

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 November 2016

Latin America

Two-day strike by Argentine public sector workers to demand wage readjustment, renewal of talks

Municipal employees, teachers and other workers held a 48-hour national work stoppage on November 10 and 11 to press their demands for better wages and the reopening of parity talks with the Labor Ministry. It was the seventh limited job action since Mauricio Macri's assumption to the presidency in December 2015, and occurred despite an "obligatory conciliation" call by the ministry.

A number of labor federations, unions and social organizations, including the state workers' ATE, Festramp (municipal workers), the Teachers Union Front, AMET (technical education), SADOP (private schools) and Amra (medical sector), joined the strike call. In Buenos Aires, Santa Fé and other cities, protesters marched to demand the reopening of parity talks and a wage raise to counteract the inflation rate. Oil and press workers struck as well.

Protesters denounced the thousands of firings of public sector workers that have either already taken place or will at the end of the year. Another focus of anger is Macri's offer of an end-of-year bonus of between 2,000 and 3,500 pesos (US\$130 and 228). At a Plaza de Mayo rally in Buenos Aires, ATE head Hugo "Cachorro" ("Puppy") Godoy called the bonus "squalid and miserable ... the crumbs of power."

Apparently, not all union bureaucrats share Godoy's ire. La Capital reported November 11 that the bonus "will be accepted by the majority public sector union, UPCN, but rejected by the ATE."

Chilean Uber drivers strike, protest low fares and robberies

Uber drivers in Chile announced a one-day strike November 11 to protest low fares and their insecurity while on the job. The app-based ride service contracts nearly 34,000 drivers nationally.

The announcement demanded that commissions be raised and that the deduction by Uber of 25 percent per trip be replaced by 15 percent. "They allege as well," reported latercera.com, "that when the enterprise initiated cash payment, the fare diminished 20 percent, from which they subtract earnings."

The communiqué decried the lack of security, especially in dangerous neighborhoods after 10:00 p.m., and said that there should be a 20 percent increase in fares under those conditions. On average, it claimed that there are at least five robberies of Uber drivers every day.

The drivers want the installation of a "panic button" or at least a way to be informed of potential danger.

Drivers for another firm called Easy, which groups together taxi drivers who also work for Uber, agreed to honor the strike call.

Brazilian taxi drivers protest Uber

Over 1,000 taxi drivers protested in front of the Brazilian Congress against Uber November 8. Many of the cabbies, who converged on Brasília from all over the nation, drove their cabs to the protest.

The cabbies, citing the drastic drop in their incomes since the service was introduced, demanded that the legislators ban the service altogether throughout Brazil.

Brazilian workers and poor protest over public spending amendment

At least 19 of 27 Brazilian states, as well as the federal district of Brasília, were shaken by protests November 11 against a proposed amendment that has passed the lower house of Congress. The amendment, PEC 55, was proposed by president Michel Temer and would tie budget increases to the inflation rate, effectively cutting spending on social, infrastructure and other programs.

This is after years of grandiose and wasteful projects like soccer stadiums and other facilities for the FIFA games and 2016 Summer Olympics—several of which have fallen into disuse—and the Petrobras and other corruption scandals involving billions of reais, the nation's currency. With passage of PEC 55, the ruling class and its political representatives intend to escalate their offloading of the political and economic turmoil of recent years on the backs of the Brazilian working class.

Protesters, who numbered in their ranks union members, social organizations and landless movement members, held "[d]emonstrations, partial stoppages at work, delayed entries to work shifts, popular rallies, assemblies and interruptions to public transport services" (rt.com). Despite demands by Temer that they "respect institutions," protesters set up blockades, occupied buildings and burned tires in various locations, resulting in confrontations with police.

At protest rallies, union leaders slammed Temer, who was vice-president during the Rouseff administration and whom they call a "usurper." CUT labor federation head Vagner Freitas called the actions a "warm-up for the general strike," adding, "Today is a day of

national protest, but it's not a general strike yet." Rousseff, meanwhile, has claimed that she was not guilty of the charges against her, but that she is going to produce evidence that her former vice president was.

Peru hit by strikes, protests over wages, budgets, working conditions and other issues

Strikes and protests against the government of right-wing president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski broke out across Peru last week. On November 7, public health sector workers clashed with police during protests against job insecurity due to the use of temporary contracts. Workers may be subject to these contracts for years without ever gaining permanent full-time status.

That day, thousands of protesters marched against the designation of "questionable persons" to positions as directors of the Central Bank. The newly named directors are two conservative politicians and one neoliberal technocrat, all appointed by the conservative majority in the Congress.

The Medical Syndical Federation of Peru called an indefinite strike November 8 to demand better salaries and an increased national budget for the health sector.

In the southern Andean region of Cusco, the Workers Federation called for a general strike November 12 to demand progress in construction projects for a new airport and a gas pipeline.

Judicial workers, complaining that they could not adequately do their job under the current budget, struck for 48 hours to demand an increase for their sector.

In addition to workers' struggles, native and rural populations have also held protests.

The United States

Hertz workers at San Francisco airport strike against job losses

Some 156 drivers who shuttle cars for Hertz Rent A Car at the San Francisco International Airport (SFO) went on strike November 7 to protest layoffs. Hertz outsourced the jobs of shuttle drivers to another company after workers voted down three agreements negotiated with the Teamsters.

The workers, predominantly immigrants from China, the Philippines and Latin America, appealed the company's sudden decision to outsource by requesting a 90-day delay until after the holidays and to allow further negotiations, but Hertz refused. The company declared they would "transition the vehicle transporter work at SFO to an outside provider in order to remain competitive after the workforce turned down three reasonable contract settlements."

A worker with 16 years at Hertz who emigrated from El Salvador was quoted on the Teamsters web site, "I have suffered a lot in the US; my wife had a battle with cancer and we struggle to pay rising rents. I feel really bad about what Hertz has done to us, abusing their power to fire us by tossing us out like trash."

Another worker with 21 years at Hertz declared, "They think that because we are immigrants we don't like to get involved or disrupt

things. But this is America; we must stand up for our rights."
Canada

Saskatoon transit workers take job action

Having delivered strike notice in the middle of September, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) representing transit workers in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan only this week decided to take limited job action but with the possibility of an all-out strike at some point.

Announcing a work-to-rule campaign that began on Saturday that includes an overtime ban, ATU negotiators say that they were forced to take action after workers voted not to vote on a new contract offer last week after working without a contract since 2012. The main sticking point in negotiations is proposed changes by the city to pension plans which would shift the burden onto workers.

It is unclear whether the job action will disrupt transit service, but the city says the overtime ban may affect some routes.

Newfoundland quarry workers locked out

One hundred thirty workers employed by Atlantic Minerals Ltd. (AML) at its Port au Port Peninsula Lower Cove quarry in Newfoundland were locked out last week after their union, the International Union of Operating Engineers (I.U.O.E), warned of possible strike action.

Although the two sides have been in negotiations since the spring, which has included conciliated talks, the main obstacle to a new agreement continues to center on wages. The company says it had no choice but to lock workers out because a strike would limit delivery to its customers.

The two sides are reportedly still very far apart on a new agreement, but the company has indicated it wants to resolve the dispute as soon as possible.



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