, which are holidays. Health workers will attend to their labors, but a negotiating team spokesman told reporters that he could not guarantee that municipal sanitation workers would pick up trash, which has

accumulated in central Santiago and other localities.

Before the temporary halt in the strike, participation, according to union sources, has been over 90 percent. On October 28, Civil Registry workers, who had limited themselves to a two-hour delay the previous two days, joined the strike, only attending to emergency services like passports and death certificates.

The public employees will resume the strike on November 2 if there is no response to their demand, said union sources. The Congress will meet to continue its debate on a bill to raise their wages by 3.2 percent on that date.

Puerto Rican school bus drivers strike to demand unpaid wages

Bus drivers in three Puerto Rican cities, including the capital San Juan, stopped work on October 27 to demand back wages, which they have not been paid since August. The government claims that since it is in the middle of an economic crisis, it does not have the money.

Officials for the Department of Education claim that the money will be forthcoming in upcoming weeks. Meanwhile, the strike remains in effect.

Lockout of pipeline workers in six states ends

The lockout of 915 workers by Dominion subsidiaries in six different states ended earlier this month after the company received a no-strike pledge from United Gas Workers Union Local 69 in return for a no-lockout pledge by the company. Other details on the final agreement were not available.

According to the company, it reached a tentative agreement with the union in September, but the union refused to present that proposal to the membership. Dominion reacted by locking out workers on September 7. The original proposal offered wage increases of 2.5 percent over the course of the first two years of the contract and a 2.75 percent increase in the last two years of a four-year agreement.

Dominion management claimed they feared the union would strike as colder weather approached. The company's pipelines transfer natural gas to the states of Ohio, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia.

McGill University staff take strike action

More than 1,000 casual support staff at McGill University in Montreal are on a five-day strike as of last Saturday after voting 82 percent in favor of a walkout the previous week.

The striking workers are employed in support roles such as recreation, libraries and work-study programs and have been without a contract since April 2015. According to their union, the Association of McGill University Support Employees (AMUSE), they are fighting for an increase in wages with the majority of casual support workers currently earning a minimum wage of C\$10.85 an hour. In addition, the union is asking for changes to the hiring process for the work-study program, which they say is currently an opaque process lacking proper standards.

AMUSE has warned that some campus activities could be affected by the strike, and McGill University management have stated that contingency plans are in place to minimize the effect of a strike.

Ontario public health workers set to strike

Public health workers in Oxford County, west of Hamilton, Ontario, could be on strike as early as Wednesday of this week if mediated talks fail to produce a deal before then.

The workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and include health inspectors, dietitians and epidemiologists. The union says that a main area of contention is proposed changes to sick days by the County, but few other details of negotiations have been made public.

If a strike does take place, some programs would be suspended, although many workers will be compelled to stay on the job under essential service legislation.



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