

Workers Struggles: The Americas

13 December 2016

Dominican Republic: One-day truckers strike for fee increase

Drivers of freight trucks, flatbeds and tractor-trailers held a 24-hour stoppage December 6 to push for higher freight fees. At least 90,000 truckers, affiliated with the Fenatrado truckers' federation struck nationwide.

The striking truckers also demanded improvements in working conditions and the end of a fuel subsidy to the business sector.

Clashes erupt between Brazilian police and anti-austerity protesters

Hundreds of anti-austerity demonstrators protested "fiscal adjustment" measures being discussed in Rio de Janeiro's legislature December 6. The protesters gathered in front of the Legislative Assembly headquarters of Rio de Janeiro, or Alerj. Some of the workers demanded back wages, which the federal government ordered the state to pay, following the state's declaration of a financial emergency ahead of the Rio Olympics earlier this year.

The demonstrations included public security employees such as police, firefighters and prison guards, who have engaged in previous demonstrations, often shouting right-wing slogans demanding military rule and disassociating themselves from education, health and other civil service workers.

Union bureaucrats railed against corruption, of which some of them have previously been beneficiaries, and denounced "these criminals, these politicians who are in the legislative assembly and don't want to let go," in the words of Oil Workers' Union spokesman Ronaldo Moreno.

Riot police moved in to disperse the crowd with pepper spray, rubber bullets and stun grenades, while some demonstrators threw homemade bombs at them. Some police holed up in a nearby church, from which they fired rubber bullets at the protesters.

Argentine cabbies continue anti-Uber protests

Taxi drivers descended on Buenos Aires December 6 to protest the Uber app-based ride service. A number of taxi drivers' unions called the mobilization. In the city center, some drivers burned

tires.

The Buenos Aires cabbies have held a number of protests against Uber and other similar services, which they say steal jobs from taxi drivers, are unregulated and do not comply with city ordinances. Last June, over 5,000 taxi drivers held a protest in Buenos Aires calling on the government to shut the service down.

Nonetheless, Uber has grown in Buenos Aires—with over 550,000 customers and 37,000 drivers—and it is expanding to other cities in Argentina. Union officials have accused the government of Mauricio Macri of "full complicity" in undercutting the cab drivers' jobs.

Argentine metro workers strike for 24 hours over worker's electrocution death

Underground commuter rail service on the six lines that serve Buenos Aires was halted December 7 following the death of maintenance worker Matías Kruger. The 24-year-old was repairing the air conditioning on a car when he was killed by a discharge of 1,500 volts of electricity.

The Buenos Aires rail system, known as the "subte" (for subterranean) is run by Metrovías, which took over the lines in 1994 during president Carlos Menem's privatization drive. Workers have complained of the lack of a consistent protocol when treating electrical issues. One official for the AGTSyP (Subte and Premetro Workers Union Association) told reporters, "This is the fifth such death in less than eight years," and another declared that "'work accidents' are misnomers, when in reality this is about management crimes."

The official, Enrique Rosito, complained that "the protocol for security and for cutting electricity at every workshop has a different modality, but when it's a matter of working with 1,500 volts there should be a single protocol." AGRSyP bureaucrats had requested a meeting with the city's Labor Subsecretariat the day before on the issue of the protocol, but "not only did they ignore us, they mocked our demand."

Short strike by Chilean metro ticket clerks over wages, benefits, conditions

About 300 ticket clerks for the *Metro de Santiago* underground

railway network struck on the morning of December 7 at 27 stations in the Chilean capital. The striking workers, some 80 percent of the total, walked off the job to press their demands, including a raise in salaries, which they claim are barely above the minimum; “quality of life” benefits; overtime pay and bonuses for working festive days and 6-day workweeks. They also complained of being contract workers and not permanent employees.

By that afternoon, their union and management had signed an agreement that contained a monthly raise of about 50,000 pesos (US\$76) and every other weekend off. The ticket clerks returned to work the next day. The workers’ contract status remains unchanged.

Chilean home improvement center workers return to work after union accepts inferior offer

After 26 days on strike for improvements in wages and benefits, 8,700 workers for Chile’s Sodimac home improvement warehouse chain were called back to the job December 6. The final contract, according to a report in *El Mostrador*, is “very far from the 5 percent above the consumer price index offer, in addition to an increase of benefits and an end-of-negotiations bonus of between 360 thousand and 500 thousand pesos [US\$549 and 762], brought out last November 7, when the strike was decided.”

Instead, the union signed for a 2 percent raise and a bonus of 200,000 pesos (US\$305). The company will pay nothing for the 26 days on strike, but will advance 15 days of wages, which will be deducted over the next five months.

The union’s web site claimed that “we were confronted by an indolent enterprise” that keep lowering its offer, “despite the effort of the [union] directors to demand dignity for the workers.” The cave-in was a replay of similar strikes at Banco de Chile in 2011 and at Walmart in 2014 that ended with acceptance of lower offers.

Comments on social media by embittered workers blasted the union, especially union head José Luis Ortega, a member of the Christian Democrats and president of the Sodimac workers union for 22 years. “For some observers,” *El Mostrador* noted, “the situation is similar to what is happening in the ANEF [National Fiscal Employees] and CUT [Unitary Workers Center], which they see as a reflection that even the unions are living through a crisis of legitimacy.”

Judge reinforces anti-strike injunction against ABX Air cargo pilots

A US district court judge issued a preliminary injunction December 7 that extends an earlier temporary injunction that barred ABX Air cargo pilots from striking or engaging in other forms of service disruptions. Judge Timothy Black first issued a

temporary restraining back on November 22, bringing to a halt a strike by 250 Teamster pilots, protesting low wages, understaffing and forced overtime.

In extending the bar on striking, Judge Black called the issues with ABX a “minor dispute.” The new preliminary injunction is slated to be turned into a permanent injunction at some future date, guaranteeing pilots are to be held hostage to their current working conditions.

Behind the labor conflict stands retail giant Amazon, who canceled contracts with higher-paid UPS and FedEx pilots and now seeks to become a player in air cargo transport. Amazon holds options to buy stakes in ABX’s parent company ATSG, and another cargo operation named Atlas Air.

The same day that Black issued his decision, a group of Atlas Air pilots carried out a protest outside of Amazon’s Seattle, Washington headquarters. Current contract talks between Atlas and the Teamsters union are at a standstill. Atlas Air management is seeking to incorporate inferior terms from the contract that governs the recently-acquired Southern Air unit into the Atlas contract. Southern Air went through bankruptcy in 2012.

Quebec paramedics set to strike

Some 3,600 paramedics, ambulance dispatchers and other emergency health care workers could be on strike as early as this week after 15 different union locals delivered strike mandates of at least 92 percent in November.

The workers involved in the dispute are represented by the Fédération de la santé et des services sociaux (FSSS-CSN), who have been working without a contract since March of 2015. The emergency health care workers are employed by ambulance companies across the province of Quebec and their right to strike is limited by essential service legislation which will mean that any job action may have a limited effect.

The union said the strike is due to the extremely slow pace of negotiations, but details of contract negotiations have not been made public.



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